Vol 13, Issue: 01 (S), 2026

ABAAD Journal

ISSN: 2353 – 0030
EISSN: 2602-697X

Contemporary Societies: The Duality of Consumption and Culture

المجتمعات المعاصرة، ثنائية الاستهلاك والثقافة

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Received: 29-01-2026	Accepted: 20-05-2026	Published: 10-06-2026

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Abstract:

Today, consumption constitutes a foundational concept in contemporary societies, especially since humans are consummate consumers amid a profusion of products and rapid marketing. This has led to the objectification of the self: the modern individual finds himself searching for his own truth, grappling with heightened alienation in the wake of tremendous scientific and technological advances that have transformed human life. People have become mere consumption machines, uninterested in the essence of things and focused solely on the incidental—on products that satisfy their various needs. This phenomenon has opened new conceptual fields and given rise to behaviors alien to their original societies, weaving a fabric of artificially constructed cultures

Keywords: culture industry ; consumption ; contemporary society ; alienation ; scientific development

ملخص:

يشكل الاستهلاك اليوم مفهوما أساسيا في المجتمعات المعاصرة، خاصة وأن الإنسان استهلاكي بامتياز في ظل كثرة المنتوجات وسرعة تسويقها، وهذا ما أدى إلى تشيؤ الذات، أين وجد الإنسان المعاصر نفسه ذاتا تبحث عن حقيقتها، ذاتا تبحث عن نفسها في ظل ارتفاع مظاهر الاغتراب بعد التطور العلمي الهائل الأمر

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الذي غير منحى الحياة الإنسانية، حيث أصبح الإنسان مجرد آلة استهلاكية لا تبحث عن جوهر الأشياء، إنما تهتم فقط بما هو عرضي وما يشبع حاجياتها من المنتوجات المختلفة، وهذا ما فتح حقولا مفاهيمية جديدة وسلوكيات غريبة عن المجتمع الأم شكلت نسيجا من الثقافات المصطنعة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: صناعة الثقافة؛ الاستهلاك؛ المجتمع المعاصر؛ الاغتراب؛ التطور العلمي

3. Introduction:

In the age of industrial overproduction, consumer values dominate: individuals constantly chase what is new, distinctive, and exclusive, striving to satisfy their desires and feed their vanity. Industrial societies therefore drive the proliferation of attention grabbing brands and products under the banner of "fashion," which sweeps across all social strata and creates a hierarchy of acquisition. This stratification fractures communities and exerts a direct impact on human life: individuals exist merely to fulfill personal demands—often at the expense of their social, religious, and moral references. Many social critics and philosophers have warned of the dangers posed by humanity's wholesale surrender to its desires.

2. Consumption as Act and as Contemporary Cultural Practice

2.1 Consumption:

Consumption is a key economic concept closely tied to postmodern societies. It relates directly to supply and demand dynamics and is defined by economists as "both the aim of economic activity and its driving force, exerting a dynamic influence on production. It also denotes the portion of income spent on purchasing goods and services to satisfy specific needs, and—operationally—encompasses all expenditures by individuals to acquire goods for need fulfillment." (Firas Abbas Fadil, 2016,p 306), As a lifestyle pattern, consumption occupies a central place in the lives of modern, especially industrial, societies—giving rise to what Herbert Marcuse described as "one dimensional man," whose dimension is primarily consumerist.

2.2 Culture

Terry Eagleton argues that the concept of culture is among "the most complicated in the English language, because it is a general and fluid term, defying any single, all-encompassing definition. Its history stretches back well before the twentieth century turn: Matthew Arnold wrote Culture and Anarchy in 1869, and E. B. Tylor published Primitive Culture in 1871" (khalil, 1971, p78), The concept of culture was never independent of its context but was inseparable from the social conditions in which it evolved. "The first important thing we notice about the familiar content of the word 'culture' is that its early meaning of a natural

form points to an external appearance (...) and, more generally, to the forms created by nature." (gadamar, 2007,p 58) This every day, life world linkage contrasts with its earlier conceptual meanings in ancient civilizations: among the Greeks, culture was associated with craftsmanship; in the Latin context, with agriculture; and in classical Arabic history, with warfare (al-zain, 2014, p17). If we say that for the Greeks culture was linked to craftsmanship, this meant "the making of household tools and the formulation of societal laws "(lakhal, 2015, p23)—a complementary relationship between artisans and craftsmen on one hand and orators and philosophers on the other, thus uniting abstract, philosophical theory with practical labor. If the artisans' role was production, the thinkers' task was enlightenment and guidance. In Latin—cultura/kultur—the term denoted the clearing and refinement of farmland, uprooting everything harmful to plant life to ensure healthy growth, analogous to sowing virtue after uprooting vice. In Arabic, it is associated with innate character and honor—especially in the context of warfare—its essential conditions being skillfulness and astuteness.

With the rise of anthropology and historical research, culture came to signify "the totality of knowledge, beliefs, art, law, customs—or any acquired human capability—as an ethnographic whole." (mattelart, 2008, p58) Edward Tylor (1832–1917) crystallized this in Primitive Culture (1871). Hannah Arendt later defined culture as "the attitude or mode of relationship that civilizations adopt toward the less utilitarian and more habitual realms: the works of artists, poets, musicians, philosophers, and so on" .(al-zain, 2014, p55)

This confirms the view that culture shapes individuals' consumption patterns. Accordingly, culture depends on effectiveness—specifically, the efficacy of the self in relation to surrounding circumstances—by adopting certain stances toward particular events, by directly observing them, and by how the self responds. Some scholars note that the term "culture" entered English usage during the Industrial Revolution, and that its historical definitions vary according to its intellectual context: if rooted in anthropology, it differs from its meaning in structuralist or post structuralist thought. Culture does not merely resist definition; it makes the very act of definition a reflection and foundation of the underlying cultural structure itself (khalil, 1971, p82) —which emerges and evolves within societies irrespective of the academic field to which the concept of culture is ascribed.

2.3Consumer Culture:

The dominance of capitalism worldwide—together with the revolution in mass media, communication, and information—has directly driven the emergence of what is called "consumer culture." This is a value system created within postmodern industrial society, which opened itself to a massive and abundant influx of goods, thus providing fertile ground for the spread of a consumption culture that reflects "all the habits and behaviors an individual employs when purchasing goods to satisfy personal cravings." (Firas Abbas Fadil, 2016, p307) A focus solely on satisfaction has bred alienation and self-objectification, as Marxist cultural critics have noted in capitalist societies: although these societies can produce an abundance of material goods, they inevitably generate alienation. This is evident in cases where individuals possess full material means and resources for a comfortable life, yet lack the moral criteria for true happiness—making them prey to alienation.

Consumer culture encompasses all lifestyles, meanings, and symbols. It comprises the cultural dimensions that accompany the act of consumption—that is, the set of meanings, symbols, and images surrounding consumption—which endows the process with meaning and significance in individuals' daily lives (fakhri, 2014) . Indeed, consumption today serves as a vital social indicator, reflecting individuals' nature and their desired level of consumption within a materially saturated contemporary society.

3. The Consumer Society and the Culture Industry in the Frankfurt School Critique.

The Frankfurt School emerged out of nineteenth century Germany and its social conditions. Although its founders initially adopted Marxist ideas in response to capitalism's development and the rise of the proletariat—as a way to challenge alienation and reification—over time most moved beyond strict Marxism to develop a critical social philosophy. That philosophy remains a powerful paradigm for understanding contemporary issues, built on two pillars: first, constructing a new theoretical conception of humanity and the world; second, establishing an analytical method capable of grasping real social problems (al-muhmdawi, 2011, p 70) . Their intellectual starting point was bourgeois society, which they critiqued through Marxist inspired analysis, ultimately concluding that "modern society is irrational and repressive because it robs or destroys humanity's two fundamental capacities: the power to transform its environment and the ability to make collective, rational choices about our shared lives." (krib, 1978, p 283)

Frankfurt thinkers focused especially on culture, which they saw as the sole means of linking and integrating modern society. Adorno began from the premise that "human capacities have been diminished by modern society," (krib, 1978, p289) and he argued that the highest forms of culture—art, literature, and music—both express our human potential and simultaneously criticize contemporary society . Culture, he held, was once "the repository of elements such as truth and beauty; although these elements carried class based connotations, they illuminated paths to human fulfillment. Today, however, culture functions only as a deviation from reality" (how, 2010, pp62,63) For critical theorists, culture represented "the third process supporting ever growing domination: alongside changes in political economy and social psychology, there emerges a third force— the seduction of the culture industry." (how, 2010, pp 106,107)

Adorno first observed these shifts in Germany and later saw them play out in the American cultural sphere—most visibly in the "enormous abundance of artistic production in the United States, evident in the sheer volume of films and records and their rapid, widespread availability." (mufriji, 2011, p20)

Adorno coined the term "culture industry" in his 1972 essay collected in Dialectic of Enlightenment (with Max Horkheimer) to describe the media's dominance over culture. He and Horkheimer asked: What are the limits and effects of modern communication technologies on culture? If democracy is meant to expand individual freedoms—such as free speech via media—today's reality shows instead how media "help those in power enforce their influence and sustain the status quo." Their critical studies examined how mass culture—rather than highbrow culture that might elevate public taste—spreads media content that advances the interests of dominant social classes (muhammad, 2014, pp 107,108).

Thus, "manufactured culture" can be defined as "a pseudo culture produced and disseminated on a broad scale by those in power; it stands in opposition to genuine popular culture, which emerges organically from human interaction within society." (muhammad, 2014, p115)Media activate this manufactured culture among the populace, creating space for foreign cultural forms and thereby reshaping democracy: ordinary citizens are barred both from managing their own affairs and from controlling media content, which are kept

under authority supervision and forbidden from voicing opinions contrary to the political or economic positions of the powerful—resulting in widespread misinformation and distraction.

Critical Theory has long examined the role of art in shaping a society's aesthetic framework; Frankfurt School thinkers extended this critique to the media. Today's media developments illustrate how art's original purpose has been overtaken by technological change. As Richard Rorty observed, "I don't think we can now imagine a future for human dignity, freedom, and peace—we lack a clear sense of how to transcend purely aesthetic concerns. Instead, culture has become a means of controlling mass behavior for purely commercial ends." (fakhri, 2014, p20) Consequently, contemporary media play a central role in directing public opinion by leveraging the authority of artistic works.

The culture industry is one facet of capitalism's evolution: it no longer views art as a means of liberation and emancipation but as a marketing tool that meets demand. Whereas art "under a communist orientation is a craft or engineering serving communism and its ideals, illustrating the working class's struggles," under capitalism it has been falsified and removed from its authenticity by being fed into the machinery of propaganda, media utility, investment, and consumption—transforming art's aesthetic value into purely material and commercial worth (hayani, 2016, p 129) .

The media extend their control over the masses by instilling psychological reassurance. In a 1975 essay titled "The Stars Down to Earth," Adorno exposed the falsity of this reassurance in his critique of horoscopes. He noted that "what the press publishes in the immensely popular horoscope column presents astrology as a science among the sciences (...) and claims expertise that itself becomes a source of reassurance." (krib, 1978, p289) For Adorno, this shows how modern humans are subjected to the production system—regardless of its form—because media adapt artistic works to its requirements. In reality, all artistic works, in their variety and as transmitted by the media, are reshaped according to what those in power deem fit: stripped from their original context and deprived of their essential features to conform to market exchange mechanisms. In the marketplace, commodity comparison is the basis of exchange. For example, "paintings can be copied and sold on a large scale—not for the sake of art, but to reinforce acquisition as a value prized by consumer society." (mufriji, 2011, p 26)

From this we observe that genuine art remains marginalized as long as it clings to its defining characteristics and original purpose. In contrast, consumer art—driven by exchange—enjoys notable popularity among the masses, because what matters now is not the value of the artwork or its impact on the viewer, but the nature of the commodity itself. For instance, "in music, isolated aesthetic effects distract from formal completeness; in painting, favoring one color over others distorts the work as a whole; in the novel, psychological depth has become more important than its structure. (theodor adorno, 2006, p147)

Thus contemporary media suppress genuine art. As Adorno lamented:

"Today, the culture industry treats artistic works as if they were political slogans, selling them cheaply to a broad audience: artworks are as accessible to all as public parks. This does not mean that, once they lose their original character, they will be integrated into a free society and preserved as art—instead, their last defense against collapse has itself fallen." (theodor adorno, 2006, p187)

This confirms that cultural manifestations in Western societies have deviated from their original purpose.

Adorno's critique also addressed a particularly sensitive issue that the media have amplified: pornography. He observed that "modern pornographic imagery is constructed entirely as a commodity: it is designed to present sex in vivid, organ focused detail, excluding broader sensory experiences. In short, the stereotypical products of the culture industry, as Adorno says, are no longer semiotic commodities but pure commodities." (how, 2010 , pp106)

The overarching aim of the Frankfurt School—and of Adorno in particular—was to safeguard humanity from the repercussions of technology, whose effects have become increasingly severe and rapid. As Adorno acknowledged, "the hope in my philosophy is to achieve a final reconciliation between humanity and society—but that reconciliation is impossible ." (krib, 1978, p298)

The lesson for our contemporary reality is stark: humans today are captives of the media and cannot apprehend their reality apart from it—even though they live it daily. Hence, we observe that genuine interpersonal communication has all but vanished, replaced by both traditional and new media channels.

We cannot discuss the consumerist nature that has seized modern humanity without considering Erich Fromm's critique of Western man and his extravagant, wasteful consumption. Fromm observed that, from earliest times, humans seeking truth engaged directly with knowledge to extend control over nature through technology. Yet this mastery, unforeseen in its scope, severed humanity's connection both to itself and to life—especially as contemporary life turns toward the purely material and consumptive. According to Fromm, human existence no longer rests solely on being; it now includes possession as a second foundation for a good life and better living. "Possession, as it should be clear, is one of the natural functions of life: to live, one must own something. Beyond that, one must own things to enjoy them. In a civilization whose highest aim is possession...possession is the essence of being "(fromm, 1989, p29) One cannot understand human nature apart from possession. The convergence of culture and industry reveals that culture has ceased to be free human expression of social integration and has become a product of overlapping commercial interests—manipulative and speculative—transforming all cultural products into consumer commodities directly tied to the market (fawaz, 2019, p245), which now serves as the primary factory of cultures.

Fromm also distinguished between being and having: the former centers on people, the latter on things. Western industrial society is defined by its orientation toward possession, where money, fame, and power dominate life (fromm, 1989, p33). After extensive analysis of being—a concept with many facets—Fromm defined consumption as a form of possession and one of the most crucial concepts in contemporary industrial societies. He explained that consumption is "a process with contradictory traits: it relieves anxiety because what one acquires cannot be taken away, yet it drives further consumption, since each past acquisition quickly loses its social impact. Thus the identity of the modern individual can be summed up: I exist to the extent that I have and that I consume "(fromm, 1989, p40) Modern humans have become enthralled by production levels and consumption rates—now their new religion—detached from concrete human needs and reality (fromm, a contrubution to the human sciences: the mental health of contemporary society, 2013, p57). This immersion has plunged the human self into the mire of alienation and the loss of basic identity.

4. Consumer Society and Liquid Consumption:

Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017), in Liquid Modernity, examined humanity's condition in the twentieth century—a condition shaped by modernity and globalization, two new states of

affairs requiring navigation. These forces produced radical, rapid changes across all aspects of life aimed at elevating humanity and propelling progress. Yet technological and scientific flows also generated obstacles and challenges, carving out the crisis that besets modern humans. Bauman described this condition thus:

"All this does not mean that the changing human condition has been emptied of the difficulties that plagued its previous form; it only means that the difficulties have changed and are experienced differently...The new terminology must first reflect on the ways in which the current human condition might be improved." (bauman, 2016, p45.)

Bauman's writings on liquid modernity stress the consumerist character that dominates market needs, demanding deep understanding and analysis—particularly in light of Western modernity's transformations, now termed "liquid modernity." "Liquid modernity," he explains, "is a categorical denial of solid modernity. It is more than its simple opposite; it in fact mirrors the hierarchy of values adopted by solid modernity but achieves its aim—whether overt or covert—of dissolving and liquidating everything." (ashmawi, 2017, p 394) Liquid modernity, from its inception, has sought to dissolve all that was once solid.

The problem of consumption and culture is vitally important, as it constitutes one of the fundamental components of liquid modernity. Bauman's reflections on this subject echo those of numerous philosophers—Theodor Adorno and his critique of the culture industry; Alain Touraine's critique of Western modernity; Richard Rorty's new pragmatism—all affirming that human culture has become mere consumer culture. According to Bauman, modernity has nourished and upheld the act of consumption: "the aesthetics of consumption have relegated work to a purely instrumental, secondary role—preparing and conditioning the ground—and reduced it to an exercise in restraint and asceticism, a form of sacrifice that, though perhaps necessary, is burdensome and odious, and ought to be minimized" (bauman, 2016, p288) Consequently, work has become nothing more than a tool for satisfying ever expanding human desires and needs.

Bauman links culture, in his account of liquidity, to the fundamental idea of fashion: an ever ongoing, unstable process that underpins consumer society. Fashion serves as its foundation precisely because it is untethered from time or place: what is novel today becomes obsolete tomorrow. The vast, harmonized forces of the consumer market compel culture to submit to fashion's logic (bauman, liquid modernity, 2016, p 30) . In Bauman's view, constant change becomes a prerequisite for authenticity; yet this transformation has opened the door to cultural pluralism, replacing notions of a single, unidirectional culture. Thus, "Bauman sees consumption in liquid modernity as driven by planned obsolescence: products and fashions are rapidly replaced by other products. This disappearance intensifies anxiety, as individuals find themselves in a never ending race not to fall behind. In this way, the consumer impulse becomes a form of searching for identity and belonging, but paradoxically generates feelings of emptiness and alienation. Anxiety in liquid modernity also manifests in personal relationships: human bonds have become more superficial and fleeting, reflecting the age's liquidity. The quest for validation and recognition through social networks exemplifies how relationships are mediated through the symbolic consumption of images and status. Constant comparison with others feeds anxiety and creates a society marked by insecurity and heightened competitiveness." (Caverna, 2025)

Bauman further suggests that, rather than speaking of inherited or acquired identities, it is more appropriate—given the realities of globalization—to speak of identity as "an endless, uncompleted, and never ending activity, open ended, in which we all participate, day by day, driven as much by necessity as by choice. The chances of halting the tensions, confrontations, and conflicts produced by this activity are vanishingly small. The frantic search for identity is not a remnant of a pre globalization era; on the contrary, it is a secondary, derivative effect of globalization's pressures on individuals and the tensions those pressures generate. Identity wars do not contradict globalization; they are its legitimate fruit and natural companion." (bauman, identity and globalization , 2025)

Consequently, the post-modern—or today's—human lives under the pressures of market ethics, competition, and excessive consumerism. Post-modern, neoliberal societies incline

toward cruelty, selfishness, and an insular individualism that neglects the Enlightenment and modern project of raising human dignity. As the Iraqi writer L. al Dulaimi observes, such societies come to treat humans and manufactured goods alike as interchangeable objects: that which has been consumed—and thus rendered "old"—is no longer suitable for the ethics of appearance, the market's ever renewing temptations, its material standards, and its degrading offers. Values collapse, human bonds falter, and pure utility takes their place. At that point, a shocking truth emerges: humanity has reached the extreme of consumption and is powerless to protect itself from the devastation wrought by its own runaway desires and unbridled appetites. The worship of money, materialism, and immediate gratification has left societies unable to confront the unleashed upheaval spawned by science. (al-dulaimi, 2019, p11) . Bauman further observes that, in the liquid age, consumerism no longer concerns itself with satisfying needs—even the loftier needs of self definition, adequacy, reassurance, and confidence—but is driven by desire itself: a force that refers to nothing external to itself. It is a self generating drive whose movement is internal, requiring no justification or reason for its existence .(bauman, liquid modernity, 2016, pp 127,128)

The acceleration that characterizes today's society has produced individuals who never cease demanding so long as supply continues to terrifyingly and endlessly meet their wishes. The modern maxim becomes: "I consume; therefore I am."

Consequently, the effects of consumerism have extended into—and even corroded—human relationships, giving rise to the reification of people. No constants or norms govern relationships or human life except materialism and high consumption values. In this scenario, a partner can be replaced with pure utilitarian ease—just as one would swap an old car or an outdated mobile phone model—so human bonds collapse, and individuals' anxiety about losing a partner to market temptations multiplies. The human condition becomes dreadfully disordered, devoid of genuine values and intimacy, which are all but extinct within the marketplace. Bonds become fragile and fleeting, lacking human meaning,

depth of attachment, tenderness, and unconditional giving (al-dulaimi, 2019, p12) . These are the very manifestations of individual and societal alienation that consumption fundamentally produces. One need not be a psychologist to see that this accumulated deprivation inevitably breeds envy, jealousy, and societal tensions. Exclusion from the feast of consumption is not merely social ostracism but a form of social death. This consumerist pattern threatens both communal life and the environment unless we radically reexamine humanity's relationship to objects and commodities. For the quality of people's relationships to things determines how they relate to one another and to nature. When people compare themselves to others and yearn to emulate those who consume more, (zanar, 2014) social distances widen and the values of coexistence and communal living fade. The consumption driven class divides have unsettled the human self and will continue to do so as long as people remain captive to consumption and tie their very existence to it.

5. Conclusion

Post-modern scholars largely agree on the high degree of reification and alienation in contemporary societies, especially under globalization's pervasive influence on daily life. Consumption—one of the dimensions and manifestations of globalist ideology—has asserted control over the individual's thinking, reducing the self to a mass of desires: a pursuit of material goods, constant engagement with market offerings under the banner of "staying on trend," and so forth. This focus has harmed the self in tandem with the erosion of moral, intellectual, and even ethical values that once recognized social differences among human beings. Today's act of consumption has breached the humanitarian values that guarantee forms of human coexistence. The value of selected objects and commodities has become the sole, foundational measure of social relationships—rendering them superficial and devoid of genuine normative values—and has given rise both to hybrid cultures and to cultural forms alien to their parent societies

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