

## **Consumer Entitlement**

Popular culture postmodernism believes that there is a wide sense of consumer entitlement today. Consumers expect a reward for behaving in a certain way. "I know I am entitled to this product or service and I don't care if I hurt someone else in the process." Northern consumers are much more affluent relative to other consumers. Affluence is perceived as a matter of deserved personal reward and thus fully available to any who put forth the effort. Having worked for what they now enjoy, people expect others to do the same. This ideology ignores the plight of those people who did not start with the same advantages. A negative consequence of this perspective is that many consumers do not feel any sense of noblesse oblige to support their nation or to spread charity among the general public (Surdyk & Diddams, 2001).

Worse, if something is seen as an entitlement (in this case, the right to consume), people will place a high priority on that activity to the exclusion of others (McGinnis, Chun & McQuillan, 2003). Because of this high priority on the right to consume, people will not be receptive when asked to make socially and morally responsible consumption decisions. Remember that, in a consumer society, people have very high expectations for personal gratification. People feel that they are entitled to have all their expectations met. Life should be easy. People should get out of their way (Strauss, 2000).

Not surprisingly then, a sense of entitlement can lead to destructive, as well as aggressive, consumption behaviours. An entitlement mentality holds that the world is theirs (there) for the taking, regardless of possible harm or ramifications to others. Promoting the interest of a few elite populations, by facilitating consumer communal indulgence, harms and leaves out the masses (Hexmoor, 1998). Delayed gratification is a difficult reality for entitled consumers to accept, and their attitude can be expressed as: 'I must act now to get mine.' This behaviour exhibits a sense of social Darwinism on their part. They believe they have the right to subject others to undesirable outcomes simply because they can (Surdyk & Diddams, 2001).

## **Consumerism as Self-Identity**

Consumerism is a serious threat to peace during the postmodernism era because it has become a process of self-identification, a process that has to be continually fed by buying more things to define who we are. We now use the products and services to define ourselves. It is all about images and illusions. Our reality is recreated on a daily basis by buying things. We do this at the expense of those who make our products and the natural environment - creating injustice and ecological destruction. That is, we create a lack of positive peace, eco-peace and inner peace.

## **Consumerism as Structural violence**

Capitalistic consumerism needs an infrastructure in order to continue to manifest itself. Components of that infrastructure include technology and telecommunications, corporate led globalization, the neo-liberal market ideology, several world financial institutions, and complacent, or complicit, governments. Most significantly, the other component of this infrastructure is the consumer. This entire *infrastructure* is a key source of structural violence, and is enabled by consumers who, knowingly or unknowingly, embrace the ideology of consumerism.

Remember that those adversely effected by structural violence are not involved in direct conflict. Because they, and others, may not **see** the origin of the conflict, they feel they are to blame, or they *are* blamed, for their own life conditions. This perception is readily escalated because, in a Modern world, people tend to divide people into in-groups and out-groups (dualities). Those outside "our group" lie outside our scope of interest and justice. They are invisible. Injustice that would be instantaneously confronted if it occurred to someone in "our group" is barely noticed if it occurs to strangers or those who are invisible and irrelevant. Those who fall outside "our group" are easily morally excluded and become demeaned or invisible so we do not have to acknowledge the injustice

they suffer (Winter & Leighton, 1999).

Almost all of our consumer products are made offshore, thousands of miles away, by people we cannot see. Services delivered to us at home are usually delivered by those in the unskilled sector or the high paid professionals - invisible to us. Resources used to make our products are extracted in countries thousands of miles away - invisible to us. We are so far removed from the source of the goods and services we consume that we can readily create a dichotomy of “we and they.” The evidence of consumerism as structural violence is in the facts (see Figure 1). These facts reflect oppressive conditions created by globalization, capitalism and neo-liberal development models.

War and violence are an inherent part of this scenario. Too often, people conclude that they must arm themselves to protect their commodities and the ongoing access to them (especially oil, drugs, and metals). This position justifies war and violence (Cejka, 2003). The “veil of consumerism” enables them to overlook the connections between consumerism and oppressive regimes (governments, several world financial institutions and transnational corporations) that violate human rights, increase drug trade and increase military spending (Sankofa, 2003). This disregard is possible because consumerism accentuates and accelerates human fragmentation, isolation and exclusion for the profit of the few, contributing significantly to violence (Board of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, 1994). Society has ignored the “new slavery” and the resultant disposable people through ignoring the implications of consumption decisions on third world citizens, the next generation and those not yet born (Sankofa).

### **Lack of Consumer Accountability**

Deconstructive postmodernism holds that people have no loyalties to other people. Self interest and individualism are paramount (also part of modernism). It is not surprising, then, that consumers do not feel any duties or obligations to other citizens if they hold this point of view. Popular culture maintains that people are loyal to product brand names for as long as they are novel. This craving for novelty, the latest technological gadget, has led to a new illness in society - gadget addiction. Popular culture postmodern thinkers also say that there is a growing distrust and disrespect of authority. If this is so, we are in an even more compromised position if we are calling for human responsibilities to balance consumer rights. Northern consumers need to be held accountable for their consumption choices because they have so much collective marketplace power. They also live a life of the privileged Northern consumer. With privilege comes responsibility but this moral imperative is not front and centre in a society shaped by selfish individualism and self-interest, perpetuated by consumerism, materialism, and survival of the fittest mentality.

In the deconstructive postmodern world, all things are relative, that is, no one standpoint is uniquely privileged above any others. If this is so, it is hard to make a case for Western consumers to assume responsibility of the consequences of their consumption habits on others and the environment because one point of view (i.e., be responsible) cannot take precedence over any other. If consumers can say, “*however I see things is actually true -- for me. If you see things differently, then that is true - for you,*” then we are hard pressed to advocate that they shift to seeing all people as members of the human family and that there is a universal truth or value for social justice and freedom etc. In a deconstructive postmodern world, if they see their consumption behaviour as true and legitimate, that leaves little room for convincing them that others see this behaviour in a negative light.

### **Consumer Skepticism and *Whateverism***

Deconstructive postmodernism holds that people feel that they have no purpose - that their life is meaningless. When people are skeptical, when they lack conviction that their truth is valid, that their life has meaning and is worth something, they tend to engage in *whateverism*. This is the label given to the “who cares?” response when asked deep questions about consumerism. When people say, *whatever*, they are really saying they do not want to take a stand for their truth, likely because they have not critically examined their life. “Have it your way. Fine. Whatever you say is

right... Whatever!” It is an attitude of defeatism, an attempt to avoid confrontation, a sign of abdication, a note of surrender. It is as if everything is a battle and a struggle (signs of modern Grand Narrative). *Whateverism* is passive acceptance of all ideas as more or less equal, the fear of conflict, and the acceptance of pluralism as a political default position. Unfortunately, taking this attitude does not get one any closer to real and rigorous understanding of the issue of consumption. Instead, people can relinquish responsibility and say “If other people aren’t consuming differently, why should I?”

Whateverism also goes hand-in-hand with modern and postmodern secularism. If life is being lived with less and less reference to faith and religion, people may be losing their ability to find a purpose in life. God and religion used to serve that role. Now, people find meaning in life by buying things or services, owning them or by being seen consuming them, with little thought to their disposal or what went into their production. Unfortunately, this meaning is short lived so they continue consuming and perpetuating lack of inner, eco, relational and positive peace (cause injustice, infringe on rights of others etc.). Lack of answers to moral questions perpetuates endless consumerism as an attempt to find meaning and purpose in life. This can lead to a profound lack of inner peace, let alone what it does to the lives and futures of others and the environment.

### **Lacking moral consumption compass**

Deconstructive postmodernism holds that people do not have good moral sensitivity. It assumes that people are not capable of living by a coherent ethical code and that truth (correctness) degenerates into personal beliefs, tastes, and lifestyles where private preferences are alienated from moral convictions (Jessup, 2001). From this standpoint, people can more readily see unpaid work, community involvement, voluntarism, involvement in social activism etc. as not valuable, not legitimate activities to advance rights and responsibilities.

Allowing the philosophy of consumerism to fill the sucking hole created by moral ambiguity creates intolerable social injustice and ecological disaster on a worldwide scale. This situation is made worse by the popular culture assumption that if we resist consumerism, we are accused of not coming to grips with the fundamental shift away from modernism (Burman, 1998). If we do not comply, we are seen as failures (a subliminal message from the modern Grand Narrative). And, we do not like to fail in a postmodern society. It is a sign of weakness. As a result of having no moral compass, the following *state of immoral consumption* exists today. People are:

1. buying goods produced using slave, prison, sweatshop and child labour, without compunction;
2. remorselessly buying products produced using non-renewable raw resources;
3. ruthlessly, sadly, buying goods to create a personal identity;
4. buying goods for instant gratification to address the fear of being isolated and ignored;
5. feeling annoyed and irritated when someone tries to hold one accountable for unsustainable consumption;
6. denying any link between one’s consumption patterns and the impact on the lives of those who labour to produce our goods or on the environment;
7. refusing to acknowledge that one’s consumption behaviour is tantamount to exploiting, using, abusing and discarding people and elements of the ecosystem;
8. shutting out empathy and altruistic values; and,
9. worst of all, assuming a misplaced sense of being immune to all of the ramifications of one’s consumption behaviour, then assuming that “someone will save us in the nick of time!”

These practices have led to profound injustices in the world (structural violence, discrimination, marginalization), lack of eco-peace, deep fractures in global, human relationships

(relational peace), and lack of inner peace (fear, isolation, greed, no remorse, irritation).

### **Oppressed Northern Consumers**

Consumerism is also a form of slavery to those *doing the consuming*. People behave as they do in a consumer society because they are so indoctrinated into the logic of the market that they cannot “see” anything wrong with what they are doing. Because they do not critically challenge the market ideology, and what it means to live in a consumer society, they actually contribute to their own oppression (slaves of the market and capitalism) as well as the oppression of others who make the goods, deliver the services and of the natural ecosystem. Strong and unsustainable consumption patterns have developed and have been unchallenged over a long period of time. This has happened to the point that consumerism and structural violence represent dominant forces in human social interaction and these forces are transforming human life in powerful and destructive ways (Santi Pracha Dammha Institute, 2001). When someone is oppressed, they are living with structural violence. Until they can be brought to see that they are responsible for their own oppression, they will continue to consume the way they do now. It is very unnatural for a Northern consumer to call themselves oppressed because they have been taught that it is their fundamental right to have individual choice, especially in the marketplace.