

University of Michigan

**Manufacturing a Consumer Culture
Through Materialism and Consumerism**

Living in a Materialized Society;

a world of mass production that many of us take for granted

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I. Consumerism and Materialism in Today's Society

Within today's society and culture, consumerism and materialism often involve comparisons with others, those being celebrities and how the media portrays them. With the immense amount of advertising we are bombarded with on a daily basis, it is unsurprising that there are many things we feel we want and need. Significant amount of research studies and experiments discover that materialism could foster social isolation, low self-esteem and dissatisfaction on life itself. For many, social status is defined by possessions and the endless drive to acquire ever more impressive belongings. People believe that buying more and more things will make them happy when research has shown oppositely. Media and advertisements plays on our fears and the need for social acceptance and upper echelon. This topic is relevant because of increasing levels of dissatisfaction and the creation of "hyper-consumers" amongst adolescents. The Association for Psychological Science published a research article, *Cuing Consumerism: Situational Materialism Undermines Personal and Social Well-Being*, that "... indicates that materialistic individuals experience relatively low levels of well-being." ⁴ Using four different experiments, researchers found that "...situational cuing can also trigger materialistic mind-sets, with similarly negative personal and social consequences. Merely viewing desirable consumer goods resulted in increases in materialistic concerns and led to heightened negative affect and reduced social involvement."⁴ The article with corresponding experiments concludes that the costs of materialism are not restricted only in specifically materialistic people. The cost of materialism

⁴ Bauer, Monika A., et al. "Cuing Consumerism: Situational Materialism Undermines Personal and Social Well-Being." *JSTOR*, May 2012, www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41489733.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ae5327a5e2dd6a8e2fdda5f25a113973b.

can also be found in people who are exposed to different environmental cues in contemporary society that trigger consumerism. How can I translate materialistic ideas using consumerist images? Why is consumerism and materialism so solidified in our culture? How did we manufacture a consumer culture? Has our consumer culture become a curse rather than a cure? What are the effects of being too materialistic? What makes us this way?

II. Manufacturing a Consumer Culture

Today, the world is flooded in material goods and an advanced standard of living. We are living in a world of mass production that many of us take for granted. Getting and spending has become the most fanatical simultaneously, the most imaginative, endeavor of modern life. According to an online article, *Manufacturing a Consumer Culture*, history professor William Leach, claims that the development of the modern consumer culture has played on another human desire completely: to have an inordinate desire for things. Leach asserts “American consumer capitalism produced a culture almost violently hostile to the past and to tradition, a future-oriented culture of desire that confused the good life with goods.”¹ The article develops a clear insight into the cultural shift through time. As recently as 150 years ago, people living in rural communities were governed by production of goods they needed; “They valued stability, thriftiness and family. Handmade goods were passed down through the generations; items that were purchased, such as cloth or tools, were cared for, repaired, repurposed.”¹ A cultural shift in the United States began in the mid 1800’s as rural life was being substituted by urban commerce.

¹ Cloer, Laura, and Dan Cloer. “Manufacturing a Consumer Culture.” *Manufacturing a Consumer Culture*, Vision, 2013, www.vision.org/consumerism-does-having-more-lead-to-happiness-118

The United States was quickly transforming into a highly accelerated society. “Commerce became the focus of the national consciousness, and it spawned the consumer culture, according to Leach: “In the decades following the Civil War, American capitalism began to produce a distinct culture, unconnected to traditional family or community values, to religion in any conventional sense, or to political democracy.”¹ A market oriented culture with the exchange and circulation of money became the foundation of aesthetic life. The fundamental components of this culture were acquisition and consumption- “...means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the democratization of desire; and money value as the predominant measure of all value in society.”¹

Stephanie Coontz, historian and author of *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, states “The word *consumption* increasingly lost its earlier connotations of destroying, wasting, or using up, and came instead to refer in a positive way to the satisfying of human needs and desires.”¹ How did we manufacture this consumer culture? Amplified advertising stimulated consumer desire and increased consumer demand for products that were being promoted. Mass marketing became an industry of its own to keep the circulation of

¹ Cloer, Laura, and Dan Cloer. “Manufacturing a Consumer Culture.” *Manufacturing a Consumer Culture*, Vision, 2013, www.vision.org/consumerism-does-having-more-lead-to-happiness-118.

consumers and money. "...brand loyalty and consumer confidence also became commodities." ¹
"Advertising plays on our fears and the need for social acceptance." ²

Hyeseung Yang, author of *Do media portrayals of affluence foster feelings of relative deprivation? Exploring a path model of social comparison and materialism on television viewers' life dissatisfaction*, conducted an experiment to see the influence of American television being filled with images endorsing capitalist consumerism on American lives. Yang distributed surveys to 239 adult residents in the state of Pennsylvania where data was collected and analyzed. "The findings of this study suggest that heavy television viewing may be associated with higher levels of material value, estimates of other people's affluence, and perceived gaps between the self and others in terms of material affluence." ⁷

¹ Cloer, Laura, and Dan Cloer. "Manufacturing a Consumer Culture." *Manufacturing a Consumer Culture*, Vision, 2013, www.vision.org/consumerism-does-having-more-lead-to-happiness-118.

² Pursey, Kirstie, and Alvin. "How Consumerism and Materialism of Modern Society Make Us Unhappy, Lonely and Unconfident." *How Consumerism and Materialism of Modern Society Make Us Unhappy, Lonely and Unconfident*, Learning Mind, 13 Dec. 2018, www.learning-mind.com/consumerism-and-materialism-unhappy/

⁷Yang, Hyeseung. "Do Media Portrayals of Affluence Foster Feelings of Relative Deprivation? Exploring a Path Model of Social Comparison and Materialism on Television Viewers' Life Dissatisfaction." *ProQuest*, 2005, search.proquest.com/docview/305415744/abstract/6D7FB267F6E04C92PQ/1?accountid=14667.

III. Effects of Consumerism and Materialism

Further, a series of studies published in the journal, *Motivation and Emotion* revealed evidence that as people become more materialistic, their sense of welfare and purpose is decreased.

Although materialism is great for the economy's growth, there lies a negative connotation on a personal level. Consumerism and materialism come hand and hand when reflecting on damaged personal wellbeing, relationships, communities, and the environment. According to the article *How Consumerism and Materialism of Modern Society Make Us Unhappy, Lonely and Unconfident*, digs deeper into the effects of the consumer culture we constructed. "Consumerism and materialism often involve comparisons with others and, if it is perceived that others are doing better, resulting feelings of deficiency are understandable. With the immense amount of advertising we are bombarded with on a daily basis, it is unsurprising that there are many things we feel we want and need." ² The article further explains what consumerism and materialism are actually doing to us and proclaims that materialism could foster social isolation.

Despite the overall understanding of the effects of materialism and consumerism amongst the general public, materialisms' influence on adolescents is a topic of increasing concern of parents, educators and consumer activists. In 2003, Lan T. Nguyen published a research article, *Growing Up in a Material World: An Investigation of the Development of Materialism in Children and Adolescents*, to understand the "...relationship between children's social-cognitive development and consumption values such as materialism." ⁶ This topic was broken down into three

⁶ Nguyen, Lan T. "Growing Up in a Material World: An Investigation of the Development of Materialism in Children and Adolescents." *ProQuest*, May 2003, search.proquest.com/docview/305330353.

subtopics: The Emergence of Self-Brand Connections in Children and Adolescents, Materialism in Children and Adolescents: The Role of the Developing Self-Concept and Materialism in Children and Adolescents: The Role of Parental Influence. Within each subtopic, researchers assess the changes in self-concepts from childhood through adolescence by focusing on the connections between branded possessions and self-concepts. In addition, they examine several aspects of oneself such as self-esteem in arbitrating the affiliation between age and materialism. “Specifically, changes in children’s and adolescents’ self-concepts, which are fueled by increasing social-cognitive abilities, are viewed as the catalyst for the adoption of materialistic values.”⁶ Lastly, they observe how family factors impact the development of materialism in children and adolescents by impelling their self-esteem as well as parents’ materialism influencing their child’s materialism needs. The studies conclude that certain parental styles, such as less supportive and more controlling parents, and family structures, such as divorced parents, have a direct relationship with children’s materialism. Supplementary, evidence indicates that the connection between consumer brands and self-concepts starts to develop between middle childhood and early youth. “By third grade, children are familiar with many brands and are just beginning to define who they are in terms of brand names...Brands are viewed as being connected to a child’s self-concept because they own, purchase, or like items with the brand name. By seventh/eighth grade, children are not only familiar with many brands, but also understand the images and personalities behind brands.”⁶ These social-cognitive developments lay the foundation for the emergence of materialistic values in children and

adolescents.”⁶ The article concludes that parents, peers and the media are the primary socialization vehicles that drive the escalation of materialism amongst children.

IV. Artists Dealing with Consumerism and Materialism

Angie Kordick, author of *Consumer Culture Expressed Through 10 Contemporary Art Pieces*, references contemporary artists that both explore and criticize the notion of consumerism in a variety of ways. Carefully selecting famous artworks as evidence for her article, Kordick picked ones that present well-known corporate symbols and mass-produced goods that reflect the commercialization of popular culture. “The browsing, selection and purchase of goods and commodities have become one of the defining activities of modern urban life.”³ Kordick states, “In this consumer culture, shopping has become a crucial ritual for shaping and transforming our identities.”³ Pop art emerged in the mid 1950’s when a new movement arose in the art world. A movement in which criticized yet favored consumption choices and mass production. This pop art movement used ordinary and familiar imagery and products in our surroundings such as famous brands, celebrities and advertisements as inspiration. “... pop art aimed to elevate popular culture to the level of fine art. Incorporating various aspects of the mass culture such as

³ Kordick, Angie. “Consumer Culture Expressed Through 10 Contemporary Art Pieces.” *Consumer Culture Expressed Through 10 Contemporary Art Pieces*, Widewalls, 10 Sept. 2015, www.widewalls.ch/consumerist-culture-art-10-artworks/.

⁶ Nguyen, Lan T. “Growing Up in a Material World: An Investigation of the Development of Materialism in Children and Adolescents.” *ProQuest*, May 2003, search.proquest.com/docview/305330353.

advertisements, comic books or industrial labeling, Pop artists created kitschy combinations of commercialized and recognizable elements.”³ Pop Art undoubtedly emphasizes the materialism that dominates our capitalist and consumerist society. The pop artists represented in the article tend to deconstruct the phenomenon of consumerism rather than criticizing consumption. For example, Leon Sessix, better known as Dotmaster, created meticulous, engaging impeccably crafted and well-crafted collections of street art and paintings that aim to trash consumerism using high end and/or popular brands as his victims. In Figure 1, *High Roller*, Dotmaster uses a Gucci shopping bag “... as a dispenser for his spray cans and paint rollers.”³ In an interview with WideWalls, Dotmaster states “The



Fig 1. *High Roller*. Dotmaster
Paint roller “trashing” Gucci Shopping Bag
Source: WideWalls

themes of trash, vulgarity and currency are something I have been playing with for some time.” In the interview Dotmaster was questioned “*Is your work always or mainly focused on political or social issues?*” He replies, “I think it’s personal political issues. I do my trash because it’s so mundane, as well and being the biggest problem today. It’s an image that everyone has some responsibility, knowledge and understanding of the wider issues. I am not posting a solution just a reminder that it’s a thorny one we have to think about. It’s visual not party politic heavy.” Similar to Dotmasters’ theme of materialism and consumerism, Banksy, a world renown and pseudonymous England-based graffiti artist, political activist, and painter creates work that

³ Kordick, Angie. “Consumer Culture Expressed Through 10 Contemporary Art Pieces.” *Consumer Culture Expressed Through 10 Contemporary Art Pieces*, Widewalls, 10 Sept. 2015, www.widewalls.ch/consumerist-culture-art-10-artworks/.

examines the relationship between commercial and street art. Banksy has a specific piece of work that reflects an outrage of consumerism during the holiday season. WideWalls chose Banksy's piece from 2005— *Jesus Christ with Shopping Bags*. This piece reflects on modern society and the transformation of religious values. As we see in figure 2, Banksy creates a screen print of Jesus Christ holding shopping bags in both hands. This work was created during Christmas time and the piece is interpreted as the holiday of Christmas is more about the presents that focusing on the Christian values. WideWalls states "...yet this work carries a special force with it, as it has to do with religion. When did obsessive shopping for things we don't need replace the true spirit and values of Christmas, such as compassion, love, forgiveness? One might think that this is what Jesus ended up dying for." ³



Fig 2.

Banksy – *Jesus Christ with Shopping Bags*, 2005
Source: WideWalls

³ Kordick, Angie. "Consumer Culture Expressed Through 10 Contemporary Art Pieces." *Consumer Culture Expressed Through 10 Contemporary Art Pieces*, Widewalls, 10 Sept. 2015, www.widewalls.ch/consumerist-culture-art-10-artworks/.

Most similar to my work is Alec Andon, also known as Alec Monopoly, who is an artist from New York and has gained worldly recognition for his art often containing the character from the popular board game Mr. Monopoly. Alec Monopoly uses his work to overthrow the consumerist hierarchies presented in existing popular culture as evinced in his series Richie Rich and Scrooge Money Mesmerized.

Monopoly's style is most similar to famous street artist Banksy. Alec Monopoly uses his artwork to lull his audience from the capitalist and consumerist hierarchies that exists in modern popular cultures. Monopoly does this by portraying the icons and presenting them in the way he wants you to see them but it is in the audiences' control and imaginations that make the picture come to life. Monopoly uses characters such as the Monopoly man from the popular board game, as well as other iconic cartoon characters to create a piece of art with a narrative that is relatable to a



large audience with some kind of memory or experience.⁴

Fig. 3
Alec Monopoly
Mixed Media Painting
92x61 cm | 36x24 in

As seen in Figure 3, Monopoly uses a cartoonist style with bright colors to emphasize key icons and symbols.

⁴ EdenArtGallery. "Richie Giving \$ To Monopoly." *Alec Monopoly*, 31 March. 2020, <https://www.eden-gallery.com/artwork/alec-monopoly-richie-giving-to-monopoly>

V. Interdisciplinary Work Based on The Theme of Materialism and Consumerism

How will my work differ from Dotmaster, Banksy, Alec Monopoly and other contemporary artists that use monetary values, consumerist images and materialistic ideas? My first painting, *The Golden Soapbox* on a 36" wide by 80" long piece of plywood using acrylic paints and spray paints. In this piece, as seen in figure 3, we see Scrooge McDuck standing on a stacked pile of Hermes Boxes. He is spray painting the brick wall behind him of cash and lyrics to world famous singer and rapper Cardi B's hit song *Money* stating "All I really need is the money." The spray painted lyrics represents songs in the world today that symbolize money is everything. "As the song's title implies, the lyrics mainly see Cardi rapping about money. She talks about the insane wealth she has created for herself and the glittering lifestyle it has brought her. And despite the great fortune she has at her disposal, she still raps about wanting more in the song." ⁴ These lyrics go hand and hand with my idea of materialism and consumerism; the unsatisfied feeling and the crave to always want more. The stacked Hermes boxes represents the fantasized hierarchy we strive to reach. The buildup of Hermes boxes represents class, money and upper echelon.



Fig 4.

The Golden Soapbox
36" x 80" Acrylic and Spray Paint on Wood

⁴ Smf. "'Money' by Cardi B." *Song Meanings and Facts*, 24 Oct. 2018, www.songmeaningsandfacts.com/money-by-cardi-b/.

In my next large scale painting I have delivered another message dealing with consumerist and materialistic people and their focus. In my 48” x 48” painting, “*All I See Are Dollar Signs*,” stands Scrooge McDuck, once again climbing on a “hierarchy” ladder, only focusing on the dollar signs that lays on the ground below him. Chaos is represented by a repetitive pattern of shapes on the right side of the painting- the area that has no dollar signs. We see that Scrooge has dismissed the world around him due to the fact that he is only focusing on the symbolic dollar sign. Famous artist, Rhianna delivered a song to the world “*Pour it Up*” in 2013 using lyrics that classify her wealth and uses lyrics such as all she sees “are dollar signs,” influencing the title of my painting.



Fig. 5

All I See Is Dollar Signs
48” x 48” Acrylic and Spray Paint on Wood

Lastly, I used a consumerist item, Grey Poupon, that became the condiment of choice by popular artists that dates back to the 1980's. After the medias advertisements in the 1900's of using an upper echelon to depict the mustard, the message carried on. One artist, Kanye West releases a song called *Facts* in 2016 with lyrics "Yeezy, Yeezy, Yeezy, this is pure luxury I give 'em grey poupon on a DJ Mustard, ah!" Here, we see Kanye West using luxury with Grey Poupon. I decided to use a "luxury" mustard for my 42" x 25" inch painting- a modernized version of Andy Warhols' Campbell Soup, one of the most famous Pop Art pieces of all time. A famous artist using a consumerist product released evidence that there was an immense increase in Campbell Soup sales. This acts like the media portraying Grey Poupon and the connections it has to class. All in which concludes the constant evolution of manufacturing a consumer culture. To enhance minor details that further exploit Grey Poupon as a luxury item and using pop art irony and comic, I changed the original label "Made With White Wine" on each Poupon bottle to "Made With ___" and filling the blank with a "high class" ingredient, such as caviar.



Fig. 6

Grey Poupon
42" x 25" Acrylic, Spray Paint and Screen Print on Wood

I. Discussion

This dissertation delivers various imperative insights into how materialism develops prior to adulthood, the effects of materialism and consumerism, existing artistic work dealing with these problems and my own creative practice revolving around these issues; "... that material value and perceived social comparison gaps may be associated with dissatisfaction with standard of living, and that the dissatisfaction with standard of living in turn may influence both dissatisfaction with personal life and with current social equality." ⁷ I can translate materialistic ideas using consumerist ideas and imagery by exploring and criticizing this idea by featuring consumable goods, sites of consumption, the ownership of goods, or using advertisement imagery in my work. As see in figure 3, I used materialistic goods that are popular in today's society such as Kanye West's Yeezys, Virgil Abloh's Off-White sweatshirt and Louis Vuitton hat and Hermes boxes, all in which are items that are highly priced primarily because of the label. This consumer culture we manufactured has become a curse to society and our physical and mental well-being. With the use of advertisements, social media platforms, American television, environmental factors such as one's family and surroundings, we created an inordinate human desire for things we want, but feel like we need. From generation to generation, materialism and consumerism increases, effecting and damaging personal wellbeing's, relationships, communities, and the environment.

⁷ Yang, Hyeeseung. "Do Media Portrayals of Affluence Foster Feelings of Relative Deprivation? Exploring a Path Model of Social Comparison and Materialism on Television Viewers' Life Dissatisfaction." *ProQuest*, 2005, search.proquest.com/docview/305415744/abstract/6D7FB267F6E04C92PQ/1?accountid=14667.

II. Conclusion

To conclude, materialism and consumerism is socially and self-destructive. The impulse to continuously buy wants over needs is affiliated with depression, anxiety, lower self-esteem, isolation and broken relationships. Immense amount of psychological research supports these assessments and suggests that materialism diminishes the happiness and peace of mind of those who succumb to it, afflicting people of all class, both rich, poor and anywhere in between. “Materialism forces us into comparison with the possessions of others, a race both cruelly illustrated and crudely propelled by that toxic website. There is no end to it.”⁸ George Monbiot, author of the article, *Materialism: a system that eats us from the inside out*, provides an example; “If you have four Rolexes while another has five, you are a Rolex short of contentment. The material pursuit of self-esteem reduces your self-esteem.”⁸ We allow ourselves to believe that having more financial income and more possessions boosts our wellbeing. Combining worldly ambitions, material aspirations and perpetual growth creates the formula for mass unhappiness. Materialism and consumerism has adversely affected the entire framework of our society. “People are forgetting their moral values and often fail to understand the distinction between right choices and the wrong ones. The only thing that matters is good quality life and false comforts. They think that everything around them is dictated by need of humans and is being

⁸ Monbiot, George. “Materialism: a System That Eats Us from the inside Out.” *The Guardian*, Dec. 2013.

⁹ Mukherjee, Bidisha. “The Adverse Effects of Materialism in Our Society.” *MissionSelf*, MissionSelf, 26 Feb. 2018, missionself.com/materialism-in-society.

provided by the environment. All their beliefs are based on scientific inference only.”⁹ Set yourself apart from the material world and recognize the real self that lies within you. If you do this, you can prevent materialist and consumerist influences from blocking your inner growth and disrupting your psychological health.

I plan to continue working on this project, painting more artwork to submit to exhibitions. Now, more than ever, due to the world pandemic of COVID-19 and the downfall of the economy and stock market, people will soon realize the more important things in life; How this manufactured culture of ours does not promote overall happiness. These materialized items are just “things” we want, but don’t need.

⁹ Mukherjee, Bidisha. “The Adverse Effects of Materialism in Our Society.” *MissionSelf*, MissionSelf, 26 Feb. 2018, missionself.com/materialism-in-society.

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