

Life²



The
problem with
consumerism

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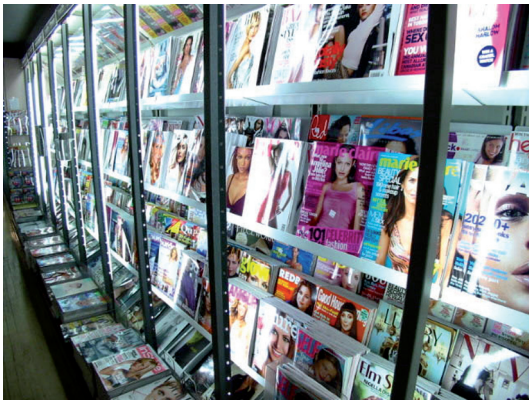
Introduction

Consumerism is one of the strongest forces affecting our lives in the modern world. The term 'consumerism' does not simply refer to immediate factors in our daily lives such as the omnipresence of advertising, but anything connected to the overarching idea in our modern society that in order to be happier, better and more successful people we have to have more stuff.

In this booklet, we will explore the power of consumerism, how it manifests itself in our lives and the effects it has on us.

Advertising

Every day, each of us is bombarded with around 1,600 commercial messages.ⁱ This sounds like a massive number, but when you think about a typical day in your life it is quite possible. A typical day might feature the following activities – get up, read the paper (featuring advertisements), listen to the radio (advertisements), catch the bus to work (advertisements on the bus and at the roadside), arrive at work (advertisements on the internet), go home (same advertisements as on the incoming journey), watch TV (advertisements) and go to bed. Needless to say, this is exposure to a lot of advertisements!



Just take an example from one source – in a randomly-selected weekday edition of The Sun newspaperⁱⁱ there are forty one advertisements, taking up roughly twenty two pages of a sixty four page paper. Over one third of the paper consists of advertisements! This does not include the full page



specifically devoted to classified ads, an entire section sponsored by a company, the prominent product logos in the sports section or the other product placements that are included in many of the articles themselves.

We are exposed to advertising through a range of different sources. Some of them we may be aware of (like the examples listed above) but others may be

less easy to spot, such as product placement in films. For example, a James Bond film might feature lead characters using mobile phones made by a particular manufacturer who has paid a handsome sum to make them do this. For this fee, manufacturers would expect a few close ups of the product's logo when the characters use it. One of the most famous cases of product placement was the use of the American chocolate sweet 'Reese's Pieces' in the film ET in 1982. As a result of this placement, sales of the product increased by sixty five per cent.ⁱⁱⁱ Placement has now become so common that some films are being

criticised for becoming little more than vehicles for a range of products. The 1997 James Bond film 'Tomorrow Never Dies' featured placement for the following products - Visa card, Avis car rentals, BMW cars and motorcycles, Smirnoff vodka, Heineken beer, Omega watches, Ericsson mobile phones and L'Oreal make up. It's a wonder there was any time left for a plot.

Despite occasional criticism however, product placement remains widespread – in films, TV programmes, magazines and other media. So, commercial messages even affect how we are entertained.

But it goes further than this. In her seminal book on consumer culture 'No Logo', Naomi Klein identified a range of underground tools that marketers use to get us to do things - tools that we cannot hope to identify unless we are insiders within the advertising industry. One example of such a tool is 'street promoters' – people who will "hype brands one-on-one on the street, in the clubs and on-line".^{iv} In other words, companies are attempting to recruit our friends and peers to sell us things – not simply influencing them to believe a product is desirable and telling us about it, but by actually paying people to use their status and relationships with others to flog their products to their peers. This seems a rather cynical exploitation of human relationships and trust.

This massive amount of advertising is now such a normal part of western society that most of us do not seem to realise just how pervasive it is in our lives. As you go through your day tomorrow, notice the number of adverts you see and the sources from which they appear, and you will discover just how much of your valuable time and brain space advertisers are forcing themselves into. Surely we have better things to do during this period of 'hijacked' time?



It is not simply the 'irritant factor' of advertising that is the problem however. Although we may have stopped noticing just how much we are being bombarded by advertising, it is still affecting our decisions, our worldviews and our lives generally. We will consider just how much later in this booklet.

Consumerism beyond advertising

Advertising is just the tip of the iceberg. There are many other influences in modern society that promote the ‘values’ of consumerism. To get a sense of these influences, imagine yourself as the recipient of ‘mental inputs’, the messages that enter your brain from the outside world. They could include the opinions of your friends, images from TV news programmes, advertisements on the internet and things you have learned from books or your education. Some of the major sources of inputs can be illustrated as follows:



This is not an exhaustive list, but even if we only consider a selection of these we can see that many of them promote and support consumerism.

For example, newspapers and magazines do not just contain pages of advertisements but also stories about

new gadgets, new clothes, property, makeovers, travel and many other things, all suggesting that having them will make life more fun and interesting, bring you greater freedom or bring some other positive change to your life. They may not promote an item directly like an advertisement but many will help to create desires and needs in the reader – some relating to specific products like cars or clothes and others relating to particular ways of life that require further money and consumption.

Our modern obsession with celebrities also means that newspapers and magazines publish stories about glamorous people we might aspire to copy, and much of this aspiration is to consume the same things as they do – from designer clothes to private jets.

Overarching all of this is a tendency in the mass media (in the UK, at least) to be unable or unwilling to question consumerism as an idea. When this lack of critical thinking is accompanied by the promotion of consumerism that we have just been describing, this amounts to implicit support for it. Moreover, in their coverage of issues where consumerism could well be a major cause (e.g. poverty, climate change etc.) the media appear to be unwilling to make this link – somehow consumerism is regarded as an untouchable component of modern society. This applies to most mass media, whatever their political leanings and whether they are tabloid or ‘quality’.

So it is not just the advertising within newspapers and magazines (or indeed other media – from radio to the internet) that promotes consumerism, but also much of their actual content. This



content might not only consist of features that directly create needs and desires in people but it might also include those that deal with topics that are apparently unrelated to consumerism that somehow still manage to give support to its vision of the world.

Leisure activity is another source of mental inputs. One example of a leisure activity that supports consumerism is sport – perhaps most notably football. Even at its most basic level – a kickabout in the park – the game is touched by consumerism. There is pressure on children (and indeed adults!) to have the latest boots, kit and the latest version of the strip of their favourite team. And clubs are well aware of the commercial value of people's loyalty to their team – many launch a new kit each year, with both 'home' and 'away' variants, along

with numerous other items in their club shops. One of the most mystifying aspects of this is when fans buy an updated version of a team's strip that is no different from the previous one other than the fact that the sponsor displayed on the front has changed. This surely shows the power of consumerism – people being prepared to spend £45 to advertise your company for you!

At a higher level, football has become mired in consumerism and greed. Top players can earn in excess of £100,000 per week, creating role models for children that are not based on excelling at the sport they love but on earning as much as possible and achieving a particular lifestyle. Football and consumerism seem to have become intertwined, and the same thing is happening in many other sports, including rugby, cricket and tennis.



A final example of a source of mental input is our family and peers, who can influence us in subtle ways. Even sitting at home with one's family chatting about holiday plans or in the pub with friends discussing someone's new mobile phone can create new needs or feelings of pressure. Mixing with people who have consumerist lifestyles can therefore be a powerful influence on us. It can often seem as if this is the only way to behave and that these are the only aspirations to have. In short, it is another thing that helps the consumerist philosophy to maintain its power in society.

The influence of other people on us can go way beyond friends and family however. If we look around and see that everyone is living consumerist lives with consumerist aspirations – from our neighbours to film stars to politicians – it is likely that most of us will accept this as the only way of life that is available, or if not the only one then the best.

These are just a few examples of the many 'mental inputs' we receive, but in almost any area of life we can find consumerism wrapping its tentacles around us. Overall, this means that consumerism is the all-pervasive theme in our culture - a way of life and a judgement about what the best life is. It seeps into most parts of our lives, whether we are aware of it or not, and can profoundly affect each of us.

The effects of consumerism

It might be argued that we should have the mental strength to resist the influence of an advertisement or our friends, or that consumerism is nothing more than a minor irritant in our everyday lives. But that would be to underestimate its power.

Exposure to one advertisement can be powerful enough to influence someone. Otherwise, why would Coca Cola alone spend \$2 billion per year on advertising?^v But when we are exposed to thousands of advertisements a day (and have been from childhood), and consumerism is promoted in most of the mental inputs we receive, this can trap us within a consumerist bubble and can mould our entire worldviews – our aspirations, views, lifestyles and many other things. And this trap is very difficult to escape from. Indeed, such is its power, we may not even realise we are caught in a trap. So, the real power of consumerism comes from its cumulative effect - the fact that it has seeped into every aspect of our lives, and that these elements of our culture continually reinforce each other.

Some of the effects of consumerism on us are what one might expect from a culture that promotes consumption. We slip into a cycle of wanting more things – whether it is the new iPod, another holiday abroad or simply a particular type of food – and the pursuit of these things takes up our time, energy, stress and money (sometimes money we do not have – one reason for the spiralling debt of Britons today). We also constantly compare ourselves with other people (both real and fictitious), wanting to be like them or in their position. This leads us into a state of constant dissatisfaction – we are never happy with what we have and are always on edge. And this is just what the logic of consumerism wants, as it makes us more active consumers on a continuous basis. So, consumerism not only affects our behaviour (we spend more time on consumerist activities) but also our thinking (our aspirations, attitudes and worldviews).

Other effects are perhaps less immediately obvious but equally important. For example, consumerism can affect our worldviews and



confuse us - especially when we start feeling that our lives are not providing us with what we need to be happy. From the Western perspective, we might have all the elements that constitute a good quality of life – job, car, house and other material possessions. But we might nevertheless feel somehow dissatisfied and empty, feeling that the pursuit of more possessions and the pressure of having to earn more money or sink into further debt to pay for this lifestyle is bringing more costs than benefits to our lives.

This situation can be extremely difficult to escape from, as there are very few dissenting voices on consumerism in modern society – the mainstream idea of what it is to be ‘ethical’ still does not incorporate the idea of escaping the consumerist trap. Any individual struggling with their consumerist lifestyle is therefore unlikely to receive understanding, guidance or support from mainstream society or their friends if they too are immersed within this mainstream society.

There may well be millions of people who feel this sense of dissatisfaction in their lives but are not able to identify its cause or escape from it. Although consumerism is not the only reason why one might feel dissatisfied or stressed, evidence is building among psychologists that “holding a strongly materialist values orientation is, all else being equal, detrimental to psychological well-being”.^{vi}

What is wrong with consumerism?

There is not necessarily anything morally wrong in buying and selling things, nor even in promoting them (in an honest way and to a certain extent). But the extreme form of consumerism that now dominates the Western world has a number of unpleasant and even potentially dangerous characteristics.

It is intrusive

This is as good a reason as any to dislike it! Advertising, selling and product placement is simply an annoying imposition on one's peace and personal space.

Advertising is everywhere, and spoils many experiences and pleasant views. It is like having a stranger following you and shouting at you for several hours a day.

It is manipulative

Both advertising and consumerism itself try to manipulate us into adopting a particular view of how we should live rather than letting us decide for ourselves.

One might argue that advertisements are simply there to make people aware of the products available to them and serve no purpose other than this. But this is

not always the case. Many advertisements and other communications in our consumer society go way beyond this function and attempt to manipulate people into making particular decisions.

Modern advertising is not just about telling people that a product exists – i.e. responding to an existing want or need someone may have. It is now about creating wants and needs that we might not have had before seeing the advertisement. In other words, it creates false desires and needs in us by manipulating us. The advertiser's ultimate purpose in creating these needs is always to make people want their product.

But how dare anyone manipulate us into having these wants and needs?

If I really wanted to do something - say, purchase a particular product - I would decide for myself that I needed it and then make my own mind up about which product to buy once I had seen what products were available. If however someone tries to persuade me that I need a particular product when I do not and then attempts to create (false) feelings of dissatisfaction in me if I do not have it, this is an aggressive attempt to exercise power over me. This 'mental aggression' is just as unpleasant as physical aggression, because its effect can be equally, if not more, harmful.

At the end of his book 'Authenticity', David Boyle notes that he asked himself whether the book (about moving away from a society dominated by marketing, spin and fakes) was just for middle-aged people. He concluded "maybe it is, but I actually think a yearning for the real is shared by people far younger than me, because they don't like to be taken for a ride".^{vii}

It does not meet our needs

Some people may believe that consumerism meets all their desires in life. But for an increasing number of people it does not. It creates impossible aspirations – quite simply, the principles it is based on make it a logical impossibility that it will make us happy. If the idea of consumerism is to continually create new needs in people and make them consume more, this will result in us constantly chasing after a carrot on a stick. Although we might reach it sometimes (e.g. by buying a particular product), a new 'carrot' (i.e. need) will then appear. A lack of fulfilment is therefore built into the whole idea of consumerism. This is not surprising – if the system is not aimed at meeting



human needs and interests, but at generating profit, then it will only be a matter of extreme luck that it ends up doing the former.

The second point follows on from this: consumerism cannot provide many of the things that are important to us. This view is supported by recent studies in the relatively new discipline of 'human well-being' which is gaining increasing interest from politicians and others. It can broadly be described as the study of what makes human beings happy and fulfilled, and the desire to base political and social systems on promoting these things.

Research in this area is showing that consumerism is inconsistent with human well-being. The New Economics Foundation is a think tank at the heart of this topic and in a discussion paper setting out the political territory of the topic they note that:

“The areas in which greater [financial] investment will yield continued improvements in well-being lie beyond the reach of markets”^{viii}

In other words, economic markets and consumption can fulfil some of our basic needs – including areas such as food and shelter - but there are other important things they simply cannot provide. The paper's author, Richard Reeves, describes these things as 'non-market goods'. As he notes:



“There is little wrong with Faberge or Furby’s. It is what [they are] failing to give us: companionship, time for reflection, spirituality, security, intellectual development and joy in our children”^{ix}

The problem is that consumerism often claims that it can provide us with these things. Firstly, advertisers link their products to real human needs. An example of this cited by Reeves is an advertising campaign for Doritos tortilla chips that linked the product to the idea of friends and companionship.^x Secondly, advertisements will suggest (or at least, strongly imply) that the product can help to fulfil these real human needs. In the Doritos example, the advertisement seems to suggest that “buying their tortilla chips is one way to boost companionship, styling

them ‘friendchips’”.^{xi} So, consumerism pretends to be able to meet our real needs – but it can not. This process of misleading people about critically important human needs represents one of the saddest aspects of consumerism’s manipulative power.

It has been encouraging recently to see the Government and political parties beginning to develop policies to promote human well-being. Their efforts will never be successful, however, if they seek to achieve them within an economic system that continues to allow (in fact, encourage) the present culture of consumerism. The same could be said for attempts to address key global issues such as climate change and poverty. This is firstly because the culture of consumerism conflicts with the aims of human well-being (both globally and individually – e.g. poverty reduction and sustainable living) and also because it is so strong and all-encompassing that it makes it extremely difficult for people to see the inconsistencies within it or easily pursue alternatives.

It restricts our choices and lives

Even if consumerism did meet our needs it would not be an acceptable philosophy on which to base our societies because we need to be able to choose the lives we want to lead and it prevents us from doing this.

In its broadest sense, consumerism can be seen as a particular view of the 'good life' – a view that says life is better when you have more 'market goods' (products, services and activities). It was not originally set up as a specific philosophy or with any particular aim in mind – in fact, it may not have been 'set up' at all but may simply have developed as a result of a range of factors, including the desire for growth that is implicit within our global economic system, the need to get economies and societies back on track after the Second World War, the technological developments of the last sixty years and the spread of new forms of communication.

But regardless of its origins, it does now represent a particular view of how we should live. There are, however, many other ways we could live (e.g. simple living or a focus on time and people rather than possessions), some of which people may feel are more appropriate for them.

There will always be some cultural system that forms the basis of society. This will always feature a particular view of 'the good life'. We need a system that sees choice as a key aspect of the good life. Not the idea of 'consumer choice' that is so often presented to us in the modern world but a system that enables people to have real choices about the lives they want to lead, gives them the

skills they need to make these choices and encourages them to pursue the lives they really want.

Consumerism is completely inappropriate for this role, as it is a system that actually restricts our ability to see the choices available to us in life, make choices or put them into action. It only promotes its own view of 'the good life' – attempting to make people become better consumers - rather than helping people to see the full range of options open to them and helping them to decide for themselves what they want. It pretends that it offers people choices and freedom beyond its own view of the good life. You know the sort of thing – advertisements saying 'You're you. Be you. You can be what you want' and other such nonsense. But all that this is doing is encouraging you to feel free within the consumerist parameters they are setting for you. And that is not real freedom.

A key reason why it restricts people so effectively is that it has become a massively powerful force, with an influence across most areas of society and our individual lives. And as it is the basic culture of our society, very few people are going to be able to see beyond it.

It therefore becomes very difficult to question or escape from the consumerist worldview, even if one feels strongly that something is wrong with one's life within

it. This is particularly difficult when consumerism claims to be able to meet all our needs, because it leads to self-doubt and confusion about our identity, happiness and life direction which is painful to experience and which, for many people, is never resolved.

It affects our worldviews and characters

Consumerism does not just restrict our choices. It is also a significant influence on our perspectives on the world. For example, if we are spending much of our time and energy seeking the next product or activity to consume then we have less time and enthusiasm to learn about the world or broaden our horizons. Also, consumerism is unlikely to prompt us (or make it easy for us) to question important things such as the availability of the resources that maintain our lifestyles, the capacity of the planet to hold the waste we generate or the vulnerability of the centralized, import-reliant food supply systems we currently use.

Also, consumerism plays a role in moulding our characters – perhaps in ways we would rather it did not. For example, if the whole aim of consumerism is to get us to acquire more, then it might well lead to excessive self interest in the people affected by it. If it includes the pursuit of interests other than human (or value-driven)

ones then it seems likely that those following this path will have less time for, or interest in, other people.

It is unsustainable

We live on a planet with a rapidly growing population (6.7 billion people and counting) and a finite set of natural resources for this population to consume. We've moved from using around half the planet's biocapacity in 1961 to over 1.25 times it in 2003. We are already living way beyond the planet's limits.

Given this worrying situation, it seems obvious that we can't continue with the ever-increasing levels of consumption demanded by consumerism without major consequences. In fact, what we urgently need is precisely the opposite of consumerism – namely, a philosophy that urges us to reduce our levels of consumption.



What can we do about it?

Changes we can make to society

As we have seen, consumerism is an idea that is woven into the fabric of our modern society. It is intricately linked with the particular economic philosophy that has dominated the West in recent decades – that of neoliberal capitalism. To move away from a culture of consumerism, we will therefore need to challenge the philosophy and values of this current economic system. Essentially, we need a cultural shift in our society and its values. Perhaps the current financial crisis gives us the ideal opportunity to think about the direction in which we're heading as a society, and to consider new ideas like this.

One of the key tenets of neoliberal economic philosophy has been the need to seek constant economic growth, as the assumption is that this will provide us with the best lives. As consumerism builds ever greater demand for goods and services, it is easy to see how it plays an important role in driving this economic growth.

This neoliberal economic philosophy is not working. And it's not surprising when you think about the faulty assumptions that it is based on. It is based on the view that human beings are rational calculating machines

seeking to maximise our share of available goods. All of the systems and institutions that we go through in life and the communications we receive in day-to-day life serve to promote lives that uphold this view - so it profoundly affects and moulds our world views. This makes many of us miserable, for a number of reasons we have already covered:

- It is based on a restricted and incorrect view of what makes us happy. We aren't simply 'consumers' who want to maximise our share of goods – we are also human beings who need love, relationships, cooperation, nature and, above all, the ability to choose the lives we want. This view therefore leads to a system that fails to give us what we need and forces many people to live lives they might not otherwise choose. It also puts pressure on us to behave in particular ways or be particular people that may not be 'us' and may therefore cause us stress and anxiety;
- This system actively prevents us from making our own choices about how we want to live our lives, as it only promotes this one restricted view of what a 'good life' consists of (for example, buying more stuff) and doesn't give us any opportunities to consider alternative views or ways of living. Many people therefore end up believing that this is the only way to live, in the absence of any alternatives. We end up

trapped in this way of thinking and unable to make real choices about how we want to live.

Our current choice of economic system is not only bad for our well-being. It is also one of the central influences exacerbating key global problems such as the environment (including climate change and the unsustainable use of natural resources) and social justice (including poverty and human rights abuses). Our own well-being and global problems are therefore two sides of the same coin. We urgently need a new system that will put these things right too.

We need to move towards a society that has a much broader and nuanced view of what gives people well-being and happiness, and use the economic system simply as one of the means we employ to achieve this end, rather than as an end in itself. We need to do all this within parameters of sustainability and social justice. This type of approach to society is often referred to as 'new economics'.

This is a system that sees real choice as a key aspect of the good life. It enables people to have real choices about the lives they want to lead, gives them the skills they need to make those choices, and encourages them to pursue the lives they really want.

So how might a system of new economics look? It would seek to promote human happiness and well-being by equipping us with the basic material and non-material resources we need in order to live the lives we want. It would include a basic level of material goods such as food, drink, shelter and money, plus nonmaterial goods such as the life skills we need to be truly self-determined and live happily.

The new system would also promote particular conditions that are felt to be conducive to human flourishing, such as stronger local communities, greater equality, education to promote well-being and the opportunity for children to grow without being exposed to influences (such as advertising) that they are not yet equipped to deal with. Measures on the latter point might include a ban on all forms of advertising to children under sixteen and regulation to ensure that advertisements are labelled to show that they are attempting to communicate a message for a specific purpose. There would also be regulation to ensure that we live within the resources of the planet and within some boundaries of social justice.

For a more detailed discussion of what a better future might look like, read Richard Docwra's book 'Modern Life – as good as it gets'.

Changes we can make to our own lives

These changes in society will not happen overnight.

There are however some immediate steps we can each take in our own lives to release ourselves from the grip of consumerism, and to start living the lives we really want.

- **Exercise intellectual independence**

Be aware of how consumerism touches your life and when people or organisations are trying to manipulate you. Try to defend yourself from unwanted external pressures. One effective way to do this is to simply ignore advertising – don't let it affect you or take up any of your time or brain space.

Avoidance is one strategy, but it is also important to build up the intellectual independence to deal with consumerism. When you receive any message, whether it is in a social conversation, at work, in a newspaper, or on television, consider the source it came from and whether it might have a particular agenda. Decide whether you can trust it and whether you should make any allowances for it in your interpretation of the message. You can then choose whether the message is to be digested or ignored. You can apply this questioning approach beyond specific messages such as advertisements to challenge even broader cultural or social beliefs such as the importance of striving for greater material wealth.

- **Consume less, live more**

Take some time to stand back from your life, away from influences like consumerism, and think about what really matters to you in life and how you want to live. Then, try to live the life you want, not the one that others would like you to lead. For many of us, a life of consumerism and constantly striving to gain further material wealth is not the one we would choose upon honest reflection. Many of us will find that reducing our levels of consumption, caring less about materialism and refocusing our attention and time towards things that really matter to us will eliminate a lot of problems in our lives and give us a great deal more satisfaction, whilst also leading to a more sustainable and fair future for all.

For more ideas on how to thrive in the face of consumerism, have a look at some of the other things we offer at Life² - visit www.lifesquared.org.uk.





The problem with consumerism

Consumerism is one of the strongest forces affecting our lives in the modern world. Every day we are surrounded by messages telling us that in order to be happier, better and more successful people we have to have more stuff.

Despite this, many people remain unaware of just how far consumerism has crept into different areas of our lives or the level to which it can affect us.

In this booklet, we will explore the power of consumerism, how it manifests itself in our lives and the effects it can have on us.

