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## Theoretical understanding of consumerism in light of Jean Baudrillard

Mohammad Rafi Bhat

PhD scholar Sociology, University of Kashmir -190006  
Email id:mohmmadrafi14@gmail.com

### Abstract

Postmodernism establishes the way things are rather than how we would like them to be. It accepts consumption as an important feature of society. Unlike modernism, where we desire to change things as per our disposal and convenience. To the consumers themselves, consumption is less like a pleasure for its own sake and more like a pleasurable fulfillment of social duties. Consumerism is having rather than being. Your worth and value are measured by what you have rather than by who you are. It is buying into a particular lifestyle in order to find your value, worth, and dignity. Consumerism seems to promise fulfillment is merely an illusion. In a consumer society what we buy is not strictly necessary, because we have lost any meaningful sense of what is necessary, and of what is superfluous. Those who do not possess certain goods are perceived to be deviant or to be pitied: imagine living without a mobile phone, but to intentionally lack them is to invite scorn, incomprehension and derision. Consumerism extends beyond simply "having" a good, service or experience. It extends to the search, the quest, the journey for those goods, services and experiences. Having is not enough - there is always another consumer product or experience to be had. There is always a more satisfying toothbrush, shoe, diet, holiday experience, electric tool. The fact that this process is never-ending means that, the actual product is not as important as the ongoing search. The paper is based on theoretical background of Jean Baudrillard about consumerism.

**Key words:** Consumerism, simulation, postmodernism, consumer culture

**Introduction:**

Modernity had at last reached its limit. Modern societies had reached 'the end of the history and there could no longer be any prospect of 'advance' or 'progress' beyond. However, some have witnessed a sea change in human existence and was marked by the entry of the western world to a new 'post-modern' milieu in the second half of the twentieth century. Postmodernism establishes the way things are rather than how we would like them to be. It accepts consumption as an important feature of society. Unlike modernism, where we desire to change things as per our disposal and convenience. To the consumers themselves, consumption is less like a pleasure for its own sake and more like a pleasurable fulfillment of social duties. In addition, mass consumption is rarely the endless modernist round of pleasures and sensations. Thus, foreseeing future and taking it for granted is the attitude of post modernism, although it has not been able to define itself quite clearly.

Consumption is a social activity characterized with differentiation of lifestyles. Hence, consumption patterns do not implicate that consumption is an individualistic activity. It is radically different from what one knows and so far is ill-equipped to deal with its epistemology known as "consumerism". Symbolic consumption, in this respect, is a social and cultural event which centers on the exchange of symbols for what is consumed, and even more importantly is the way it is consumed. This conveys the message of 'who you are' and 'how you wish yourself to be perceived by others'. The students learnt their 'right answers', needed to qualify the entry in the clubs and bars. The degree level unit in consumption studies becomes itself a ritualised sign of cultururation- necessary for passing through an age grade and moving into the society, equipped to participate on both sides of the cash nexus, as wage labourer and consumer-knife or no knife

Baudrillard's Theoretical Formulation on Consumerism:

The formulation so far, however, rested on historical emergence of the phenomenon called consumer culture. The consumer culture is the product of mass production of the late capitalistic stage in the nineties. Emerged from the western societies, it has resulted into the vast accumulation of the commodities and consuming urban space. When we talk of consumer attitude and preferences, the amorphous categories owing to the dream 'sequences of multifarious imaginations comes into play. Here, we find an emphasis upon the blurring of boundaries between real and imaginary, coherent and vague, deconstructing of traditional culture, and a modern designing of the urban space is visualised. Nevertheless, we assume consumerism as larger than life in these urban spaces. The focus will be on commodities playing as signs and making sense of the entire study of consumerism in the present context

**Consumers Not as Active Agents:**

This becomes central to the late capitalism where commodities act as signs and symbol transforming it into other worldly pleasures. Baudrillard rests his analysis on a systematic study of consumption and does not empower consumers or others as active agents in shaping their practices. The plinth of his study has nothing to do with a particular set of need for a particular object. Instead, needs with respect to individual are related to a system of objects i.e. consumption is governed by the whole system of objects working in order to satisfy. The truth is not that 'needs are the fruits of production', but the system of need is the product of the system of production, which is quite different matter. By a system of needs we mean to imply that needs are not produced one at a time, in relation to their respective objects. Needs are produced as a force of consumption, and as a general potential reserve within the larger framework of productive forces. In this perspective, one becomes consumers in a broad sense, not merely consumers of a particular set of objects. In other words, this is something applied to any object of consumption.

**Baudrillard's Creation of Needs as a Result of the 'System of Objects':**

Implicit in the above, is the suggestion that we find ourselves in the realm of signs as we consume signs for general social ends and not specific objects to consume specific concrete ends. Needs, arise due to an outcome of an established system and not as a result of some simulated relation between an individual and object or object and objects. Baudrillard sees consumption as another logical step in the development of capitalism. "Needs and consumption are in fact an organized extension of productive forces". Beyond subsistence, however, consumption disciplines people to become consumers at their free will yet controlled by their innate dependence on society. Hence, the modern consumption deepens labor discipline, maintains class hierarchy and compels people to lead a proper life in order to become a member of the modern society. Thus, there is no scope under any conditions to manipulate consumers by its consumptionist demands and so cannot be exploited. According to Baudrillard, this is just another way of socialization in a new world where consumption is synonymous with communication.

Contemporary consumer theories admit that, consumption is social activity by which symbolic meanings as well as social codes and relations are produced and reproduced. For Baudrillard, this phrase is apt 'we become what we buy' hence, to simplify one attains the identity of the commodity one associates with in due course of time. The sphere of symbolic has become primary in modern capitalism; the 'image' is more important than the satisfaction of material needs. Though, 'I shop therefore I am', is totally an idealist practice. In relation to the discussion made above, it clearly implies that it is ideas that are being consumed, not objects. Because it is an idealist practice, there can be no final physical satisfaction. We are fated to continue to desire consumer goods and consumer experiences.

**Baudrillard's Idea of the Consumption of the Image as well as the Actual Object:**

In these theoretical perspectives consumption is viewed as full of hidden meanings of creative work where everyday life and cultural patterns are actively produced and reproduced. The new paradigms of consumption, frequently referred to as postmodern paradigms, emphasize the idea of an independent, self-constructing consumer. According to these new streams of thought consumers are capable of self-reflection of their own preferences and actions. They are active in reinterpreting and accommodating signs to their own culture. At the same time there has been a shift in morality that is from the universal morality towards private morality. Each individual finds his or her own decisions and is personally responsible for them. The postmodern theorists further suggest that individuals are characterized by weak commitment, they are not committed to any single task but are partially interested in several issues, the interest shifting from one issue to another. Consumers are responsible only for themselves, and they are weakly committed to collective issues, such as ethics, environment, morality etc. Thus, a question arises whether responsible consumption is possible within the post modern paradigm. The postmodern perspective provides, however, is an alternative to the excessive consumption of material goods. Since consumption activities are seen as surpassing reality, what is consumed are signs and symbols rather than material goods. Accordingly, consumption becomes a play by which symbols are created and manipulated. This is, according to Baudrillard, the world of 'hyper-reality'. The image of purchase as well as the actual act may motivate the consumer to obtain resources which facilitate consumption. Consumption resources are obtained through paid labor, which is more, and more a matter of creating real and imaginary consumption possibilities. The fact that symbols and ideas are consumed we may suggest that consumption goes beyond struggling for societal position.

**Baudrillard's Science of Signs in Consumer Culture:**

The major contribution will be from Baudrillard theory of 'semiology' in which consumption entails manipulation of signs. A commodity in late capitalism has developed the capacity to take up a wide range of imagistic and symbolic associations which overlay their initial use-value to become commodity sign. He has detected the process as consumer television culture producing an endless series of simulations marking a shift which leads to the loss of concrete reality. It becomes more noticeable in his later writings in which stress on commodity logic and the endless meanings of signs and simulations of the commodity transferred through the media produce a complete new social order. It is followed by a bizarre catharsis of metanarratives in which the social life becomes cultural with new sets of order and reality\_ the overproduction of signs reproduces social relationships different from the earlier orders of social stability. The culture of postmodern is the culture of consumer society. The crux is to explain the late capitalism- the post World Wars period influenced by the commodification of cultures. These symbolic hierarchies have opened up spaces to study the resultant commodity culture as well as the transmitters and carriers, and their

relationship to consumption as symbolic specialists.

### **Baudrillard's Postmodern Approach:**

The aesthetization of everyday life refers to the rapid flow of signs and images which saturate the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society. The theorization of this process draws much from Marx's theory of fetishism of commodities, which has been developed later by the Frankfurt school, Baudrillard and Jameson. For Adorno, the increasing dominance of exchange value not only obliterated the original use-value of things and replace it by abstract exchange value, but also it left the -commodity free to take on secondary use value, what Baudrillard was later to refer to as 'sign-value'. On one hand, it can be the real consumption; but in the other hand, it can also be the imaginative consumption of what exists as thoughts, ideas and ethereal things. There exists dual play of consumption of imagination as well as the necessary goods. Of course, these practices in themselves are not historically new. One finds examples of carnivals and museums of the nineteenth century in Paris, as well as Berlin, as described by Baudrillard. From this perspective, spectacular imagery and transformation into amazing spaces encourage a lively experience. This is captured in Baudrillard's description of the Beaubourg Museum in Paris, which facilitates masses which is further described as 'Hypermarket of culture '. He states, that people want to accept everything, eat everything, and touch everything by looking, deciphering and studying yet do not move them. The mass effect is that of touch or manipulation. The organizers (and the artist and the intellectuals) are alarmed by this uncontrollable impulse, for they reckoned only with the apprenticeship of the masses to the spectacle of the culture. They never anticipated this active, destructive fascination-this original and brutal response to the gift of the culture, which has all the semblance of housebreaking or the sacking of the shrine. The same can be said for two other features of postmodern culture: the transformation of reality into images and the fragmentation of times into a series of perpetual present. In many ways, masses are engaged in the complex interplay of signs and symbols in their built-in environment. Postmodern cities have become centre of consumption, play and entertainment, saturated with signs and images to the extent that anything can become represented, thematised and made an object of interest, an object of tourist gaze '. Then, it is expected that leisure activities such as visiting parks, shopping centers, malls, museums and galleries should show convergence.

### **'Hyperreality in Reality' in Relation with Contemporary Consumer Culture:**

In the end, a seamless rhetoric of the ephemeral experience of watching television signifies the perpetual involvement and addiction to the something new all the time. For example Baudrillard, talks of the ideal simulational world, where T. V. is the world hence, T.V. provides the sharpest illustration of the above. The more television provides us with information, the less meaning we are able to grasp. Theorist often talk about the ideal-type channel-hopping MTV (music television) viewer who flips through different images at such speed that he/she is unable to chain the signifier

together into a meaningful narrative, rather he/she merely enjoys the multiphrenic intensities and sensations of the surface of the images. This is referred as commodity-sign in which the commodity becomes a sign in the Saussurean sense with its meaning arbitrarily determined by its position in a self-referential set of signifiers. Thus, Baudrillard affirms that 'we live in everywhere already in an aesthetic hallucination of reality'. The death of the social, the loss of the real, leads to nostalgia for the real: a fascination with and desperate search for real people, real values, real sex'. It

is reality itself today that is hyperrealist. Surrealism's secret already was that the most banal reality could become surreal, but only in certain privileged moments that are still nevertheless connected with art and imaginary.

The depiction of a post modern simulational world is based upon the assumption that the development of commodity production coupled with information technology have led to the 'triumph of signifying culture'. It, thereby, reverses the direction of determinism, so that the relation become saturated with shifting cultural signs to the extent that we can no longer speak of class of normatively and are forced by 'the end of the social'. The above experience has a psychological dimension of fantasy fulfillment along with the social dimension to the role of the goods as communicators. Further the channel hopping is also termed as 'schizophrenia', as the breakdown of relationship between signifiers, the breakdown of temporality, memory, a sense of history. The 'schizophrenic experience is of

'isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence. Although he/she therefore does not know personnel identity and has no projects, the immediate undifferentiated experience of the presentness of the world, leads to a sense of intensities: vivid, powerful experience which bear a 'mysterious and oppressive charge of affect'. The tendency, therefore, is to produce a lifestyle, as stylish, dream-like, and fantasized on the symbolic structures of commodities. Arguably, the continuous flow of diverse images makes it difficult to chain together into meaningful messages; the intensity and degree of saturation of signifiers defy systematization and narratives. So, art is everywhere, since artifice is at the heart of the reality. And, so, art is dead, not only because its critical transcendence is gone, but because reality has been confused. It has been explained in relation to the art of modern cities like Paris 'the capital of the nineteenth century. The above account is sufficient enough to move to the backdrop of reconfiguring class politics.

### **Consumerism and Class Positions:**

Despite its fleeting transitory beauty and ugliness of life, there are commodities, responsible in maintaining social relationships as well. They are used as markers, partly related to their physical consumption. In this sense, the consumption of high cultural goods (art, novels, opera, philosophy) is related to the ways in which other mundane cultural goods (clothing, food, drinks, leisure pursuits) are handled and consumed, and high culture must be inscribed



into the same social space as everyday cultural consumption. Later, as cautioned, it entails a strict resistance of the lower class to ascend their status to that of the upper classes. In this way, it erects high admission barriers and effective technique of exclusion. Therefore, consumerism on one side is a way to impose uniformity in diversity and on the other side accentuates the divide between diverse classes of users/consumers. A reflection on Baudrillard leads us to the explanations on origin of nihilism pertaining to the logic of capitalism.

"Then the logic of commodity production has produced a particular reversal in which culture once determined, now becomes free floating and determining to the extent that today we can talk about the triumph of signifying culture, to the extent that we can no longer speak of class or normatively which belong to the prior stage of the system as people are reduced to glutinous mass which refuses to stabilize in its absorption, reflection and cynical parody of media images. It is neither manipulated nor manipulable"

This then affirms the end of the symbolic, as sign would be free to take on whatever associations of meanings- the accidental and bizarre juxtapositions of consumer culture. In effect, the practical reproduction of sign stabilizes into a classificatory schemes vis-a-vis a coherent reality. The message embedded in the fleeting images makes sense via television, codes, advertisement etc. Contrary to the fact, that they are repetitions, yet rebel against any narrow stereotypical image. In order to involve the 'other' as if within, is the crux of consumerism. Thus, consumer culture is destined to disseminate worldwide. In this way, the entire connotation of the traditional cultural sphere has been overloaded with the overproduction of signs and images of mass consumption via the media and the market in the

longue duree (long duration). Yet, we have to make sense of the terms discussed above as per the understanding of Baudrillard. It is worth mentioning the term 'postmodern' as adequate to unravel consumerism of the late nineties, though that is not the focus of attention when discussing the emergence of the simulational world of Baudrillard.

**Conclusion:**

Baudrillard therefore appears to produce a theoretical basis of the fatal strategy, without being able to argue it explicitly. If as Bryan Turner argues, Baudrillard's arguments suggest the need for a new theoretical vocabulary which 'offers an alternative discourse by which the complexities of the new realm of post modernity might be approached'. Consumption is a socio-cultural activity situated within a social environment, entailing interaction with other consumers. Consumption is thus not only about purchasing and consuming particular goods, but is also about producing and reproducing social structure. The empirical patterns of consumerism entail ideas about how to consume, what to consume, what consumption of certain goods and services means, and about the links between individual character and consumption behaviour. The contemporary consumer theories assume that an ordinary consumer is an active, critical and creative person. At the same time, consumption is viewed within the social and cultural context. The central idea is that consumers actively produce and reproduce culture in their everyday life. Consumers' actions influence social and cultural conditions, and also the norms and structures which form the conditions where consumers must live. Environmentally conscious consumers are active agents rather than manipulability objects. They have opportunities of resistance, and they have the survival strategies. Meanwhile, they have responsibilities. In addition, it is necessary that they become more committed to the quality of environment and conscious of the consequences of their decisions and actions.

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