# [SOCG001] Understanding Societies

## Phoebe Tey

## Email: phoebe20tey05@gmail.com

The essay discusses social media's influence on consumerism in contemporary society, mainly focusing on the impact of materialism and marketing through the perspectives of both consumers and producers. Materialism in people nowadays has increased tremendously due to the use of social media, where people have an increased range of connection with others online, leading to increased feelings of fear of missing out (FoMO). Using sociological theories like symbolic interactionism and social conflict theory, we understand more about the reasoning behind the increase in consumerism brough about by social media. Through the eyes of the companies and brands, the phenomenon of influencer marketing has also been more prevalent in recent years, leveraging on influencer's social media popularity to increase sales for products, then creating a cycle of consumerism. The sociological theory of McDonaldisation is used to analyse this phenomenon's impact on consumerism. Finally, we discuss the effects of consumerism on our society, on a personal and societal level through mental health and the environment, to understand more about should be done to balance social media's impact on it.

# What is social media's influence on consumerism in contemporary society?

In this paper, I ask the following question – what is social media's influence on consumerism in contemporary society?

## Introduction

Social media has become largely integrated into our lives within the past decade, we start to largely rely on it daily. In this essay, social media is defined as online platforms that allow users to engage in social interaction with broad and narrow audiences in real-time or asynchronously, through platforms such as Instagram and Tiktok.  (Bayer et al., 2019) Through this essay, I will be examining consumerism from both the points of view of the consumers and the producers. With the increased use of social media, consumer behaviour has changed greatly due to influence of publicity using social media. With trends coming and going, materialism is also exacerbated where people greatly associate their worth in a society to what is currently popular on social media. Overall, social media has altered consumer behaviour, increasing our materialistic tendencies, which then in turn affects' brands marketing decisions. The cycle of change would then affect how we socialise, as social reproduction would then establish the phenomenon of influencer marketing to become one of normality.

## Social Media in Contemporary Society

Social media platforms provide the space for people to express themselves, sharing ideas or simply sharing their lifestyles with the audience online. Especially since the COVID-19 period where everyone relied on social media to keep in contact with

loved ones and for their commitments, we have started to rely more on the internet to keep track of others and our own lives. In 2024, it was found that we spend around 35.8% of our online screen time on social media (Kemp, 2024), which means that around 1 in 3 minutes we spend online is solely on these platforms.

Social media platforms have evolved to a point where access to e-commerce is made easier, with product placements and advertising from companies being placed in one's online timeline. Therefore, people have gradually changed their consumer habits online, whilst companies and brands have adapted to this change, expanding their range of marketing strategies to leverage on these new platforms brought about using social media.

## From the Perspective of the Consumers

As mentioned earlier, social media users' consumer behaviour has shifted recently. It was reported that 80% of consumers make their purchase decisions based on what they see on their friend's social media post, showing how the use of social media even within their sphere of connections is highly influential on one's consumer choices (Kowalewicz, 2024). Therefore, with the rise of social media influencers, people who are popular based on their online content, it can be argued that people nowadays usually base their purchases off what they see online, generally due to the personal behavioural habits they have.

Materialism has been found to have a positive association with higher social comparison orientation and social media usage (Ozimek et al., 2024), meaning that with an increased range of people on the same platform to compare to, paired with increased time spent on the platform, people would tend to have more materialistic behaviour. Consumers would perceive their personal value and social status

according to the material value of the things they possess in comparison to others online. Consequently, as they spend more time online, they would desire to possess the products seen advertised or popularised by people within their own social circles or social media influencers. As people view social media influencers as having higher success and social status than them, they would also want to reach the material level of success achieved through owning the same products as them.

For example, the Labubu dolls were created in 2015 by an artist named Kasing Lung, under the series of "The Monsters". (Lynn-C, 2024) It first collaborated with Pop Mart in 2019, but its popularity truly skyrocketed when K-pop Idol Lisa had posted one doll on Instagram, where one doll can be sold at $30 and above. Through this example, it is observed that the symbolic meaning of a Labubu doll has increased significantly through its virality through social media, from its original lack of recognition in the beginning. However, when asked about the appeal of the doll, most people around me had associated their reason of purchase to Lisa having it instead of liking the actual appearance of the doll, with some even telling me that they bought it as they were experiencing a fear of missing out (FoMO).

FoMO is a phenomenon often observed on social networking platforms, where people are afraid of being out of the loop with the latest news or trends found online, which then makes them compulsive to maintain the social connections involved (Gupta & Sharma, 2021). With social media platforms allowing people to look at the latest trends, people experience FoMO more nowadays, considering the increased time spent online after the pandemic and the increased amount of advertising done on social media platforms.

To analyse this phenomenon, we can use symbolic interactionism. This is observed where we realise how the symbolic meaning of the trending products is only greater when it is popularised through social media. As the theory focuses on how we establish symbolic meaning through social interactions we have, social media tends to feed into consumerism habits through its ability to enable people to flaunt their success through material wealth.

Additionally, the disparity between social media and reality is reflected by Goffman's dramaturgical perspective in symbolic interactionism ("The Oxford Handbook of Digital Media Sociology," 2020), where he compares between the frontstage, a public presentation of the self, and the backstage, where the actual self lies. On the frontstage, people tend to create an idealised version of themselves who follow the latest social media trends and purchase the newest popular item, but on the backstage, they might personally feel that the purchase was unnecessary, but only did it to "follow the trend". Many would also turn to social media to post about the purchase to keep up the "frontstage" impression, prompting those in their social circles to also feel compelled to purchase the item.

Bourdieu's idea of economic and social capital also be considered by looking at how social media contributes to materialism, as those with material wealth on social media, like social media influencers, often gain a large social capital too, through their large follower count that increases the network of people they are connected to, with more opportunities like advertisement partnerships with brands, invitation to publicity events and even organising their own events. Consequently, in pursuit of this idea of economic and social capital, materialism is reestablished amongst social media users, as people would yearn to reach such success and status, which then

causes them to value themselves according to what they possess in comparison to the people they see online.

Social inequality is seen where FoMO perpetuates social inequalities that we have, where people of lower social classes tend to feel more affected by FoMO as they are unable to access the material possessions that they see those with higher social statuses have online. This shows how there is social class divides in terms of social status, economic and social capital.

Therefore, in pursuit of greater success and higher status through materialistic beliefs exacerbated by social media, consumers have increased their spending habits to things that are not necessarily important to themselves, considering that they just wish to "follow the latest trend" and seem to look better in the eyes of others, putting aside their personal opinions and wellbeing.

## **From the Perspective of the Producers**

Based on these consumer behaviours, the way that companies have marketed their products have also changed. Specifically, I will be focusing on the phenomenon of "influencer marketing", which refers to a company's strategy in partnering with online influencers to engage their followers to promote and purchase their products (Leung et al., 2022).

Influencer marketing has been increasingly popular with companies, seeing as the rise in reliance on social media has created a new and more direct channel for communicate with their consumers. By partnering with influencers with large and established follower bases, companies can market their products easily to increase purchasing statistics. This can be seen where 82% of respondents in a poll supported the claim that consumers usually follow recommendations from their

favourite influencers (Lim et al., 2017), which then links back to consumerism in terms of increased purchases.

This phenomenon of influencer marketing can be linked back to consumerism through McDonaldisation, where the four aspects of it show how social media has amplified consumption habits of people nowadays. McDonaldisation focuses on four aspects – efficiency, calculability, predictability and control.

Efficiency through influencer marketing can be seen through how companies outsource for influencers to partner with, which would already give them access to a large audience easily. Calculability comes through the statistics of the advertisements or sales of the promoted products done through the partnership, measuring the success of influencer marketing through the revenue and viewership that come from these projects. Predictability is seen in the standard marketing method of influencer marketing, with set video formats like skits and the standard hashtags used by the influencers involved for "product placement", or how social media platforms would be showing these videos as "ads", which would ultimately boost their sales and reach. Control over this form of marketing happens through the partnership contracts between the company and the influencer, to be able to handle the marketing to the image that the companies desire.

Ultimately, the use of influencer marketing helps to contribute to consumerism through its ability to use social media as a platform for producers to expand their sales network and increase consumers' purchasing habits of their products.

**Socialisation through Social Media**

Bringing both perspectives together, socialisation through social media from influencer marketing can occur whereby partnerships often have the influencer

reiterating the benefits of the product marketed to us through our feed, reestablishing the norms and standards that we set for ourselves, convincing people to believe that what we see online is the norm (Lee & Conroy, 2005). Therefore, like how those around us would influence us in our daily lives, we would also highly be influenced by what we see online, no matter the audience, which brings us to engage in consumer habits that we already see online.

## Implications of Social Media's Influence

With this increased reliance in social media shaping consumer behaviour, it begs the question of whether the issue of overconsumption in consumerism is worsening.

On a personal level, when materialistic behaviour becomes prominent, one's wellbeing is put at risk. This is because they would prioritise the material value of their purchases over their own wellbeing, which reduces their self-esteem to be on the same level as the material valuables they have. This would have a negative impact on their mental health, leading to conditions such as depression and anxiety, along with lower life satisfaction (Dittmar et al., 2014).

Additionally, there is the environmental danger at a societal level, where worsening consumerism habits contributing to the problem of fast fashion, where clothing is cycled through quickly to capitalise on trends, leading to greater wastage. Considering that the issue of fast fashion already contributes to 8 to 10% of the global carbon emissions (Niinimäki et al., 2020), with social media's impact on consumer behaviour, it would be assumed that the wastage generated from just following trends would be larger and exacerbate the problem of increased carbon emissions.

To counter this increase in consumption, green consumerism has been on a rise, where sustainable products are preferred against unsustainable ones. Green consumerism awareness has significantly increased over the past 30 years (Mbokane & Modley, 2024), but with the increased use of social media for purchasing habits, I feel that there should be more publicity done by societies for the preservation of our environment in lieu of increased consumption habits from advertising.

## Conclusion

To summarise, social media has changed consumers to become more materialistic according to the content they see online and created new ways of marketing to appeal to the changed context of socialisation through social media. Therefore, with this increased consumption rate due to social media's influence, we should also be mindful of how we should manage consumption of social media on a personal level, as well as whether we should switch towards greener alternatives of consumerism to safeguard our environment as a society.

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