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Growth of Consumer Society in Post-World War II America

As time passes, more people seem to long for the days of yester-year, when attractive, brightly colored advertisements drew consumer attention, products emerged newly developed that are now viewed as necessities, and many Americans appeared, for all intents and purposes, to subscribe to the idea of “The American Dream.” More recently, these days viewed with nostalgia have long passed, and the idea of a simpler time when Americans did not indulge in a highly consumerist culture is wrongly placed onto the era surrounding World War II. As far back as the 1920's, firms and consumers were moving away from purchases and products for necessity and encouraging the kind of spending and consumption that provide for today's society. Despite a highly romantic view of the Post-War Era as a simpler time, the truth is that much of what we now view as consumer culture was born out of the Post-War Era.

Although Americans now appear to view consumerism as negative, in the 1920's consuming more goods was seen as a solution to a problem that had been plaguing America since the Civil War. As James Wallman (2013) describes in his book, *Stuffocation*, the period between the Civil War and the 1920's saw an increase of production that was four times that of the increase in population. With so much overproduction came the looming question of what should be done to curb the market saturation, and although it made sense to simply decrease production, politicians and industrialists pushed to encourage Americans to consume more to align with the overproducing market. Although, as Wallman points out, the idea did not seem

most logical, it was successful because along with enticing consumers to buy more products, firms also shifted to producing products that would last for shorter amounts of time to force consumers to continue purchasing and stimulating the market and the economy. Even Henry Ford, who said in 1922, “ ‘We want the man who buys one of our cars never to have to buy another,’ ” eventually felt the pressure to create dissatisfied consumers, and by 1933 he was changing vehicle styles every year to promote increased consumption (Wallman, 2013, p. 44). As America shifted from one post-war boom to The Great Depression—characterized by the 1929 Stock Market Crash, inflation, high numbers of unemployment, and monetary struggles—consumers possessed less money to spend on goods, and this attitude would characterize how Americans viewed money and consumption during WWII.

Despite a grand nostalgic view of American sacrifice on the home front during WWII, many Americans experienced better quality of life and the benefit of greater purchasing power in society as the war brought jobs and steady incomes back to many American households, as Dannagal Goldthwaite Young (2005) observes. According to Young, WWII saw a large increase in advertisement targeted at Americans during the war: “It appears from the literature that advertisers communicated two messages in one to American readers; both to feel the weight of the sacrifices they were making, and to cherish and fight for the free market that gave them those items in the first place” (p. 32). This advertisement strategy began to make Americans view themselves as participants in the economy who could wield purchasing power to improve the nation despite shortages and rationing which prevented them from buying certain products whenever they wanted with their hard-earned money (Young, 2005). While Americans were no longer feeling the crunch of not having enough money in their pockets, the market was unable to provide new or large amounts of products to take advantage of this increase in purchasing power,

and as a result, Americans did not fall back into a largely consumerist society until after the war when production could be redirected away from wartime necessities to the fancy luxuries many Americans indulged in after WWII.

As America transitioned into the Post-War Era, consumers no longer faced things such as scarcity, rationing, conversion of money into war bonds, or shortages of goods. In an effort to take advantage of the increased spending power that had developed over the course of the war, advertisers became crafty and inventive to “[stoke] consumer appetites with carefully crafted advertising campaigns that pointed Americans toward a postwar consumer cornucopia” (Hurley, 2001, p. 7). One of the areas of consumption that saw a vast amount of growth after the war was private home ownership, as home ownership was viewed as a symbol of accomplishment and status (Hurley, 2001). Just as a consumer with an empty home would desire to fill the emptiness with new items and the latest products, Philip Cushman (1990) argues that a large part of the increase in consumerism after WWII can be attributed to individuals buying to fill the “empty self” (p. 599). Cushman defines the self as, “the concept of the individual as articulated by the indigenous psychology of a particular cultural group, the shared understandings within a culture of ‘what it is to be human’ ”—in effect, how an individual views him or herself against the backdrop of their society (p. 599). Cushman claims that after WWII many Americans suffered from empty self, which was often remedied with “chronic consumerism” as Americans desired to fill the empty places inside with material goods and the experience of “ ‘receiving’ something from the world” (p. 604). This emptiness and willingness to fill that emptiness with consumption made Americans highly susceptible to the advertising of the era, and Cushman maintains that this idea of ‘empty self’ continued throughout the rest of the century. This boom in

consumerism, however it was triggered, has not slowed down and seems to have transformed luxuries of the 1950's into necessities in the modern world.

Hurley (2001) claims that by 1949 “Americans purchased 21.4 million cars, 20 million refrigerators, 5.5 million stoves, and 11.6 million television sets” (p. 5). By January of 1960, “three-quarters of all families owned cars, 90 percent of homes wired for electricity had television sets, 65 million people enjoyed air-conditioning in their homes, over eleven million had refrigerators with built-in freezers,” and Americans enjoyed a higher standard of living that made them the envy of countries the world over (Hurley, 2001, p. 5). As Americans deeply embedded themselves into a more consumerist society, production was growing at continually increasing rates. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is a measure of production and consumption, real GDP is that which has been adjusted to account for inflation to only represent accurate increases, and GDP per capita is a rough estimate of income on average for every person in a country. As GDP per capita rises, that translates into more spending money for Americans, thereby increasing the amount of goods and services consumed. In just four years, from the first quarter of 1947 to the final quarter of 1951, Real GDP per capita had increased by \$1,920, from \$13,513 to \$15,433 (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2017). In one decade, from 1950 to 1960, Real GDP per capita rose from \$13,819 to \$17,380, an increase of \$3,561. In the following decade, from 1960 to 1970, Real GDP per capita increased by another \$5,684 (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2017).

American consumption was increasing so rapidly, it changed not only the amount and kinds of goods Americans consumed, but also the experiences they came to expect. Disneyland, beloved theme park and recognizable around the world, was the direct result of a demand for better family entertainment than the dirty fairgrounds that preceded it (Hurley, 2001). The

opening of Disneyland only changed the market for family-fun destinations, but also influenced the development of “working-class consumer traditions” (Hurley, 2001, p. 284). In addition to being wildly successful, Disneyland and other forms of family entertainment such as the popularization of television shows like *The Goldbergs*, *Leave it to Beaver*, and *Father Knows Best*, began to permeate American culture and shape the expectations of working and middle class Americans in consumer society (Hurley, 2001).

In fact, the image of the ideal middle-class family seen on television was so effective that it caused a shift in the way households consumed. As Stephanie Coontz (1992) writes, “ ‘patriotism, freedom, and consumption became interchangeable ideas, continually reinforced by the magic of television’ ” (p. 171). Television in the 1950’s and early 60’s reinforced the ideas of what the family and home should look like and was directly related to advertising products and making money from viewers’ consumption patterns (Coontz, 1992). The producers of these television shows, in addition to selling the overall feel of the ideal home, would even stage particularly moving or important moments in the show with goods and items in view in an effort to draw attention and encourage viewers to consume. As shows became more popular, the image of households full of luxury appliances and goods was popularized as well, and many Americans began playing “Keeping Up With the Joneses” with families that did not even exist. However, as America moved away from the highly nostalgic, family-centered television programs, the media’s effect on consumerism did not stop; it merely evolved. Demand for big-ticket appliances and luxuries for the family went down, but advertisements and television simply moved on to exploiting the next available resource for goods and services: the individual. As advertising and the market of consumers evolved, so too did television, “partitioning the mythical family of the 1950’s into as many different varieties and subsets as possible” (Coontz,

1992, p. 175). And so the pull and attraction of consumerism never stopped or stalled; it simply evolved to fill the crevices created by society's constant shifting.

The ideals and the extraordinary increase in consumptive tendencies in the era after WWII mark the beginning of today's consumer-oriented society. The shift from quality-made products to ones that require constant future consumption, and the movement of yesterday's luxury goods into tomorrow's necessity, are not new concepts and should not be viewed as such. Consumer culture has its roots in the 1920's; therefore, viewing the days of the 1940's and 1950's as more appealing and free of consumer clutter is naïve and it erases much of the culture and history behind the consumer society we know today.

References

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