

## WHAT IS WRONG WITH CONSUMERISM? AN ASSESSMENT OF SOME COMMON CRITICISMS

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Contemporary consumerism is frequently the target of criticisms by intellectuals, academics, religious spokesmen and commentators. Five of the more common of these criticisms are selected for analysis and examination; these being (a) the need criticism (b) the materialism criticism (c) the addiction criticism (d) the selfishness criticism, and (e) the irrationality criticism. Each is then shown either to be misconceived or to lack empirical support. Finally several of these common criticisms are shown to be at odds with each other.

*Keywords:* consumerism, need, materialism, addiction, selfishness.

El consumo contemporáneo es frecuentemente objeto de críticas por parte de intelectuales, académicos, líderes religiosos y comentaristas diversos. En este trabajo se analizan y examinan cinco de las críticas más comunes, como son: la crítica de la necesidad, la crítica sobre su materialismo, la crítica de la adicción, la crítica del egoísmo, y la crítica sobre su irracionalidad. Se muestra a continuación que todas ellas están desencaminadas o carecen de apoyo empírico. Finalmente, se pone de manifiesto que varias de estas críticas son incompatibles entre sí.

*Palabras clave:* consumo, necesidad, materialismo, adicción, egoísmo.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Criticising, if not actually vilifying, modern consumerism, is now a widespread and commonplace feature of public comment and debate in contemporary Western societies, with ministers of religion, environmentalists, artistic and literary figures, and even left-wing politicians, all outspoken in their condemnation of this characteristic feature of modern life. And of course none have been more forceful in their condemnation than academics, for many of

whom consumerism now seems to occupy that special role, formerly held by capitalism, of constituting the fundamental and systemic source of all the ills of modern life<sup>1</sup>. Yet few of the criticisms commonly levelled against consumerism, or more commonly against consumers and their behaviour, appear to be based on a careful study of the phenomenon in question. Rather it seems that its malign and undesirable nature is more often than not taken-for-granted, an attitude that is then backed up by the repetition of certain common assumptions concerning both its nature and the motives that impel individuals to consume; assumptions that are not merely highly questionable, but frequently contradictory. It is thus the aim of this paper to subject a few of these common assumptions to scrutiny and to try and show that, if they are not exactly false, then they are at least highly debatable.

Those criticisms commonly levelled against the behaviour of contemporary consumers (and thus by implication against consumerism itself) typically focus on the extent to which it is seen to stem from, or is regarded as stimulating or encouraging, unworthy motives (for example acquisitiveness, envy, greed, or the desire to impress), or as embodying undesirable values or traits (such as materialism or selfishness). Given that it is not possible to examine all these claims in one short article five are selected for discussion; these being (a) that modern consumerism typically involves individuals buying products that they do not need (b) that it embodies an undesirable materialism (c) that it should be considered a form of addiction (d) that it stems from selfishness, and lastly (e) that it is irrational and misguided in so far as it embodies the presumption that the acquisition of more and more goods is the path to happiness.

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1. See, for just one example among many, Z. BAUMAN, *Consuming Life* (Polity, Cambridge, 2007).

## 2. THE NEED CRITICISM

One of the more common criticism directed against modern consumerism is that it leads to people consuming more than they need. If only —the argument goes— individuals could restrict themselves just to buying only those things that they really “need”, instead of spending their money, and indeed frequently running into debt, buying those products and services that they want but cannot truly be said to need, then consumers would not only be more content in themselves but they would have the time and resources to devote to more fulfilling and worthwhile activities. Not only that of course but the human race would no longer be in danger of destroying the planet through the ever-increasing exploitation of its natural resources, while the resources that are still available could be shared more equitably between the haves and the have-nots.

This is a very seductive and apparently self-evident argument; for it would seem incontrovertible that many of us in the developed world both purchase and possess products that we do not “really need” if only because we could easily live without the items in question. Indeed one reason this argument appears so plausible is because most of us did indeed manage to live without many of the items we now possess in the not-too-distant past (as of course did our parents and grandparents). While additional force is given to this claim by the fact that we often possess multiple items that effectively serve the same purpose (as in the notorious case, for example, of Imelda Marcos and her hundreds of pairs of shoes). Finally there is the fact that many consumers will readily confess, when questioned, that they possess items that they do not “really need”, a fact endorsed by their willingness to sell them on, donate them to charity, or otherwise dispose of them. Yet, despite this, the argument is not as clear-cut as it would seem.

In the first place the fact that individuals possess items that they readily admit they do not need does not of course prove that need did not prompt the original purchase. It simply demonstrates that these items are no longer needed; not that they never were. In that respect it is merely an indictment of consumers for not disposing of

products quickly enough, that is as soon as they cease to be capable of satisfying the need that initially prompted their purchase. However the real problem with the criticism from need lies with the nature of that particularly troublesome four-letter word. Used as a noun it sounds definitive enough, and yet all efforts to specify given human needs, and especially to distinguish between real and false needs, have foundered. Indeed as Gardner and Shepherd rightly observe, the distinction between real and false needs, is “an impossible one to make”<sup>2</sup>. And yet, unless such a distinction can be made, that it is to say unless a common and definitive set of universal human needs can be identified, it is hard to see how one can criticise any individual or group for acquiring items that they do not need.

Yet the real problem with the criticism that takes the concept of need as its basis is less this difficulty of specifying a set of universal human needs than the fact that the word “need” is really a verb and not a noun, and the problem with a verb is that it requires an object. Hence this criticism, when expressed in full, is that modern consumers do not really need all the goods they acquire or consume in order to do or achieve, realise or attain something or other. But then the critical question becomes what would that be exactly? What is it that consumers do not “need” these items to achieve? Is it perhaps in order to stay alive? Or in order to lead a comfortable existence? Or perhaps to lead “a good life”; or to be happy? Or perhaps the criticism is that consumers do not “need” all the items they consume to fulfill their potential as human beings; or in order to find meaning and purpose in their lives? What is it precisely that, according to this criticism, consumers do not need all these products in order to achieve, given that each of these answers would lead to a somewhat different specification of needs? This is the crucial question that requires an answer if this criticism of consumer behaviour is to have any force. Let us take the simple example of food. Most of us undoubtedly eat more than we “need”

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2. C. GARDNER and J. SHEPHERD, *Consuming Passions: The Rise of Retail Culture* (Unwin Hyman, London, 1989), p. 48.

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in order to stay alive. Indeed we probably eat much more than we need in order to be fit and healthy, as the rising obesity statistics would suggest. But then eating fulfils other functions other than simply supplying adequate nutrition or maintaining health. It also meets important social, psychological and cultural needs; ones that are a function of the nature of our society and its culture. Hence what we “need” to eat in order to be fit and healthy may be rather different to what we might “need” to eat to make us feel happy and contented, let alone what we would need to eat if we were to regularly entertain friends and relatives in our homes, believe ourselves to be successful, or indeed attain our life-long ambition of being a gourmet. In this very obvious sense the concept of need is tied directly both to the purposes and goals of individuals as well as the values and beliefs of their culture. Consequently, and setting aside this specific example of food, it is simply not possible to assert what individuals or groups of people do or do not really “need” in the absence of a full understanding of their values, goals and life circumstances. Hence although one might want to claim that, in our society, people do not “need” to drive around in large, expensive and petrol-hungry cars, buy six pairs of shoes a year, or go on package holidays to Spain, these judgements are no more justified than the claim that people do not “need” to ride bicycles, buy the complete works of Shakespeare, or climb Everest. For the truth is that for anyone to attempt to specify what another person does or does not “need”, without a comprehensive knowledge of their background, personality, tastes, goals and ambitions, is simply to express a prejudice in favour of one specific conception of the good life.

But then there is also the strange matter of the implicit prejudice against wants that the criticism from need implies. For the force of this argument necessarily rests on the assumption that while it is perfectly legitimate to satisfy one’s needs —whatever they might be deemed to be— it is illegitimate to satisfy one’s wants. But it is not clear on what basis this discrimination is justified, or why the satisfaction of desires should not be considered as just as legitimate as the gratification of needs. There is certainly plenty of evidence

to suggest that people are quite prepared to go without things that they could be said to “need” in order to have things that they “want”, and if this is indeed their preference on what grounds is it deemed appropriate to criticise them for it? The very real danger here is that, in elevating need over want and desire, one is likely to end up elevating the observer’s priorities over the subject’s; something that usually leads to the evaluation of utility over pleasure and hence to a form of neo-Puritanism<sup>3</sup>. The truth —however unpalatable this might be to the critics of consumerism— is that if one were to try and make a list of those needs that all human beings could be said to possess it would be necessary to include the need to want in the list; for we would not be human if we did not experience desire; and it would be a miserable life indeed if these desires were never satisfied. Indeed it is pertinent to point out that those simple-lifers and down-shifters who choose to abandon their city life and high-paid jobs for “the good life” in the countryside are actually indulging a want. They do not need to live like that. Or, to put it another way; in their efforts to reduce their wants they are in fact indulging their “want” for the simple life. It follows from the above that we are forced to the conclusion that one cannot successfully argue against excessive consumption on the basis of some claim concerning what it is that consumers do or do not “need”. For judgements of this kind are usually little more than expressions of personal prejudice, while any serious attempt to develop an argument along these lines will almost certainly lead to the endearing of traditionalistic, Puritanical and in all probability, authoritarian, attitudes.

### 3. THE MATERIALISM CRITICISM

A second criticism of modern consumer behaviour that is commonly encountered is that it is materialistic. That is to say it is judged to encourage consumers to attach an undue importance to material objects in their form as commodities; objects such as

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3. See the argument in C. CAMPBELL, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1994).

clothes, jewellery, furnishings, houses, cars and the like, and hence to their acquisition, ownership and use. With the result that individuals come to value material objects, especially commodities, above all else; especially above such intangible goods as friendship, community fellowship or love, and hence above their fellow human beings<sup>4</sup>. Once again, at first sight, this seems a plausible argument. However there are also real difficulties with this critique. The most obvious objection is the fact that today's consumers spend almost as much of their income on services as they do on goods; something that is hardly suggestive of materialism. Some of this is of course in order to obtain what are by today's standards deemed essential services, such as gas, electricity, and water, together with telephone charges or internet connections, or indeed financial services, such as banking and insurance. To that extent such expenditure could be considered non-discretionary and hence perhaps not typical of modern consumerism. But then this is not the area where services have expanded most rapidly in recent years, which has largely been in the field of personal services, together with entertainment. There has, for example, been a marked growth in the number of health spas, gyms, sports clubs, fitness and "wellness" centers, together with an increase in the number of practitioners of alternative and complementary medicine, all of which can be added to the many more traditional personal services, such as the hairdressers, masseuses and beauticians, that make up this sector of the economy. Then, on top of this, all forms of entertainment have flourished, such as the cinema, theatre, concerts and theme parks, together with a wide variety of sporting events. Yet it is hard to see how any of this could be said to indicate that consumers are guilty of placing an excessively high valuation on material objects.

But there is another point that has to be made in connection with the general critique that people in contemporary society are too materialistic and it arises from the necessity of having to exclude works of artistic significance from such a claim. For in

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4. See *The Guardian* (December 16, 1998).

condemning people for being too much in love with material objects, those who criticise modern consumerism presumably do not intend to include works of art under that heading. For then they would in effect be criticising people for queuing for hours to see the Mona Lisa, or driving miles to visit a stately home such as Chatsworth or indeed paying to see an exhibition of Monet's paintings or visit a museum displaying the goods found in Tutankhamen's tomb. Presumably the accusation of materialism is not meant to apply to this kind of activity, even though the objects that people are so keen on seeing are clearly material, while they are making a special effort—one that definitely involves the expenditure—in order to see them. That this kind of activity is not generally viewed as evidence of materialism is presumably because the objects in question are considered to be distinctive and to have a claim to aesthetic, historic or scientific significance. In other words the accusation of materialism really means that people attach too much importance to the wrong kind of material objects. In addition, one assumes, to the fact that people also attach too much importance to possessing them, rather than simply appreciating them from a distance. But then we should note that this latter accusation actually makes covetousness or acquisitiveness the accusation, not materialism.

However the suggestion that the criticism that consumers are "materialistic" is only really meant to apply to commodities and not to works of artistic, aesthetic or historical significance presupposes that it is relatively easy to make such a distinction. And yet a little reflection reveals that this is not a straightforward matter. One reason why such distinctions are difficult to make is because many, if not most, of those objects that today we tend to regard as works of art were originally created as commodities; that is objects made with the specific intention that they should be bought and sold in the marketplace, as indeed many still are; even if it is only art galleries, museums or the super-rich who can generally afford to buy them. But then it is equally true to say that many of those mass-produced commercial objects which are today offered for sale to the general public have a good claim to be



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considered works of art; or at the least, objects of aesthetic significance. They can, after all, also be found in museums. The Design Museum in London, for example, contains objects that were designed and manufactured to be sold as commercial products, ones that have been specially selected because they are considered to be excellent examples of British design. In the spring of 2006 the Museum inaugurated the Great British Design Quest, in which the British public were invited to choose their favourite example of British design. What is significant is that many of the objects in the list were popular commercial products, such as Dr Martens Air Wair Boot, for example, the Raleigh Chopper bike, the Mini car, the E-type Jaguar, and the Dyson DC01 vacuum cleaner<sup>5</sup>. Whilst one may not wish to think of these objects as works of art, and hence on a par with a Picasso painting or a Henry Moore sculpture, what is indisputable is that they are seen to possess aesthetic significance. What is more they are not *recherché* objects, bought only by the discerning few but ignored by the masses. These were popular, widely consumed, products. So presumably all those consumers who bought them when they were first on sale could just as easily be credited with aesthetic discernment as with a materialist obsession. But then what is important about this observation is that it is not just the occasional product which is offered for sale that could be considered to fall into this category. For what many of today's consumers seem especially keen to purchase are those products which are generally known as "designer goods"; in other words ones that have not simply been manufactured to fulfil a function but which have also been crafted to give aesthetic satisfaction. This is especially obvious in the case of clothes, where the *haute couturier* has every right to be considered an artist, and although the clothes on sale in the high street are mass-produced modifications of the originals they nonetheless still bear the hallmarks of those creations, and hence still deserve to be thought of as objects of aesthetic distinction. But then if fashionable clothes are regarded in this way

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5. See [http://www.britishdesigninnovation.org/index.php?page=newsservice/view&news\\_id=4516](http://www.britishdesigninnovation.org/index.php?page=newsservice/view&news_id=4516)

one has to ask why their purchase by consumers cannot be seen as evidence of aesthetic discernment, rather than as an indication of materialism.

#### 4. THE ADDICTION CRITIQUE

Noting the importance of fashion to the phenomenon of consumerism connects with the third of the more common criticisms of consumer behaviour, which is that it is an addiction. This arises from the fact that one of the characteristic features of fashion—indeed one could say its defining feature—is the rapidity with which the aesthetic characteristics, or style, of modern commodities, change. With the consequence that consumers themselves are continually buying new products, if only to stay “in fashion”. This has led many people to criticise contemporary consumer conduct on the grounds that people who could be considered to lead a reasonably comfortable life should be satisfied with what they have, and not continually seeking for yet more or better products or services. This is clearly closely linked to the argument, discussed earlier, which claims that people buy things they do not need, the difference here being that the emphasis is placed on insatiability and the compulsive nature of the associated behaviour. Consumers are criticised in this respect therefore for the fact that the acquisition of new goods is apparently “unsatisfying”, as they seem to lose interest in their new acquisitions remarkably quickly, rapidly transferring their desire to other new and as yet un-acquired products. Thus it is that commentators frequently come to the conclusion that such endless consuming of new goods is an essentially empty and pointless exercise. That individuals continue to engage in this activity nonetheless is then explained by dubbing it “an addiction”; that is by suggesting that it is a form of compulsive behaviour in which the individuals concerned have become de-

pendent in some way on the experience of either desiring or acquiring products<sup>6</sup>.

Once again this is an apparently plausible argument, especially as it is well known that there are indeed some people who can justifiably be said to be addicted to certain aspects of consumption. These individuals, generally dubbed spendaholics or shopaholics, do indeed display the classic systems of addiction<sup>7</sup>. Yet they constitute only a small minority of all consumers. If there is a sense in which the majority could also be said to be addicted then it would have to be with respect to the phenomenon of novelty, a quality that is necessarily destroyed in the very act of consumption, and consequently can only be re-experienced in another, subsequent act<sup>8</sup>. It is then the subsequent pattern of conduct, in which desire, acquisition and use is then immediately followed by further desire, acquisition and use, that is seen to warrant the label of addiction. However the key point here is that an emphasis on the experiential nature of consumption means that the consumption of goods in modern societies should be seen in precisely the same light as the consumption of mediated experiences. That is to say in the same manner as one understands the consumption of music, books, plays and films. Here too of course there is typically the same high turnover in products consumed, with some people going to the cinema two or three times a week (and not normally to see the same film a second or third time), buying new compact discs every week (or increasingly perhaps downloading new tunes), or indeed getting through up to four or five novels a month. However, it is not generally assumed that such individuals find each film they see or each tune they listen to, or each novel they read, to be

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6. For an example of this kind of argument see G. REITH, *Consumption and its discontents: addiction, identity and the problem of freedom*, "British Journal of Sociology" 55 (2) (2004), 253-300.

7. For material on spendaholics and shopaholics see A. L. BENSON, *I Shop Therefore I am: Compulsive Buying and The Search for Self* (Jason Aronson Inc, Northvale, 2000).

8. For a development of this argument see C. CAMPBELL, *The Romantic Ethic* cit., chapter 5.

ultimately unsatisfying; so unsatisfying that they are then forced to go and find another one to watch, to listen to, or to read. Indeed, even though such practices display exactly the same desire for novelty as that which is typical of the consumption of material products they are not generally viewed as addictions. In which case, if indeed it is accepted as reasonable that an individual should repeatedly seek out and buy new films, new compact discs or novels, it is not clear why it should be seen as unreasonable when precisely the same novelty is sought for in the case of clothes, or indeed other commodities where fashion is a significant influence, such as furnishings, or interior décor generally. After all, the motivation would appear to be essentially the same in both cases. Why then is it that the one form of behaviour is generally seen as acceptable, while the other is subject to criticism?

#### 5. THE SELFISHNESS CRITIQUE

So far doubt has been cast on the suggestion that consumers can be criticized for consuming what they do not need, for holding to materialist values, or being judged to be addicted to consuming, but nothing has been said about the claim that modern consumerism encourages selfishness<sup>9</sup>. In fact the suggestion that consumers are motivated more by a desire for pleasurable experiences, rather than by a fetishistic obsession with commodities, would appear to strengthen rather than weaken the case for viewing modern consumerism as encouraging selfishness. But again perhaps there are reasons to pause before lending support to this view. For it is simply not the case that most, let alone all, of modern consumer activity is undertaken in the interests of the self. It is not true for example of the majority of that form of shopping that we might call routine provisioning; that is the regular trip to the supermarket to buy groceries for the home. For this, as Daniel Miller's research clearly shows, is commonly undertaken by indi-

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9. The former pope, in a special message of World Peace issued in January 1998, claimed that consumerism represented "the selfish satisfaction of personal aspirations". (See *The Guardian*, December 16 1998.)

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viduals (usually housewives) who are concerned with “the moral economy of the home”<sup>10</sup>, and whose activity is best understood as expressive of the love they feel for their family<sup>11</sup>. But then it is not merely women in their role as housewives (or indeed men acting as househusbands) whose consumption activity can be regarded as unselfish in the sense that it is directed at meeting the needs of others rather than themselves. Gift-giving in all its forms constitutes the impetus for a considerable part of the shopping that lies at the centre of modern consumerism. Indeed it is worth asking how companies like *Interflora* or *Hallmark* could survive if thousands of people didn’t regularly send flowers or cards to lovers, friends or family. While we can hardly overlook that vast orgy of spending that occurs just before Christmas; virtually all which involves buying commodities that will be given away. Activity which is rather at odds with the suggestion that consumerism necessarily supports selfishness.

But the real problem with this critique is that in one sense it approximates to a tautology to claim that consumerism encourages selfishness. For generally speaking we can define “consumer goods” as ones that are manufactured and sold in order to satisfy personal needs. Indeed the original definition of the verb “to consume” meant to eat or drink, and in matters of a straightforward gustatory nature no-one but the consumer in is a position to judge whether the items in question are to his or her “taste” or not. In other words the self is necessarily the final arbiter in such matters. Looked at in this light it is hard to see how consumption could really be anything else but an exercise in satisfying the self. What therefore one suspects that this critique is really addressing is not so much the nature of modern consumer behaviour, but rather the extent to which behaviour of this kind has come to displace other

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10. D. MILLER, *A Theory of Shopping* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998), p. 35.

11. It is important to note that much consumption may well be “other-directed” without however conforming to the Veblenesque model of being undertaken with the intention of impressing others. Rather it could be said to be “other-directed” in the sense that it is undertaken for the direct benefit of others.

forms of personal conduct and social interaction. With the consequence that satisfying the self (or “selfishness”) can be seen as the dominant activity in contemporary developed Western societies. This seems to be the only way in which this critique can be considered to make sense, the real objection against consumerism being that it has been allowed to invade areas of life where it has no right to be. Specifically that consumerism has increasingly come to replace the ideals of professionalism, public service and citizenship. Whether the responsibility for this development should be placed on consumers themselves, rather than on the shoulders of politicians, is debatable.

#### 6. THE HAPPINESS CRITIQUE

The last critique to be considered is that which asserts that individuals erroneously perceive the acquisition of more and more goods as the path to happiness. In other words individuals are criticized for making the acquisition and use of commodities the over-riding goal in life in the mistaken belief that this is the path to true happiness, or —as some have expressed it— that “the good life” is made up of “the goods life”. In one respect this claim is no more than the old adage to the effect that one can’t “buy” happiness. However this has been given a new lease of life, and apparently empirical support, in recent years from what has been described as “the emerging science of subjective well-being”<sup>12</sup>. Here the key finding appears to be that once one is beyond some minimum threshold individual estimations of happiness do not increase as absolute levels of consumption of material goods rise<sup>13</sup>. A conclusion that is then drawn from this is that for anyone other than the truly poor and deprived devoting one’s time and effort to the acquisition of more and more goods is a futile waste of time. However there are some important qualifications that need to be

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12. See D. BOUNDY, *When Money Is the Drug*, in A. L. BENSON, (ed.) *I Shop Therefore I am*, cit., pp. 3-26.

13. See M. EID and R. J. LARSEN (eds.), *The Science of Subjective Well-Being* (The Guilford Press, London, 2007).

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noted about this research. The first one to note is that the same research does show quite clearly that happiness does indeed rise as extra expenditure rises if it is spent on such “non-tangible” goods such as exercise, holidays or entertaining. But, as we have already had cause to note, expenditure on these items has indeed been rising rapidly, so perhaps consumers do know what they are doing after all. Also, within any one society research clearly shows that the rich are happier than the poor, so it is not in fact irrational for people to strive for riches. But then this research—and hence the critique based on its findings— can be criticised for focusing on the question of happiness in the first place. For not only is this an extraordinarily elusive state (one not easily amenable to measurement), but it is not clear that this is the goal that most consumers are attempting to reach through their consumption activities.

For, as the earlier discussion of the addiction critique suggests, consumers may be more concerned with pleasure than happiness, and although one might wish to claim (as indeed some philosophers have done) that there is a close connection between the two, they are clearly not identical states. Certainly the evidence would seem to suggest that the young in particular are searching for excitement rather than happiness, as is suggested by their interest in computer games, dangerous sports, gambling, adventure holidays and fast cars. For other consumers, especially perhaps the elderly, the pertinent goals may be health, security, or peace of mind. All of which are products that can indeed be bought in the market-place (in the form, for example, of private health care, burglar alarms or insurance). But then there is also the possibility, as suggested in some theories of consumer behaviour, that what individuals seek to obtain through their consuming is meaning, in the form of the construction or confirmation of identity. All of which does rather suggest that it is perfectly sensible for consumers to assume, as it would appear they do, that many significant life-goals can indeed be bought, even if that especially elusive state called “happiness” does remain tantalisingly just out-of-reach.

## 7. CRITICISMS IN CONTRADICTION

The above discussion has focused on exposing both the logical weaknesses and lack of empirical support for some of the more common criticisms of consumerism and consumer behaviour. But there is another point that needs to be made concerning these criticisms, and it relates to their mainly contradictory nature. For the problem with many a generalised critique of contemporary consumerism is that it frequently involves combining several of the individual criticisms mentioned above without the critic apparently being aware of their contradictory status. For example, the claim that consumers are materialistic, discussed earlier, is sometimes combined with another popular thesis concerning consumer behaviour, one that derives from Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption, which is the suggestion that people consume in order to enhance their perceived social status, or in popular parlance, to "keep up with the Joneses". However if it assumed that what consumers are doing is purchasing expensive items not primarily because of the qualities that these products possess but rather because of the message their possession enables them to send to others then it follows that consumers value the esteem of others above the material objects they use as a means to that end. Hence one would be forced to conclude that they are not really materialistic, for otherwise they would value the commodities themselves above all else, including the good opinion of their fellow consumers. In fact the contradiction identified here is but a special case of a larger conflict between those theories of consumer behaviour which stress the value placed on commodities because of what they can "do" and what they can "say". Thus consumers cannot be both materialistic and engaged in identity-construction for example. Equally they cannot be both engaged in buying products that they don't need and addicted to novelty, since the acquisition of an endless series of "new" products is necessary in order to feed their "addiction". Hence the problem with many contemporary critiques of consumerism is not simply that they embody criticisms that are not valid in themselves; it is also that



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their employment in combination means that they also frequently negate each other.

#### 8. CONCLUSION

It is not the purpose of this discussion to imply that there are no valid criticisms that can be made of modern consumerism. Rather the focus has been on the inadequate nature of some of the more common criticisms leveled against consumers themselves. If by contrast the focus is shifted to the larger system within which individuals engage in consumer behaviour, and specifically perhaps to the cumulative effect of their conduct, then it becomes somewhat easier to see how valid criticisms might be constructed. In other words the focus needs to shift from the supposed motives that impel individuals to consume, as well as the values it is assumed guide such behaviour, to the consequences of the behaviour itself. These can then be judged against generally agreed social or environmental objectives, such as tackling climate change, husbanding the world's natural resources, or combating poverty. Thus, to take but one example, one could then claim, not that individual consumers are acquiring products that they don't "need", but that certain categories of individual are consuming excessively as judged by the level needed to prevent others from being deprived of similar opportunities. These others may either be people alive today who are not lucky enough to have similar opportunities to consume, or they could be generations as yet unborn. Looked at in this light it becomes acceptable to ask individuals and families to re-examine their consumption habits and see if they can adjust their practices to help address these collective problems. But arguing that there is a real societal or environmental need for consumers to modify their consumption habits is quite different from claiming that, as individuals, they are consuming things that they do not need, or consuming them for the wrong reasons.

The main reason for writing this paper is encourage a more careful and nuanced criticism of consumerism, one that is more in

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tune with the empirical evidence. Because unfortunately there are reasons to believe that, as suggested in the introduction, contemporary consumerism is often the subject of unjustified condemnation by intellectuals and academics, a condemnation that would appear to have its roots in unacknowledged yet deep-seated prejudice rather than any study of the reality in question; which of course then raises the interesting question of the possible source of this prejudice. Perhaps it should be seen as stemming from the long-standing *haute bourgeois* critique of the *nouveau riches* for their obsession with wealth and status-enhancing possessions; or possibly it is merely the latest form of the traditional middle-class critique of the working classes for their tendency to indulge in instant gratification. It could even arise from the intellectual's distaste for mass society, or the traditional bohemian contempt for the bourgeois preoccupation with those material aids that help ensure a comfortable life. Whatever its origins this prejudice against consumption and the trappings of a consumer society must seem like the cruellest of jokes to the impoverished millions of Africa, Asia and South America. Not to mention the struggling poor of Eastern Europe and the hundreds of thousands who make up the under-classes of Western Europe and North America.

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