

Consumer Culture and the Absence of Art: A Challenge to Human Well-being

Ms Ankita Sharma

Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Punjabi University, Patiala

Abstract

In the contemporary postmodern era, society operates as an institution dictating norms for individuals. Those who struggle to conform often experience alienation. Moreover, within the capitalist framework, consumer culture establishes standards for appearance, eating habits, and lifestyle choices, prioritising symbolic value over utilitarian value. Consequently, this paper delves into the pervasive pursuit of social validation through wealth accumulation and adherence to social norms. In this context, humans view themselves as tools for earning money, believing it leads to happiness. However, Jean Baudrillard likens this to an illusion, drawing parallels to Narcissus' infatuation with his reflection, arguing that it only exists on the surface with nothing beyond.

The present paper also focuses on the aspect that although individuals possess a tremendous capacity for learning, there is a declining desire to pursue creative endeavours or gain new artistic abilities in the capitalist society. In contrast to the Indian aesthetic tradition, which emphasises mastering sixty-four forms of art for a prosperous life, only a limited number manage to grasp even one or two of these forms. The prevalent neglect of artistic endeavours contributes to a growing subservience of our minds to technology. This trend results in untapped potentialities of the mind, leading to the emergence of depression and anxiety issues.

This study emphasizes the detrimental effects of societal norms on human well-being in support of a paradigm shift towards a more holistic view of life. It challenges the prevalent narrative that equates pleasure only with financial prosperity and compliance with societal norms by emphasising the need to cultivate numerous art forms and transcending materialistic pursuits to cultivate a more prosperous life.

Keywords: *Art, Capitalism, Happiness, Mental health, Social norms*

Introduction

In the contemporary landscape, the pervasive influence of the capitalist narrative has reshaped societal values, directing focus toward pursuing wealth as a means to achieve happiness. This transformation has notably impacted fundamental aspects of human life, from fulfilling basic needs to shaping cultural preferences. The allure of consumerism, embodied in shopping malls and branded products, has created a societal framework where possessions and social status intertwine, potentially compromising individual authenticity. The consequences of this shift extend beyond material consumption, infiltrating realms like nutrition, architecture, and leisure, as evidenced by the rise of hyperreal environments like Disneyland and Dubai. Drawing insights from Baudrillard's critique of consumer society, this exploration aims to understand the

consequences of contemporary consumption patterns on human well-being and societal dynamics.

Contrasting this modern landscape is the rich historical tapestry of Indian tradition, which once celebrated a diverse array of sixty-four art forms known as *Catuṣṣasti-kalā*. These art forms, from music and dance to painting and weaponry, reflected both creative expressions and intrinsic aspects of individual identity and societal well-being. Regrettably, the evolution of contemporary corporate culture has led to the side-lining of these art forms, steering individuals towards professions that may not align with their true passions. This departure from the traditional appreciation of fine arts poses challenges, contributing to the disconnection between individuals and their innate creative potential.

Consumer Culture and Its Impact on Human Well-Being

In contemporary times, the capitalist narrative has ingrained in our minds the belief that more money equates to more happiness. This ideology strategically targets fundamental needs such as food, shelter, and home. Constant exposure to a myriad of amusements makes it challenging to resist the allure. For instance, shopping malls, which are the hub of consumer activities according to Jean Baudrillard, are tantalised with an array of products, creating a desire to acquire them all. Yet, not everyone can afford this, leading to distress.

The fascination with branded products intertwines with social status, creating a link between the possessions one holds and their recognition in society. A striking example is India, where 70% of iPhone purchases occur through EMIs (times of India, 2023). We can say that the use value of the product has been overlooked by its sign value. However, with their brand-centric focus, fast fashion brands adversely impact human well-being. In the pursuit of fitting into a socially constructed capitalist mould, individuals compromise their ontological essence.

Consider the realm of nutrition; today, people consume whatever is available in the market, offered by fast food chains like Domino's, McDonald's, and Burger King. Due to these growing food industries worldwide, the problems of obesity and diabetes are evident. However, in traditional societies, individuals consumed what the natural environment offered. In his work, *In Defence of Food*, Michel Pollan notes that “don't eat anything your great grandmother wouldn't recognise as food” (Pollan., p. 148). Globalisation, fostering an era of cutthroat competition, has seemingly stripped away happiness from human life.

Similar dynamics also play out in the realms of the beauty industry and infrastructure. Clothing and fashion brands are focused on women and they target women's bodies for their sales. The beauty industry creates the stereotype of white skin and anti-aging products that women buy to look good. The role of advertisements in

promoting such products and creating brand value is very significant. Individuals are always encountered with advertisements that blow their minds and make them curious to try more products for a better living. Moreover, in architecture, amusement parks like Disneyland and extravagant structures like those in Dubai create hyperreal worlds, ostensibly to bring pleasure. However, the reality is that such constructions contribute to establishing a social hierarchy, favouring only the capitalist class. These emerging forms of consumption are not just spaces for sign consumption; they are structures guiding people to consume more and different items. In line with Baudrillard's concerns about constraint in *The Consumer Society*, terms like 'totalitarian,' 'omnipotent,' and 'repressive' are aptly applied. The system mandates not only consumption but also leisure (Baudrillard., 1998).

As Aristotle argued, happiness is not a state but an activity. There are two kinds of activities: necessary or chosen for the sake of something else or to be chosen for themselves. Aristotle considers happiness one of those to be chosen for oneself because it does not need anything else; it is self-sufficient (*The Nichomacean Ethics*). However, in the modern world, the word happiness has become synonymous with the word amusement, and amusement is chosen not for its own sake.

Baudrillard's world, characterised by obligatory consumption and leisure, implies societal control but hints at an impending failure. Credit cards, ATMs, debit cards, ski resorts, Club Med, cruise ships, casinos/hotels, and theme parks exemplify this trend. Baudrillard notes that these fast-food restaurants, home shopping networks, and cyber malls contribute to this 'fantastic cage.' (Baudrillard., 1998, p. 20)

Despite these trends, human inclination doesn't solely lie in fulfilling unnecessary desires. The misdirection of human potentialities toward frivolous activities challenges our capabilities and harms nature and its resources. This reflects a shift towards a low culture, as seen in the works of pop artists like Andy Warhol, where art ceases to be creative or subversive, becoming a

mere part of the consumerist world (Baudrillard, 1998).

We find ourselves amidst the total organisation of everyday life, a homogenisation where everything is subsumed in the pursuit of an abstract 'happiness' defined solely by resolving tensions. The epitome of consumer culture, the shopping centre, embodies the sublimation of real life, erasing not just work and money but also the distinct cycles of seasons. Work, leisure, nature, and culture become amalgamated in this orchestrated pursuit of happiness.

Reviving Ancient Arts: The Cultural Vacuum in Modern Professions

Ancient Indian tradition recognised the significance of sixty-four art forms known as *Catuhstika-kala*. Unfortunately, many of these art forms are now absent in the majority of the human population, leading individuals towards professions that may not align with their true passions, causing stress, anxiety, and depression among youngsters. Earlier, individuals earned money through their talents and arts, such as painting, singing, and dancing. However, contemporary corporate culture often confines individuals to a desk with a laptop, limiting their choices and potentially dampening their happiness.

Fine arts were once integral to the cultural life of ancient India, and individuals with cultural inclinations held esteemed positions in society. Music, dance, drama, and painting enjoyed a place of honour, emphasising life's and art's inseparability in ancient Indian traditions. Artists across various fields worldwide have expressed their dreams, making the world richer and more delightful. The dress of a civilised person in ancient times reflected a fusion of fashion and passion, with true artists driven by a deep-seated passion.

Texts like *Bhannabatta's Kadambari* reference diverse art forms, including physical culture, the use of weapons, driving, elephant riding, instrumental music, dancing, painting, and various other arts. Many other writers have also referred to these arts in their works. The term *Catuhstika Kala* is commonly known among

those interested in oriental subjects (Krishnamoorthy., 2017, pp. 12-13).

The *Silpa-sastras* of ancient India, along with *Puranas*, Buddhist and Jain scriptures, and *Vatsyayana's 'Kamasutra'*, provide detailed insights into different branches of Indian fine arts. Music is considered the language of human souls and serves as a unique and unparalleled medium to convey human feelings to the divine realm. The divine traditions of music and dance, such as *Nataraja's Tandava Nritya* (dance of destruction) and Lord Krishna's enchanting flute melodies, hold immense cultural significance (Ganguly., pp. 17-18).

Dancing, known as *Nritya*, encompasses *Tandava Nritya* for male artists and *Lasya Nritya* for female artists. Another significant branch, *Natyakalā* or *Abhinayakalā*, delves into expressing one person's emotions or '*Bhāva*' through poetry in a way that immerses others in that emotional state.

During war or any other situation when postal runners couldn't deliver mail, trained pigeons were used as a form of "pigeon post." People possess the art of training birds like pigeons and parrots to achieve their desired goals. Memory, regarded as an important aid to knowledge and amusement, was considered a distinct branch of art.

While it is true that people today engage in various artistic activities like dancing, singing, painting, and many more, the contemporary expressions of these arts are just the copy of the earlier forms. Nothing new seems to have emerged in today's times. The replication of traditional art stems from the fact that many individuals view artistic pursuits as mere hobbies rather than viable career options. Unfortunately, certain art forms face decline as they lose their distinctive characteristics. Take, for instance, the fading tradition of grandparents narrating stories to their grandchildren. In the past, these narratives, sometimes spanning days, held cultural significance, fostering a strong bond between generations. In the present, however, such cultural stories have lost their prominence. The advent of mobile phones has replaced the oral tradition with digital storytelling. This shift

not only diminishes the cultural richness of stories but also erodes the opportunity for parents and children to spend quality time together. The act of storytelling, which once served as a conduit for promoting cultural traditions and strengthening familial bonds, has become scarce (Forgotten Legacies, 2006). Even when families gather, the prevalent use of mobile phones creates a disconnect, illustrating how the decline of even one form of art can adversely impact the overall well-being of individuals.

Conclusion: In contemporary society, individuals are relentlessly chasing financial gain, viewing themselves merely as a means to earn money. A pervasive consumer culture has emerged, fuelled by insatiable human desires. Capitalists champion this culture, ostensibly

promoting human well-being and happiness, yet the reality is evident to all. The more one acquires, the greater the craving for more, creating an endless cycle. This phenomenon has eroded the artistic potential of the human mind, reducing individuals to slaves of consumerism. The relentless pace of industrialisation and technological advancement leaves no room for contemplation, as everything is accomplished before it can be envisioned. The waning of artistic expression correlates with a decline in overall life quality. To foster the well-being of individuals and society, there is a pressing need to revisit our traditions and values that impart completeness to the human experience.

References

- Aristotle. (1953). *The Nicomachean ethics* (J. A. K. Thomson, Trans.). Penguin Classics.
- Baudrillard, J. (1998). *The consumer society: Myths and structures*. Sage Publications.
- Ganguly, A. B. (1962). *Sixty-four arts in ancient India*.
- Krishnamoorthy, K. (2017). *Bhannabhata*. Sahitya Akademi.
- Pollan, M. (2008). *In defense of food: An eater's manifesto*. Penguin Press.
- The Times of India. (2006, July 23). *Forgotten legacies*.