

Incomplete Order: The pretext of Consumer Anxiety

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A thesis presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Fine Art in Interdisciplinary Art, Media & Design (IAMD)

Room 118, 205 Richmond St W, March 21-27

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2024

Abstract:

Consumerism, prevalent in modern discourse, prompts scrutiny for fostering overconsumption and spiritual disconnection. Despite persistent critiques, consumerism remains entrenched in daily life, prompting reflection on its profound influence and the commercialization of dissent. This study rejects the hegemony of 'rational' discourse, advocating for the integration of subjective feelings as a navigational tool in academic and creative inquiry. Drawing from the critical insights of Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard, it seeks to challenge conventional understandings of consumer culture, inviting deeper exploration into individual desires and societal consequences. Through an investigation into the paradoxes of contemporary society, wherein anxiety about modern systems coexists with tacit acceptance, this research examines the extent to which consumerism has commodified opposition or if it is simply a misattributed facet of capitalism. By engaging with Song Dong's artwork "Waste Not" as a catalyst for contemplation and contrasting past eras of material scarcity with contemporary overabundance, this thesis delves into the symbolic significance of personal possessions in expressing consumption behavior, psychological needs, and cultural identity. The thesis ultimately challenges conventional perceptions of selfhood and identity, inviting viewers to decipher the underlying narratives encoded within consumer symbols and prompting a deeper exploration of individual autonomy within a consumerist society. Through an interdisciplinary approach integrating visual and written elements, questioning the critique of consumerism aims to foster critical engagement and prompt reflection on the complexities of contemporary consumption practices.

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Introduction:

This thesis seeks to examine the enduring experience of alienation within the mechanisms of consumerism. The intent is to invite reflection on the consumption critique through the lens of ‘anti-efficiency’.

Consumerism, prevalent in modernist discussions, refers to the relentless pursuit of material goods and possessions. It frequently comes under scrutiny for fostering a culture of overconsumption, environmental degradation, and societal alienation, particularly amidst the barrage of commercial advertising.¹ Concerns ranging from financial strain to environmental degradation and spiritual alienation have positioned consumerism as a focal point for perceived societal problems. The concept of “consumerism” has garnered widespread recognition in contemporary society, prompting many to naturally critique it upon observing various instances of moral decay within the market. From issues such as living beyond one's means to environmental pollution and spiritual alienation; consumerism seems to manifest itself as a murky breeding ground for what many perceive as societal sins.

However, the paradox of our era lies in the simultaneous co-existence of widespread anxiety about modern systems and a tacit acceptance of their actual arrangements. While individuals

¹ A Hemerijck et al., *Aftershocks: Economic Crisis and Institutional Choice* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 155–62.

critique cultural norms associated with consumerism, they unabashedly continue to consume.

Critiques against consumerism often arise to explain minor daily troubles, yet few consider it necessary to alter their behavior based on such explanations or critically examine their reliability.

This phenomenon prompts my reflection that is at the heart of this visual and written thesis: *Is it because consumerism has deeply permeated our lives, turning even opposition into a marketable commodity? Or is consumerism simply an erroneous attribution to capitalism?*

Based on these contradictions, I shift from simply criticizing consumerism as a phenomenon to adopting a contrary perspective by examining the necessity of criticism. In the thesis, I attempt to stand in the opposition to the consume critique, generating the context that presents my inherent conflict and conciliation with buying goods. I embrace the consumer system while examining its impact on both individuals and society in order to refute the widespread criticism of consumerism in society. By placing the market as secondary, it will emphasize my subjective feelings as an individual self towards the consumption of goods with an embracing attitude, and psychological pursuit of individual consumption motivations to further understand consumer behavior.

Does the Consumerism Theory Hold Ground?

Criticisms of consumerism abound, reflecting a prevailing sentiment against it among individuals who observe its various manifestations and impacts on society. Renowned figures such as Jean Baudrillard and Zygmunt Bauman have offered compelling critiques of consumerism, elucidating its detrimental effects on individuals, communities, and the environment.

For example, Baudrillard's concept of "hyperreality"² explores how consumer culture blurs the boundaries between reality and simulation, leading to a loss of authenticity and meaning.

Similarly, Bauman's notion of "liquid modernity"³ highlights the transient and unstable nature of consumerist lifestyles, which contribute to social fragmentation and inequality. These critiques underscore the complex relationship between consumption, identity, and societal values.

Consequently, within these criticisms, a familiar yet potentially erroneous argumentative approach emerges: the presupposition of consumerism's inherent truth, characterized by the relentless pursuit of material goods and possessions, followed by attributing various decadent phenomena to consumerism. This approach fails to consider alternative perspectives and overlooks the nuanced dynamics of consumer culture. In essence, the premise here presupposes the correctness of the conclusion, employing a clever circular reasoning that renders the resulting conclusion more suspicious.

² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1981).

³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

Looking at it from a different perspective, if we want to understand our relationship with consumerism, one method might be to imagine how society would function without it. So, the question now simplifies to: *Can you imagine a society without consumerism?* The first option is to exclude consumption itself. Herbert Marcuse, in his text *One-Dimensional Man*, argues that advanced industrial society maintains its dominance through the production of "false needs." According to Marcuse, these "false needs" are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression, and serve to perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice.⁴ While Marcuse critiques the alienating effects of consumerism, he acknowledges that completely eliminating consumption may not be feasible or desirable. Additionally, an ascetic perspective might raise questions about the satisfaction and fulfillment derived from a life devoid of consumerist tendencies. While reducing consumption may lead to a more equitable distribution of resources and a healthier relationship with the environment, it also challenges notions of progress, convenience, and individual fulfillment.

Secondly, if we don't want to live an ascetic life, another option emerges: a society characterized by charity and ethical conduct. This scenario hinges on the premise of absolute honesty and integrity among merchants, coupled with transparency from consumers regarding their needs. Merchants, driven by profit maximization, naturally employ business strategies to enhance efficiency and gain advantages. However, anti-consumerism advocates propose that merchants

⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 1964).

refrain from stimulating unnecessary consumption and instead present their products faithfully and objectively. This necessitates the abandonment of conventional marketing techniques in favor of providing only essential information on product labels, even at the cost of potential revenue loss. Unless market regulations are stringent, or merchants are not solely motivated by profit, it seems unlikely that sellers would adopt such counterproductive methods. As for consumers, we are warned not to exceed the boundary of ‘real needs’. We have not been told that what qualifies as ‘real needs’ and what falls into Marcuse's ‘false needs’.⁵ Humans are not binary switches of black and white; desires and needs are inherently intertwined. Can a person who has a need for food have no desire for it? Obviously, any effort to clearly define needs is bound to be elusive. For example, here are some common ‘needs’ I assumed in daily life. Can you determine which are ‘real needs’?

- 1. Reading physical books but considering buying a Kindle for environmental reasons.**
- 2. Wanting to subscribe to Netflix to watch a critically acclaimed popular movie.**
- 3. The phone camera is damaged, affecting no other functions, but wanting to buy the latest model.**
- 4. A favorite restaurant introduces a special dessert, and out of curiosity, wanting to try it.**
- 5. Learning a new language but considering purchasing an expensive online language course.**
- 6. The gym provides high-tech fitness equipment, considering switching despite infrequent workouts.**

Everyone will give different answers to a list like this. The assertion that our purchases should be based on real needs seems reasonable, but considering the complexity of ‘needs’, one realizes

⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 1964).

that it merely takes a step back from the problem in order to understand what we could or should consume. We have no way to distinguish what is a real need, nor do we have any reason to believe that every real need should be satisfied. We can consider the issue of needs satisfaction through the example of books: publishers usually don't spend too much money promoting a book. For most books, their 'marketing tactics' are limited to the introduction of the e-commerce platform. At this point, a person's decision to buy a book is more about curiosity about the content. The act of "reading" allows one to gain information that was not available before shopping. *So, does buying a book that 'seems useful' satisfy my needs before obtaining sufficient information? But if I don't buy and read it, how can I know it is useless?*

The concept of 'irrational consumption' is fundamentally rooted in an information disparity issue. Take, for example, Dyson's air purifier and hairdryer, which exude a sleek design and command significantly higher prices compared to similar products. However, until one actually 'experiences' them, their true quality remains unknown. Among friends, some may regret impulsive purchases, while others may revel in newfound happiness brought by a product. These differing reactions stem from insufficient and diverse information, this leads individuals to form varying expectations. Actual user experiences bridge the gap between imagination and reality, enabling consumers to adjust their product evaluations accordingly.

In a study on psychology,⁶ it was found that the integration of next-generation information technology into commercial applications has prompted significant shifts in business practices. Customer touchpoints have expanded from traditional offline stores to the digital realm.⁷ Live streaming, as a cutting-edge information technology, has become a staple feature on e-commerce platforms operated by major enterprises. By December 2020, the number of live-streaming e-commerce consumers in China had soared to 388 million, showcasing the sales-boosting potential of this innovative strategy adopted by prominent e-commerce giants like Alibaba, Byte Dance, and Pinduoduo.⁸ Within live-streaming sessions, hosts can present product information in various formats, including close-ups, model demonstrations, and promotional offers, effectively reducing consumer uncertainty.⁹ While ads that fail to provide adequate pre-purchase information may be considered misleading, removing them altogether is unlikely to lead to wiser consumer decisions. Instead, it could exacerbate information deficiencies. From this perspective, advertising not only avoids creating false needs but also aids in bridging the gap between consumers' desires and their real needs. In live-streaming rooms, streamers can display product information in diversified forms, including but not limited to offering product close-ups, model displays, and promotions, which reduce the uncertainty of consumers.

⁶ Donna L. Hoffman and Thomas P. Novak, "Marketing in Hypermedia Computer-Mediated Environments: Conceptual Foundations," *Journal of Marketing* 60, no. 3 (July 1996): 50–68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1251841>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Feng Liu et al., "Marketing by Live Streaming: How to Interact with Consumers to Increase Their Purchase Intentions," *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (August 25, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.933633>.

⁹ Marylyn Carrigan et al., "Fostering Sustainability through Technologically-mediated Interactions," *Information Technology & People* 33, no. 3 (January 1, 2020): 919–43, <https://doi.org/10.1108/ITP1020180474>.

The rejection of consumerism may result in a perpetually conservative lifestyle that stifles curiosity, innovation, and personal enjoyment. Consequently, some individuals, grappling with the moral complexities of rejecting consumerism, may opt for a more nuanced approach, advocating for balanced and rational consumption. While this stance holds validity, it may seem somewhat redundant in practice. In reality, most of us engage in sensible consumption practices, such as price comparisons, waiting for discounts, and monitoring credit card limits. This realm of sensible consumption may also give rise to decision fatigue¹⁰ which indicates a psychological phenomenon that refers to the deteriorating quality of decisions made by an individual. Essentially, as people make more decisions throughout the day, their ability to make sound, rational choices gradually diminish. It's often cited in contexts where individuals are faced with numerous choices, such as shopping, work-related decision-making, or other aspects of daily life.¹¹ It is important to acknowledge that not everyone possesses a high degree of rationality or access to ample information. Pathological consumption patterns do exist, leading individuals to financial distress due to an inability to properly assess loans. Personal failures can occur within any system. Critiques of 'excessive consumption' share an inherent similarity with the criticism of consumerism by intellectuals who grew up in an era of material scarcity, telling us we are too 'wasteful'.

¹⁰ Grant A Pignatiello, Richard J Martin, and Ronald L Hickman, "Decision Fatigue: A Conceptual Analysis," *J Health Psychol* 25, no. 1 (2018): 123–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105318763510.s>

¹¹ *Ibid*, 123-35.

Another line of criticism posits that consumerism entices people to consume goods for their symbolic meaning rather than their practical utility. Baudrillard noted the existence of symbolic value in commodities, in his book *The System of Objects*, he discusses how objects and signs can become detached from their original functions or meanings and instead circulate within a system of symbolic exchange, where their value is derived from their relationships and representations rather than their intrinsic qualities.¹² Today's consumption indeed transcends the practical functionality of goods. The issue lies in the fact that, even before the advent of consumerism, humans, as social beings, engaged in the symbolic function of goods continuously.

Throughout different historical periods, societies witnessed actions where individuals used personal possessions to showcase their status. If modern individuals enter the world of symbols, signs, and images through consumption, ancient societies and the individuals who made up those custom were no strangers to this consumptive practice. In both modern and ancient societies, consumption serves as a gateway into symbolic expression through which individuals express their status and identity. Beyond mere material acquisition, historical practices reveal an entrenched culture of ostentation and prestige, wherein possessions extend far beyond their utilitarian functions. For instance, taking from the World History Association's study, *Malice in Wonderland*,¹³ in medieval Europe, accounts of scholars visiting the palaces of Beijing illuminate the grandeur and opulence that defined ancient consumption practices. The description by Odoric

¹² Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*. (S.L.: Verso Books, 1968).

¹³ Erik Ringmar, "Malice in Wonderland: Dreams of the Orient and the Destruction of the Palace of the Emperor of China," *Journal of World History* 22, no. 2 (2011): 276, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2011.0031>.

of Pordenone, who visited Beijing in 1318, vividly portrays the extravagance of the emperor's palace: "The emperor's palace was not just a single building. The twenty-four pillars of the palace were made from gold and so were the artificial peacocks; the drinking jar was carved from precious stone that 'exceeded the value of four great towns,' and the pearls that adorned the coats of his courtiers were each 'worth some fifteen thousand florins'—and there were no fewer than fourteen thousands of them."¹⁴ This historical example resonates with broader themes of conspicuous consumption prevalent in ancient societies, where palaces, gardens, artwork, and ceremonial objects were utilized to showcase status and social standing. These manifestations of opulence and luxury served not only as symbols of affluence but also as mechanisms for reinforcing social hierarchies and legitimizing rulership. Thus, the historical record illustrates how consumption practices have long been intertwined with notions of power, prestige, and social distinction. Across different epochs and cultures, the display of wealth and status through material possessions has remained a fundamental aspect of human society, shaping social identities and hierarchies throughout history.

Moreover, in historical contexts, many individuals were deprived of the opportunity for symbolic consumption, not due to a lack of desire, but because their consumption choices were constrained by factors such as societal power dynamics and economic hardship.¹⁵ While the desire for symbolic consumption may have been universal, the ability to participate in it was often limited

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Macmillan, 1912), 19.

by structural inequalities. Simultaneously, critiques of consumerism can sometimes exhibit logical inconsistencies. On one hand, people are used to decry consumerism for fostering excessive materialism, which can lead to a sense of spiritual impoverishment. In critiquing the symbolic significance of commodities, some comments appear to diminish the importance of spiritual life, implying that goods hold no value beyond their utility.

Indeed, the symbolic significance of goods has been deeply embedded in human society since ancient times, long preceding the onset of modern consumerism. Today's consumption transcends mere practical utility, the crux lies in the fact that even before the advent of consumerism, humanity, as a social species, continuously engaged in the symbolic functionality of objects. Despite these epistemic limitations, in his famous discussion of the fetishism of commodities, Karl Marx does note, as he does elsewhere in *Capital*, that the commodity does not emerge whole cloth from the product under bourgeois production but makes its appearance at an early date in history, though not in the same predominating and characteristic manner as nowadays.¹⁶ This reflects a dual nature wherein goods serve both as symbols of meaning and as drivers of materialistic tendencies. Thus, recognizing the dual nature of consumption—both as a means of symbolic expression and as a driver of materialism—is essential for understanding its complex role in shaping individual identities and societal dynamics throughout history. For example, Roman emperors wore purple clothing,¹⁷ and ancient Chinese officials travelled in carriages

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (1867; repr., The Classics Us, 1867), 86.

¹⁷ Debra Wilson, "Born to the Purple," Carnegie Museum of Natural History, November 5, 2018, <https://carnegiemnh.org/born-to-the-purple/>.

drawn by four horses, and this is not fundamentally different from our current high-end customizations and expensive sports cars.¹⁸ The distinction lies solely in the fact that in ancient times, one could only obtain such resources through power rather than money. Nonetheless, Baudrillard's emphasis on the importance of symbolic meaning obtained through consumption is perplexing. In his framework, social status appears as an aristocratic lineage, seemingly unattainable through mere consumption. Through the accumulation of possessions, individuals seek a salvation devoid of reflective thought, driven by a futile desire to attain a status inherently reserved for the upper class.

By their number, redundancy, superfluity and formal extravagance, by the play of fashion and all that exceeds pure and simple function in them, objects merely simulate the social essence - status - that grace of predestination which is only ever bestowed by birth to a few and which the majority, having opposite destinies, can never attain. This hereditary legitimacy (whether of blood or of culture) is at the very heart of the concept of status, the key concept in the whole dynamics of social mobility.¹⁹

Through the proof of possessions, salvation obtained through consumption, in the purposeless process devoid of reflexive thought, there is a hopeless desire to acquire a status bestowed by people, endowed and fateful. However, regardless of how this status is pursued, it still belongs to

¹⁸ "Wheeling through the Centuries," www.china.org.cn, October 26, 2002, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/culture/46892.htm>.

¹⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society : Myths and Structures* (London: Sage, 1970), 60.

the upper class. The latter, elsewhere, showcases its positive aspects through the exercise of culture and power. This portrayal suggests that regardless of the pursuit, social status remains inherently tied to aristocratic lineage. Conversely, the upper class, elsewhere, showcases its positive aspects through the exercise of culture and power. Consumer culture, therefore, appears as a fabrication perpetuated by businesses falsely claiming to facilitate status attainment.

Consumer culture seems to be a fabrication by businesses falsely claiming to help people attain status. If social status in a society can only be acquired through inheritance, then the most severe problem in that society is evidently not consumerism but rather a closed, feudal class system.

Imaginary Republic

In the realm of cause and effect in the real world, if explanations fall into two categories, one could be viewed reality as an ‘engineering’ project, typically involving explicit plans, organization, and execution driven and controlled by specific decision-makers or entities. This approach entails deliberate planning, design, and construction by conscious entities to achieve specific goals or objectives.

For instance, in the 20th century, some countries adopted planned economies, wherein the government centrally planned production, distribution, and resource allocation in an attempt to achieve social and economic goals through centralized engineering efforts. However, the failures of planned economies demonstrated the profound complexity of market systems, which even the most powerful institutions struggled to fully comprehend, let alone construct intentionally.

According to Mark Beissinger’s book, *Nationalism and the Collapse of Soviet Communism*,²⁰ the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 20th century serves as a stark illustration of the limitations inherent in centrally planned economies. Understanding the collapse of communism requires viewing its Soviet and East European dimensions as interconnected rather than isolated processes. At the core of this interconnectedness lies the capacity of opposition movements to draw analogies across a wide expanse of political and cultural space, fueled by a shared

²⁰ MARK R. BEISSINGER, “Nationalism and the Collapse of Soviet Communism,” *Contemporary European History* 18, no. 3 (August 2009): 331–47, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0960777309005074>

experience of oppression and a collective sense of alienation. Nationalism played a critical role in providing a framework through which analogies across cultural and political boundaries were drawn. During this period, issues surrounding nationalism became central to mobilizing populations within the Soviet Union. While democratization, labor unrest, consumer shortages, and environmental concerns also fueled social mobilization, nationalism exhibited a distinct potency and resonance.²¹ Despite the authoritarian control exerted by the Soviet government over its citizens and economy, it ultimately failed to dictate consumer behavior or effectively manage economic production. This failure is vividly illustrated by an anecdote recounted by Soviet economists Nikolai Shmelev and Vladimir Popov, detailing the massive overproduction of mink fur that rotted in warehouses due to misjudged demand and flawed resource allocation. Despite the government's considerable resources and efforts to mobilize production, the centrally planned economy couldn't effectively gauge consumer demand or allocate resources efficiently. This resulted in massive overproduction of certain goods, like the mink fur that went to waste due to lack of demand or improper storage and distribution.²² Thus, this failure underscores the challenges of centrally planned economies in contrast to the spontaneous order of market systems.

²¹ Ibid, 336.

²² Nikolaj Petrovič Šmelev et al., *The Turning Point: Revitalizing the Soviet Economy* (London: Tauris I.B. & Co, Copyr, 1990).

Another specific example of the failure of the planned economy during China's planned economic era is the Great Leap Forward movement (1958–1961).²³ Initiated by Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong, the Great Leap Forward aimed to accelerate agricultural and industrial development through rural collectivization and large-scale farmland construction. However, the movement resulted in severe economic problems and humanitarian disasters. During the Great Leap Forward, rural areas underwent massive collectivization, and the agricultural production mode was rapidly transformed. Large tracts of farmland were merged into Large People's Communes, production teams and households were abolished, and collective planting and agricultural socialism were implemented. In addition, to rapidly achieve industrialization, the government launched massive infrastructure projects and promoted rural electrification and heavy industry simultaneously. Due to a lack of practical production plans, overly idealistic goals, and distorted statistics, the Great Leap Forward led to disastrous consequences: Agricultural production plummeted; grain output was exaggerated as local officials provided false data to meet government statistical targets. In reality, vast tracts of farmland were abandoned, and agricultural production decreased, leading to severe famine. From 1959 to 1961, tens of millions of people died from hunger and related diseases. This disaster revealed the flaws in the planned economic system in terms of management and planning, and the catastrophic consequences that may arise from the government pursuing overly aggressive goals.²⁴ Subsequently, the Chinese government gradually recognized the failure of the Great

²³ Clayton D. Brown, "China's Great Leap Forward," Association for Asian Studies (The Association for Asian Studies, 2012), <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/aaa/archives/chinas-great-leap-forward/>.

²⁴ Ibid.

Leap Forward and implemented economic reform and opening-up policies in the late 1970s and early 1980s,²⁵ shifting towards a more open and market-oriented economic model.

On the other hand, the other perspective could be interpreted reality as a ‘system’ formed through spontaneous connections — a network or structure naturally established without deliberate design or planning, but through various spontaneous connections and interactions. The market, in essence, falls into this latter category. No one plans to manage the laws of supply and demand, nor does anyone possess the capability to easily create or eliminate demand. A society with sufficient productivity, profit-seeking individuals, and a framework for free trade naturally gives rise to spontaneous transactions among individuals, leading to a consumerist society. Here, every seller desires to market their products as much as possible, while buyers seek more choices.

When discussing or critiquing consumerism, the market is often regarded as a purposeful creation, a tool designed and planned as if there were a group of people consciously using the market to harm others. Critics argue that the operation of the market is a sophisticated scheme employed by a group to harm others. However, the question arises: who exactly constitutes this ‘capital’? Some may discuss the relationship between capital and society on an excessively abstract level, which can easily lead to a misunderstanding, viewing them as entities engaged in combat within the social structure, such as ‘capital exploiting labor,’ ‘white police discriminating against black communities,’ or ‘the state controlling individuals.’

²⁵ Ross Garnaut, Ligang Song, and Fang Cai, *China's 40 Years of Reform and Development: 1978-2018* (Acton, Act: Anu Press, 2018), 93–116.

Initially, Guy Debord's metaphorical analysis of *The Society of The Spectacle*²⁶ seemed convincing in revealing the essence of social modernity. He describes the concept of the social spectacle as a "constructed situation / landscape" filled with ideology and visual representations, emphasizing individual passivity.²⁷ Besides, Debord contends that, under the development of capitalism, society has transitioned into an era dominated by images. In the society of the spectacle, commodity production prioritizes the accumulation of spectacles, altering social temporal structures. This has constituted an inherent regulation of the society of the spectacle, where commodity fetishism evolves into image fetishism, leading individuals to consciously engage with the logic of capital and consumer society. The spectacle's presumed control over our non-labor time implies a potential influence on our cognition. People are constantly subjected to the spectacle, and the domination of our non-labor time implies a preconceived control over our cognition. The alienation of individuals from commodities has transformed into the separation of individuals and society by the spectacle. In this scenario, past political and economic control has shifted to cultural ideological control, achieved through cultural, social, and media manipulation of people's thinking.²⁸ Furthermore, in consumer-driven market economies, relentless pursuit of efficiency drives the production of information and images, inundating our lives from the streets

²⁶ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, Michigan: Black & Red, 1967), https://monoskop.org/images/e/e4/Debord_Guy_Society_of_the_Spectacle_1970.pdf.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

to digital media. Consumers' time is calculated down to milliseconds for the acquisition of commercial information.

But, Giovanni Sartori, in his *The Theory of Democracy Revisited*,²⁹ points out that these top-down theorists may overlook the fact that society consists of individual people who interact with one another. He emphasizes that abstract categories are merely tools created to facilitate understanding; highly abstract theories often make people forget that societal issues are actually 'composed' of interactions between concrete individuals. He argues that behind every entity lies a specific individual, and only individuals can interact with one another. Sartori states, "There has never been 'capital' dismissing 'labor'; what exists is a specific employer dismissing a specific employee, although the employer may only partially realize that their action falls within the broad category of labor-capital power relations."³⁰ Shifting the focus back to individuals, we find that the grand concept of 'capital' frequently discussed is actually composed of individual actors pursuing self-interests.

We often being depicted into a sharp dichotomy between 'capitalists' and 'consumers', but upon closer examination, it may not solely be the domain of 'capitalists' who design sophisticated marketing schemes. In modern times, it is conceivable that ordinary workers, who utilize their earnings to acquire goods outside of work hours, are not merely passive recipients of roles

²⁹ Giovanni Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited - Part Two* (CQ Press, 1987).

³⁰ Ibid, 90.

dictated by ‘capital’. However, it's pertinent to consider that, in this advanced stage of the market system, ordinary workers are not simply using their wages to acquire goods; they are also gradually shaping their own consumption ideals and demands through this process. This implies that they are not merely passive recipients of roles dictated by ‘capital’, but rather, through their choices in the purchasing process, are influencing a segment of the market. This suggests that workers may actively participate in consumption, with their needs and preferences exerting an influence on the market to some degree.

According to James Rhodes’ study, *Measurement of Consumer Preference*,³¹ he states that, ‘the improvement of products has characteristically been a concomitant of many preference studies. Various methods have been used. Respondents may be asked reasons for use or non-use of a particular product or group of products. Consumer preferences may be obtained by sales or interview for products which are identical except for variations in a particular attribute. Also, more complicated analyses may be used.’³² This underscores the agency of consumers, who are no longer solely ‘passive’ recipients of market influence but are, to some extent, involved in shaping its development. The enhancement of products is often a concurrent outcome of numerous preference studies, employing various methodologies such as obtaining consumer feedback through surveys or interviews, analyzing reasons for product usage or non-usage, and conducting sales experiments with products that differ only in specific attributes. Individuals

³¹ V. James Rhodes, “The Measurement of Consumer Preferences,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 37, no. 4 (November 1955): 638–51, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1234626>.

³² *Ibid*, 647.

may flexibly assume roles as sellers, buyers, capitalists, or workers at different times and in different contexts. Perhaps in modern society, although the sharp opposition between social classes has been somewhat alleviated, the accumulation of wealth and power still makes it impossible to completely erase these contradictions.

Alternatively, one might speculate that those designated as ‘capitalists’ may not necessarily aim solely to encourage increased consumer spending. It's possible that they could prefer exploring consulting services if they offer the potential for profit. In such a scenario, even individuals fitting the ‘capitalist’ label may not share common goals but rather pursue diverse paths to profitability. This suggests a complex web of motivations among individuals, underscoring the diverse nature of economic roles. The order that seemingly emerges spontaneously from this pursuit of profit could potentially hint at a systemic objective at the macro level, comparable to how the natural world evolves a food chain driven by the fundamental goal of ‘acquiring foods’. But can we truly label the food chain as ‘evil’?

Of course, there is no need to deny a core assertion of critics, namely that commercial society overall encourages consumption. This is merely a neutral statement of fact; the issue arises in the process of deriving value judgments from facts. In the eyes of mainstream economists, consumption is not only not sinful but also a source of economic vitality. In Keynes's view, if people save too much money instead of consuming, and businesses do not invest enough to offset the shortfall, it can trigger layoffs. The laid-off employees, due to reduced income, cut

back on consumption, leading to more layoffs, and the triggered vicious cycle can disrupt the economic system, resulting in widespread unemployment and poverty.³³ Therefore, when one accuses businesses of being greedy plunderers, Keynes would point out that the harm caused by well-meaning savers is far greater than any evil industrialist.³⁴

In contrast, Jean Baudrillard,³⁵ Zygmunt Bauman,³⁶ and Herbert Marcuse³⁷ offer perspectives on consumerism that are predominantly based on subjective moral judgments, emphasizing its detrimental impact on traditional value systems. They contend that the prevalence of consumerism presents a significant challenge to values such as thrift, frugality, and self-restraint, often promoting impulsiveness instead. This societal shift towards consumerist lifestyles raises concerns about spiritual impoverishment, as individuals increasingly prioritize material possessions for fulfillment. Moreover, the relentless pursuit of consumption fosters a race-like mentality, diminishing opportunities for leisure and impeding meaningful emotional connections among individuals. However, critics of consumerism, whether consciously or unconsciously, may overlook an important historical context regarding the tradition of thrift. It's essential to recognize that the concept of thrift originated from past scarcity, where ordinary people were compelled to save out of necessity to secure their livelihoods. While thrift was once a pragmatic

³³ John Maynard Keynes and Mark G Spencer, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money ; the Economic Consequences of the Peace* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2017), 122–27.

³⁴ Ibid, 122-27.

³⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1981).

³⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

³⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man : Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 1964).

necessity for ancient commoners struggling to meet basic needs, its perception has evolved over time. In contemporary society, thrift is still valued as a virtue that respects labor and benefits the environment. Yet, this does not imply that thrift should reign as the overriding supreme value. It is crucial to question whether it is fair to deprive individuals of their freedom to consume as they desire, particularly as they begin to enjoy newfound economic autonomy. Embracing a balanced approach that acknowledges the merits of thrift while respecting individual autonomy in consumption choices may offer a more equitable solution.

Nevertheless, the viewpoint has been raised that the pursuit of goods compels us to continuously work to acquire more novel items, resulting in a loss of leisure time for interpersonal communication.³⁸ Statistical data does not support this notion. Despite the escalating trend of consumerism over the past half-century, the average annual working hours for employees in Western countries have decreased by approximately 500 hours.³⁹ Generally speaking, in more economically developed countries, working hours are shorter. In terms of leisure time, the time people spend on ‘interpersonal communication’ has increased by approximately 20% due to reduced investment in work and household chores.⁴⁰ In terms of absolute working hours, people are indeed busy, especially in China and other East Asian countries. This is not solely the fault of consumerism but rather because economic and technological progress has not reached the level

³⁸ Meera Velayudhan and Renu Chakravarty, “‘Dialectical’ Materialism and Dialectical ‘Materialism,’” *Social Scientist* 10, no. 4 (April 1982): 60, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3520330>.

³⁹ Diva Astinova et al., “Dissecting the Decline in Average Hours Worked in Europe,” *IMF Working Papers* 2024, no. 002 (January 12, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400261183.001.A001>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

we expect. With economic development, I see no reason to conclude that there is an irreconcilable conflict between leisure and consumption.

For those who hold hostile views towards consumerism seem to yearn for a more communal and simplistic way of life, the class disparities in ancient societies were more rigid and cruel than in modern times, and ordinary people perhaps did not often willingly choose austere lifestyles. If given the opportunity to live a consumerist life, they might readily forsake the past. This idealized life may only exist in the future, but how can we predict the shape of the future? Have we already reached the moment to step into the future? If individuals lose the motivation for pleasure and pursuit of interest, then who will undertake the production work? If these questions cannot be answered, the notion of 'post-consumerism' may be nothing more than an impractical utopian fantasy.

Finally, it also cannot be denied that, despite the inducement of advertisements leading many households to be filled with some useless items, if it were not for active consumers paying the bill for potential innovations, modern household appliances such as washing machines, microwaves, dishwashers, window-cleaning robots, and vacuum robots would not have appeared in our lives. However, it's important to recognize that the adoption of new technologies is influenced by various factors, including historical, cultural, and economic considerations. In the case of dishwashers, some Quora users have posed the question: "Why is dishwasher and clothes

dryer ownership relatively low in China?⁴¹ Based on my personal experience, their slow adoption in China can be attributed to several factors. Historically, early economic conditions may have limited the affordability and availability of dishwashers in Chinese households.

Additionally, China's family planning policy, which typically results in smaller household sizes of two to four people,⁴² has made it less practical to use dishwashers due to the limited number of dishes to wash. Also, many Chinese families are accustomed to hand-washing dishes and may perceive dishwashers as unnecessary or inefficient in removing grease and stains. This lack of trust in dishwasher technology contributes to the reluctance to invest in these appliances. While personal experiences may vary, the broader societal attitude towards dishwashers reflects a combination of economic, cultural, and technological factors. Although dishwashers have indeed improved the quality of life for many individuals and reduced household chores, their adoption remains limited in China due to a variety of historical and cultural reasons. I admit that I cannot live without a dishwasher in my life, it has indeed saved me a lot of unnecessary time and work. For many these household appliances have indeed improved our quality of life, and reduced household chores have, to some extent, liberated housekeepers in any genders. Yet, in a country where dishwashers are not yet widely used and not considered essential appliances, would buying a dishwasher also be considered a fault of consumerism?

⁴¹ "Why Don't People in China Own Dishwashers and Clothes Dryers?," Quora, 2019, <https://www.quora.com/Why-dont-people-in-China-own-dishwashers-and-clothes-dryers>.

⁴² Penny Kane and Ching Y Choi, "China's One Child Family Policy," *BMJ* 319, no. 7215 (October 9, 1999): 992–94, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.319.7215.992>.

Reasonable Critique on Consumption?

Critiques of consumerism by most sociologists are puzzlingly laden with poetic parallelism, ubiquitous metaphors, and various self-invented concepts such as "spectacle," "simulacrum," and "assemblage of images," which undoubtedly partly obscure their true intentions.

C. Wright Mills describes this writing style in *The Sociological Imagination* as follows:

In many academic circles today anyone who tries to write in a widely intelligible way is liable to be condemned as a 'mere literary man' or, worse still, 'a mere journalist.' Perhaps you have already learned that these phrases, as commonly used, only indicate the spurious inference: superficial because readable. The academic man in America is trying to carry on a serious intellectual life in a social context that often seems quite set against it. His prestige must make up for many of the dominant values he has sacrificed by choosing an academic career. His claims for prestige readily become tied to his self-image as a 'scientist.' To be called a 'mere journalist' makes him feel undignified and shallow. It is this situation, I think, that is often at the bottom of the elaborate vocabulary and involved manner of speaking and writing. It is less difficult to learn this manner than not. It has become a convention—those who do not use it are subject to moral disapproval. It may be that it is the result of an academic closing of the ranks on the part of the mediocre, who understandably wish to exclude those who win the attention of intelligent people, academic and otherwise.⁴³

Firstly, they perceive the existence of 'deception' in the market. If people were to engage in

⁴³ C Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 1959), 218.

transactions with each other candidly, then the market itself would seem unimpeachable.

However, language and cues can be deceptive or directional, resulting in partial power imbalances between consumers and the market, fostering an atmosphere of distrust. The term "deception" carries a broad meaning. Broadly speaking, mild deception has become a necessary element of commerce, including as a standard in store design known as 'customer flow design' — guiding consumers through as many products as possible through spatial layout to stimulate their purchasing desires.⁴⁴ It also includes symbolic sales, such as promoting a particular style of dressing as fashionable.⁴⁵ Lastly, there is also the satisfaction of healthy cravings, as high-calorie foods may be the most appealing to people's taste buds, but can harm their health in the long run.⁴⁶ These tactics may lead to localized power imbalances and an atmosphere of distrust in market transactions. Such criticisms are primarily based on observations of "deception" in the market, which may mislead people during the shopping process.

Meanwhile, in addition to some recognized forms of deception in the market, there are also more narrowly defined, more sinister forms of deception. One scenario is where deceivers lead people into inescapable debt traps, as revealed in Pulitzer Prize-winning reporting by The New York Times in *A \$750000 Taxi Medallion, a Driver's Suicide and a Brother's Guilt*,⁴⁷ exposing how

⁴⁴ Katherine N. Lemon and Peter C. Verhoef, "Understanding Customer Experience throughout the Customer Journey," *Journal of Marketing* 80, no. 6 (2016): 69–96, <https://doi.org/10.1509/jm.15.0420>.

⁴⁵ Susan B. Kaiser, Richard H. Nagasawa, and Sandra S. Hutton, "Fashion, Postmodernity and Personal Appearance: A Symbolic Interactionist Formulation," *Symbolic Interaction* 14, no. 2 (May 1991): 165–85, <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.1991.14.2.165>.

⁴⁶ Adrian Meule, "The Psychology of Food Cravings: The Role of Food Deprivation," *Current Nutrition Reports* 9, no. 3 (June 23, 2020): 251–57, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13668-020-00326-0>.

⁴⁷ Brian M Rosenthal, "A \$750,000 Taxi Medallion, a Driver's Suicide and a Brother's Guilt," *The New York Times*, December 23, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/23/nyregion/nyc-taxi-suicides.html>.

lending institutions enticed New York City cab drivers to purchase expensive taxi medallions, and then, after the medallion prices collapsed, many were forced into bankruptcy or even suicide.

Regarding milder forms of deception, economists and liberals may adopt a more tolerant attitude. Compared to sacrificing one's freedom to make decisions, the cost of voluntary acceptance of slight deception is not too high. If wearing specific clothes can help you enter your ideal social circle, then that's a good choice; even if the goal is not achieved, spending money on certain shopping experiences may also be seen as a test of personal judgment. In fact, economists use the concept of market equilibrium to explain that if we have weaknesses, even if Business A doesn't deceive us, there will always be Business B willing to do so, making it almost impossible to eradicate this phenomenon. As for those more malicious forms of deception, almost everyone with a moral conscience finds them intolerable, a view shared by economists and cultural scholars. Supporting free markets and consumer freedom does not equate to supporting unbridled liberalism; free markets can also be combined with various regulations, which is not contradictory. This could be because it is essential to eliminate deceptive practices in the market rather than mitigate market consequences through regulation.

The second reasonable aspect of criticism involves discussions of moral issues. Although their criticisms largely rely on morality, making their opinions seem lacking in consistency and persuasiveness, economists have gradually realized that in certain specific economic areas, moral is a genuine value. In discussing moral issues, we can use commercial surrogacy as an example.

A good example is surrogate mothers in India. Between 2002 and 2015, Indian law allowed commercial surrogacy, and its prices were much lower than in Western countries. Many women were willing to become surrogate mothers because providing one surrogacy service could earn them between \$4,500 and \$7,500, which often exceeded their earnings from 15 years of work, enough to buy their own house or pay for their child's education. Until 2015 when India banned commercial surrogacy, the size of the surrogacy industry was approximately 2.8 billion yuan, with over 80% of clients coming from overseas.⁴⁸ Why Should Commercial Surrogacy be Prohibited? One reason is the assertion that the rights of surrogate mothers are compromised in this process. For instance, they are required to reside in designated communal dormitories during pregnancy, far from their families, with limited mobility, and the lack of clear legal contracts can make it difficult for them to assert their interests when they suffer losses.⁴⁹ However, the issue of living conditions does not seem insurmountable; theoretically, this industry could become more formalized and humane. Consequently, a deeper accusation emerges: human life itself should not be used as a commodity for consumption. This criticism points out that separating surrogate mothers from the children they carried for nine months can cause emotional trauma. Furthermore, the significant disparity in the ability to pay among different countries and classes makes voluntary contractual agreements appear strained. While wealthy individuals can readily pay tens of thousands of dollars in surrogacy fees to avoid the pains of childbirth, women in India, due to their poverty, have to seize this sole opportunity to earn money, even at the expense

⁴⁸ Sharmila Rudrappa, "Reproducing Dystopia: The Politics of Transnational Surrogacy in India, 2002–2015," *Critical Sociology* 44, no. 7-8 (November 17, 2017): 1087–1101, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920517740616>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

of their own physical health. Although commercial surrogacy is technically a fair trade and is considered a voluntary contract, there are indeed barriers to childbirth and the "genuine demand" of certain reproductive services by sexual minority groups. Including considerations of surrogate mothers' rights and the moral dilemmas arising from economic disparities, the phenomenon of wealth inequality may blur the clarity of voluntariness and raise doubts about its effectiveness.

Similar situations also occur in other transactions related to personal dignity. For example, the sale of items such as blood and organs, which are crucial to individual life autonomy, is generally considered unethical. Kenneth E. Boulding, an economist, proposed the idea of a birth permit system in 1964: every woman would be issued a permit specifying the number of births allowed. If they did not want to give birth or were unable to care for the child due to poverty, they could sell the permit to couples willing to have more children, thereby balancing society's reproductive needs.⁵⁰ This idea is indeed efficient in economic terms and helps improve the lives of the poor, but in the foreseeable future, this system is unlikely to be implemented. Why do people not want to trade items related to human dignity on the market? Legal scholar Guido Calabresi believes it is because allowing such transactions may reveal how economically unequal society is.⁵¹

Nevertheless, at the same time, society also hopes to use the efficiency of the market to promote the economic operation, leading to the current situation — core items related to life and dignity

⁵⁰ David de la Croix and Axel Gosseries, "POPULATION POLICY through TRADABLE PROCREATION ENTITLEMENTS," *International Economic Review* 50, no. 2 (May 2009): 507–42, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2354.2009.00539.x>.

⁵¹ Guido Calabresi, *The Future of Law and Economics : Essays in Reform and Recollection* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2017), 41–72.

are removed from the market, while relatively insignificant items can be allocated by the market.

While defining the boundaries of areas in which the market can operate, there is a lack of consensus on what constitutes "core items" related to human dignity. Some strongly argue that the market should be restricted from encroaching on core areas directly related to human dignity. However, this proposition also brings a troubling question because society has not reached a consensus on what constitutes "core items." For example, today, some still support commercial surrogacy for the practical benefits it can bring to both parties involved; whereas before the 20th century, aside from Western European countries like Britain, life insurance was considered unethical, with most regarding the life insurance industry, which profited by betting on how long a person could live, as morally reprehensible and banning it.⁵² The issue with appealing to morality is that morals are never static; marketization itself can change people's perceptions of morality, such as today, when few consider life insurance to be inherently evil. Moral prohibitions primarily call for a more careful stance towards marketization but often lack clear directives for action. The interplay between evolving moral standards and market dynamics complicates the establishment of definitive criteria for determining what ought to be subjected to market forces and what should be shielded by moral constraints.

On the other hand, from an environmentalist perspective, excessive consumption imposes

⁵² Sarah Quinn, "The Transformation of Morals in Markets: Death, Benefits, and the Exchange of Life Insurance Policies," *American Journal of Sociology* 114, no. 3 (November 2008): 738–80, <https://doi.org/10.1086/592861>.

tremendous pressure on the planet, leading to biodiversity loss, climate change, marine pollution, and other environmental issues. Here, the question arises: *is all consumption a problem of capitalist society, or is it a commonality of modern production methods?* Even in non-capitalist systems, the desire for a better life may still exist, and environmental degradation may not necessarily be avoided. After all, environmental destruction is not the goal of capitalism, and as public concern for the environment grows, businesses are more willing to please consumers by implementing environmental measures and adopting eco-friendly stances — for example, Adidas launching jerseys made from recycled ocean plastic and sneakers made from recycled materials.⁵³ If this is the case, then simply blaming consumerism for negative environmental impacts may not be practical; we may need to rely on government action and individual virtues to address environmental issues.

Individual virtues should be supported, but virtues are unreliable and unstable. A study by Maria Csutora in 2012 compared the carbon footprints of consumers who pursued environmentally friendly consumption with those of ordinary consumers and found almost no difference between them. “The BIG problem means that even when consumers act in an environmentally aware manner, their carbon footprint or ecological footprint may improve only slightly, if at all. Wishful thinking about prospective gains from pro-environmental behavior is common, which is actually

⁵³ Clancy Morgan, “Adidas Is Turning Plastic Ocean Waste into Sneakers and Sportswear - Business Insider,” Business Insider (Business Insider, September 2, 2019), <https://www.businessinsider.com/adidas-sneakers-plastic-bottles-ocean-waste-recycle-pollution-2019-8>.

more a policy-making problem than a consumer behavior problem.”⁵⁴ Therefore, economists tend to include environmental costs in commodity prices through flexible means. A person may betray their morals, but they rarely betray their wallet.

In addition to the three criticisms mentioned above, David Harvey also mentioned a claim that consumerism undermines stable urban life: “Stabilized lives, connections, and social ways are repeatedly disrupted to accommodate passing fashions or whims. The urbanized development inevitably involves demolition and forced relocation, violently disrupting the already formed urban life texture to insert flashy and momentarily outdated things.”⁵⁵ Though, whether this claim holds true in modern society requires further evidence. After all, not everyone values neighborly relations, or they are very willing to leave their original land with the demolition funds. Moreover, commercial development will convert wasteland into new “urban textures.” In today's world of frequent transportation and migration, few people can stick to one place for a lifetime. Blaming the disruption of relationships on consumerism seems to be an excessive accusation. When discussing market economies, we are often indoctrinated with the notion that a good life is mainly composed of money and material possessions. In fact, perhaps the fulfilling life we desire goes beyond material possessions. A truly rich life encompasses social respect, solace from family and friends, relaxation, and joy, among other aspects. The values of these

⁵⁴ Maria Csutora, “One More Awareness Gap? The Behaviour–Impact Gap Problem,” *Journal of Consumer Policy* 35, no. 1 (February 1, 2012): 150, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10603-012-9187-8>.

⁵⁵ David Harvey, “Flexible Accumulation through Urbanization Reflections on ‘Post-Modernism’ in The,” *Source: Perspecta* 26 (1990): 251–72.

aspects are difficult to measure in monetary terms but are indispensable parts of our lives. People are not foolish enough to ignore these real values; it's just that other spiritual values are too subjective to be well measured in models. In this process, although economics emphasizes efficiency, it may not fully understand all aspects of life. It is more accurate to say that it is a perspective rather than the whole picture.

Said by David D. Friedman, "Although 'efficient' is not entirely equivalent to 'desirable' or 'should,' it is quite close, more precise, and easier to apply. Without relying on economics, we would have nothing to rely on."⁵⁶ This does not negate the importance of other unquantifiable aspects of life. Each aspect of life contributes uniquely. Therefore, when evaluating the value of life and consumption, we need to pay sufficient attention to non-material aspects beyond money and material possessions. The true richness of life lies in considering various aspects comprehensively, rather than being simply defined by money and material possessions.

⁵⁶ David D. Friedman, *Law's Order: What Economics Has to Do with Law and Why It Matters*, JSTOR (Princeton University Press, 2000), 18–27, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt24hr06.5>.

Art Statement – Incomplete Order

Based on my questioning and inquiry into criticisms of consumerism, I visualized these critiques through the language of graphic design. Drawing from Baudrillard's analysis of consumer society⁵⁷ and semiotics⁵⁸ to Guy Debord's proposition of the spectacle society⁵⁹, they become evident that consumers are often portrayed as passive entities, overshadowed by the dominance of the market and consumption. In my visual work, I aim to challenge this perception by prioritizing the amplification of individual subjective experiences, akin to my thesis theme where the market assumes a secondary role. This shift emphasizes the significance of individual consumption motivations for visual impact.

Throughout the visual research of this project, I photographed all the personal items I've accumulated over the past two years of living in Toronto. Approximately 600 items were meticulously photographed, edited, and categorized. Departing from conventional categorization methods based on functionality, I categorized these items into three main groups: emotional relationship, behavioral tendency, and psychological state. Rather than distinguishing items based on their utility, I focus on their capacity to fulfill psychological needs, blurring the distinction between real and perceived needs in consumption. Here, the concept of functional

⁵⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society : Myths and Structures* (London: Sage, 1970), 60.

⁵⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1981).

⁵⁹ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, Michigan: Black & Red, 1967), https://monoskop.org/images/e/e4/Debord_Guy_Society_of_the_Spectacle_1970.pdf.

needs is transcended, liberating items from their utilitarian constraints. Every retained item is highlighted for its ability to only satisfy my psychological needs.

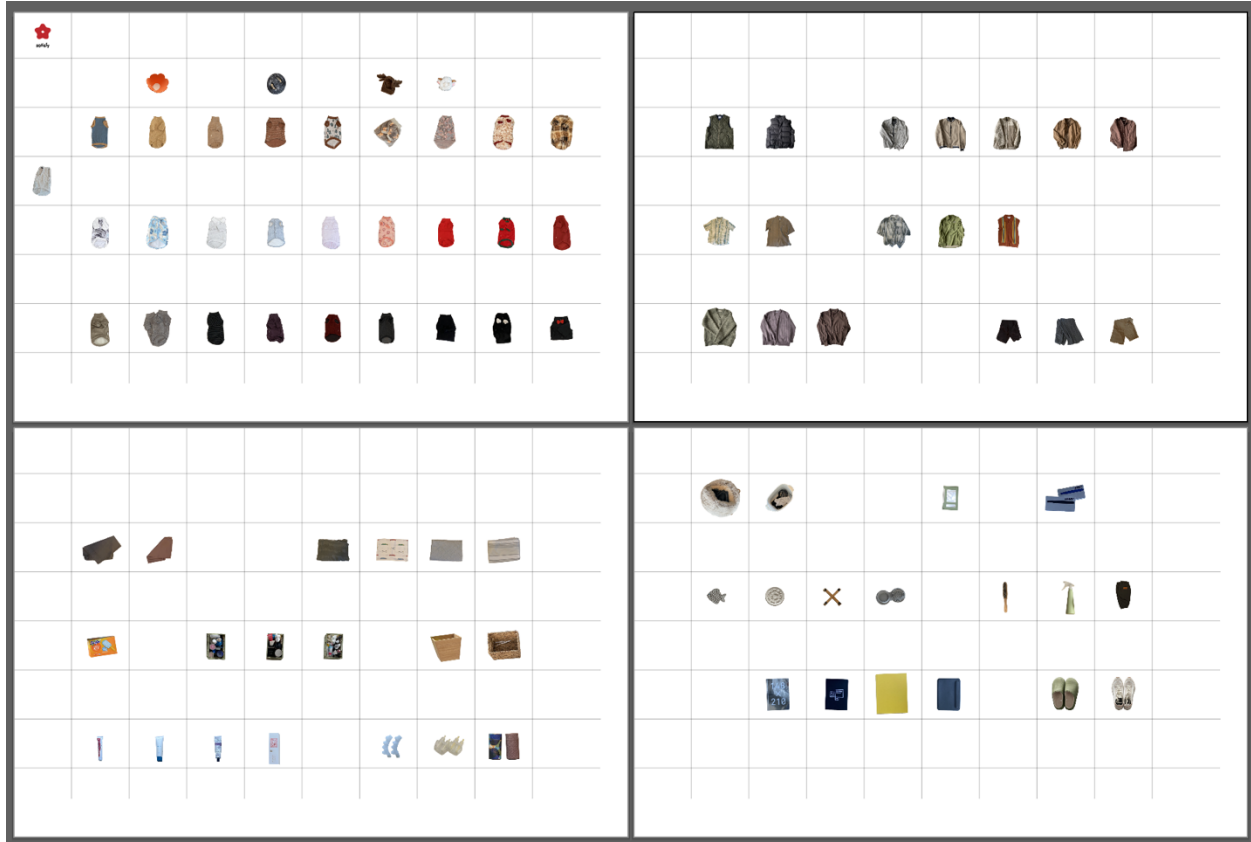


Figure 1. Partial Items images from my home with directional and numbering signalling ‘stratification’

Building upon these three categories, I further delineated 12 sub-categories, each representing distinct facets of personal experience. These sub-categories include emotional aspects like excitement, satisfaction, joyfulness, and memory; behavioral tendencies such as belonging, confidence, challenge, and duty; and psychological states like reliance, exploration, fulfillment, and inspiration. Each sub-category is assigned a unique graphical symbol, which, when combined with typographic elements, forms a cohesive visual narrative. These symbols

collectively construct a fictional wayfinding map, with arrows signage in different directions, from ascent to descent, relative to repulsion, walking back and forth within each symbol, guiding viewers through a journey that explores various dimensions of consumption symbolism.

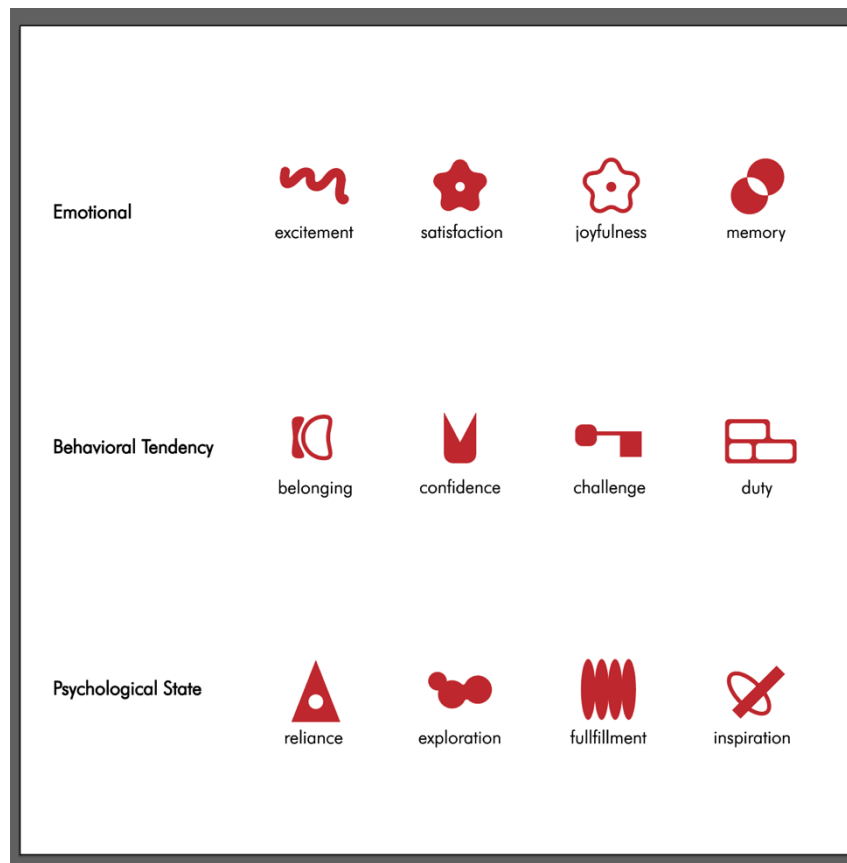


Figure 2. Sub-categories of 12 personal consumer symbols

These visual narrative places consumer symbols at the forefront, aiming to elucidate the intricate relationship between individuals and consumer culture. By dissecting consumer symbols visually, I endeavor to construct a critique of everyday consumption practices, challenging conventional perceptions of selfhood and identity. In doing so, I shift from the realm of tangible ‘things’ to the domain of symbolic connections. Just as Baudrillard recognized the symbolic

nature of consumption⁶⁰, my work tries to replace personal characteristics and desires with symbolic representations, inviting viewers to decipher the underlying narratives encoded within consumer symbols. Through this process, audiences gain insight into my individuality and experiences, transcending conventional modes of self-expression.

Song Dong's installation and exhibition 'Waste Not'⁶¹ has inspired me, and my research, greatly. This single installation comprising over 10,000 commonplace, domestic items of daily life that had been used and amassed by the artist's mother Zhao Xiangyuan over fifty years. The shabby and sometimes thread bare items were arranged throughout the curved space of the gallery along the lines of a Chinese traditional garden with serpentine pathways and changes in scale serving to draw in the viewer, whilst re-casting the collective memory of an entire generation under Mao Tse-tung's reign (1949-1976)⁶². The installation allowed for a conversation around objects, memories and family ethics against the background of contemporary China. For those who had experienced the great change of China's reform and opening period, Song Dong's Waste Not elicited sympathy and empathy. In the era of material scarcity, the Chinese planned economy was distributed equally in every Chinese family with each family owning the same items. The objects in the installation were familiar to everyone's childhood. It was not only the piece about the love between a mother and son, but also it referred to something greater that was deeply rooted in the

⁶⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1981).

⁶¹ "Song Dong: Waste Not 宋冬: 物盡其用," ART.ZIP, December 23, 2012, <https://www.artzip.org/song-dong-waste-not>.

⁶² Ibid.

collective memory of China.⁶³

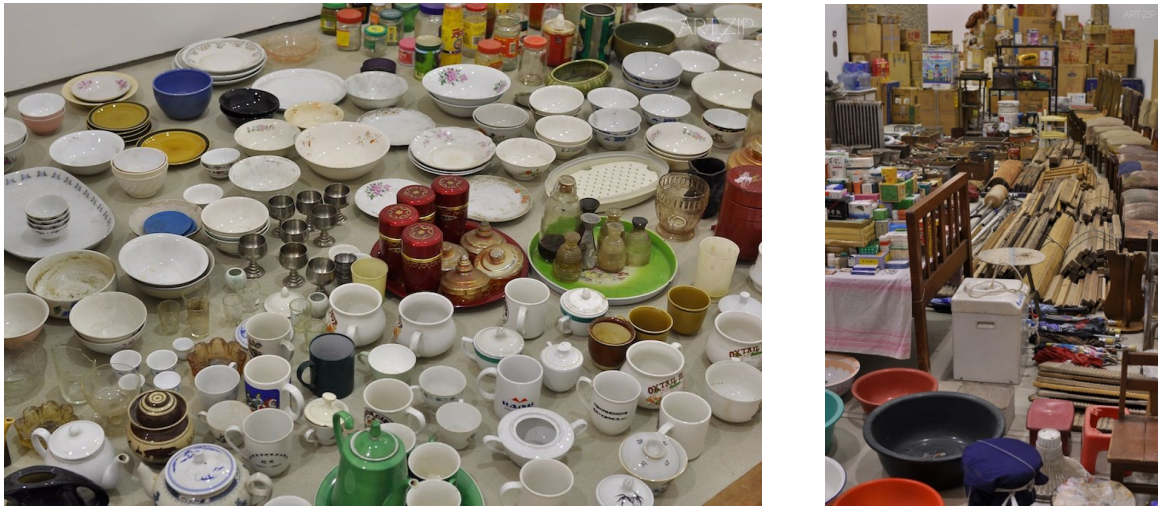


Figure 3. Song Dong - *Waste Not* (2012) <https://www.artzip.org/song-dong-waste-not>

My visual work draws on his combination of personal items and narrative, contrasting significantly with the purpose of acquiring goods in a different era. Due to the panic of material scarcity, Song Dong's mother accumulated many fabrics, leading to a lifestyle where anything that could be preserved was not allowed to be discarded. This mentality and way of life of making the most out of everything became ingrained, but when material abundance prevailed, this habit became a burden. The drastic change in life seemed to happen in an instant, with space occupied by these materials waiting to be 'wasted not'. The fear of material scarcity, for the next generation, turned into anxiety about the accumulation of useless materials.⁶⁴ For us, hoarding goods seems to have nothing to do with material scarcity. We are more conquered by consumer culture; we are encouraged to buy more, own more, and consumption has become a part of our

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

lives, almost a form of identity. *‘With the prevalence of consumerism, are we neglecting the meaning behind material consumption? Are we ignoring our true needs and desires while pursuing more material enjoyment and psychological satisfaction?’* Song Dong's work has sparked my contemplation on these issues, prompting me to explore the relationship between consumer culture and personal life. Through my graphic illustration, I attempt to take a stance against consumerism criticism, presenting this internal struggle and conflict, discussing the impact of consumerism on individuals and society, and how individuals find their ‘true selves’ in this cultural environment.

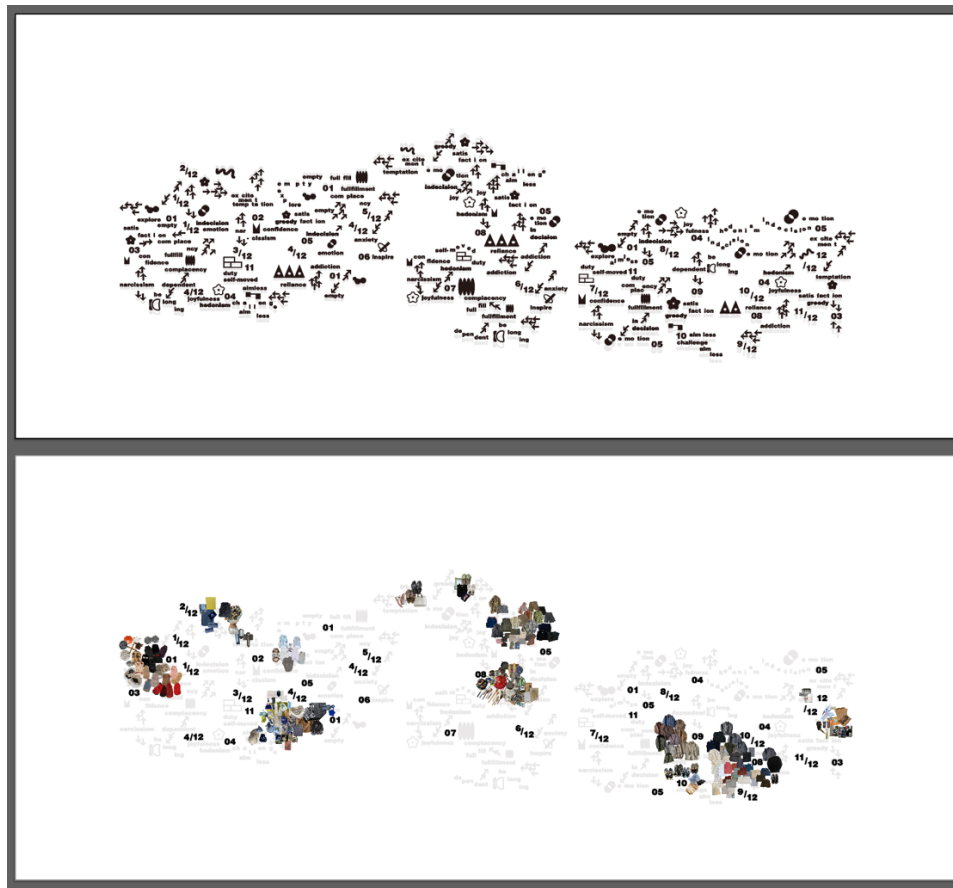


Figure 4. Progress illustration of consisted symbols and items on Adobe Illustration

In this work, I approach to the context that is embracing the consumer system to seem to refute the widespread criticism of consumerism in society. I place the market as secondary but emphasizing and enlarging the subjective feelings of individual selves. It tries towards declaring the consumption of goods and the psychological pursuit of individual consumer motivations. Here, using the means of refutation to understand consumerism does not mean supporting it, but rather attempting to try to comprehend and criticize it more comprehensively within an alternative context.

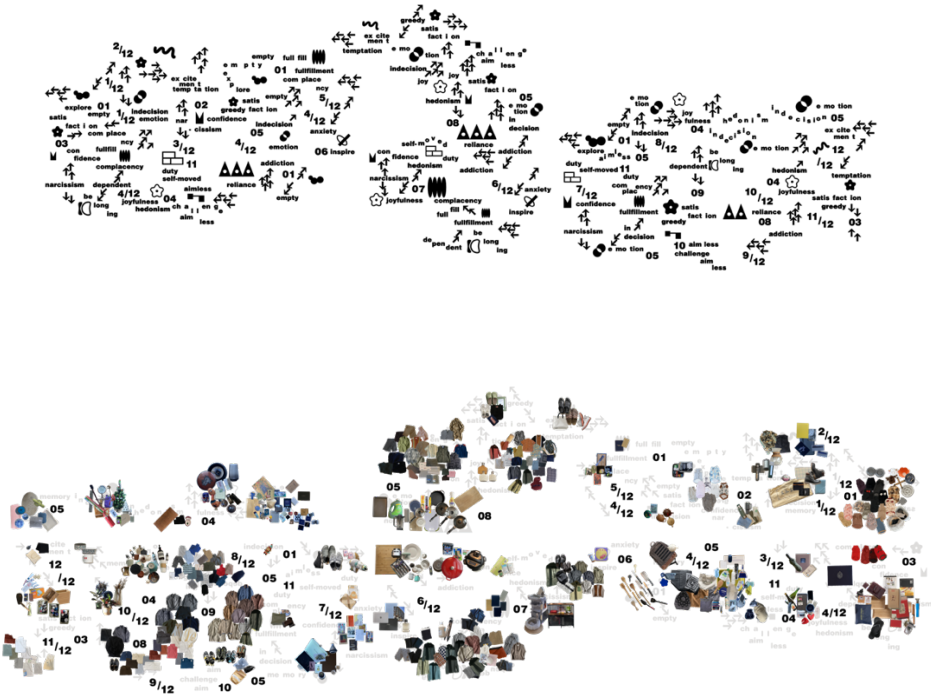


Figure 5. Final version of consisted symbols and items on Adobe Illustration

My personal items serve as symbols, representing our consumption behavior, psychological needs, and cultural identity. While the spectacle fosters extreme consumerism and

commodification, turning everything into a commodity that is exhibited. For instance, human movement becomes tourism, sexuality becomes porn, clothing becomes fashion, and information becomes infotainment. The world we perceive is the world of commodities.



Figure 6. Transformation from life experience to commodification

Debord regards this extreme consumerism as a form of alienation and believes that by transforming all aspects of our lives into a spectacle, a society of the spectacle also alienates us from direct life experience. By showcasing these belongings, I aim to encourage reflection and dialogue on the complexities of consumer culture and its impact on individual well-being and societal values. Viewers are invited to walk through the constructed space where it is surrounded by merchandise symbol, it tries to ask audiences to examine their relationship with consumerism critically, confront contradictions in contemporary society, and envision alternative modes of living prioritizing authenticity, connection, and sustainability. These symbols not only shape our lives but also express our worldview and identity, prompting exploration of the connection between individuals and consumption and the influence of consumer culture on cognition and behavior.

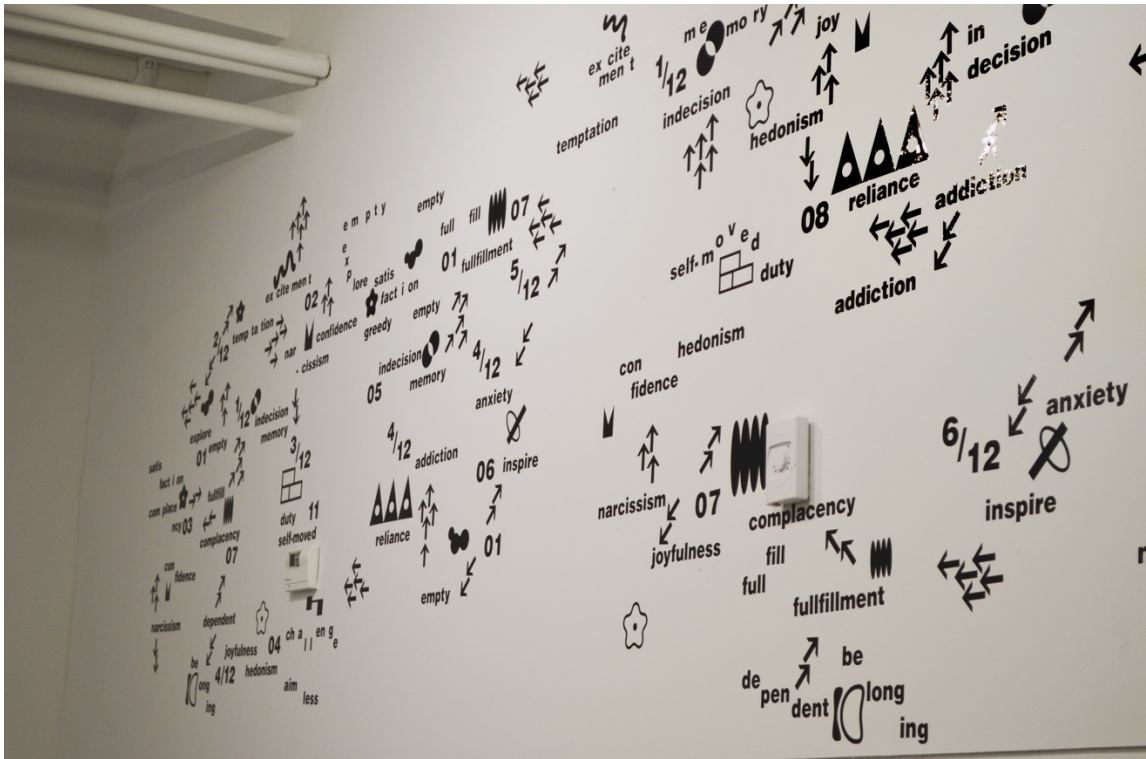


Figure 7. Detail image of final installation from room 118, 205 Richmond St W



Figure 8. Detail image of final installation from room 118, 205 Richmond St W

Conclusion

Nearly all beliefs considered to be correct are rooted in some conception of human nature.

Conservative beliefs, such as the need for strong and centralized political authority, are typically built upon the notion that humans are inherently selfish and competitive. Conversely, liberalism arises from the belief that most people possess rationality and the ability to manage their own lives. Criticisms of consumerism, on the other hand, reflect a desire for the inherent goodness of human nature - *if humans are inherently good, why do we witness so much evil in economic life?*

The only explanation is that these individuals have been brainwashed by oppressive capitalist institutions and ideologies.

Behind this notion of the inherent goodness of human nature, it lies a deeper call for equality. If everyone is born equally pure and good, then they are fundamentally equal, with no distinctions of high or low. However, this call for equality is in tension with a long-standing disdain for the common people in the European philosophical tradition. Nietzsche's slave morality (1887),⁶⁵ Heidegger's everydayness (1927),⁶⁶ Debord's society of the spectacle (1967),⁶⁷ and Foucault's panoptic vision (1975),⁶⁸ all reserve for themselves a position of superiority from which to look down upon the mundane world. Yet, if all people are equal, what gives these philosophers their extra status?

⁶⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887; repr., New York Vintage Books, 2011).

⁶⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1927).

⁶⁷ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, Michigan: Black & Red, 1967), https://monoskop.org/images/e/e4/Debord_Guy_Society_of_the_Spectacle_1970.pdf.

⁶⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (S.L.: Penguin Books, 1975).

Whether one likes it or not, commerce and consumption have become the tune of contemporary society. Reflecting on criticisms of consumerism is not about creating an opposing position to deny the negative consequences it has already caused. I hope this perspective can offer me a new understanding of consumption, leading to deeper and more personal thoughts and judgments. Here, critiquing consumerism does not necessarily stem from seeking better alternatives but rather expresses moral dissatisfaction. It serves as a means for individuals to explain minor discomforts in their lives that they morally dislike about society, whether it be weariness toward the pursuit of efficient production or a sense of powerlessness in adhering to capitalistic market and spectacle rules. The refuge sought is not a historical, friendly community but rather an unrealized utopia.

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