

Pedagogy of Consumption: Youths As Collateral Damage

*By
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Introduction

The ability to consume can be seen as a vehicle for freedom, power and happiness. Consumerism is often seen to supplement work, religion and politics as the main mechanism by which social status and distinction are achieved (Gabriel & Lang, 1995). Consumerism is indeed really strongly integrated into all aspects of our life, from our birth to our death, 'including, but not limited to, education, leisure time activities, the popular arts, the home, travel, and personal imagination' (Spring, 2003). Even Mr. Goh Chok Tong, in his National Day Rally Speech in 1996, said that 'life is not complete without shopping' (Chua, 2003). It can almost be safely said that in our country, with the variety and extensiveness of advertisements, this is true for all age groups. This article, however, aims to especially explore how the consumer culture, affects our youths.

Our youths should not be reduced only to a cliché. To only be seen as *symbols of hope for the future* and then just left alone to suffer the consequences of the society that they did not have a hand in constructing but will one day, inevitably inherit. This is especially so when they are often seen as a threat to existing acceptable social orders, when they do not or perhaps cannot, conform to society's irrational practices. Our youths are one of the most important assets, if not the most important, that our community has. It is therefore worthy of our best social investments. Especially so when today, the number of Muslims below 20 years old constitutes 38% of the community's total population (Population Census, 2004). But with only 13% of the total national population, the Malay-Muslim community contributes to about 24% of youth rioters, 34.4% of juvenile rioters, 24% of children beyond parental control and 29.3% of shoplifting offences. So it is therefore important for the

Muslim community to study why this is so, so that any formulation of possible solutions attempted can be done not only critically and coherently.

Pedagogy of Consumption

Other than the usual claim of it enabling and empowering consumers with vital information so that they are able to differentiate and discriminate between products, advertisements, in all its forms, has also been identified at the same time, as powerful agents of socialization. Today's youth constitutes a huge consumer's market (Rice, 1996). Businesses target youth directly with their advertisements to educate the masses to consume. Through powerful imagery, this mass education programs all, including our youths, on how to live the 'good life' (Covell, 1992). As such, a representation of an acceptable and desired social status is being propagated to our youths, daily.

This socialization to consumerism starts very early. Since young, the 'animated pedagogy' (Giroux, 1996) of cartoons and children entertainment inducts these pre-youths to the culture of purchasing. Through the construction of a culture of pleasure, under the guise of innocent story telling and family entertainment, consumerism is rigorously advocated. Children's entertainment, together with advertisements, coaxes children and their parents to consume the many forms of accompanying merchandise available.

Advertisements also drive buyers to purchase and consume 'out of irrational emotions associated with particular brand names and products' (Spring, 2003). Especially so, when at no time are consumers more vulnerable than during the early stages of their life. Not equipped with cognitive maturity, children and adolescents become easy targets by the media.

Levin and Linn (2004), for example, highlighted the fact that children are unable to realize that smiling people in advertisements who 'appear to be having fun are actors who are paid to smile, so that a toy may appeal to a viewer, not necessarily because the product

makes them happy'. Today, consumer culture even sponsors their own educational programs specially designed with schools in mind, forming clubs and organizing educational tours.

This 'animated pedagogy' of cartoons and children entertainment also includes the many children animated movies in cinemas. All these, and more, makes youth defenseless and thus to agree that they need to consume in order to live the portrayal of the 'good life', so that they too can be as happy as the people they see in the commercials.

Consumerism's Backlash

Unfortunately, in real life, the 'good life' that consumerism portrays are not possible to many, especially those from our own community. Many of youths become disappointed when their families are not able to provide them or they themselves are not able to attain the only depiction of the 'good life' that they have been programmed to think since young (Rice, 1996).

Studies have shown that youths coming from families who have not been able to keep up with the struggle for the 'good life' feel abandoned and rejected (Lipsitz, 1991). Some other studies have shown that such adolescents often seek status, by rejecting such middle-class portrayals of the good-life that they realize they are not able to attain, through antisocial behavior, or behaviors that the middle-class society rejects (Rice 1996). These antisocial behaviors, or behaviors that are simply rejected by the middle-class, include synthetic drugs abuse, casual sex that often leads to unplanned teen pregnancies, gang involvements, dropping out of school and political apathy. This rejection seems not to stop at just rejecting the middle-class standards but instead also continue to manifest itself in the form of youth crimes.

For example, records since 1997 have shown that three types of crimes are common among youths and these are rioting, shop theft and simple theft. Youths now have a great desire for 'material possession, hedonistic consumption and status consciousness', and see this consumption and the display of such consumption as a way to assert their own sense of

purpose. Unlike their peers who do well in the formal education system, who generally come from families of better socioeconomic status, they cannot assert their status in terms of better academic performance. The only ways left available for them to assert their own sense of purpose, assert their identity and boost their self esteem is to appear hip and trendy and be accepted by their friends.

In fact, shop theft is the most prevalent offence committed by youths between 7 and 19 years of age. Statistics showed that from 1997 to 2002, more youths were arrested for shop theft than any other crime. It is agreed that most of such thefts are not done out absolute poverty, since most of the items stolen were mostly branded and fashionable items, which are very much needed by youths in the consumerist culture, to enhance their image and status, but the crimes were committed by youths so that they can assert themselves in a society such as ours through a culture of material possession and display. The fashion industry is, after all, one of the major driving forces in consumerism and the consumer society (Spring, 2003).

Conclusion: Towards Critical Consciousness

This is not to say that materialism alone should be blamed for youth angst, aloofness and youth crimes. Nor can we say that only the youth from the poor working class is doing all the crime. Juvenile delinquents come from varied socioeconomic classes, but the studies also showed that crime rates tend to be higher in poorer communities. Indeed, youth delinquency is truly a very complex issue and it must be recognized that the causes are multifaceted (Choi & Lo, 2004). This paper then focuses on one facet, and that is how the consumer culture affects our youths, so that deliberations on how a counter pedagogy can be made possible and why it is important to have one.

So what can be done, given Singapore's situation, where youths are opened to the strong global capitalistic influences of consumption and life styles, to mitigate this damaging facet of globalization and capitalism? There must exist a critical pedagogy that 'does not

collapse social into personal problems' and 'systematic oppression into the language of victim blaming' (Giroux, 1998).

First and foremost, our youths need to be brought to a higher level of critical consciousness. Our youths need to be able to discern between necessary and unnecessary consumption. In other words, what our youths need is a pedagogy that can counter, or put in check, the pedagogy of consumption and that is pedagogy of responsible and of critical resistance.

This pedagogy needs them to be brought into the realization by all those responsible for their education, which is truly the education of the future of our own community and our own society. Our youth need to be made aware, to be conscious of the real intent of advertisement. Our youths must be discerning individuals and well aware of the forces that work in the world around them. This includes the agencies behind the forces that promote such imageries, why they do so and how. The youths themselves need to be 'critical agents able to recognize, appropriate, and transform how dominant power works on and through them' (Giroux, 1998). They need to be able to critically assess how the powers around them subject authority onto them, dehumanizing them by making them think that only through consumption and self adornment with materials can they be happy.

This counter pedagogy needs to first start with all those responsible for the education of the youth, especially the classroom teachers and parents who are directly responsible for all of the children's literacies. For example, Schwarz (2001), suggested that teachers must also consider media literacy which is "the ability to create personal meaning from verbal and visual symbols we take in every day through television, radio, computers, newspapers and magazines, and, of course, advertising. It's the ability to choose and select, the ability to challenge and question, the ability to be conscious about what's going on around us - and not be passive and vulnerable".

Lastly, they must be allowed to see that it is also possible to find happiness and self respect through other fulfillments that does not require them to conform to the consumerist ideology nor do they need to go to the other extreme to resort to unhealthy and self

destructive means to reject the portrayal of the 'good life'. This includes, among others, finding happiness and self respect through intellectual and social fulfillments.

[*This article is an abridged version of a seminar paper delivered at Young AMP's Focus Group Discussion Series No. 3, 24th September 2005.*]

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