Symbolic Consumption under the Influence of American Consumerism

Lu ZHANG

College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China
Zhanglu3091367@163.com

Keywords: Consumerism, Symbolic Consumption, Sign Value.

Abstract. Since the early twentieth century, with the increasing development of economy, the invention of Fordism and the accelerating course of urbanization, America has eventually stepped into the threshold of consumer society. According to Jean Baudrillard, a famous French philosopher, an object, besides its use value and the exchange value, has the value of sign. The value of sign embodies an object’s “differences” that enable the object to contain some symbolic meanings. Consumption thus becomes “a system which assures the regulation of signs”: when people consume an object, they consume the value of sign instead of its materialization or utility. In this way, people convey some important social meanings such as social position, personal tastes, and unique lifestyles through the commodities they purchase. Theoretically, as Saussure’s sign theory has claimed that sign can be divided into “signifier” and “signified” whose relationship is arbitrary, Barthes further proposes the idea of “mythology” to explain the creation of sign value; in practice, the advertisements and the fashion system reinforce the power of sign value through the differences of appearance, space and services.

Introduction

In this paper we assume that consumerism is an acceptance of consumption as a way to self-development, self-realization and self-fulfillment, which is manifested in the purchasing of new goods and services, with little attention to their true need, durability, product origin or the environmental consequences of manufacture and disposal. In a consumer society, an individual’s identity is tied to what he consumes, and people end up buying more than they need for basic sustenance to seek for the satisfaction brought by the accumulation of goods and the use of services.

As Zygmunt Bauman analyzed in his book Society under Siege, because of mass production and installment purchasing, since the twentieth of last century, America is undergoing an economic shift in emphasis from production to consumption. In such a society, emphasis has been placed on consumption instead of saving and austerity. And following America, gradually the western countries even some developing countries have stepped into the consumer society — a society that is organized around consumption.

As consumerism originated in America, the lifestyle brought by it is typically represented by the Americans. There the consumers are immersed in consumption and the purpose of their consumption is not to meet the effective demand, but to satisfy the stimulated consumption desire. In other words, what people consume is not the utility value of merchandise but what it symbolizes.

A Survey of the American Consumerism

Historical background of consumerism in the US can be traced back to the 1920s when there were enormous changes in nearly all aspects of American life. Due to the following causes, the United States entered the initial stage of consumer society. Firstly, the industrial revolution in the end of the nineteenth century laid a solid material foundation for the development of the consumer society. And then World War I largely weakened the power of Europe and promoted America’s status. Furthermore, occurring at the very beginning of the twentieth century, Fordism, referring to ideas and principles of Henry Ford, represents the most advanced management system at that time. In the 1920s, there emerged an economic shift in emphasis from production to consumption as
vastly growing number American citizens, especially in the notable new “middle class”, “equipped and eager to become consumers”.

**Symbolic Consumption as the Prominent Feature of Consumerism**

As is known to all, in economics, to consume is to pursue the principle of utility maximization. On that occasion, under the rule of the minimum cost and maximum profit, consumers make their consuming decision rationally according to the price of commodity and their private favor. However, nowadays, the prevalence of consumerism continuously advocates a kind of value which instigates the consumer passion, stimulates the buying lust. Influenced by this tendency, consumers are no longer rational, and they seek to satisfy not only their needs but also their eternal desires. Besides the original utility, commodity must carry something more significant to underline its owner’s social status, lifestyles and so on, and thus symbolic consumption appears. As Baudrillard, a famous French philosopher said, it’s necessary for commodities to change into signs if they want to become the objects of consumption, and the process of consumption was in fact a “systematic act of the manipulation of signs” that signified social status through difference.

As it is suggested by Maslow in his hierarchy of needs, with the affluence of goods, people can satisfy their basic needs to a great degree, and then they seek to the higher levels such as esteem and self-actualization. However, if all commodities are of the same package and usage, signifying no difference in meanings, how can consumers recognize the higher levels of spiritual satisfaction by consuming? Thus symbolic meaning must be created to fulfill customers’ dreams as well as make money.

![Figure 1. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.](image)

In consumer society what people consume is not only the use value of goods and service but also its symbolic significance. Baudrillard develops sign value to represent the symbolic meaning of the commodities.

Aristotle and Marx speak of commodities having use-value and exchange-value, and Baudrillard maintains commodities have the status of “sign” value as well. The sign value embodies an object’s differences that enable the object to contain the symbolic meanings. When people consume an object, they consume the value of sign instead of its materialization or utility. In this way, people can deliver some important social meanings such as social positions, personal tastes, unique lifestyles and so on. Baudrillard asserts that it is merely an astonishing repetition of the saying: “I buy it because I need it.” To him, “the world of objects and of needs would thus be a world of general hysteria” [1]. And therefore, in the consumer society, we do not consume because its use value, but for its sign value. What’s more, playing the function of the signified illustrated in the last section, the “sign value” is arbitrary. That is to say, the sign value of the commodity has nothing to do with its real function in daily life, but is “determined by social or orectic logic”. [1] As
Baudrillard points out, when we buy something in a consumer society, we are not only consuming the commodities, but the “code” [1], under which commodities fall and the messages embed in acts of consumption.

The famous French scholar Roland Barthes put forward the concept of mythology to explain the creation of sign value. Based on the linguistic theory of Saussure, he introduces semiotics into the research of consumerism by developing two levels of meaning: the denotation and the connotation. The denotation level consists what Saussure called signifier and signified; and the connotation level is a second-order of signification which uses the denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified. In this framework connotation is a sign whose signifier derives from a denotative sign. Changing the form of the signified while keeping the same signifier can generate different connotations.

Here the red rose can be set for example to clarify the theory of mythology. As the sound image, the sound /red rəʊs/ can be seen as a signifier, and the notion it represents can be seen as a signified. Both the signifier and the signified are on the denotation level that represent the original meaning, and they together can be seen as a “new signifier” which represents a “new signified”: love. Here both the new signifier and new signified are on the connotation level that symbolize the transferring meaning. In fact, in our daily life, as soon as people see red roses, they may think of love, which means that the transferring meaning of the red roses is often seen as their original meaning. Roland Barthes calls this phenomenon “a mythology which endows objects with new significances”. It’s in the same way that the sign value of commodity is created by human beings artificially. Take the LV bags for example, the signifier (the bag itself) and the signified (the utility of the bag) consists the denotation level, which seems no difference with other bags. However, what matters much is the next level: the original signifier and signified together play the role of the new signifier in the connotation level to symbolize the new signified — pride and dignity. And it’s the new signified that urge all women to have a crush on LV bags. Here pride and dignity is the sign value brought by the LV bags.

Boosters such as advertisement and the fashion system are used by merchants to “operate” the commodities and create sign values. The aim of Advertisements is to endow commodities with sign value that represents some cultural significance, or function as a bridge connecting a commodity with its certain cultural significance in the heart of customers. In that way, once customers see the products that have appeared in the Advertisements, they associate them with the certain cultural significance. Once commodities take on the function of cultural relationship and stardust by advertisements, they are easily to be sold out. Advertisements imply you: once you possess this commodity, you possess some cultural significance and life value, for the commodity is the embodiment of this kind of significance and value; once you miss it, you are confronted with a pity of life. By the reinforcement of the Advertisements and the fashion system, commodities are endowed with some cultural significance, which may help consumers construct a habit association between the objects and some cultural or social values. Generally speaking, the sign value is produced in the following three ways: First, as there’s difference in the appearance of commodities, such as the designs, colors, patterns and packages, especially the trade marks, the special styles and grades are thus delivered to the customers as the differential sign. The sales of the famous female fashion brands such as Prada, LV and Dior are in this category. To some degree, it’s the logos of these commodities that attract customers more than the products themselves. Second, as a space sign, the environment of consuming can be seen as the content of consumption. As the environment and atmosphere of all the five-star hotels or top shopping malls are always very spacious and
comfortable, it is seen as a match of the dignity of the customers. Furthermore, the rituals of consumption like the series process of service can show the grades, which can explain the careful and close post-sale service of some luxury products. In these three ways, different commodities may represent different social status and special taste as a status symbol, and people consume not only the use value but also the sign value: the ambience, the taste, the beauty, the grade, the status or the magnificence.

**Crises Brought by Symbolic Consumption**

Symbolic consumption does bring people some benefits by offering them diverse needs, biological and especially spiritual. However, it exerts more negative influence upon the society. Apart from the distortion of consumption, symbolic consumption involves people into both existential crisis and ecological crisis.

The consumer society featured by symbolic consumption help build a hyper real world in which people lose their subjectivities. Obsessed by the plentiful signs and diverse choices, people are busy enjoy the spiritual satisfaction of showing off their existential significance such as the richness, personal lifestyle, social positions and so on. On the surface, they may feel quite liberated, pleasant and satisfied; however, the truth runs counter to the fact.

In such a society people worship signs blindly. When commodities such as a bottle of perfume, are exhibited in shopping malls, the commodities represent more than their use value and they have constituted “spectacle” which represents some kind of lifestyle or culture sign. Merchants keep beautifying “sign”, which is beyond the use value of commodity and create more beautiful “spectacles” to guide people to consume. Consumption is no longer a process of labor and transcendence, but the process of absorbing and being absorbed by the sign. Consumers are never confronted with their own images; neither do they see what they produce and what they really need. They merely internalize the signs that they buy.

As a result, man in the consumer society has nothing but the signs to rely on, he has no existence in and of himself, no deep “self” to return to. Stripped of symbolism and expression, he acts only as a controlled consumer, responding to a market of signs. It leads to what Herbert Marcuse calls a "one-dimensional man", his thought and behavior are trapped by the outer objects such as signs and images. Therefore, his aptitude and ability for critical thought and oppositional behavior wither away. In such a society, with their subjectivities lost, all men are superficial and empty.

Since symbolic consumerism sets persons against themselves in an endless quest for the attainment of the sign value of material things, few people give thought to the utility of commodity itself. Instead of caring about commodity’s quality performance or performance cost ratio, people attach much importance on its appearance and symbolic significance which may present their social status. In addition, the “fashion rule” shortens the life span of commodities, which results in the spoil of energy. Furthermore, in order to create the sign values to win the favor of customers, many commodities are over-packaged and exaggeratedly advertised with high cost, which lead to useless waste. Due to the above reasons, environment conjuncture rises dramatically with the promotion of symbolic consumption.

**Conclusion**

Under the influence of American consumerism, signs and images take the dominant roles in consumption, which may represent the social status, lifestyles and so on. In the thick atmosphere of consumption fashion formed under the drive of advertisements and the fashion system, people are all desperate to jump for the sign values. In this way, signs devastate all things. Symbolic consumption sets up its powerful kingdom, profoundly permeating through each corner of American consumer society. It ostensibly satisfies the various desires of people. Living in the affluent society, people seem to be happy for realizing their dreams. However, beneath the symbolic consumption, consumer activities have already been distorted, abandoning its original positive meaning. It builds up a hyper reality for people to practice the distorted consumptions with their
subjectivities lost, at the same time, it damages the ecological balance unconsciously. What’s worse, the wave of consumerism has spread from the USA to western countries, even to some developing countries. In China the symbolic consumption is also brewing. In the thick of the consumerism atmosphere, few can get their way out.

To escape from this morass, it’s crucial to have a conscious mind that the real life should be based on our striving for spiritual life rather than the “good image of life”. For the governments, kind and effective guides and warnings on consumption must be enacted to expose the harm of symbolic consumption, as well as to encourage citizens to form a healthy consumption concept. For the consumers themselves, they must be conscious enough not to step into the depth of eternal seek of sign values. In a word, an environment-friendly and rational way of consumption should be promoted to save our insane life as well as the dying earth.

**Acknowledge**

The accomplishment of my paper results from the help from all sorts. Hereby I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the International Conference on SSES2016, for giving me this opportunity to learn something new and to share my ideas. More importantly, I would like to express most heartfelt thanks to National Science Foundation for its financial supporting.

**References**


