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A Big Flex for a Little Pump: How Social Media Flexing Contributes to Adolescent Materialism

When strolling through a public area on any given Saturday afternoon, the number of children with an iPad in their hand can be alarming. The landscape of youth tech usage has changed dramatically in recent years—Ofcom reports that among children aged 12-15 in the US, 83% now have their own smartphone and spend an average of over ten hours per week on social platforms like YouTube and Instagram (2017). All this time spent in the realm of digital social networks is especially potent for younger individuals; users too quickly enter the underlying competition of who can present the most pristine and curated image in order to receive social praise, expressed in views and likes. One teenager who tops nearly all others in his digital display of opulence and quantified social approval is a rapper known as Lil Pump. Lil Pump skillfully uses platforms like Instagram and YouTube to widely share his high-flying lifestyle to the adolescent masses with his 2018 music video “Esskeetit” being a prime example. “Esskeetit” exemplifies how the world of increasing social comparison fueled by twenty-first century social technologies contributes to rising levels of materialism, especially among adolescents.

Rising material standards of living around the globe are nearly indistinguishable from a growing culture of materialism. As a result of the various large-scale processes underway since the 1700s, including industrialization, labor specialization, and north-south economic exploitation, material prosperity has skyrocketed. Ever-increasing quantities of expendable cash

paired with “growth-centric” economies have produced a modern reality centered around possessions, validating Adam Smith’s claim that “consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production” (*An Inquiry*). Smith would likely not be surprised at the picture of materialism in 2016 painted by professor Noah Tenai: “Household expenditure and consumption of goods has risen steadily in industrialised nations and is growing rapidly in developing countries.” He observes that in the higher-income world, “large new houses need to be filled with 'stuff', such as 'home theatres'... and several car garages,” and the average 10-year-old child of a homeowner “owns 238 toys but plays with just 12 daily.” Meanwhile, in the lower-income world, “shopping malls are beginning to outnumber high schools and expenditure in shoes, jewellery and watches is bigger than that spent on high school education” (Tenai, “The Simple Living”). In an age of surplus, behaviors and values related to belongings are slowly shifting away from modesty and towards overindulgence. Irrespective of economic class, rising material quality of life is empirically leading to a growth in the scope and influence of materialism.

One common mode of consumption under a materialistic worldview is known as “conspicuous consumption,” characterized by a motivation to purchase not for actual utility but rather social comparative value. In his work titled *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, economist Thorstein Veblen describes his perceptions of upper-class consumerism: “since the consumption of these more excellent goods is evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority.” His observation describes an all-too common phenomenon nowadays; even though someone already has a perfectly-functioning \$10 pair of earbuds, they are subconsciously drawn to a \$199 pair of AirPods so they can join the *#AirPodGang* in-group. In this case, AirPods are considered “positional goods,” providing little additional functionality but rather considerable social status.

In a world where no explicit currency for status exists, conspicuous consumption has taken its place, becoming a formidable driver of materialism in the process.

Lil Pump puts on a textbook display of this type of comparative consumerism in his chart-topping 2018 music video “Esskeetit.” “Esskeetit,” a twist on the phrase “let’s get it,” is Lil Pump’s playful yet gaudy showing of his obscene wealth. Scenes consist of Lil Pump, dressed head-to-toe in diamond jewelry, exuberantly dancing beside tropical mansions furnished with foreign cars and private pools. With the emergence of each positional good, the viewer comes to appraise Pump as more affluent, powerful, and important. Computer-generated imagery, or CGI, is employed to stretch the display of wealth beyond imagination by creating a massive tornado of hundred dollar bills which swarms his first château. The rapper even extends the materialism into his lyrics. Lil Pump ensures that his message of untouchable riches gets across by name dropping extremely expensive and well-known brands such as Gucci, Patek, and Rolls Royce. He also shows off his solid command of “flexing,” a quintessential convention of rap that reinforces a system of materialistic self-worth. His line “took a private jet to Dubai (ouu) / bitch, you better buy your own flight” illustrates that his personal jet trumps your Southwest ticket, while the verse “pull the Porsche out the car garage (brtt) / and I never had a job (nah)” implies that he’s making millions while you’re washing dishes. Flexing is Pump’s method of deriving his worth from a direct juxtaposition of his material wealth with others’, and it combines seamlessly with the music video’s over-the-top lavishness, CGI money-tornadoes, and high-profile brand shout-outs to leave the viewer in awe of all the things Lil Pump has. Even though his six-figure coupés and Gucci chains are lacking in practicality, Pump’s tactical display of positional goods elicits a material comparison which further augments his social status.

Lil Pump's conspicuous consumerism is amplified to previously unfathomable degrees thanks to novel digital technologies, particularly social media. YouTube and Instagram are the artist's primary interface to his fans—he boasts a combined 35 million followers on the two sites. His “Esskeetit” YouTube video actually led the charts upon its release and has racked over 500 million views since (Zidel). This astronomical view count is made possible by the playback feature of modern social streaming platforms; the three minute long video can be replayed as much as one desires, further ingraining the catchy lyrics into their head each time. For Lil Pump, YouTube also serves as a free advertising service; hundreds of independent channels have uploaded “Esskeetit reaction videos,” with “The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon” even offering Lil Pump a segment to perform the hit single. In this way, “Esskeetit” gains publicity with entirely new audiences who might never come across his YouTube channel otherwise. Instagram, on the other hand, is Lil Pump's channel to his target audience of adolescents, given that 72% of Instagram's one billion-plus monthly users are teenagers (Copeland and Zhau). While he has recently revamped his Insta account, Lil Pump actually built his initial following on the social networking service (SNS) through his ridiculous stunts and callous pranks. As evidence of the uniqueness of his case, marketing company Starbreakers Entertainment offers a \$2,000 service titled “The Lil Pump Effect” for propelling artists to fabled fame via Instagram, just as Lil Pump had done. I myself distinctly remember first hearing “Esskeetit” through a snippet on his Instagram account, being dumbfounded by the spectacle of insane luxuries, and later quenching my curiosity by watching the official YouTube production upon its release. Indeed, the two recently developed platforms YouTube and Instagram are effective catalysts for videos like “Esskeetit” to reach new audiences and grow a community of followers.

While social networking sites are incredibly powerful in their ability to connect physically distant users to a single cultural production, their power is equally dangerous in causing heightened, unrealistic social comparison. The ways in which social media usage affects consumerist values and behavior were examined by Hillbun Ho and Kenichi Ito at Nanyang Technological University. They offer the objectively agreeable argument that “the proliferation of SNSs over the last decade has considerably changed the ways in which people interact and socialize with peers.” The more prominent change in our psychology from SNS usage, they argue, is the resulting increase in social comparison. In terms of physical looks, they find that “the intensity of SNS use is linked to more frequent social comparisons of appearance, which in turn elevate young adult users’ lower self-perceptions of physical attractiveness and social competence” (“Consumption-Oriented Engagement”). And just as Instagram feeds of perfected external appearances affect one’s perspective on their personal image, so do posts of ostentatious affluence influence one’s relationship with physical objects. Most importantly, a connection between the social comparison in SNSs and materialistic tendencies was found; they conclude that “social comparison is a critical psychological process accounting for the effects of consumption-oriented use of SNSs on users’ excessive spending.” Social media might seem like the perfect tool for a conspicuous consumer to broaden their public display of expensive possessions, but it simultaneously becomes the voice that psychologically pressures the consumer to buy more. The resulting feedback loop of consumption, posting, and comparison is an inescapable byproduct of SNS usage paired with human nature.

The unique psychology of adolescents positions them to be especially susceptible to the social comparison inherent to SNSs. Exemplified by their ability to acquire languages effortlessly, children are like sponges, able to pick up on things incredibly quickly. Jon Hamilton

at the Nashville Public Radio summarizes a few pieces of scientific literature on this topic, writing how adolescent brains are more “vulnerable,” “malleable,” and “elastic” than adult brains (“Teenage Brains Are Malleable”). These characteristics are superpowers when it comes to learning wholesome and useful things but become tragic weaknesses in the presence of negative influences. In their research on youth and social networks, communications professor Shin Wonsun explains the unfortunate reality of this phenomenon, writing that “frequent exposure to mass media related to sex, violence, and smoking can change young people’s attitudes toward and participation in related risky behaviors” (“Social Networking Site Use”). In the same way that exposure to mature context can shape children’s perspectives on those activities, exposure to widespread consumption can normalize a lifestyle of material abundance. Psychology expert Liu Hu conducted multiple analyses on this subject, and their results confirm the relationship between media and materialism; he writes that “passive social network site use significantly predicted adolescent materialism through the mediation of upward social comparison” (“Passive Social Network Site Use”). The comparative quality of social media taps into the psychological elasticity of children, thereby redirecting their values and behavior towards a competitive materialism.

With a viewership primarily consisting of adolescents, “Esskeetit” is especially well-positioned to pass on the rapper’s materialistic values to impressionable youth. Lil Pump’s music embodies a carefree, rebellious and self-absorbed energy which has proved incredibly popular among adolescents. *Heritage Herald* columnist Twumasi Duah-Mensah contends that teenagers are drawn to his music, despite its obsessive materialism, for one simple reason: “they think it’s cool” (“An Inquiry Into Lil Pump”). Nadra Nittle of the magazine *Racked* elaborates on Duah-Mensah’s claim: not only is his demeanor and artistic style appealing to youth, but the fact

that Lil Pump was only 17 years old upon the video's release "makes the clothing he wears, and its costliness, carry as much weight as a classmate's" ("Lil Pump Loves Gucci"). Lil Pump is far cooler than even the coolest classmate. What other kid his age can flaunt Gucci clothing from their personal Lamborghini in Beverly Hills? Lil Pump has an incredibly high social status for a teenager, and this certainly plays a role in influencing youth behavior. In their research titled "Beyond Homophily: A Decade of Advances in Understanding Peer Influence Processes," professors Brechwald and Prinstein of Duke University present evidence for the role of status among children, finding that "adolescents are more likely to engage in behaviors if they believe that doing so has been endorsed by high-status peers." The rapper is clearly more than just a high-status peer, though—he is a B-List celebrity with a massive following and elite connections evinced by his recent musical collaboration with Kanye West. In researching the effects of celebrities on adolescents, advertising professor Chan LaFerle validates Brechwald and Prinstein's findings from a materialistic standpoint, stating that teenagers "want to develop or refine personality traits that are similar to their idols" and, as a result, the imitation of media celebrities is a "positive predictor of materialistic values" among youth ("Determinants for Materialism"). Lil Pump serves as the prototypical case for LaFerle's findings; thanks to his celebrity status, Pump's skillful use of SNSs aimed at the demographic most susceptible to social comparison results in youth naturally desiring to emulate his conspicuous consumerism. Every time Lil Pump shows off his Lamborghinis and Gucci, his materialistic lifestyle becomes more appealing to the millions of teenagers watching from home.

In light of the evidence indicting twenty-first century social technologies for their catalyzing effect on materialism, one common vindication is that they simultaneously create new spaces for dialogue on social issues, thereby bringing about attention and action. However, while

this perspective might be true in some scenarios, it fails in the case of materialism for two reasons. As discussed earlier, current attitudes are statistically shifting towards that direction on the whole. Even if these digital discussions are offsetting the negative impacts of materialism, they certainly are not doing enough to tip the global scale. Additionally, the adoption of materialistic values is largely a subconscious process, meaning people are generally not aware of their own materialistic tendencies in the first place. In their master's thesis at Empire State College, Jeromy McFarren corroborates that the process by which people become consumeristic is one that "encourages individuals to define themselves subconsciously as consumers" ("Buy me!"). As the media shifts perspectives on what is normal, consumption gradually becomes part of one's identity and distinct behavior recognition grows difficult. For the time-being, unawareness of consumerist tendencies prevents new modes of social dialogue from making a dent in the modern rise of materialism.

Revolutionary social networks like Instagram and YouTube lead to an increase in social comparison, thereby predisposing adolescents to consumeristic values and behavior such as those exhibited in Lil Pump's "Esskeetit" music video. Meanwhile, as Silicon Valley tech giants continue to expand their influence in emerging markets, it seems unlikely that this process will decelerate any time soon. While youth around the world are no longer limited by physical distance and are now more cosmopolitan than ever before, they are also shifting their attention from books to diamond earrings and from real human interaction to online shopping. In order to maintain thriving, active communities amidst the onslaught of materialistic messages, digital social technologies should be redesigned and reconsidered entirely. We cannot allow our innate desire for human connection to be transformed into an artificial desire for material accumulation.

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