

Materialism & Its Discontents

Matthew Roskowski

Senior, Applied Social Science

ABSTRACT

With the ever-growing importance placed on material objects, consumerism as a social and cultural phenomenon has become an important area of research. The growing amount of research dealing with consumerism in modern capitalist societies has mainly dealt with the effects of materialism in regards to happiness. The main focus of this analysis was centered on desire and the perceived fulfillment of desire upon purchasing commodities and the perceived satisfaction individuals felt upon purchasing those commodities. The data from this study came from a survey distributed to students, which were analyzed using regression analysis. The data showed that even though consumers realize that their desires are not being fulfilled through the act of consumption, they are still more likely to have a feeling of emptiness when they are not able to purchase other goods that they desire. This paradoxical result is used to illustrate that the capitalist conception of desire—something that can be fulfilled by purchasing a commodity—is erroneous and leads to an endless construction of false needs and desires. The results from this study give us a better understanding of how capitalism manipulates desire in order to perpetuate consumerism.

Keywords: capitalism, Lacan, Marx, fetishism, materialism, desire

INTRODUCTION/THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK/LITERATURE REVIEW

Desire is an essential aspect of human nature that incessantly drives us onward and wills our existence. Inextricably bound to the development of our subjectivities, desire is a key informant of our actions, which perpetually negotiates a world of absent objects and emotions, always positioned vis-a-vis a notion of the 'lack'. In order for desire to continually exist, the objects of desire must remain in absentia, and it is in this absence that we construct fantasies for our desires. Felluga (2002) explains that.

In constructing our fantasy-version of reality, we establish coordinates for our desire; we situate both ourselves and our object of desire, as well as a relation between. Our object of desire (what Lacan terms the "objet petit a") is a way for us to establish coordinates for our own desire. To come too close to our object of desire threatens to uncover the lack that is, in fact, necessary for our desire to persist, so that, ultimately, desire is most interested

not in fully attaining the object of desire but in keeping our distance, thus allowing desire to persist. Because desire is articulated through fantasy, it is driven to some extent by its own impossibility (p. 1)

This Lacanian understanding of desire illuminates the shortcomings of the modern capitalist conception of desire: that desire is something that may be fulfilled through the act of attainment; in particular, the attainment of commodities. This erroneous, hegemonic conception of desire has been reified through a language that animates and sanctifies commodities as the ends of those desires. By manipulating desire in such a way, this falsification serves to perpetuate materialistic behavior by keeping subjects in a constant state of 'salivating' as the capitalist machine continually lays out what it is we are to desire, stripping us of our will and agency. It becomes clear then that our material desires are cultural constructions that we learn to internalize upon our entry into the linguistic, symbolic world.

The self as a 'significant form,' as a blend of experiences, values, and beliefs, combined in a particular way to create form through the formation of a self, has thus become a dissolution of experience and achievement as our phenomenological selves have been displaced by selves of objects—bodies of commodities.

For Nietzsche there is a kind of dissolution of the self. The reaction against oppressive structures is no longer done, for him, in the name of a "self" or an "I." On the contrary, it is as though the "self" and the "I" were accomplices of those structures" ('Nietzsche's Burst of Laughter', 2011, p. 1) The self, the consumer, has become an accomplice to the very structure, to the very state that is consuming it. Our subservience to commodities has reversed the dynamics of our relationship with the world of things: instead of being the masters of matter, the beings who write the nature of objects, we have become the slaves. The abandonment of a human 'significant form' is a consequence of the poverty of imaginative forces that have rendered the creative construction of the self obsolete, or, at the very least, unnecessary. This self as significant form, of a phenomenological being of experience, has been displaced by an algorithmic self that finds meaning (the negation of meaning) in the adherence to a capitalist symbolic order that propagates the manifestation of a self of negation through rational and mechanistic means. Our being thus finds itself positioned in strict categories. These constructed categorical selves—these selves that exclude the self—are developed apart from us by and through commodities. The nomadic nature of the self thus arises from a constant departure, a perpetual displacement from a point of origin (our self, our bodies).

To advance this idea of the self I will appropriate Zygmunt Bauman's

concept of 'the tourist'.

The tourist is on the move...He is everywhere he goes in, but nowhere of the place he is in...The tourist moves on purpose (or so he thinks). His movements are first of all 'in order to', and only secondarily (if at all) 'because of'...In the tourist's world, the strange is tame, domesticated, and no longer frightens; shocks come in a package deal with safety. This makes the world seem infinitely gentle, obedient to the tourist's wishes and whims, ready to oblige; but also a do-it-yourself world, pleasingly pliable, kneaded by the tourist's desire, made and remade with on purpose in mind: to excite, please and amuse (Bauman, 29-30)

The 21st century 'tourist' must not be thought of as someone who travels spatially, but a being that forever traverses the muddy waters of the void that is the capitalist symbolic order. This tourist takes up residency in the perpetual present, gorging the ready-made comforts of the modern world, and speaks in the dead tongue of commodities. Its language has undergone a metamorphosis: it wears the abrasive sensuality of objects on its fingertips.

While Bauman says that the world appears to the tourist as something which is "pleasingly pliable, kneaded by the tourist's desire," I argue that it is the tourist's desires which are kneaded by the world that seems "infinitely gentle." The hegemony of consumerism marks the shift from our natural desires to culturally constructed desires. Being that human desire is always a desire for something else, for what is lacking, desire can have no fixed object: "There is no object of desire, an object that could satisfy desire, only object-cause of desire: something that incarnates the lack and entails a promise of dealing with it" (Stavrakakis, 2002, p. 90). The discourse of advertisements manipulates this lack by mythologizing commodities, instilling in them a breadth of experiences and emotions that promise the consumer (the tourist) a navigable path to traverse the world of absence into the world of attainment. It is for this reason that I say the tourist of the 21st century no longer travels spatially, for it is the object-commodities that do all the traveling whilst we sit static, dejected in their absence, forever anticipating their presence.

The 21st century tourist, therefore, perpetually traverses the world of objects, navigating a reality of dead things which signify our displacement from the real, possessive of desires that are not only not our own, but also interlinked with and determined by the social relations of society and the power. To be complete, to satisfy our pleas for individuality and the construction of a subjectivity which is truly our own, we must possess, for possession in our modern society implies 'becoming whole', which presupposes a 'lack'—a

feeling that one is not completely oneself, that we must find bits our being in material reality, possess them, and thus bestow meaning upon ourselves. Nietzsche proclaimed that "possessions are usually diminished by possession," and this phenomena is nowhere more evident than in our modern capitalist society.

When framed within this theoretical background, it becomes clear that any analysis of materialism must transcend the vast amount of research that has simply sought to delineate a relationship between materialism and well-being. Traditional definitions of materialism have centered on individuals overestimating the importance of material goods to their overall happiness and life satisfaction (Flynn, Goldsmith & Kim, 2013; Belk, 1985). While I believe this definition of materialism to be slightly accurate, it does little to imply the psycho-social effects of materialism on the individual, nor does it incorporate the dialectical relationship between the state and the populace, which, together, reinvents and perpetuates consumption as the purpose of being. This hegemony of consumerism marks the shift from our natural desires to culturally constructed desires. Since human desire is always a desire for something else, for what is lacking, desire can have no fixed object. The discourse of advertisements manipulates this lack by mythologizing commodities, instilling in them a breadth of experiences and emotions that promise the consumer a navigable path to traverse the world of absence into the world of attainment. These discursive elements of advertisements have permeated the value system of western culture and are continually perpetuated in the socialization process (Ahuvia & Wong, 2002, p. 396). In studies done by both Burroughs and Rindfleish (2002) and Norris and Larsen (2010), materialism has been shown to correlate positively with negative values such as hedonism and achievement, and correlates negatively with values associated with universalism and benevolence. This research, when coupled with research that illustrates a negative relationship between high materialism and happiness (Belk, 1985), helps portray a proliferating feeling of anomie.

This feeling of anomie is born of a deregulation of morality, which is symptomatic of unbridled production, a limitless market into which one is submerged without quite knowing one's place; an essence-less system which substitutes life for death in order to continue its continuous expansion. In this system, the fetishism of commodities is perpetuated through a dead analytical language that finds its basis in and through dead things (i.e. commodities).

Commodity fetishism is the misinterpretation of material goods as things which possess value in and of themselves; things that are endowed with mystical qualities and begin to rule over humans as if ordained by some natural law. Marx describes the idea of commodity fetishism by saying:

In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labor... (Marx, p.43).

In an object present where one feels a 'lack-of'—when an individual becomes aware of an absence—the ends of desire become manifest in the object which is not present. Materials are thus bestowed with mystical qualities and transcend the realm of sensuousness. Commodities become the bearers of meaning, fostering a pseudo-individuality that necessitates the surrender of the individual to a social formation, which propagates a world of dead symbols, language, and values. It is in this contextual framework that I will begin my analysis of materialism, further seeking elements of our current social condition, which ground us in this anomic, disenchanting state.

METHODOLOGY

The data used in this analysis was collected through an online survey I conducted, which asked respondents to answer 13 questions using a Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). The questions asked in the survey all pertained to aspects of materialism and required a mild to high degree of self-introspection on the part of the respondents in order to gauge their materialistic habits. The questions revolved around satisfaction with material goods, individuality and material goods, views on American consumption patterns, and the desire for material goods. My sample population included UW-Stout students, and the assumed age range was between 18 and 25, with the possibility of a few outliers. The reasoning behind choosing this demographic was because I was particularly interested in examining developing materialistic habits in educated, young adults. Most college-age students are exposed to copious amounts of advertisements, whether it is through television or their engagement with social media, and therefore they are an important demographic to analyze in order to understand materialism as a whole. The university's research clearinghouse provided the e-mail addresses of the 1,000 students, and all results were submitted anonymously, leaving no possibility for anyone to trace certain answers to particular individuals.

Of the 1,000 participants who received surveys, only 117 individuals completed the surveys. After I sent out the initial survey, I followed up each week for two weeks with reminders to complete the survey. Upon gathering the data, I performed a quantitative analysis in SPSS searching for relationships and interactions within the data to aid in formulating a cohesive argument in regards to the detrimental effects of materialism on society and the individual.

RESULTS & ANALYSIS

Through my analysis I found certain patterns of dissatisfaction with material goods, which provided paradoxical results. The main focus of my analysis was centered on desire: the perceived fulfillment of desire upon purchasing commodities and the perceived satisfaction individuals felt upon purchasing said commodities. Having framed my research around Lacan's theory of desire, I was curious to see if this theorization would be reflected in the respondents' answers. To explore these ideas I ran two linear regression models. The first model included a dependent variable corresponding to the survey question, "I often have a feeling of emptiness or disappointment when I am not able to purchase material goods that I desire," with explanatory variables exploring impractical spending, how much the respondent desires other individuals' materials, the respondents' tendency to not feel that their desire was satisfied upon purchasing a material good, and their affinity for possessing unique materials.

Table 1 Regression statistics for effects of level of impractical spending, desire of others material goods, lack of satisfaction upon possession of material goods, & desire to possess unique goods on the feeling of emptiness when unable to purchase desired goods.

	1
Impractical Spending	.179**
Desire Others' Materials	.227***
Not Satisfied Upon Possession	.162*
Uniqueness	.031****
R ²	0.230***
df	3
N	117

*p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01, **** not significant two tailed tests

Source: Matt's Awesome Survey

Table 1 reveals that three of the explanatory variables were statistically significant at varying levels. The most interesting result shows that for every 1 unit increase in an individual realizing that their desire for a material good was not satisfied upon purchasing said good, they are .162 more likely to have a feeling of emptiness when they are not able to purchase other goods that they desire. This paradoxical result is easily framed within Lacan's theory of desire. What this result reflects is that cultural desire, propagated by the capitalist system, is not realized in attainment. Despite the fact that

the fulfillment promised by commodities is not realized, individuals still feel a degree of disappointment when they are unable to further purchase commodities which promise the same fulfillment.

There are multiple explanations for this paradox, but the one I will put forth is that individuals are, in essence, 'consuming themselves'. Materialism, for many, provides an arena for forging an identity. The idea that one can forge an identity through the materials they possess presupposes that there are traits inherent in materials, and that, by possessing materials, those traits are then bestowed upon the possessor. This type of behavior is symptomatic of a materialistic hegemony wherein the values of materialism permeate into the consciousness of the citizens and are accepted as the guiding voices of action. Though these values are internalized by citizens and regarded as serving their best interest, it becomes clear that the current erroneous conception of desire is detrimental to the essence of the individual. Desire must necessarily remain unsatisfied because the ends of this desire lay not in the actual acquisition of a particular commodity, but in the perpetual attainment of the conceptualized sentiment or state of being, which guided the act of consumption and is instilled into that material which is consumed. Upon the acquisition of a particular commodity, it is from thereon a simple act of transference: the possessor seeks to instill the spirit of the commodity into him or herself. The folly here lies in a simple misconception: the commodity has no spirit, for it is a dead thing. The fetish value of the commodity is realized in the possession of a desired material: upon possession, the consumer realizes the disconnect between the object-cause of their desire (which is what they base their fantasies around), and the actual object that they attain. Here we see another paradox: in order for desire to persist, the object must remain in absentia because once the object is attained, all fantasy melts away and the consumer is left with a dead object unable and unwilling to satisfy their desire. It is this paradox, as I've mentioned, that capitalist and hegemonic advertising manipulates.

My second regression model includes a dependent variable which corresponds to my survey question, "I often desire other peoples materials such as cars, clothing and electronics," with explanatory variables exploring whether or not an individual's desire is satisfied upon purchasing a material good, the feeling of emptiness an individual has when they are not able to purchase a good that they desire, and individuals who state that they are always satisfied upon purchasing material goods.

TABLE 2

Table 12 Regression statistics for el level of lack of satisfaction upon posse: material goods, desire satisfied upon pu of material goods, & desire unfulfilled able to purchase material goods on how an individual desires others' materials

Desire Satisfied Upon Purcahse	
Desire Unfulfilled	
Not Satisfied Upon Possession	
R ²	
df	
N	
<hr/>	
*p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01, **** not s	
two tailed tests	
Source: Matt's Awesome Survey	

Table 2 illustrates that for every 1 unit increase in an individual finding that their desire was not satisfied upon purchasing a material good, they are .203 more likely to desire other individuals' material goods. This regression model again provides us with a bit of a paradox, and again reiterates Lacan's theory of desire. When an individual finds their desire unfulfilled, they desire the 'other'. Lacan believed that all humans desire in the 2nd degree: our desires are culturally constructed and we are taught what and how to desire. The rationale for desiring others' material goods can certainly play into the desire for social status, but also a false perception that leads the individual to attribute certain characteristics to materials that others own, which may lead to thoughts such as, "They are so happy with their new house and new car! If only..." These types of thoughts are common in individuals who are seeking out happiness through materials, though we can see that they are misattributing the others' happiness to material goods.

As we can see, both models illustrate a sort of perpetual-motion machine that constantly reiterates material goods as the ends of our desires. This type of desiring is formulated by and through advertisements that construct fantasies that do not align with reality, rather: they fetishize commodities. This materialist hegemony severely limits the sphere of agency for any given actor by creating algorithmic 'niches' which individuals are cast into. Thus, each person has given materials which are used to define their individuality, but really, the use of materials as a means of presenting oneself creates a shroud of inauthenticity around the individual because their 'self' is not constructed around anything real, but around dead, spiritless commodities. The

capitalist system is dependent on economic growth, and economic growth has become the mode by which we measure 'success' in America. The call for economic growth is therefore a call to consume, as consumption is necessary for growth. This call to consume is paradoxical because, as I said before, with the fetishism of commodities, consumers are essentially becoming the consumed: our desires are prescribed to us. I believe this research thus shows that this desire for materials is an erroneous attempt to construct a unique individuality within a vast, disenchanting socio-economic order. Modernity has presented us with a paradox: we have an inner desire to express ourselves, to be individualistic, yet, we embrace this desire by rejecting our own moral and aesthetic preferences in order to live a more comfortable existence by desiring the 'other'.

In summation, I think future research is needed to expand on the object-cause of desire and consumer perception of desire. I believe that a psychoanalytical approach to materialism will foster a deeper understanding of how hegemonic forces are internalized and externalized into consumptive behavior, which, ideally, will help in our quest to find ways to undermine the current capitalist system and its proliferation of materialism. Due to my small sample size and limited age group, I think future studies should also encompass a larger population in order to bring about more generalizable results.

REFERENCES

- Ahuvia, A.C., & Wong, N.Y. (2002). Personality and Values Based Materialism: Their Relationship and Origins. *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates), 12 (4), 389-402
- Aaron Ahuvia and Nancy Wong (1995), "Materialism: Origins and Implications For Personal Well-Being", in *E - European Advances in Consumer Research Volume 2*, eds. Flemming Hansen, Provo, UT : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 172-178.
- Bauman, Z. (1992). *Intimations of postmodernity*. London: Routledge
- Belk, Russell W. (1985), "Materialism: Traits Aspects of Living in the Material World", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 12, 265-280.
- Burroughs, J., & Rindfleisch, A. (2002). Materialism and well-being: A conflicting values perspective. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29, 348–370.
- Felluga, A. (2002, January 1). Introduction to Jacques Lacan, Module on Desire. Introduction to Jacques Lacan, Module on Desire. Retrieved May 10, 2014, from <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/psychoanalysis/lacandesire.html>
- Flynn, L., Goldsmith, R. E., & Wan-Min, K. (2013). A Cross-Cultural Study of Materialism and Brand Engagement. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (1947-2000)*, 5(3), 49-69
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1970). *Das Kapital; a critique of political economy.*. Chicago: H. Regnery.
- Stavrakakis, Y. (2008, January 1). Objects of Consumption, Causes of Desire: Consumerism and Advertising in Societies of Commanded Enjoyment. Retrieved May 15, 2014, from <http://www.enl.auth.gr/gramma/gramma06/stavrakakis.pdf>