

## CONSUMERISM AND ENVIRONMENT: A QUEST FOR MAN'S PLACE IN THE WORLD

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*T*here is an existential anxiety felt by man today. Man's fear and danger, influenced by the gradual annihilation of things connected to his survival, has arisen out of over-consumption. Worldwide destruction of ecological resources adds to such angst. Also, food shortages, pollution, health, and waste mismanagement threaten man's existence. In the human level, a decline of moral resolve and spirituality among different classes of people is observable. All these occurrences endanger the future of humanity and exhibit dangerously the loss of Being.

This paper examines the phenomenon of consumerism, its effects on social and economic life, and its impact on the environment in particular and the quality of life in general. Furthermore, it draws the philosophical foundations to rediscover the inherent worth of a human being, re-establish his natural link with the things in the universe, and to offer some solutions to the problems brought about by consumerism and thus, establish a healthy environment conducive to human living.

Consumerism occurs when there arises a new attitude on the part of the public to chronically buy new goods and services as an endless quest for the attainment of material things. It creates the myth that consuming will gratify the buyer of products or services. Also, consumerism obscures the connection between the product and man's true need, whether or not he has knowledge of the product's quality, its origin and its processing; or whether or not the product has some adverse environmental consequences. Thus, with little consideration on the usefulness of the product, buying becomes endless and uncontrolled, compulsive and irrational.



Consumerism is a means. Through it, rich businessmen retain control of their buying public. But while man has a common desire for a sufficient supply of life's necessities, a peaceful community, a stable family, and a healthy relationship, consumerism, on the other hand, sustains the ongoing insatiable quest for material things and money. Hence, consumerism makes the acquisition of these things as ends in themselves.

Mass media perpetuates the myth of consumerism. The advertising media, which spends huge sum of money, persuades consumers to satiate their desire and follow the latest trends; it creates certain attitude on the part of the consumers. Advertisers manipulate man's basic needs. They use techniques to dig into his unanswered needs and urge him to buy the product with the personal reward systems of acquisition and acceptance by others.

In addition, the capitalist economy holds the myth that the condition will improve if people buy more and more things. It is true that as people develop culturally the need for better food and other material things increase. But one must assess the use and relevance of the things he acquires or he must evaluate whether or not they redound to his true benefit, needs and goals, and not just for status symbol, prestige or vanity.

Capitalists create new needs to consumers even if the products they sell have little relation to their actual use. Items never heard before such as foot lotion, magic hairbrush, new jeans, etc. create a compulsive and irrational desire to buy and possess those items. They also take advantage of the fact that not all consumers are wise. Thus, those who have less in life and less in moral values are excited in the opening of new malls; others even go for a month without eating good food in exchange of an expensive jean.

Erich Fromm says that the mode of acquisition and use of things should be qualitatively proportionate to man's actual needs. Sadly, such claim remains unheeded. Today, money is spent largely on trendy things like weight training, dieting, cosmetic surgery, liposuction, or total makeover. These trends, reinforced by advertising, create a false notion about the true goals in life. As a result, one believes his self-worth and dignity are measured by a total change of his physical appearance. Further, one is led to believe that

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consumption is an answer to problems of daily life; that sadness, regrets, emptiness, and despair can be quenched by spending lots of money in shopping; and that buying a new car or cell phone eases these negative emotions. However, material things only temporarily relieve man's sadness and pain. Thus, he must confront his existential turmoil with his nature, that is, with his capacity to be conscious of his condition and to rise to the level of reflection and spiritual awakening.

Moreover, over-consumerism badly affects the poor consumers in the country. Poor consumers are led to buy more than what they can afford. For example, most public school teachers in rural areas, a certain survey shows, are manipulated by businessmen to use credit cards and buy what they want when they go to the city. Years ago, credit cards belonged exclusively to the rich for convenience in their business transactions. Now, even a low-salaried worker can have a credit card. However, he can be deceived by the convenience of its use and by some psychological trick that with a card one can buy limitless items.

In addition, marketing trend today hastens the discarding of old products since most items produced for economically average consumers lack durability and quality. Secondly, if the item is still physically functioning, advertisements make the items psychologically obsolete in just a short span of time. To illustrate: one who has a doctoral degree is psychologically inclined to dispose of his old 3210 Nokia cellular phone even if the item is still physically well-functioning. Society may say that the new things one has owned confer him high status. Today, many users sell their cellular phones not because of a need for money but because of a want to buy a new one and follow the latest trend.

Consumption can become an end in itself and no longer a means to an end. Fueled by passion for the new and the trendy, consumption makes man lose his sense of the past and his connection with it. As a result, man's existential time element is reduced to the present. What is old belongs to the past and should be discarded. What is new must be welcomed, but must be constantly replaced. In contrast, people before kept their items with care as part

of their lives and extensions of their experiences. Now, nothing is kept even if a product is in good quality.

The market keeps on introducing new things. For instance, a month-old item can be speedily replaced by a new one; songs on Billboards have no lasting impact on the general public no matter how good they are [The business of the billboard competition replaces a song in just a matter of a week or two with another hit song.] If ever one remembers a beautiful composition, he will buy its compact disc as his own personal collection and hears it solitarily in the confines of his own room. As a society, we then lack a common tune, a shared music which we all can universally appreciate.

Consumption of food and drinks is also dictated by foreign markets which influence the tastes of poor consumers in the third world. Food and drinks are produced not necessarily to cater to man's nutritional and health needs but to provide wealth and distinction. With the influence of television, people today crave for hotdogs, noodles, French fries, Coca-Cola and other food and drinks which have less-nutritional value and might even be dangerous to their health. In this sense, we consume certain food and drinks because we are enticed by celebrities who endorse the product.

In a larger perspective, consumerism has brought serious social and environmental costs. As rich capitalists consume all the resources for their own profit and interest, nothing is left for the poor to consume. For instance, capitalists from rich countries cleverly set up large-scale industries for profit in some remote corner of developing countries. Agricultural lands, the source of living of the local people, are developed to fit to livestock raising for food chain businesses and then promise the local people employment opportunities generated out of the new businesses put up. While the local people suffer the loss of their agricultural lands, the rich businessmen benefit from such loss. They are mainly interested in the profit with no attention to the social, environmental and human costs of their doing.

Consumerism has destroyed the ecological balance of nature crucial to man's survival. There is wasteful use of resources, labor and capital in the country. Consumerism further accelerates the problem of food shortage, exploitation of child labor, annihilation of native



homelands and extinction of forest, water, and land resources, pollution, waste management problems and most all degradation of morals and spirituality. For instance, in terms of waste management, fast food chains make possible the convenient but questionably health-conducive use of styrofoams and other items that cannot be recycled. Landfills are always full of cheap discarded products made obsolete before they are worn-out.

In the aspect of leisure and recreation, a lot of people no longer participate actively in sports and games that are supposed to develop them physically. Many children spend long hours playing virtual computer games that may not be in the real sense productive. Leisure is something they have to pay per hour in a computer mall in order to enjoy.

Erich Fromm mentions repression of awareness of the basic problems of human existence. More basic issues like love, communal solidarity and freedom are replaced with materialism and an infinite hunger to possess more and more things. Man refuses to confront the universal problems of human life. He has lost touch of the fundamental facts of human existence. For example, one may neglect giving quality time to his family and loved ones and resolving problems of loneliness or of communication gaps with his fellowmen as he is busy spending long hours in his office just to be able to buy 5-million peso car in the next six months.

When consumption has become an end-in-itself man simply consumes too much and possesses too much. Every goal is motivated by selfish interest and not by service. Success for a greedy man is defined as possession or accumulation of wealth and when bottomless appetites are encouraged, corruption is inevitable. Corruption destroys the basic foundation of a political society. Fromm, on the other hand, stressed that buying and accumulating have to be justified by a real purpose. Secondly, over-consumption creates a false pursuit of happiness identified only as nothing but achieving selfish personal gain. As a result of promoting one's self-gain, basic necessities of life needed for the poor to uplift their conditions are neglected. Ironically, as more and more malls, shopping centers and other business establishments are put up, the poor conditions of the majority of the Filipino worsen. In the area of

food security, the Presidential Committee on Effective Governance reports that rice production rate is now lower than that of population. The country is producing nearly enough to feed the present population. Moreover, domestic rice prices are high and each price increase has a similar effect to that of depressing wages. In the area of health, the study of Herrin says that the country still faces the high mortality rate of unhealthy children of inadequate basic health services for environmental sanitation and childhood health care. In the area of housing, the findings from population and development studies states that the three key issues in housing are availability, accessibility and affordability. In the area of education, the study of Herrin states that high enrollment rates mask unacceptably low achievement scores and large regional and economic differentials in educational attainment.

Something in the essence of man's true goal in life has been replaced by the despiritualization and commercialization of culture. Human thought has lost its richness. Too much desire for material things and profit has weakened the capacity of human reason to discern man's true goal in life. Secondly, while consumerism offers a satisfaction of owning a product, it only offers a short-term self-gratification for those who can afford the luxury while disappointment and misguided ambition for those who cannot. What Fromm wants to emphasize is not to reduce cultural and communal values to a mere economic success in the market. Instead, morality and the ontological value of a meaningful cultural experience must be preserved. Thirdly, the modern consumer sublimates the desire for cultural fulfillment to the rewards of buying and owning commodities. But overly consuming without its true purpose leads to the danger of cultural materialism and profane attitude towards life.

On the contrary, Fromm says that man is not purely situated in this material world. As partly a spirit, he needs to nurture the acculturating and beautiful experience of spiritual rebirth and renewal as expressed in arts, religion, and participate with his family in promoting communal solidarity. These human experiences other than materialistic pursuits evoke transcendent truths that truly satisfy man's innermost being.

Given all these facts of consumerism, the society is confronted with many challenges today. There are philosophical questions in relation to issue of consumerism that must be dealt with. Firstly, consumer policies especially in the Third World countries result to exploitation of the environmental resources. With the capitalists main interest on profit economic laws and policies are not humanitarian and ecologically sensitive. Business ethics is set aside. In addition, the rich capitalists always prevail upon poor consumers for profit. Consumers' capacity to select products and services is curtailed. Selection of products is not catered to what the consumers want, but to what greater profit stockholders can get. Thus, a consumer's choice and freedom is limited. His choice is made for him by advertisements that reduced his choice to brand names advertised by celebrities. His self-knowledge and freedom of choice are restricted. Furthermore, a consumer who strives to fill an image shown in media advertising has a distorted sense of self-awareness and self-worth. The belief of this modern time is that man's self worth is measured and re-enforced by what expensive items he can afford to buy. Subtly, he forgets to use his ability to think, to choose and to act independently.

As a community, there is a need to re-examine the process of production of goods and services and their impact to the environment. Man must be able to re-educate and assess his real needs from what are just simply wants and luxuries. Man needs to reconnect with nature. Gandhi says that man and nature are interconnected; and thus, man needs to value humans and non-humans. Man needs the things in nature for his survival and continued existence. If the natural resources are exploited and gone so does the life of man. Man is, therefore called to be responsible for the things that help provide him life. Gandhi advocates the philosophy of non-possessiveness wherein man can pursue material things for his own welfare but he is not attached to the things he possesses. Attachment to materials things by way of over-consumption is destructive to the environment and to human survival. Gandhi clarifies the importance of detachment from material things which means that although human beings work to

own and use things he sees them as only means to an end and thus, he is not attached to his possessions.

Furthermore, it is man's aim to live a good life and be happy here on earth. It can mean as having quality time with his family, achieving economic well-being, and living in a peaceful healthy environment. But happiness does not just come from the things man owns and consumes. It is not the interest on quantity of material possessions that truly makes man happy but the quality of life he lives. St. Thomas Aquinas says that material things are only means to an end. Man is challenged to pursue higher ends other than possession of material things such as spiritual knowledge. Man's bodily needs and desire are meant to direct him to his proper end. Moreover, it is also important to assess man's place in the world and the things surrounding him. To recall, Fromm conceives man as an active creator and bearer of his powers, actions and choices. He comments on the alienating effects of consumption that only serve to stimulate artificially created fantasies and desire for prestige and status with man not directly connected to the object of what he consumes. He further states that today's materialistic trends have made man endlessly multiply his wants and make consumption an end in itself. Over-consumption creates a materialistic attitude towards life and that when man loses himself to purely worldly and temporal concerns he can lose touch of himself and the world.

It is then essential that man must go back to the fundamental realities of human existence that ultimately give meaning to his life. Materialism can be replaced by pursuing aesthetic, religious and communal concerns. Fromm also emphasizes that consumption should be a concrete human act: where all man's senses are involved. Man has an intrinsic worth and value not measured by what and how much he possesses. Self-value is inherent and is not dependent on outside. Unfortunately, in over-consumerism, man's value is measured by his marketing success and how much things he owns. To add, man's intrinsic human qualities such as friendliness, courtesy, kindness and even beauty can be transformed into a commodity, an asset or capital in the market. Yet, Fromm sees man as someone not to be treated as an abstract reality but a real human being who can reason, can feel love, or fear, who is unique, has dignity and whose





existence is induplicable. The self is a subject with thought and feelings. Man is someone capable of decision, judgment and actions. These qualities should not be manipulated by consumer advertisements that make man lose touch of himself and his real needs. Consumption must be connected to the real needs of man. Furthermore, Fromm describes human nature as belonging to a communal social structure where he yearns for belongingness and solidarity with other people in the community.

To build a community and to save itself from environmental depredation brought by over-consuming, it is important to save humanity and nature. The first thing that must be done is to have a working and live Philosophy that would guide man in his actions. This is expressed in live moral principles. The following are some of these principles: Firstly, one must reassess his concept of life, his real goals and find out what ultimately would make him happy. He should ask himself what would truly redound to the benefit of his soul and his body. In these times, there is a need to practice what existentialist philosophers call as attentiveness to being. Attentiveness can mean awareness and sensitivity to the consequences of production of goods and services and their socially destructive consequences to the environment. Attentiveness can be made possible by journeying inward and, as stressed in the Oriental thinking, by limiting his desires, practicing self-discipline and guiding his actions at a controlled pace. By limiting one's desires, one contributes to social betterment; he gives primary importance to humanity than things. This requires strengthening of one's spirituality by striving hard to get rid of the selfish patterns of life. Secondly, guided by these philosophies, man can then take concrete actions to fight over-consumerism and protect his environment. One possible thing he can do is to work for ecological balance and management. He must control his cravings and must learn to tighten one's belt even in ordinary times. As a community, there is a need to work for a sustainable development which means a continued ascending growth and sustenance in the total aspect of human life. Concretely, it can also mean working to meet man's needs, not his greed. Any concept of sustainable development aims for the betterment of the future especially for the next generation.

In sum, there are limitless possible actions to overcome destructive consumers' trend; but whatever action man takes he must be guided by the fundamental issues of his existence to assess his true goal in life.

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