

Hyper-consumerism: Rethinking Virtue Ethics and Moral Solution in Contemporary Society

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ABSTRACT

Hyper-consumerism is a new philosophical assumption of humanity but it is worthy to ask whether it propels goodness in the society? If no, then we have to rethink about ethical education that would cultivate virtues among people in the society. This review therefore advocates a re-think of virtue ethics and moral solution in contemporary society towards hyper-consumerism. Turning to virtue ethics, it will enable a person to attain practical wisdom or prudence which is very important in deliberation including consumption choices. Here, a moral agent examines himself whether he needs to consume this or that. Additionally, virtue ethics emphasizes on cultivation of moral virtue of temperance which enables moral agents to have a sense of moderation to matters regarding pleasure. However, the virtuous life cannot be attained overnight. So, there will be an exposition to ethical education and cultivation of virtues as habit. Since the virtuous life encompasses a sense of moderation and prudence, it enables us to replace consumerism as motivated by greediness with a status of mindfulness whereby we take only what is needed for our survival while preserving the rest for the future generations. Indeed this will bring about sustainable development.

Keywords: *Virtue, ethics, moral and hyper-consumerism*

INTRODUCTION

The hyper-consumeristic culture in our contemporary society depicts a radical shift of our being, from “Homo-Conservator” to “Homo-Consumerism.” In our global society hyper-consumerism is engineered by persuasive advertising through power of mass media. This solicitation of mass media advertisements make us believe that happiness is simply the multiplication of pleasure and utility. Advertisements create wants and aspirations that are superficial and self-centered. This results in escalated levels of greed (Msafiri, 2008). Eventually, we can attain the culture of mindfulness of our needs other than greediness as beautifully grasped in the words of Mahatma Gandhi “the earth has enough resources for everyone’s needs but not for everyone’s greed” (Msafiri, 2008). This greedy nature cultivated by hyper-consumerism reduces human beings to the level of being pleasure seekers and utility oriented at the expense of searching for the ultimate good for appropriate human flourishing. At the human level, the indoctrination of the competitive market compels us to strive and be as everybody

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else in terms of current fashions, designer wears and technological accessories. Consumerism is all about feeling good. It holds that buying things should be our goal in life, that buying things leads to fulfillment in life. More-so, consumeristic culture in our contemporary society works upon a maxim that “*I consume therefore I am*” (Msafiri, 2008). Two trends that weave our modern society are those of globalization and consumerism. Indeed the world has become a marketplace and its citizens’ global shoppers. Almost everything is commoditized (Msafiri, 2008). For this reason, markets tend to govern our lives while the market values play the role of influencing the choices we make. Therefore, as the markets bring about more and more prosperity, they play a great role in our social life. Consumerism has become like a new religion spreading the creed of materialism and greediness (Msafiri, 2008). Undoubtedly, the media bombards consumeristic tendencies and every space is used to advertise (Msafiri, 2008). As a matter of fact, consumerism attains supremacy among ideologies (Msafiri, 2008).

Unfortunately, consumerism has become the way of life. So, the market values penetrate deep into our social life (Msafiri, 2008). This situation threatens virtue by exposing it to be corrupted while at the same time risking commoditizing it (Spring, 2003). This makes virtues to languish. Consumerism arrived with the industrial revolution and rived on the dictum that the way to come out of the low standard of living was to spend freely and work creatively (Thompson, 2000). Since it is to buy and waste things to improve our economy, therefore one was coerced by persuasive market strategies, such as, advertisements, to consume more and more (Anthony, 2011). This is the main goal of the Neo-liberal market economy which tries to make profit by whatever means possible (Anthony, 2011). In the camouflage of catering to the needs of the people, the market manipulates people’s desires by creating envy through the mass media especially by way of advertisements (Anthony, 2011). In most cases, those advertisements play on the sub-conscious mindset by making the people to believe in hyper consumerism.

As succinctly put by Anthony (2011), “a social and economic order that was based on systemic creation and fostering desire to purchase goods or services in even greater amounts has been entrenched deep in the society”. Concretely, we can say that the market values have made the present society into a generation of “*compulsive shopaholics*” who exult in a culture that is more or less like that of instant-coffee (Msafiri, 2008) i.e., a culture of people who are extremely time conscious, easy going, accumulative, easy on using and throwing yet without respect and concern for the wellbeing of the entire society (Msafiri, 2008). This reflects that consumerism tarnishes away our authentic identity (Msafiri, 2008). We define ourselves based on what we have, than what we really are or ought ‘to be’, and as integral human beings with sense of dignity, spiritual values and moral integrity instruments of gain and objects of use (Sandel, 2012). This discourse does not dismiss the relevance of consumerism in our society, but it tries to analyze hyper-consumerism and proposes a solution from virtue ethics. On analyzing hyper consumerism, it reflects on Information and Technology, fashion clothes and food. Lastly, it is centred on the Aristotle’s virtue ethics as a platform

to offer a moral solution on consumption among people that meets culture of mindfulness through prudence, moderation and aiming at collective good of the society.

Global Perspective on Hyper-Consumerism

Hyper-consumeristic culture from a global perspective takes into consideration of economic exchanges; these include cross-border trade in goods and services, capital flows and financial investments. A basic feature of global economic exchange is that of global capitalism, which functions on the interplay between the basic principles of production and consumption with an over-riding orientation towards profit making. This study concentrates on the controversy of hyper consumerism whereby human identity in the consumer society is highly influenced by items in the market. In order to have a glimpse of this challenge, it is worthwhile to review opinions of Jimmy Carter, the 39th President of the United States of America (1977 to 1981) in his televised speech on July 5, 1979 entitled: Confidence Crisis. Carter ponders on increasing hyper consumerism in United States by asserting that:

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we have discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We have learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.

He emphasizes on some key issues namely: objectification of human identity expressed by greediness for the consumable items without a sense of moderation. Secondly, hyper-consumerism fosters stiff competition with regard to the consumable items. The status quo of consumers is defined in terms of owned items, rather than intrinsic features of humanity such as human dignity.

On a further note, the study has confined to shed some light on the elements that trigger hyper-consumerism reinforced by the power of the mass media (newspapers, television, radios, internet, and movies). For instance, multinational companies advertise their products by using romantic pictures, for example nude women bodies are used to market products, whereas, there is usually very little or no correlation between the products and nude or naked women. But we live in a society where “sex sells” (Kochuthara, 2013). This phrase usually entails the use of women’s bodies or sexuality to sell products. Also, some advertisements on the media persuasively present some items, such as luxurious and posh cars as a way of enhancing people’s respect and status in the society. Our perception on our status is triggered by such advertisements and it is here that theoretical reasoning can be helpful to lead us to a virtuous life and not hedonistic life styles. The diagram below represents major tenets of hyper consumerism in our global society.

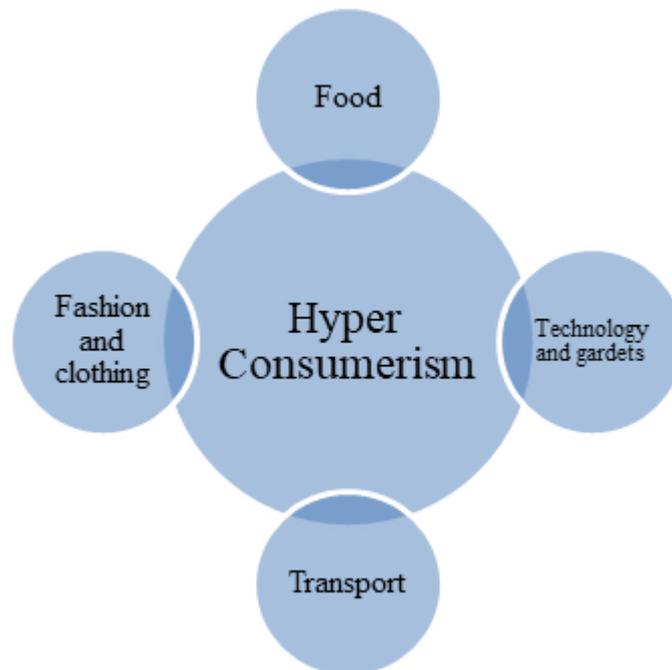


Figure 1: Major Tenets of Hyper-Consumerism in Contemporary Society

- i. Technology and Gadgets; latest technological versions such as iPhone, ipads, smart phones mac books, LCD TV, smart TV, cameras, CCTV and latest video games, have helped to bring people together, but at the same time, the media present them as basic needs that we cannot live a worth life without them. Consequently, we have turned to be followers of the latest versions of technological gadgets and this portrays hyper-consumerism.
- ii. In fashion and clothing, the designers such as Giorgio Armani (Italian), Pierre Cardin, and Van Heusen fashion designs embark on aggressive promotion about their products. Nevertheless, clothing is a basic need for human life, but recent fashion designs make us believe that the only reality and virtuous life is to always acquire latest fashion designs. Film stars and celebrities are ambassadors of such designs which are more appealing to youths. This results into increased spending so as to meet the status quo through expensive dressing, including watches.
- iii. Food includes, drug addictions and alcohol; with rapid growth of McDonald's, KFC's outlets, pizza huts selling outlets, hamburgers and French fliers, residents of big cities especially the youths find it comfortable to consume Macdonald's food stuff, and many times we hear youngsters underrating their colleagues who have never had burger or pizza. It is absurd 'you have never taken a burger,' this turns to be hyper consumerism in case the consumer thinks he cannot survive without it. Also, informal drinking and smoking parties are on the increase among youths especially in big cities due to curiosity. As a matter of fact, drinking

- and smoking become an addiction, thus leading to hyper-consumerism among users of such commodities.
- iv. In transport, the study reflects on increased spending on transporting items such as expensive cars like (Jaguar, Roy Royce, BMW, Aston, Audi, Range Rover, Mercedes Benz and Ferrari etc); thereby possessing such posh and fancy cars enhances one's status among the community of consumers. Thus, leading to increased spending on such items as a way of raising one's social status quo.
 - v. This fourfold presentation depicts major consumable items which makes hyper-consumerism a reality.

VIRTUE ETHICS FROM ARISTOTLE'S PERSPECTIVE

In order to show connection between virtue ethics and consumerism, it is very important to reflect on the virtue from the moral perspective. Virtue (arête) is a keyword in ancient Greek which specifically means "good function" (Bostock, 2000). Virtues relate with natures and extend from the nature of men, which are natural characters, therefore, can be called natural virtues (Xianzhong, 2007). The concept of virtue (arête) refers to natural endowments of human beings (Xianzhong, 2007). The function of growth and nourishment as natural characters are not owned by human-beings alone, thus, virtues do not refer only to those of human beings but of all organic bodies (Xianzhong, 2007). However, of all the organic bodies, men alone have the function of logos, which makes their virtues fit social lives (Drefcinski, 2000). These social characters of human-beings differ from natural ones, and can be called ethical virtues (Xianzhong 2007).

The evolution of the word virtue from natural to ethical reflects objectively, the grades and levels of organic bodies in Greek thought, also records the course of ancient Greeks from studying the natural world to attempting the understanding of men themselves (Xianzhong 2007). This depicts that human society evolves naturally towards ethical virtue just as the aim of individual socialization is to change his natural virtues into ethical ones. Therefore, virtue is a disposition that makes a person to perform human functions well. Virtue is a quality that allows whoever possesses it, to perform one's functions well and thereby gain well-being or happiness (Sherman, 1997).

In this sense, it can be affirmed that virtue constitutes *eudaimonia*, which literally means well-being, human flourishing or happiness (Van, 2006). It makes the one who possesses it and his/her work good, not because it causes goodness but because it is 'goodness' (Van, 2006). In other-words, virtue and its exercise are what essentially constitute the goodness of *eudaimonia* (Van, 2006). Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* translated by Irwin (1985) articulates virtue in terms of habit or habitual doing. However, to be virtuous is more than a simple acquisition of habits or dispositions to act in a certain way. It involves desiring to act in a virtuous way (Keenan, 2005). We can say that Aristotle's virtue from moral perspective depicts individual character which enables the human being to perform well his/her functions. Virtue as character orients towards human flourishing or wellbeing of an individual as well as the society since human-being is a social being (Xianzhong 2007).

KINDS OF VIRTUE

a. Moral Virtue

Moral virtues belong to the appetitive part of the soul. They are directly related to regulation of emotions and feelings guided by reason. Aristotle dismisses life which is guided by feelings alone, he says: “for we are called excellent or base in so far as we have virtues or vices, not in so far as we have to feel” (Irwin, 1985). So, virtue of character is, a disposition to have the right feelings, and at the same time for those feelings to be in harmony with reason, so that they lead naturally to the right actions (Irwin, 1985). We can say virtues of character (moral virtues) consist in desiring well, choosing proper objects of desire and desiring them in a proper way to human-beings. Thus, they are not acquired naturally, but by habituation. They are acquired by training and practice. In Aristotle’s words: “virtue of character results from habit (ethos); ... comes about, not by a process of nature, but by habituation, hence it is also clear that none of the virtues of character arises in us naturally” (Irwin, 1985). Since moral virtues are cultivated habitually they involve doing or an activity so as to perfect them. So, they deal with particular instances in our moral actions by giving us right direction. In this, Aristotle shows that moral virtues require an observance of golden mean, which he expresses as follows:

Virtue is a state of character [a habit] concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle [by reason], and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom [of prudence] would determine it. Now, it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depend on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. Hence, in respect of its substance and the definition which states its essence, virtue is mean, with regard to what is best and right, an extreme (Irwin, 1985).

This view considers virtue as a habit of choosing the mid-point between excess and defect in action, and this mid-point is determined by reason guided by the intellectual virtue of prudence. Virtues of character aim at an end, and must neither overdo nor underdo an activity. For Aristotle the golden mean is not absolute but relative to us, for what is the right amount for one would be too much or too little and this is not a single thing and not the same for everyone (Irwin, 1985). The relative mean to us is determined by reason basically by practical wisdom which Aristotle describes both as the intellectual and moral virtue.

b. Intellectual Virtues

Virtues of thought enable one to attain the relative mean among human-beings. Aristotle distinguishes them between theoretical reasoning and practical reasoning. Intellectual virtues refer to the rational part of the soul (Fagothey, 1953). Intellectual virtues are the ways the soul arrives at truth by affirmation or denial (Fagothey, 1953). They are good habits of the intellect, enabling it to be a more efficient instrument of knowledge (Fagothey, 1953). Intellectual virtues encompass wisdom, science, understanding and art, enabling virtuous personal to know the good and perform good actions (Fagothey, 1953). It helps in deliberation and making choices when encountered with the particular instance (Fagothey, 1953). In the context of this work intellectual virtues if cultivated can help us in our consumption decisions.

c. Prudence (Practical Virtue) as an Intellectual and Moral Virtue

Essentially, prudence (Greek: *phronesis*; Latin: *prudential*) is an intellectual virtue, but as well it enters into the realm of moral virtues by pointing out the golden mean and suggesting ways of securing it (Fagothey 1953). Prudence as an intellectual virtue enables us to know the good and how to do it rationally and as the moral virtue. It essentially helps us to perform good actions. In Aristotle's words:

Prudence/practical wisdom is a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man, it cannot be knowledge nor art; not knowledge because that which can be done is capable of being otherwise, nor an art because action and making are different kinds of things. So, it is a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to things that are good action itself is its end (Irwin, 1985).

Importantly, prudence regulates other virtues, for instance, in the absence of prudence fortitude becomes boldness, temperance becomes moroseness, and justice becomes harshness. As it is impossible to have the moral virtues without prudence, so it is impossible to have prudence without the moral virtues (Fagothey 1953). Also, prudence determines the right choice of means for each of the virtues, but it especially looks to recommend the just actions since justice governs all exterior principles (Keenan 2005). In Aristotle's moral theory, intellectual virtues and moral virtues are bridged by prudence, and prudence enables a moral agent to have a good response to appetites driven by feelings and at the same time to have good reasoning over actions (Bostock, 2000). In case of moral dilemma, prudence acts as a guideline to overcome and act morally well so as to achieve human flourishing or well-being both as an individual and society at large.

APPLICATION OF VIRTUE ETHICS AND MORAL SOLUTION TOWARDS CONSUMERISTIC CULTURE

a. Consumers with Moderation

As already shown that consumerism is fostered by the market mechanism through the mass media. The media present that hyper-consumerism as a virtue and through accumulating consumption; we can only attain well-being in the society. Observing critically in our society, sense of moderation has been wiped away. Rather we are driven by greed which makes us feel satisfied with too much without affirming the premise that small is beautiful (Balot, 2001). This requires a paradigm shift to virtue ethics through maintaining a mean relative to us in consuming. This is neither overdoing nor underdoing while consuming our needs. For example, guided by the sense of moderation, one can ask “Do I need four cars yet, even when one can be enough”? Or “Do I need private means of transport or public?” If virtues are well cultivated among people, we can achieve moral reasoning in our consumption choices. It is here, that we can as well, use our theoretical reasoning to critically analyze advertisements of products through media whether they are genuine or else used to enhance our consuming practices so as to enrich the greediness of capitalists and industrialists which leads to impulsive buying.

b. CONSUMERS WITH PRACTICAL WISDOM AND PRUDENCE

Practically, wisdom bridges together virtues of intellect and virtues of character enabling the moral agent to act in a virtuous way. Though, this does not come automatically but is cultivated in the process through learning, training, and practicing (Van, 2006). For Aristotle, it is impossible to have proper moral disposition without practical wisdom (Irwin, 1985), hence, it is highly required in the cultivation of virtuous characters in moral agents (Kamtekar, 2013). Practical wisdom, if cultivated, might be helpful in dealing with escalating trends of hyper-consumerism in several ways. Firstly, practical wisdom helps people to have proper disposition and characters in consuming items in the market. Through practical wisdom, consumers buy only what they need but do not buy just to meet their greediness. Secondly, practical wisdom might help consumers to connect theoretical reasoning and practical reasoning in their consumption behaviours. In the former, a consumer critically evaluates his appetites and feelings toward consumable goods in the market, and the latter enables a consumer to have a good disposition to items. For instance, by temperance as a practical virtue, a moral agent is able to control consumer’s appetites towards items. Thirdly, virtue ethics through practical wisdom, a consumer as a moral agent strives to be good and excellent in relation to others. So much so, in consumption, a moral agent is required to be excellent not only through the appropriation of things, but in terms of having self-control over items and having excellent consumption pattern. Finally, through practical wisdom,

the mass media and marketers are obliged to carry out their activities not only for their self-aggrandizement driven by profit making but to act prudentially in the society.

c. CONSUMPTION FOR ULTIMATE GOOD (EUDAIMONIA)

At the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that human life can be judged well when it is shaped by a relatively consistent pursuit of ends that are themselves good (Irwin, 1985). That is to say, Aristotle's moral reflection propounds for determining the nature of the good that people should seek. Aristotle's entire understanding of morality was built upon the conviction that a good life is one devoted to the pursuit of good purpose or ends. One of Aristotle's most significant conclusions was that a good life is oriented to goods shared with others – the collective good of the larger society of which one is a part. The good life of a single person and the quality of the common life people share with one another in society are linked. Thus, the good of the individual and the collective good are inseparable (Keys, 2006). In fact, the collective good of the community should have primacy in setting the direction for the lives of individuals, for it is a higher good than the particular goods of private persons.

Unfortunately, the alternatives offered by market forces do not come from love for the good of individuals or the common good; instead it is oriented only to the good of those who plan and execute business strategies to bring larger proportions of profit. Market forces are primarily concerned with profit maximization attainable through all possible means, which need not necessarily be value-based or concerned with the well-being of the other, competition, etc (Chackalackal, 2013). The talk about wealth generation is misleading and unjust, as the so-called wealth that is generated by market forces is employed towards their own self-aggrandizement (Chackalackal, 2013). As the mass media accompany most of such moves, – they thrive on sensitizing human needs and make better profit when the fundamental human wants are manipulated. The mass media bombard the society with information flow, so as to effect a growing consciousness among the larger public that would crave for more and more products (Chackalackal, 2009).

Michael Sandel reminds us that through the appraisal of market triumphalism over the past three decades, this trend has led to the market encroaching in areas beyond its competence and the moral concerns being neglected (Sandel, 2012). Sandel rightly observes that: “making market more efficient is no virtue in itself” (Sandel, 2012). He is aware that in the market money can buy many things, but not things such as friendship, apology, and love (Sandel 2012). Sandel invites us to rethink market that promotes the common good and not private gains. It is here that market should aim at promoting good as a way forward to promote the common good. So, there is a need to cultivate virtue as character trait among people in the society, such virtues should aim at bringing common good in the society. Here, consumption patterns should be propagated in the way that promotes the common good in contemporary society and to cater for the needs and not want which translates to greed.

CONCLUSION

This study has tried to show hyper-consumerism as controversy in contemporary global society. Also, it has argued that hyper-consumerism is motivated by greediness and a desire to have more and appropriate more. This study is based on a study conducted by Clive, Cafaro and Newholm (2005), regarding ethical consumption. Virtuous consumption is highly needed among people in contemporary society. These values discard true virtuous life for human flourishing both individually and collectively. Aristotle's moral theory dismisses hyper-consumerism by rejecting the life of pleasure and life of honour. Aristotle is of the opinion that the most vulgar, would seem to conceive of the good and happiness as pleasure, hence, prefer the life of gratification (Irwin, 1985). Here, they appear completely slavish, since the life they decide on is a life for grazing animals (Irwin, 1985). From this perspective, virtue ethics allows us to clarify what the problem with consumption is, by asking the question whether consumption as an activity is virtuous or not. Therefore, turning to virtue ethics in consumption will enable us to preserve the environment by using resources prudently, so as to meet sustainable development which does not compromise the needs of the future generation. Since virtue ethics is habitual, there is need for introduction of ethics and moral education in schools, so as to cultivate learners with good character trait as regards consumption in contemporary society.

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