

Simulated Reality of a Consumer Culture

In the 21st century where nearly everyone owns a smartphone and other screens, we are more vulnerable than ever to the agenda of producers through screen based media. It creates simulations of reality that offer unattainable lives that can only be acquired by buying their products. We have become individuals who constantly desire commodities and are seldomly content with our current possessions. We are victims to the subconscious influences that have more targeted to individuals, and we are desensitized to the blatant problems of a commodity culture. These advertisements and influences on social media create a substitute for the “real,” a fantasy for which we perceive can be obtained through buying, which in turn distracts us from actually enjoying the basic qualities of life. The imagery works to deceive us because often times these realities do not even exist. The capitalist model has forced us into a vicious cycle of dissatisfaction and have forgotten the basic human needs of interaction and activities nonrelated to technology.

Technology has developed rapidly before our eyes in the turn of the century. Humans have created products which many thought would not be possible, but it is a digital age now. Television was the first monster to permeate our homes and target us through visual advertisement. It was, and still is, a black hole intended to waste our time through useless visuals which distract us from living life and connecting with others. It bombards us with useless advertisement promising to work miracles. Again, it is simply a malicious cycle which keeps us desiring more without limit. Computers were at first another way for capitalism to target

individuals through advertisement, aside from TV, but since the creation of the first Apple smartphone in 2007, advertisers gained much more power. People could be targeted from a device they carry in their pocket. Previously, individuals had to choose to turn on the tv to be exposed to commercials in their home, but at this point there are no boundaries. This advance in technology has created a society who is constantly wanting, and seldomly content with necessities and current possessions. Constant exposure to consumer products is detrimental to anyone's well-being because having more doesn't equate with happiness. Instead it depletes savings to provide only brief satisfaction until something new seems even more appealing at the time, which it inevitably does. Instead of TV and non-digital forms of media like print ads which are distributed to a wide audience, smartphones use algorithms based on search history and such, to create tailored advertisements which prey on people's desires. Constant desire for the next best thing that fools us into self-betterment distracts us from true source of satisfaction: interpersonal relations and actually doing things.

It is vital for individuals to become aware that there are no such thing as benign visuals- all have connotations and agendas created intentionally by the those who produce them, as highlighted by Roland Barthes in his "*Photographic Message*". He also notes how photos are used in conjunction with text which alters the meaning, and although he was referring to printed photos in the press, the concept still applies to captions which accompany almost every social media post. In today's society, thanks to smartphones, everyone is constantly producing photos and sharing them on various platforms. The imagery may seem to be a believable representation of the situation presented, however, the producer must choose what to include and what to leave out. They even have the tools to manipulate certain aspects of the imagery though programs such as Photoshop, which is deceptive to the viewer.

Phones are a distraction and route for capitalist agenda just like TV with its commercials, but smartphones use interpellation, Althusser's ideology, to an unprecedented extent. Unlike broad advertisements which may or may not pertain or catch interest of a viewer, advertisements through social media and web browsers on our phones are much more personalized and targeted because they draw directly from sources which you search. Instagram is a prime example, using its explore page to gather images based on what you follow, search, or like, then present other people, images, or product ads which intend to influence the viewer to buy a product or buy into a lifestyle.

We are constantly inundated with advertisements: phones, computers, tv, everywhere we turn. Media is essentially unescapable unless you make an effort to escape to nature and ditch electronics, which in today's society is entirely impractical considering everyone must be connected for work or other reasons. But it is important to keep in mind that humans have lived fulfilling lives for hundreds of years without such technology. Using it is a choice, and we are responsible for limiting ourselves.

According to Jean Baudrillard, we live in a postmodern "society of simulation, identities are constructed by the appropriation of images, and codes and models determine how individuals perceive themselves and relate to other people. Economics, politics, social life, and culture are all governed by the mode of simulation, whereby codes and models determine how goods are consumed and used, politics unfold, culture is produced and consumed, and everyday life is lived." In other words, the media we are exposed to dictates all aspects of life. We as humans are constantly in a state of comparison, obsessed with aspiring to live the lives of those who we see online or on TV, and in turn, sacrifice actually living our own life. Although Baudrillard considers this postmodern simulation society to supersede the modern commodity culture of

production and consumption, the capitalist model still thrives. People more than ever spend their money to aspire into which simulated lifestyle that they have acquired a taste for. In turn humans have lost their agendas as citizens, and instead, have turned strictly into consumers who are entirely influenced by the media through the screens. Having more screens more easily accessible like tablets and cell phones only worsened the problem which TV seemed to be the only culprit of. “Influencers,” whether it be celebrities or everyday people purposely create imagery to evoke desire, flaunt publicity, and create envy for the viewer like Berger suggests. Being exposed to such imagery makes us subconsciously desire what they have, whether material or lifestyle. They are a pawn in a capitalist society, making themselves the embodiment of the product that they make appealing to consumers. We are even more vulnerable to this type of advertisement because it feels personal. These images are integrated in pictures of friends and family, making them seem even more relatable and obtainable. Being constantly exposed to pics through social media makes us want, crave, and desire. Consumers are more inclined to believe that they are justified to have the products since everyone has equal opportunity to share on Instagram which blurs class lines (Pierre Bourdieu) .

Capitalism is dangerous because it preys on our weaknesses. Ironically, we spend hard earned money to obtain the products, and make ourselves broke in return as demonstrated by the perfume factory workers in John Berger’s “Ways of Seeing.” Advertisements encourage us to buy in order to obtain an enriched lifestyle like people of a higher class, yet spending money on the product lessens the amount of money we have. Media gives a sense of value, ownership, and wealth to commodities like clothes, cars, technology. (Berger Ways of Seeing 3)) This is comparable to how paintings are considered valuable because they are associated with the wealthy in society, as also demonstrated by Berger. They are placed in institutions by curators

which gives them value. People in turn buy reprints, an affordable version, just like how consumers today buy knock-off items. The end goal is the same, trying to feel the same sense of worth as the upper class which simulates a sense of inclusion. In Baudrillard's words, the "entire society is organized around consumption and display of commodities through which individuals gain prestige, identity, and standing... the more prestigious one's commodities (houses, cars, clothes, and so on), the higher one's standing." One example of a current company that utilizes social media as its prime connections to impressionable buyers is Gymshark. It is the fastest growing UK fashion brand because it uses fitness influencers to model and review the products. Thousands of people bought into the commodity, also buying into the simulated reality where wearing the clothes will grant instant confidence to be fierce in the gym and look like the models. Posting on Instagram and doing reviews on YouTube makes them relatable since those are platforms available to everyone to post on. It disguises the fact that they are essentially just advertisers who get paid (through free clothing) to advocate for the brand. They even have personalized discount codes which makes it appear they are doing their viewers a favor to get them to buy. Purchasing the clothing seems like a simple way to have that lifestyle, when in reality it takes dedication to work out, regardless of attire.

America has pushed the idea of progress and commodity since the Industrial Revolution, it became ingrained in our psyche to strive to have more possessions. We cater to commerce and put things on display to make people aspire to have things they don't actually need, like the Crystal Mall first did when manufacturing took off. Things had to be advertised or displayed to convince people of buying it. Production and consumption is seen as progress since the Industrial Revolution where the economy benefitted from mass producing goods to sell. We are therefore blind to the flaws of such a culture, and fail to question buying way more than necessities, and

disposing of what is out of style or no longer enviable. People from even a couple of generations early, coming from the Great Depression, lived in a society that differed greatly. They valued what they had, and only bought what they needed since funds were tight.

Nowadays we Push to get kids outside and active, but there are infinite apps and games which are constantly advertised that appeal to us more, making the outside world unappealing by comparison. As Baudrillard describes it, we now experience “*hyperreality* in which entertainment, information, and communication technologies provide experiences more intense and involving than the scenes of banal everyday life.” Smartphones make it even worse because they are mobile, so even if you are outside, you can still be distracted from actually socializing or being active. Enjoying free activities is no longer the first choice, like walking, biking, climbing trees, playing with pets. There is no one to advertise the benefit of partaking in such activities, because there would be no financial gain. In fact, if you are outside playing, that takes away time you could be online shopping. Companies have selfish financial motives which are not for the well-being of people, no matter what they claim in regards to a product. Actually doing tasks and moving is what makes us feel accomplished, unlike the brief, false feeling of accomplishment of getting likes or completing another level in a digital simulation. People spend hours glued to their screens and wonder why they feel drained, tired, and lack desire. Being active, getting something done, creating something, these are things that release hormones that relate to actual satisfaction and happiness. Humans are also social beings meant to interact, and screens only serve to keep us isolated and silent which is detrimental to mental health. Why call when texting is there? Why meet up when you can communicate through video call? Why check in on someone when you can just see their post and drop a quick comment? The Covid-19 social distancing requirements have made people aware of the importance of human connection. Being

able to interact with others is something that is taken for granted, and people are experiencing the negative emotional effects of not being able to. Of course in this consumer society, producers are taking advantage of the situation by advertising their products, claiming solutions in these trying times. Online companies especially are thriving and taking advantage of the fact people have all day to access their computer, and in turn are having deals and promotions.

People are desensitized to producers' tactics. Culture has molded us to accept these practices of buying as normal (Foucault). We spend our energy glued to the screen, searching things to buy to improve our lives. In the meantime we forget how important it is to actually get out and live. Whether we are aware or not, we desire what we see depicted through visuals. Although we may repress our desires, our unconscious is an active realm of desire that we have no control over according to psychoanalytic theory. We acknowledge ourselves as a human subject, and in turn, substitute ourselves into the visuals to imagine how our life could be improved. Pictures and media create a façade of contentment through the fallacies of which they portray, and what they decide to leave out, mentioned by Barthes. We believe the simulated satisfaction presented through our screens and fail to acknowledge deceiving tactics. Yet, we cannot help but envy and strive for the lifestyle presented anyway, which companies thrive off of. We are in a vicious cycle of being unsatisfied because we are inundated with so many ads, and so many (what we assume are true) depictions of other people's lives that we feel we cannot keep up. We find ourselves unhappy, and frankly broke because we cave to the ads and buy the latest, greatest things to possess what we envy from others. Baudrillard phrased this threat well, "An individual in a postmodern world becomes merely an entity influenced by media, technological experience, and the hyperreal."

There may not be a solution since the development of technology is unpredictable and uncontrollable, but the best medicine is education. It doesn't necessarily need to be taught in schools, but people, starting from a young age, need to be made aware of the dangers associated with an inundation of media. All visuals have an agenda whether we know it or not. Visuals are impactful and draw on our subconscious thought to deceptively influence us. Culture is a fluid, always changing network of relationships in a society which influences our desires and taste. As trends shift, we shift our views and styles because we are susceptible to the media. Institutions have it figured out down to a science how to influence by means of visuals, which we are at risk of more than ever now that media fits in our pocket and is constantly by our side. There are so many simulations for people to view, on so many different screens, that they become meaningless as a whole. People need to reassess the true values in life, and what actually is the source of satisfaction. Interpersonal connections and time away from screens is vital to living a fulfilling existence, and reestablishing meaning and autonomous thought.

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