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ENGL 112

WA3

**Fuck, Eat, Spend – Mass Consumption and Immediate Gratification in 1950s America**

**Preface**

The events, occurrences, changes, and innovations in 1950s America contributed to the society-wide push towards mass consumption, immediate gratification, and the ever-revitalizing American Dream in specific reference to money and the use of credit cards, sex and the rise of Playboy, as well as food and the exponential influx in the fast food industry.

The promotion and vast influence of credit cards solidified the society-wide push to consumer mindset and encouraged immediate gratification as an American cultural prerogative. This, in turn, planted the seeds for future economic problems relating to the widespread acceptance and normality of debt within American society redefined economic “stability” and success. This theme only is multiplied and exaggerated through the decades.

The wider acceptance and meshing of sex/sexuality within society and the public sphere represented the huge shift towards modern promiscuity and a weakening of traditional modest ideals. The legality and social appropriateness of licentious materials were challenged through the years and are still being confronted today. Playboy also played a huge role in 1950s society because it reinforced the concepts of immediate gratification in its convenience and accessibility for the American population. You could now—more than ever before—get what you want, when you want, wherever you want it; sex was now an industry.

The rise of the convenience dining and the fast-food industry represented the growing divergence from the traditional structured meal-time as well as the growing instability of familial and societal roles of the time—specifically in relation to gender. The more convenient, flexible, and individualized meal-times and food preparation-techniques represented the shifting to the ‘more options-more opportunity’ consumer-based society. Food also was the key component to America’s rejuvenation in the post-war time period. “Among all the technological, economic, and social transformations in American life in the 1950s, food was the key marker of American progress.” (McDonald)

The concepts of physical, monetary, and sexual consumption were all revitalized during the decades following WW2 and leading into the Cold War. They were capitalized upon and grown exponentially. They only continue to grow through our current generation and so on.

**The Roots of a Mass Consumption Society – Part 1**

In America we consume. Since the beginnings of the 20th century, we have been encouraged socially, culturally, politically, and sometimes in-part legislatively, to consume— even beyond our individual economic means and sustenance needs. This shift is frequently recognized as having been sparked in response to the invention of Henry Ford’s mass-produced Model-T, and newly revolutionized “assembly line,” however the push to consumerism is far from limited to exclusively the automobile industry. The influx of available and “affordable” products in every industry— fashion, entertainment, money in credit, technology, food, even sex —gave way for a new style of the inculcated and sought after American Dream.

Historically, the American Dream had much of its seeds in idealism, optimism, hard work, and new-world hope. The first recordings of the phrase the American Dream was in 1931 by a writer, James Truslow Adams. He defined it “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (Truslow Adams). Later, the definition and social connotation was morphed. The American dream now had its roots in material and fiscal fortune rather than overall socio-cultural mobility.

**The History, Pros, and Cons of Consumerism – Part 2**

Consumerism was heavily supported by the government because of its exponential political, economic, and industrial value. Soon-to-be President Hoover as early as 1928 recognized this value. When addressing a group of marketers and advertisers he stated to the assemblage, “You have taken over the job of creating desire and have transformed people into constantly moving happiness machines, machines which have become the key to economic progress.” (Kawalek) Hoover saw the potential within the more commercialized and consumeristic society, especially in the face of the growing favoring towards communism in the Eastern hemisphere.

The roots of the intensification in consumer spending and theme of consumerism in 1950’s society can also be traced to the effects of the economic Depression that occurred between 1929 and 1939 and the WW2 mass-production boom. The efficiency and effectiveness of the rapid diffusion of war-time necessities on the nation-wide scale set the scene for the massive construction and distribution of the variety of products that we start to see in the early 1950s, post WW2. Not only was the groundwork laid structurally and transportation-wise for this shift, it was also being culturally reinforced. The economic blossoming following the mass-production surge produced the first signs of true economic progress in what had been decades. The suppressed pocketbooks and strained spirits of American families, compounded with the excitement and hope that the economic growth from war-time mass-production, brought upon a new and passionate wave of consumers—with newly stuffed wallets too.

Not only was consumer spending brought on by the segmentation in consumer retail-opportunity and post-war abundance, but also was influenced by the sense of civic duty. This is reiterated by Elizabeth Cohen in her examination of mass consumption during this time period. She discusses the influence of and for the movement the movement, “a wide range of economic interests and players all came to endorse the centrality of mass consumption to a successful reconversion from war to peace. (Cohen). During the early 1950s, the concerns of communism were echoed undefinably through media, entertainment, products, news, and all other platforms of society. Mass production and the practices of mass consumption, became the icon worldwide for American capitalism, equality of opportunity, and freedom from Communism. As described by Luke Corden in Mass Consumption and Meaningful Democratic Politics, “American’s would not only consume their way out of depression but in doing so they would resurrect the faltering capitalist system and guarantee the survival of liberal democracy over the threats of communism and fascism.” (Corden). Though we have since moved away from the government and political motivations of this initial push to consumerism, it was a huge influencer of the adoption and usage during its foundation.

The influx of new available, affordable, and viable products in every industry created a climate of competition and growth within each sector. Jan Logemann refers to this competition, specifically in the business of credit, “the competition of commercial banks in the consumer credit sector helped drive down the cost of credit, as sales finance companies and especially consumer finance companies had to adjust their rates.”(Logemann) The government encouraged this competition between businesses, it ensures that citizens and consumers are getting the best value and products. In this position, consumers can lessen their risk of being swindled by a monopoly and therefore have more confidence in spending.

There was, as early as the 1950s, opposition to the growing trend of mass-consumption and consumerism. Environmentalism and the Environmentalists represented an emergent “alternative aesthetic” found within the “embrace of small-scale methods,” as discussed by Thomas Jundt in Greening the Red, White, and Blue. He discusses how “when the American Way was stretched to include unfettered corporate capitalism,” that Environmentalism diverged from these trends that were redefining the postwar world. (Jundt) Yet, despite the considerable following this opposition to consumption/consumer culture carried, the media and entertainment did not adequately publicly present such views. The media was, and is in almost all cases, on the side of big-business and are motivated by the huge profit growth being generated by the changed consumer mindset.

**Money and the Rise of the Credit Card Industry – Part 3**

The credit card, often regarded as the catalyst to the industry of mass-consumption, was started by a group called The Diners Club. The creation of the credit card was provoked by the demand for an economic asset tool that could be used universally; crossing product and store lines. The impact and adoption of the card was immediate and all-encompassing. “In 1952, after two full years of operation, Diners Club showed a profit of $61,222 on sales of $6.2 million. By 1986, 55 percent of all U.S. households held at least one credit card.” (Mandell and Holmes) Upon the installation of consumer credit across America, many started to regard credit as “a means of ensuring democratic access to the American Dream and to an expanding middle class” (Logemann).

The credit card influenced the theme of mass-consumption and immediate gratification in 1950’s society, as Mandell and Holmes discussed, by now “allowing consumers to spread their debts over a long period of time but still allowing them to take home what they purchased, credit cards made it possible for consumers to live above their means.” (Mandell and Holmes) The concept of “buy now—pay later” solidified the consumer mindset within the American cultural front of the time. The introduction of the credit card within society and the widespread adoption of the economic practice was definitely an influence in the undeniable socio-cultural strains and tensions of 1950s society. The general premise of immediate gratification is being able to experience the pleasure and fulfillment without any delay or deferment. (Patel). The support of this style of gratification on a societal scale is conflicting to how people were raised at the time and therefore clashes with their ingrained and natured values and morals. Traditionally, we are taught to try to practice delayed gratification—resisting temptation for the immediate reward in order for larger future gain. This rise therefore only caused more tension for the generational/age societal division as the new generation of young people, who felt tied down to the commitment of supporting the family at a young age, finally were able to work to support themselves—with whatever and to whatever extent they could so manage.

There are many familial benefits for the invention of the credit card, not so closely related to war-time consumption and economics. Before, families would have to wait months or even years to buy large appliances or tools for their homes. However, with this new credit tool, the waiting time diminished. They could buy the product, while only paying small “affordable” portions over long stretches of time. This, in a way, evened out expenses that would have previously broken the bank. This essentially widened the accessibility to middle-class, and overall a more comfortable socio-economic status, for American families.

While this tool is very convenient, many times card-owners and families so focused on finally affording the commodities they “needed” and could finally “afford” would become blind to the huge fees accumulating, as well as the harsh realities of debt. This concern was also under addressed and underrated by the American government, whose ineffective role combating this rising epidemic would only be later amplified.

**Food and the Rise of the Fast Food Industry – Part 4**

Convenience foods are referred to as having two pivotal stages in American history: the “TV-dinner” that was first invented in 1953 and again in 1986 when microwave ovens were invented. Frozen and prepackaged dinners were pre-existing to the Swanson TV Dinner, however were never as popularized or commercialized towards families (Wikipedia). With the growing popularity of convenience food, combined with the encouragement towards capitalism within American society, sprung about the industry of Fast Food Dining.

The momentum towards convenience and fast-food was brought in part by the transition in family roles. Families were shifting to dual-income. Women were gaining more rights and leaving the household—over 30 percent of housewives in 1953, up from 24 percent in 1941. (McDonald). They were no longer seen as just “housewives” and there was no longer a solidified food preparer. Food preparation, consumption, and meal-time organization shifted to become increasingly individualistic, convenient, and flexible. This contrasts the previous communal and systematic meal style that was can be seen in practice during pre-war and pre-Depression periods, when consumption was not forefront.

This transition is criticized on the basis that “separate, individually-marketed servings reduce the need to share and compromise in a family unit, as everyone gets what they want when they want it.” (Burd) However, on this very basis is why they became so popular. The consumer-mindset is being encouraged and reinforced by the opportunity presented. The theory positions that if there are more options, there is no need to compromise— you can simply have it all.

At the American Nation Exhibition in Moscow in 1959, America was able to iconize our convenience and consumerism in a tasteful blow against the Soviet Union, and communism en bloc. This exhibition, as quoted by the New York Times was “a lavish testimonial to abundance and originality of design,” in that the exposition presented an assortment of consumer products and goods that were available to the typical American family. (NYT). This exhibition was a huge demonstrator of the US’s postwar use of food power in direct comparison to other countries around the world. Food was very prominent at this event, due to the socialist systems of the Soviet Union and their lack of food stability. America’s abundant supply of food choices and food products for consumers in post-war years “became emblematic of the advantages of the capitalist system,” versus the socialist system of the Soviet Union (McDonald). This argument of the American upper hand was later iconized and referred to as the Kitchen Debate.

The Kitchen debate solidified for American citizens that consuming modern convenience foods was their tool in expressing patriotism and allegiance to the American ideal—especially in the midst of Red Scare and Cold War tensions. Combining the newfound sense of purpose among American constituents, along with their desire for individual satisfaction based on peoples own individual and personal preference, the need for more flexible food options for newly structured homes, and the insatiable need for immediate gratification, is what created the culture needed to ignite the fast food industry into the influential position it is in today.

**Sex and the Rise of Playboy – Part 5**

With the publishing and dispersal of the popular men’s lifestyle magazine, Playboy, in December of 1953, there was an immediate and drastic societal reaction, both positive and negative. The first issue sold more than 50,000 copies (Playboy Enterprises).The advertisement of sex, pleasure, and the ‘Playboy Philosophy’ stimulated an interesting new-age culture in 1950’s society.

The “Playboy Philosophy”, was originally documented by Huge M. Hefner in a series of essays published; the first one being publicized in December of 1962. It is described briefly as “an evolving manifesto on politics and governance … fundamental beliefs about free enterprise and the nature of man and woman… [and] the truths of human sexuality.” (Biography.com) The openness and candor of those at the forefront of this push non-traditionalism and “the good life” either entranced followers or sharply, and often personally, offended others. Playboy attributes its widespread, almost immediate, embrace to the misinterpretation and overemphasis of “security, conformity, a downgrading of education and intellect, and a near deification of the Common Man and a great many all-too-common concepts and ideas,”(Playboy Philosophy) within magazines, newspapers, movies and radio in the 1930s and 40s.

The popularity of playboy can be traced in more ways than one to the decades of war and economic depression that had struck early 20th century society. “For many, the magazine proved to be a welcome antidote to the sexual repression of the era.” (Biography.com) Playboys popularity also represented an extension of American’s felt-desire for consumption in masses. If the product or desire for a product is present, and one has the money or credit available, then they shall have that product—even if said product is sex entertainment. That is the consumerist American-way enforced by the influence of a mass-consumption society following the pre-war and wartime strangulation of freedoms, opportunity, and choices.

Playboy Magazine and its founder Hugh Hefner challenged traditional and cultural normalcy as well as played a huge role in redefining the legality of censored material. In 1955, Hugh Hefner sued the Post Office after a Postmaster General refused to deliver copies of Playboy magazine because of its explicit content. Hefner won, officiating his right to use the mail system as well as granting him $100,000 in damages for the suit. (Glusman) Then again in 1958, the Post Office tried to ban the magazine completely. The results were all the same, Hefner as well as his constitutional right to freedom of speech came out on top. Hefner and his Playboy brand are known for and idolized by the revolutionary actions in emancipating the press and entertainment literature sector from the limits of obscenity laws that he presented. “By fighting to expand the power of the first amendment to include pornographic content, Hugh Hefner forever altered the American public’s conception of obscenity, and in doing so, redefined and exalted sexuality and gender in America.” (Glusman)

The introduction of Playboy into society brought about unforeseen complications with law, the American people, and ruffled the very fabric that held society together. The ability to now distribute large quantities of sex, pleasure, promiscuity, and “the good life” brought on the new wave of consumers ready and willing to purchase such products. Not only were mindsets about the culture of sex, gender roles, and pornographic images changed, laws were altered. In all sectors of society, the idea that if you have the means to purchase, and the desire is there, the product will be available to you— even mailed straight to your doorstep.

**A Mass Consumption Society Solidified – Part 6**

Contributing to the growth in technology, economy, and the overall purchasing power of each shopper within the larger American consumer society, it is easy to argue the positives of mass-consumption and consumerism. The credit card allowed families to afford a more comfortable lifestyle. Convenience dining allowed more flexibility to the millions of American families transitioning to dual income homes during this time. Playboy helped expand and better establish the 1st amendment to allow more freedoms. However, it is important to reflect upon the negatives. The environmental and cultural concerns of a mass-consumption are irrefutable. The credit card has created a pathway for one of the biggest concerns to maintaining American economic equilibrium—the debt crisis. Fast food, convenience dining has almost single-handedly caused the obesity epidemic plaguing America with their large quantities and abysmal nutritional value. Playboy has, in image but not in company policy, contributed to a portions of societies degrading, subordinate view of women.

Mass consumption, in a literal sense, is defined by Oxford Dictionaries, is “the use or purchase of goods or services by a large number of people.” Mass consumption, as many refer is the tendency for people to want without end. If one feels they can, in a mass consumption society, then they shall. Mass consumption is greed. Often with greed comes urgency; a time frame. This is where the addition of immediate gratification comes into this argument. Immediate gratification is the ‘I want it now, so I’ll have it now,’ attitude. These desires, to be satisfied instantly and on a mass scale, along with the innovations in products, manufacturing, and advertisements are what have shaped America into the consumerist society we are still today.

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