

Chris Eng

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Affluenza reader response

Through the reading this week on Affluenza I was able to gain a better understanding of the cultural transition from a society based on needs to a society based on wants and learn details about the emerging epidemic that would become the consumer culture we see today. Through the lens of the rise of industrialization and mass production brought about a shift in societal values and aspirations. The desire for material possessions and status symbols became increasingly prevalent, eventually helping to shift the culture creating a hyper capitalist economy driven by consumerism.

In the article “A Brief History of Consumer Culture” the main idea is the emergence of the consumer culture that is now seen as one of the pillars of our world. It first recounts a brief history of the initial shift from a more traditional styles of consumption and while attempts to promote sales based off of “envy” grew in the late 18th century it was not until the late 19th century that people began opening up to the ideas of a lifestyle befitting the urban middle class. In the 1920’s the rising manufacturing made it so that to increase profits continually consumers would need to consume more to meet the output of the newly made commodities and thus the first wave of consumerism was born but it was short lived as the financial crash in the 1930’s put a damper on the rampant consumer culture that was forming. Once WWII was over the consumer culture took off again and was filled with the “renewed zeal” fueled by corporate advertising through the new medium of television. Immense effort and money

was now being devoted to persuading people to buy things that they did not need fueling the planned obsolescence and commodity riddled industries that were thriving off of the new culture of consumerism. The advertisements also began to shift as a new form of propaganda aimed at having these commodities be seen as the goal in satisfying human aspirations and creating a culture of never ending consumerism. I can definitely see the impact on today's consumer economy whose foundation was laid by these early efforts to create said economy, and for better or for worse they have now perfected, and proliferated the whole world with their advertisements and branding to the point where it is almost impossible to escape said advertisements.

“Affluenza” also covers the time after WWII and adds the context of the economic demand that was fostered by the wartime restrictions and the GI bill that helped Americans start stable families during the baby boom. The growing age of abundance that was seen made it so the average American could indulge in the commodity based economy and their ticket to the good life was seen as their growing consumption of cheap short lasting products. Instant loans from the banks also helped aid the rampant consumer culture as the “rush to suburbia continued”. (135) In 1970, Europeans were spending only 1/4th of the time shopping compared to Americans, showing the disproportionality of American spending. Television ads fueled consumer wants as the TV took center stage for advertisements. Some Americans tried to hold themselves back from engaging with such reckless spending habits, seeing the potential damages that could be caused by such a culture, especially the younger generation who fought

back against the materialism driven desires. However this counter movement was just that, a counter to the spread of affluenza, which was rapidly taking over the world.

“Affluenza” begins with a recounting of Regan era politics that brought with it, the true normalization of the greedy consumer. The Yuppies who wanted everything were the perfect customers for the growing consumer economy and fit perfectly into the advertisers ideal market. As the average americans standards of living rose so did the americans desires and the market was there to fulfill those desires. Additionally, increasing television consumption made advertising even more prevalent and important that ever before as it served as the prime way for consumers to learn about new products and the advertisement companies made large amount on short ads which reached more people. But that's not to say outdoor advertising was gone by the year 2000, outdoor advertising was a \$5-billion-a-year industry, they even thought of making a billboard that would be in space about the size of the moon. And with so many ads companies wanted to differentiate themselves from the pack, and that's where logos and branding came into play. The internet also played a role in the proliferation of ads wherever you went as especially today much of your time is spent on the internet, becoming an over 100 billion dollar industry, and the hypercommercialism we see today where it is almost impossible to escape the ads is a sad reality. The financial crash of 2008 also seemed to be at least partially linked to the hyper consumer economy as people lived beyond their means and the backs were readily available to give out home loans for those who matched the motto of greed is good. Despite the financial crisis that

is caused, America has not yet learned its lesson as we are still in the frenzy of spending habits that are a hallmark of affluenza.

Then we move on to how the advertisement industry is often overlooked and how that extends even to the way we view our consumer culture in that a main aspect of advertisements is their PR with the public and how we view the companies that they represent. Corporate lobbyists create and draft bills to further their corporate interests and lawmakers seem to go along with what the corporate strategy is. These lobbying front groups are purely meant to further their corporate interests and often erode protections in the workplace for the workers to increase their corporate earnings. They even create competing science teams to refute ideas that what they are doing is harming the general public. Journalists also play into the narrative by telling stories that might be contrarian as they care more about the continued views of their programming rather than truly keeping the public informed. Our economy is driven at full throttle, operating on the assumption that resources are inexhaustible and that the Earth can constantly recover from exploitation, and things like fracking that present real danger to our environment are often pushed to the side as the real questions would put a damper on this style of living.

The article and chapters that were assigned for this week's reading really opened my eyes up to the rapid shift in culture we have seen and how the culture that has been created, one based on fast cheap products made to satisfy our cravings for novelty which has been seen as what will bring us happiness is truly unsustainable. This culture

is bringing us no meaningful happiness and only closer to the brink of catastrophe, this culture is one fueled and powered by the industry of advertisements and is one where the only goals are to create a world where every consumer is indoctrinated with the idea that greed is good. A culture created to help corporate profits which are only growing due to the cultures increasing desires for more, no matter the cost to the environment or the people of the world.