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“It’s Not More Than You Need, It’s Just More Than You’re Used To”

*I was puzzled by this title until you told me that it’s a General Motors slogan for one of its new cars.*

One of the most neglected topics discussed in America is how materialism is such an integral part of American culture. It is necessary for people to experience life from a different angle to better grasp the importance consumption habits have on society. It is well known that America consumes more than any other country, but there has been little investigation on why. What needs to be researched are America’s motives for consuming and how to best motivate people to consume less. Changes in consumption levels are a very important part of the sustainability equation. Although humans have an innate desire to consume, it is important to analyze the possible impacts excess materialism has made on first world countries such as America.

Humans have always had the desire to have and consume. In ancient Egypt, men and women had expensive perfumes, makeup, and fine cloths for their enjoyment. Trading between cities and countries began occurring at a phenomenal rate, and the acquisition of “things” became commonplace and a source of security and wealth. Humans have an innate desire for things (Kasser 1). Think about how a young child cries out when they do not have their favorite toy or blanket. That natural desire from birth extends and multiplies throughout a person’s life. Individual desire ranges widely and

varies with each personality. Some people may desire material things like fast cars, or immaterial things like a boyfriend or even knowledge. Not all desires are negative, and everything should be enjoyed in moderation. Everyone knows too much of a good thing can be bad.

Men and women have desires that fulfill different needs. According to Susan Kleine, “men desire possessions that fulfill autonomy, and women want possessions that fulfill affiliation” (1). Men want things to complete themselves and form their sense of self; whereas, women want things to form a “community” of sorts and establish a sense of belonging. Possessions act as self-extensions of the individual. The clothes a person wears defines them as much as the items in their room. Humans are attracted to specific things because of their individual personalities. Many people purchase and accumulate items to further the creation of their sense of identity and sense of purpose. Kleine also points out that possessions encourage well being and self-development in children and adults alike (2). Part of the happiness of humans is to acquire possessions in their lifetime, whether it be a home, a car, clothing, stereo systems, or many other things. People need to have ties to things; they need to have stuff. This reaffirms their status in life and demonstrates their power or lack of power. The more things a person has, the more powerful they are, and many humans share the need to feel important. Power and purpose are deeply intertwined. Sometimes the less possessions a person has, they less powerful they are, and their sense of purpose becomes lost in the pursuit of survival. Whereas people with power are more likely to feel that they have a purpose in life which is partly defined by the things they own.

One of America's greatest problems regarding materialism and consumerism is the extraordinary emphasis placed upon it. Americans are bombarded with hundreds upon thousands of advertisements a day that implicitly tell consumers that they can become a better, stronger, more confident man by using a certain deodorant or by having a certain car. Women are implicitly told constantly that they are not desirable and beautiful as individuals if they do not have flawless skin and a perfect body. This excessive emphasis had increasingly made a negative effect on society because it hurts people's self-esteem and self-respect. Imagine the difference it would make if people were overwhelmed with images and advertisements for getting a good education or reading an influential novel. People would be happier and smarter.

*The Myth of Material Wealth: Wealth does not primarily depend on its material embodiment . . . The word material makes no sense when attached to such words as wealth or well being. . . Wealth is whatever people value. Material things can contribute to wealth . . . but there is no necessary relation between the growth in wealth and an increase in the volume or weight or quantity of material objects. [Lloyd Orr, chap. 6, pp 166-167 of the text]*

Americans probably consume so much because they have so much. If Americans have a natural tendency to have and consume things, then are they entitled to consume excessively for the sake of personal fulfillment? Excessive materialism often has negative effects. Tim Kasser wrote in his book, *The High Price of Materialism*, that excessive materialism leads to negative behaviors such as dissatisfaction, anxiety, narcissism, pain, aggression, alienation, anti-social behavior, and social destruction (3). America has most of the world's richest people, and also the highest crime and jail rate in the world. Is there a possibility that America's high rate of consumerism had led to violence and aggression among people? Does America place so much emphasis on the acquisition and

consumption of things that is has increasingly lead to the destruction of society? Because there is so much inequality and so much emphasis on the need to have things, it is hard for lower class citizens to accept that they lack things. America has the highest jail population and has the most violence in terms of gun deaths. Many of these people are lower class citizens of all races. These people are possibly angry because they know they will never have like the owning class has, and in some ways they might feel trapped or helpless, which would encourage people to commit crimes.

According to Kasser’s research, “a strong materialistic value orientation works against well-being and happiness” (Kasser 8). Materialism is harmful because it interferes with the ability to accommodate the human needs of self-esteem, relationships, and autonomy. When people define themselves by their possessions excessively, then they lose sight of who they are as people and begin to lose their sense of self, and that is why there are a lot of rich people in the world who are very unhappy.

Many people find satisfaction and fulfillment through Christianity, so it is important to examine the morals and values this religion teaches. Christianity instructs in the Ten Commandments that as a Christian, “Thou shalt have to *[no]* other gods before me.” This helps teach individuals that they should put God number one in their life, and not “worship” other things.

*Just things, instead of “other things”? Is God a thing?*

The problem, however, is that the fight against materialism is not an integral part of Christianity. There seems to be a lack of teaching against materialism and consumption among churches. In some churches, the importance of emphasis on anti-materialism seems to be a more personal experience. Increased emphasis is placed upon the family

and church attendance. Church sometimes seems to be a haven for competition. The families who are rich stand out, and are more popular and respected than those who are lower class.

Buddhism is the religion that is probably the most influential in teaching the importance of avoiding materialism and consumption. Buddhists are very aware of the danger of this and it is very well integrated into their whole religion and way of life. Buddhism is somewhat rare in America, and those who are Buddhist are often looked down upon because they are not part of the majority who believes in God. Certain religions are better at teaching various morals and values, yet it all boils down the kind of life a person lives and the effect they have on others, on society, and the rest of the world.

*This is probably what Al Gore had in mind when he wrote: "There is a great danger in seeing technology alone as the answer to the environmental crisis. In fact, the idea that new technology is the solution to all our problems is a central part of the faulty way of thinking that created the crisis in the first place."  
["Earth In The Balance" by Senator Al Gore, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1992]*

It is probable that America will never change its consumption habits as long as it has the resources to consume. Personally, I think there needs to be more education on the dangers of excess materialism and how it can lead to the gradual breakdown of a person's identity and happiness which contributes to the breakdown of society as a whole. An awareness of lower class struggles is one of the best paths for decreased materialism. I think if more people knew how other people fight to survive, they would be encouraged to consume less and give to others more.

*It was nice that you expanded on this last point in your class presentation by relating your own experience.*

*You've raised fundamental questions that we haven't talked about much in class. There's no way world energy needs could be met in environmentally acceptable ways with world-wide lifestyles like those in so-called "developed countries" today.*

#### WORKS CITED

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