

CONSUMERISM VALUE THROUGH ARTWORK PRODUCTION BY MALAYSIAN ARTIST

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this writing is to further discuss the values of consumerism through the exploration of images, texts, and materials via the production of artwork by a few artists in Malaysia. The lifestyle of the society is influenced by the institutional social culture which is upheld by the surrounding environment. The value of consumerism can be identified from the way of lifestyle projected from the society which effected and contribute to form of behaviours and expression of today 's society and eventually will produce as symbols and belief among social community. This includes artists who views this issue as part of their research theme. Through the application in artwork production, the understanding towards the concept of materialism and consumerism agenda in society could be manifest, translated and arranged in various forms. The translation of consumerism values is put forward by giving an interpretation on how a social environment which currently exists is severely impacted by the elements of consumerism and brings various connotations on to the lifestyle as well as to the belief of the current society. By using the Feldman's Model of Art Criticism approach in describing, analysing, interpreting and judging the artwork and supported from Organic Unity Models by Ocvirk et al. (2009) in formulasing the artwork in using the meaning of form, subject and content the research will discussing and examines the value of consumerism in the artwork production by the artist involved. In referring to a few Malaysian artist and their artworks, such as Mohd. Sallehuddin, Choy Chun Wei, Mohd. Fauzi Sedon, Mohammad Khizal Saat, Roslisham Ismail, Ahmad Fuad Osman, and Azliza Ayob this writing is hoped to be able to explain on how this issue of consumerism influenced and effected society lifestyle. The outcome of this writing hopefully could broaden the meaning of consumer value interpretation and possibly associated with the art scene as a collective and hollistick approach.

Key word: *Consumerism, Visual Art, Malaysian Art*

INTRODUCTION

This article is basically made to address and further explain the aspects of consumerism which is currently happening within the society through the exploration of the usage of images, texts, and materials which are present in artworks based on the principles of consumerism which is currently present within the daily environment. This research is also aimed to identify different artworks which have been produced by various artists in Malaysia who has turned to consumerism as a context in producing their works of art. We are well aware that in order for us to further understand the living culture and lifestyle of a certain society, it very important for us to understand the behavior of that same society as explained by Jackson (2005, taken from Blyton, P., Blunsdon, B., Reed, K., & Dastmalcian, A. 2009) who stated that "...understanding habit is therefore important in understanding lifestyle. A society's lifestyle is largely influenced by the social culture institute which is being upheld by the surrounding environment. This could be identified by the consumer culture or consumerism which is seen to be influencing the formation of consumer values. In addition to this regardless whether it is based on the aspects of society, infrastructure, trade, and services, they are

all interrelated and regarded as the essence of development of the environment in a life of a particular person. This situation impacts directly on the consumerism culture of a society and further creates a unique set of values and belief. The daily environment also could directly impact towards the way of thinking and behaviors of a certain society. Consumerism could be viewed as a construction of values be it from a humanity, commodity, or from a community's symbol of expression point of view. Consumerism is also part of an expression of culture where the urban community lives within its own environment. Supply and demand comes from the values and belief which is based on consumerism itself and it becomes a symbol to the preference of the society which lives together with the values of consumerism. Generally the society translates its identity, emotions, and obsessions through their consuming behavior. The practice of consumerism is an identity and way of life which is a part of every consumer's choice which in turn is effected by various factors. Binkley (2007 extracted from Blyton, P., Blunsdon, B., Reed, K., & Dastmalcian, A. 2009) stated that "...Buy an identity and the lifestyle that accompanies it through consumer choice". The society and the aspects of consumerism does not only become the center of attention for a certain group of people but it also involves observers such as artists. Their involvement is not only to observe but also to interpret the given environment into visual works of art. By reinterpreting the urban culture into another form which is suitable such as an artwork, it becomes as a necessity in understanding and expanding the understanding the urban society culture and how it translates the urban culture and at the same time the aspects of consumerism could be interpreted in a broader sense.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Materialism and Consumerism

The values of consumerism will not be able to escape the scrutiny of the material aspects. Cultural values and beliefs towards a certain object is the basis to the formation of a material culture and the aspects of consumerism itself which is present in everyday life. Directly, this situation exerts the statement that by the using the objects and goods of daily use, a certain consumption culture has been created. The values of consumerism as well, the material culture could be seen to be more effective towards the building of a certain society by means of creating and consuming and also culturing it. (Berger, 2009).

"Culture values and beliefs take form or are manifested in artifacts and objects-that is in material culture. What this suggest is that we can use artifacts to help us gain insights into the culture that produced them, if we know how to interpret or 'read' them. Material culture gives us a means of understanding better the societies and cultures that produced the objects and used them".

Material perception and belief becomes the centerpiece of the concept of materialism which is being practiced by the local community. In order to understand a certain culture and the way of life of a society, we need to observe the lifestyle and the daily patterns of the society within the studied environment. Objects, products, and commodities and also services could be seen as a representation of the materialism expression which is being practiced by a certain group within the society or an individual seen generally. According to Giddens (1991, Romu, H. (2009), who stated the opinion that "Lifestyle can be understood as a material expression of one's identity which has a role in maintaining the ontological security and the coherence of the self". Clearly based on this opinion it shows that materialism is a concept towards the expression of attitude or preference being voiced out by an individual or a certain group. It is a part of a characteristic of the material culture or materialism wanted by the society living in an environment of rapid development and having ease of access towards the formation of this culture. This has also been stated by Prown, J. D. (1982) as the following,

“Material culture as a study is based upon the obvious fact that the existence of a man-made object is concrete evidence of the presence of a human intelligence operating at the time of fabrication. The underlying premise is that objects made or modified by man reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of individuals who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them, and by extension the beliefs of the larger society to which they belonged. The term material culture thus refers quite directly and efficiently, if not elegantly, both to the subject matter of the study, material, and to its purpose, the understanding of culture.”

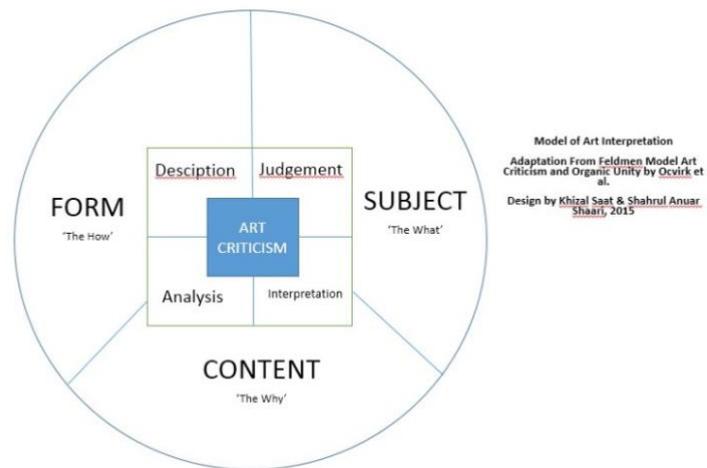
The presence of materialism also bring the connotation which involves time, place, individuals consuming it, and other factors which leads towards the development of signage and also the importance of the meaning behind the way a certain product or service is being consumed. The presence of the consumerism elements is a kind of reflection of the lifestyle of a society which depends on the usage of goods which comes from the available market. This particular situation makes it impossible for materialism to escape from the consumerism agenda. It is a material value represented by a product or service seen through a certain set of beliefs, attitude, and perception of an individual involved with it. In addition to that, the presence of a complete facility which offers a variety of goods enables certain preferences of the city dwellers gorge with their favorite objects or commodities. These objects and services could satisfy the life and all aspects of needs for the society. As mention by Koch, A.M. & Elmore, R, 2006, p. 13) stated :

“People no longer simply consume objects, but rather they consume objects laden with symbolic meaning, they consume objects, because objects signify more than their use. One’s car, one’s house, and one’s brand of toothpaste are no longer simply objects for consumption, with use and exchange value. Rather they are symbols, signs of one’s happiness, success, affluence, or penury”.

In the age of post-modern, the values of materialism through consumerism is seen to be more obvious through the ways on consumption especially in buying goods or commodities as well as services, which are not only limited to the physical appearance of the object but also the meaning that is projected to the image of the consumer by means of using that specific good. The current society makes the aspect of consumerism as their main agenda in their daily life. It has also become the symbol of representation which refers to the status on the individual or the society. Materialism which surrounds the daily life of the current society sees an object not merely as a physical substance itself but it will also adapt to the personality of the consumer. The wanted object or good is not only seen as a symbol or sign for a lifestyle but it also encompasses emotional signs which enables the consumer to form a unique personal identity. The construction of a symbolic sign shows the expressional values through the benefits of the good being used, not caused by the obvious function of the said good. Materialism through consumerism bring a lifestyle to the society towards a system that generates private and society image.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

By using the Feldman’s Model of Art Criticism approach in describing, analysing, interpreting and judging the artwork and supported from Organic Unity Models by Ocvirk et al. (2009) the research will discussing and examines the value of consumerism in the artwork production by the artist involved. As Rosalind Ragans (2005) mention the four interrelated approach in Feldman’s Model of Art Criticism could describing the hidden meaning in certain artwork. The systematic process in combining both methods in analysing of the artwork could help researcher to examine the foundation related to the consumerism context.



The Value of Consumerism from the Perspective of Malaysian Artists

Consumerism is not only evaluated and observed through the aspect of consumption of goods or the buyer but it could also be observed through the interpretation via the form of artworks. By selecting a number of local artists who views the aspect of consumerism in producing their artworks, this could further explain the relationship between the production of artwork which is related to the context of urban culture and the consumerism aspect as being discussed. Malaysian artists has been directly involved in this situation, since the early years of independence the consumerism factor has played a vital role in the environment during that period, the economic situation has become the core of development and has helped to generate the local economy and also at the same time has impacted to the change in the local socio culture. Up to today the role of economy especially in the context of consumerism has played a vital role as a medium for the local artists to showcase their works of art. Through their points of view, this group of people could form a kind of interpretation based on the observation that they have gathered during their daily lives. This particular experience has also become a part of the private lives of the artists. It is seen as suitable in discussing the question of how the society's lifestyle which is based on material and consumerism and in turn leads to the construction of a symbolic sign in life. A few of the local artists and their artworks has been chosen to be discussed on through the context of consumerism. Among the artists involved are Mohd. Sallehuddin, Choy Chun Wei, Mohd. Fauzi Sedon, Roslisham Ismail, Ahmad Fuad Osman, and Azliza Ayob. These artworks are evaluated based on the images and texts that has been produced which focuses on how these artists could interpret their observation and understanding towards the surrounding factors which directly affects the current consumerism aspect.

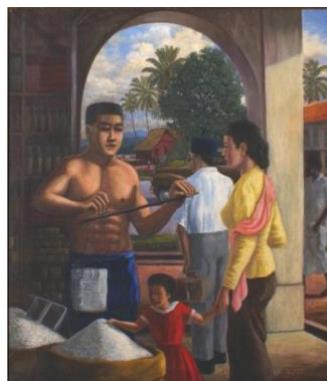


Figure 1
Mohd. Salehuddin,
Village Shopping, 1959
Oil Painting

“The combination of all of these elements and many more play a part in informing our images of what the city means, and images of urban life exert an atmospheric influence on contemporary popular culture in general. Think of the streaming images of action and change that play through the channels of entertainment and information media that play up the themes of style, of edginess, of sensuous experience, lavish lifestyle, the blurred edge of legitimacy and hustle”.

This statement somehow explains the artwork by Chun Wei which depicts the diversity and density of the life structure of the society based on the basics of consumerism which in turn forms living of the local society. The focus issue in this term relates to the value system of the urban society which has started to be engulfed by the lifestyle and filled with a life based on consumption of daily goods. Information relating to the aspects of selling and buying as well as the stimulation is always generated and presented to the consumers. The variety of information relating to consumerism enables the consumers to examine, choose, and decide what is best for them. This level is no longer for usual consumption but it has turned into a trend, style, and way of life for the consumer.



Figure 3
Choy Chun Wei,
Shopping Ghettos - Absolute Towers, 2010/2011
Mixed Media

For example in his artwork titled ‘shopping ghettos’ (figure 3) in this artwork he tried to utilize the situation in which it always happens to the general public by depicting a structure based on the construction of commercial materials which originally comes from consumerism, this includes brands, offered price, taglines, and objects representing the present and available goods in the market. The images or a text that has been rearranged were collected from advertisement materials, newspaper cuttings as well as plastic which were recycled and made in order to represent a structure which is complex, multitude, and haywire to depict the way of life of the current time. It is also a reflection of the social wants which is present in an urban environment where people compete with each other to achieve their life goals.



Figure 4
Mohd. Fauzi Sedon
Clearance # Part I,
Mixed media, 2010



Figure 5
Mohd.Fauzi Sedon
Discount # part II,
Mixed media, 2010

The next artwork which also utilizes consumerism as the main theme is made by artist Mohd. Fauzi Sedon with the title *Clearance # part 1*, 2010, and ***Discount # part II***, 2010, he who has made multiple artwork with the aspect theme of consumerism depicts on the question of how the goods which are readily available in the market, continuous buying, the environment that stimulates the consumers and other aspects which plays their own part in the market. His artwork mostly deals with the obsession of consumers especially in cities. *Clearance # Part 1* is part of a showcase named solo *Code: My Year 2011*, the series of mixed artwork is a project which is assimilated from the activities of private buying of the artist during shopping promotions located in shopping malls. It is an activity made at a location where certain information is collected such as price tag, date, discount, sign boards, sale sign, purchase receipt; name of the seller and so on is obtained and stored as a basis of the artwork. These materials are reused to develop a form of density in artwork which is a representation of the actual situation happening in shopping malls which are busy and saturated with taglines to entice the customers. For the artist, these ready information in very helpful for him to make comparison of goods and ultimately help in his buying. According to him, "Looking and comparing prices from different brands have become part of my shopping routine"- Mohd. Fauzi Sedon, (2011). Also according to him, the existing consumerism is a method used by consumers to connect the bond between them in the same society, through the use of the goods that has been purchased and when the goods are shared among the consumers, indirectly this will form a self-expression, which reflects their desire, appreciation, and idolization. Furthermore, the consumerism culture at times bends over more to the concept of buying not based on needs but wants. This environment is the same with the artwork portrayed by Choy Chun Wei. The advertisement system play a part in becoming a medium for the stimulation sent to the consumers so that they would be encouraged to buy the goods that the want. In addition, the sales tagline, the discount promotion, year-end sale and many more is always used to stimulate the consumers to come and buy. This artwork is a reflection on the environmental factors as well as the behavior of the consumers which is effected by many kinds of stimulation to heighten their emotions, desire and finally would form a sensation within the consumer to purchase and spend.



Figure 6

Ahmad Fuad Osman

Hantuhantuhantuhantu....

UV print on mirror stainless steel, 2013

On the other hand, Ahmad Fuad Osman in his artwork named *Hantuhantuhantuhantu*, 2013, which depicts a printed dollar on a sheet of steel, is an adaptation of the formation of the values of consumerism which focuses more on the value of the money in life. In addition to that, the printed dollar in an American Dollar which is a highly influential currency and it also a deciding factor for a development of a country. As stated by George Simmel in his writing *The Philosophy of Money* (2004) which showcased his analysis towards the relation between money in circulation and the exchange to various forms of commodity, and also the relationship of money with human personality, and also its relationship with women and freedom as well as the involvement of money in human lives. However, money is also the source of strength for consumerism in a human's life, and it is also the source of need for today's life, especially for the urban society and for them to build their life, it also represents on how the objects could be owned based on how much or how less money that you have in hand. As stated by Hannes Bohringer (1984) that, "Money...objectifies the 'style of life', forces metropolitan people into 'objectivity', 'indifference', 'intellectuality', 'lack of character', 'lack of quality'. Money socializes human beings as strangers...money also transforms human beings into absolute, into objects..." Money could be seen with a value which in the end could lead to an exchange in the form of a purchase or sales which is readily available in the world of consumerism. Although the aspect of consumerism is always associated with the consumption of goods through the sales and purchase, this artwork takes the approach to showcase the physical aspect of a dollar note as a form that gives multiple connotations on the element of consumerism. The control system formed based on the dollar note in any exchange of commodities in the world is thought to be significant in nature and therefore putting this artwork as an artwork that emphasizes the question of how this money is spent. The title of this artwork is more towards abstract in nature between the meanings of the word '*Hantu*' (*Ghost*) and '*Tuhan*' (*God*) gives off an indication to the usage in the current consumerism market. Money becomes the 'master' in ensuring the survival of consumerism for human, and it could also be associated on the other way, and at the same time it could also portray a negative aspect is the control factors are not emphasized. As shown in this artwork, the backward-facing word of evil is imprinted to put a perception and also reflection towards the role that money really plays. Forms of consumerism needs money in the transaction process between the consumer and the seller, the value which is contained inside becomes a symbol to the question of how we manage it whether towards the positive side or the other way.



Figure 7
Mohammad Khizal Saat
My Dreams Become Bold (2012)
Digital print on canvas

The next artwork being examined is *My Dreams Become Bold*, produced in the year 2012. Produced by Mohd. Khizal Saat which was made using digital prints on top of a canvas. This artwork displays the interpretation towards the formation of a lavish culture in owning branded goods by some groups within the society especially communities dwelling in major cities. The aspect of consumerism does not only focus on the factors of selling and purchasing goods towards the consumer, it could include the aspect of fulfilling the needs of life, the desire and up to a point where purchasing a certain good is purely based on a private and personal desire. This particular value could be interpreted as an obsession towards an object or goods which are seen as more valuable as compared to others. The value of consumerism within major cities is seen to be more concentrated on the kinds of purchase or what is actually used by a certain individual. This situation through time will lead to an assessment towards self-capability in purchasing and it could also project a certain status if an individual is able to afford the item. Owning a branded item makes the owner to feel somehow superior and show off the particular person's status. The competitive nature to own items of status become a symbol of self-confidence and that person will be in a class of his own. Wiedmann, et al. (2007) stated that "luxury is the appendage of ruling classes". This has also been mentioned by Holt (1995) who stated that "consumer may use luxury items to integrate the symbolic meaning into their own identity". The artwork which depicts an image of handbags of various major brands is an interpretation of the culture of owning luxury items or branded items happening in the society especially to those dwelling in major cities. In addition to that, the existence of shopping malls offering these luxury items gives an opportunity to the consumers to buy and own items which reflect their own symbol. The produced artwork gives a connotation towards the aspect of consumerism which is more focused towards the values of 'class' and 'status' of the consumer. The arrangement of the handbags is seen to be floating and big to interpret how these objects become an obsession to the consumers who really want them. A dark background is used which is covered by a few texts representing the price, brand mark, model figures which are intertwined to further support the image. *My Dreams Become Bold*, gives an impression to the consumer on how the desire to own a branded item becomes something obvious and it also becomes a private symbol for the society at this age.



Figure 8
Roslisham Ismail ,
Secret Affair, 2011
Refrigerator, monitor, groceries

The values of consumerism could also include the aspect of fulfilling the private or family desires or other words to fulfil the needs of the household. The installation artwork by Roslisham Ismail titled *Secret Affair, 2011* which mimics the artwork named *Still Life*, by Tom Wesellman, which mainly used daily items such as food and beverage used by a family. In the artwork by Wesellman, the technique that was used was mainly assemblage or painting, the artwork by Roslisham Ismail on the other hand portrays a showcase which is more interactive in nature on how the items are used in everyday life. This artwork was exhibited in Singapore Biennale, 2011, and this particular artwork was produced with the cooperation of 5 Singaporean households and it took two months to capture the interaction towards the consumption of items within the refrigerators. This artwork is inspired by the curiosity to find out what is actually stored in a family's refrigerator. It is also a concept related to the statement "you are what you eat", which indirectly goes back the concept of how a family goes through their daily life and it also enables us to categorize a certain family, to class that family into the broader society. The consumerism value for a particular family could be evaluated through the purchasing activity of that particular household, what are the items being purchased, what are the food being served, or even the car being used by the family to serve as an indication towards the consumption value of that particular family. As stated by Danielle Todd, (2012) who said that by observing the consumption behaviour of an individual or a certain group, it could further explain and gives a better picture on the personality of that particular person "Consumption is one of our most creative and most restrictive practices. Due to this fact it must be concluded that consumer driven production of self is less to do with "who am I" and more with "who are we" or "with whom do I belong." On the other hand, for Baudrillard (1994) who preferred the semiotic approach stated that we could evaluate how the consumption aspect plays it role in reflecting a person. [...] uses the sign/ signifier technique to explain consumption so that what we purchase is not just a product, but also a piece of a "language" that creates a sense of who we are". The consumption value is a daily aspect which happens all the time. These values always move in line with human evolution. It complements each other. The artwork by Roslisham gives a pictorial view towards a group within a society in general which is how we could see an interpretation towards the aspect of consumerism in true life. It also considered as a door which is constantly opened and closed as shown by this artwork, give and take becomes the basis of consumerism. Supply and demand enables the value of consumerism to survive through time as long as there is the need by the consumer.



Figure 9
Azliza Ayob,
Sweet Sensation
Acrylic, Collage & Glitter On Canvas
2013



Figure 10
Azliza Ayob,
The Bystanders
Acrylic, Collage & Glitter On Canvas
2013

In the artwork by Azliza Ayob, *The Bystanders* and *Sweet Sensation*, 2013, showcased in Weiling Art Gallery, on the other hand shows how the artist focuses her observation through the feminine point of view and the effects from consumerism factors caused by the abundance of goods used to style a person or beautify a person. This artwork reminds us to another artwork by Eduardo Paolozzi, *Dr. Pepper*, 1948, and also to another of his artwork named *Gold*, 1949 which gave more emphasis on self-development in your daily life through the consumption of goods for cosmetic purposes. As stated by Nur Hanim Khairuddin (2013), within the exhibition catalogue by Azliza Ayob, she stated that the produced artwork gives an impression of the current urban society who are more exposed to stimulation from aggressive advertisement which involves the development of self-esteem through cosmetics. According to her, "In today's consumer society, the ideas about fashion styling, body image and facial features, which are intimately related to our perceptions and notions of beauty, is not only shaped by but also dependent upon the machinations of commercial persuasion"- Nur Hanim Khairuddin, (2013). She further added that "It is the consumer capitalism, with the aid of advertising and media that provides and promotes beauty-related services and goods from which the large majority of women derive their pleasure and enjoyment". This shows that the value of consumerism on major cities does not only revolve around the aspect of purchasing goods, the usage of money, obsession towards luxury items, household needs, but it also includes the beautification aspect of a person. Women and beauty could be perceived as a door which opens to a whole lot of opportunity for other factors to cling along such as fashion brand, cosmetic products, symbols of

promotions and many others. All of these factors are interrelated to form a web of consumerism for the society. In addition to that, this aspect is always emphasized by the media via the television, billboards, social media as well as printed media. The artwork which visualizes goods deemed as glamour through time will evolve into a trend. The use of a dark and black background puts more focus on the items being depicted. It gives off a self-symbol that when these items are worn within a group of people, they would catch people's attention. The use of various functions, shape and colored accessories enables the consumer to portray themselves accordingly with the different function and needs of their everyday lives. Indirectly this will form the consumerism value which plays a role in enhancing an individual's self-esteem within the society.

CONCLUSION

The consumerism value which is prevalent in major cities has been found to shape the lifestyle, and it also has played the role to become the patron to the construction of a popular culture among the urban community. Materialism which exists in major cities could be in the form of objects as well as products being offered and it also includes services being offered to the consumer. A society which is obsessed with the services and products being offered has made it part of their life, and this in turn has developed into something which is perceived to be popular among the members of the society. The stimulation process which is played by consumerism through the acts of advertisement on the products and services being offered shapes a perception by the society and this has successfully persuaded them physically and mentally as consumers. This factor shows the vital role that consumerism plays in achieving the objective of fulfilling the needs of the lifestyle that they dream of through the purchase of product or service. The existing consumerism also forms a popular culture which in turn will become a practice and trend within the society living within the city. Influence which comes from the composition of goods production, society psychology, and behavior being practiced will eventually develop into a culture preferred by most. Artists are also part of this situation. They observe and examine these signs and process them and later translates it using a different approach. The usage of certain images and texts has successfully created a sign which can be easily identified. At time the consumers could overlook the sign of existence of this culture. However using the reinterpretation of the values contained within the lifestyle culture phenomena of the urban society through consumerism enables the interpretation and a new perception as well as understanding which could easily be apprehended and at the same time broadens the interpretation towards rejoicing the values of consumerism and on how it impacts the enrichment of artworks.

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