Cyber Day

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Author Note

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Figure 1 - An American Food Hall Depicting Modern Day American Consumerist Culture (American Dream, 2018)

The United States today is classified as a hyper-consumerist society to the extent that its popular mainstream culture can be defined to a great extent by its consumerism. The products and services which are advertised by the mass media to Americans are not merely items of necessity or daily use, but rather have begun to represent how people perceive social classes within the culture. Consumerism gets embedded within a culture as a result of a bandwagon effect that almost compels people to buy and buy more. Consequently, spending is not solely to satisfy a material desire but seen as a form of patriotism and success signifying the American way of life (PBS, 2019).

Figure 1 shows an image taken from a company called the American Dream. The image demonstrates what can be seen as emerging American values, in which recreation and leisure, youthfulness, comfort, and self-fulfillment are highly valued elements in society. The image represents young people from a well-off socioeconomic background, who are consuming or purchasing different products in what seems to be a shopping mall with a Food Hall. The food Hall is surrounded by different brands from where shoppers are purchasing different products and presumably use the Food Hall to eat, drink and socialize. Furthermore, the image highlights both the visible and invisible aspects of the American consumerist culture (Henslin, 2017). For instance, we can see how the youth likes to dress, their preferred architecture, socializing rituals and the food they prefer. Moreover, some of the non-visible cultural aspects that can be inferred from the image are the laid-back attitude when it comes to public behavior, their communication style and way of handling emotions, such as joy. We can also see how the people handle physical space from the considerable gap between those who are seemingly strangers with those that seem to know each other well. The people’s notions of modesty can be observed from the way they dress and interact with the opposite sex which is obviously different in many aspects from eastern and oriental cultures. Furthermore, it shows that the people of this culture place great value in material wealth and goods, wherein consuming and exhibiting material wealth is preferred to saving.

As a result of the consumerist culture, American citizens frequently tend to live paycheck to paycheck, out of their tendency to immediately spend their wealth on buying different products. It affects not just the affluent but the middle class and the working class as well. In this culture, working is not meant to simply make ends meet but to buy a social status within the society by consuming brands and unnecessary products. This could be the right kind of dress, car or coffee that the individual begins to identify with. Figure 1 demonstrates that the advertised environment intends to create an atmosphere for customers to indulge in eating as a way of socializing, leisure and interaction. The construction amenities and attractive design is meant to attract the affluent, those who will spend more, and for this, they know what will speak to the consumer, who will find the environment and products appealing and worth spending their money on. In this culture, people find meaning within material goods. Products have a social status or a social identity attached with them and symbolize associations, subcultures, meanings; all of which contribute to the consumer's self-image. Therefore the culture itself is a social consumerist culture wherein consuming becomes a way of life (Jansiz, 2014).

Another aspect of American popular culture is the emphasis on family. Like any other culture, it has its own sets of values, norms, and taboos. For instance, despite swearing being commonplace within American society, it is a taboo to swear in front of children, if we compare America to other westernized societies. Therefore one is expected to exercise care when around children with regards to their choice of words. In our celebrations such as Thanksgiving, people gather with their friends and family to drink, eat and watch American football; another form of consumption. Other rituals such as the coming-of-age rituals commonplace in which people would celebrate a ‘Sweet 16' party wherein family, and friends get together to mark a child’s 16 years of age. The ritual too involves giving gifts, often high value, to the teenager as a way of welcoming them into adulthood.

To conclude, American popular culture despite placing emphasis on family, its consumerist ethos and characteristics often intertwine with it. A child growing up in a typical American family learns to consume or value consumption after they discover the worth attached to it in their cultures. Consumption, therefore, is not only a reflection of American cultural values, but itself became a cultural value.

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