

THE WORLD OF HAVES AND HAVE NOTS: THE BIRTH OF A VIOLENT CONSUMER SOCIETY IN THE AGE OF NEW MEDIA

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Abstract

Today, actors are both discussing and experiencing the effects of globalization and globalized consumer culture is one of the much debated issues. This is a time of objects in which individuals live according to the rhythm of what they possess. Consumption and popular culture are products of social development of modernism. New media as a phenomenon of the post-modern era transformed the way in which people communicate with each other. The main aim of this article is to reveal the role of new media in the evolution of violence in consumer society by understating the relationship between these two concepts which are strengthened by popular culture. Uncovering this relationship is important because, today the impact of war scenes is not much more powerful than ordinary boxing matches. People, who die every day, became all humdrum images. Regarding this aim, first, consumerism is explained by the use of various theoretical approaches. Following this, the relationship between violence and consumption is revealed. Consequently an answer is given to the following question: do new media encourage a culture of violence in a consumer society?

Keywords: *Consumption, Globalization, New Media, Sexuality, Violence.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the modern era that we are experiencing, individuals exist to consume; instead of believing, being righteous or finding themselves. During pre-modern times, people were hunting and gathering only because they had to eat. Regarding these contemporary ages, pleasure and the possessions that give pleasure have become prominent. From the moment that it came to light, consumption has been holding a more and more important place in the everyday lives of people. This is the age in which objects keep hold of people. Today we, the people, are depended on the objects, not vice-a-versa:

We live by object time: by this I mean that we live at the pace of objects, live to the rhythm of their ceaseless succession. Today, it is we who

watch them as they are born, grow to maturity and die, whereas in all previous civilizations it was timeless objects, instruments or monuments which outlived the generations of human beings (Baudrillard, 2005, p.25)

In the last instance the modern human's main tendency is to consume. The modern person can only exist by consuming. In the world and in Turkey, specifically, actors are both discussing and experiencing the globalization and one of the branches of globalization is the globalized consumer culture. In developing countries like Turkey, the effect of globalized consumer culture is felt stronger. Regarding this, Toh indicates that: "as we rethink the causes of conflict and violence worldwide, we are challenged to deeply transform excessively consumerist lifestyles that fuel policies and structures of inequity and human rights violations" (2001, p.1).

The research on new media's influence on the construction of a violent consumer society has been complicated and contradictory. According to some studies that will be mentioned in further sections of this study, the new media have a damaging social impact and cause a troubled society to emerge. On the other hand, other studies are in support of new media and emphasize its benefits for the people. But, in general, both the new and traditional media have been accused by researchers and critics because of producing sexist, homophobic, racist, ageist materials, and other aggressive social content. Regarding this issue the effect of the harmful media material on adolescents and children is a matter of discussion. These issues include: "pornography and the degradation of women and sexuality; advertising manipulation; and the promotion of excessive consumerism and materialism" (Kellner, 2004, p.209).

Aforementioned studies were divided into two regarding the impact of new media. In support of the opinion that new media has negative effects some claim that the violence disseminated by the media contributes to the violence among society. As an example of this are the massacres created by adolescents, given by the authorities which underline the powerful effects of media on young people (Boleik, 2012). Also the American Psychological Association (APA, 2005) has announced its policy statements about the relationship between the media violence relationship and social tensions. Regarding this statement about media sourced violence, an open letter to the APA written by 230 media scholars, psychologists and criminologists utters their request that the APA shall give up its policy statements and avoid making causal attributions (Consortium of Scholars, 2013). This case shows that there is still no common agreement among the media scholars about the issue of violence in the media.

Regarding this globalized world, the boundaries that separate the countries, the societies from each other, became blurred with the impact of swiftly developing new media tools. Individuals from all over the world could communicate with each other and share their experiences. This revolutionary change in the industry of communication also developed the freedom of expression and it strengthened the social networks between people. On the other hand, new media has negative impact on personal relationships; also the tools of new media make consumption easier for its users. Moreover, it also strengthens the offensive and devious activities.

The main aim of this article is to reveal the role of new media tools in the propagation of violence in the consumer society by understating the relationship between these two concepts which are today empowered with popular culture. Regarding this aim, consumerism is one of the main concepts of this analysis; it is necessary to explain it by giving examples from various theoretical approaches.

2. A THEORETICAL LOOK TO THE CONCEPT OF CONSUMERISM

The gap in our economy is between what we have and what we think we ought to have – and that is moral problem, not an economic one
(Paul Heyne in Human Species and Beyond)

Today, the world is under siege by the passion for consuming; societies are structured under the capitalist power, and they are consumed while, at the same time, they are continuously consuming. Consumerism does not have a clear explanation in the science of Sociology but it appeared mostly in the societies where materialism and individualism are on the rise, and the features of a popular culture are more obvious.

Consumption is regarded as the inseparable part of the social development of modernism and the development of a popular culture has evolved parallel to the emergence of the consumer society. Both the popular culture and the concept of consumption started their development with the transmission coming from modernity. The beginning of twentieth century is a time period in which recent developments have accelerated. Events like the evolution of mass communication devices, huge immigration flows and mass production of consumer goods, all speed up the development of a popular culture.

In this respect, consumerism has become the distinguishing characteristic of almost all the economies of the world. Besides the Western world, developing countries also have this tendency, including Turkey. Therefore, understanding the meaning of consumerism and its importance in this post-modern age becomes very crucial.

The meaning of a globalized consumer culture is the internalization of the American lifestyle by the whole world through international companies. The economy of the United States operates on consumption culture and it has been the foremost country known for its materialism. But currently, the economy is relying under the pressure of recession. Other societies become brand-dependent as a result of the transmission of American economy to the political and cultural

power. Therefore, the entire world started to drink the same beverages, eat the same hamburgers, wear the same brand of shoes, bags and clothes; they listen to the same music, play the same games, and dance the same dances. This is a routine consumer culture.

Consumerism claims that the meaning of life is to buy things and experience pre-arranged experiences; and these claims play an important role in the making of modern capitalism. The ideology of consumerism, while strengthening capitalism, also motivates individuals to consume both in their fantasies and in reality. For instance, being unemployed becomes much more painful if houses, cars, vacations, etc. are out of the person's purchasing power. In such a situation an unemployed person would even lose the capacity of dreaming about consuming. This harms the modern economic system which depends on consumer societies. The ideology of consuming operates in very efficient fashions; thus, it is active both during the economic boom and recessions. Regarding this, according to Bocoock (1997, p.34):

In boom times the consumer goods and experiences do deliver, for some, the goal of life - consuming things. In recessions, the promise is renewed of good times just around the corner - patience will be rewarded with another period of high consumption - as the television news bulletins and newspapers report the views of politicians and economic and financial experts who speculate about an end to economic hard times.

With a little postponement and patience everything will work smoothly. Regarding this, the concept of working which becomes as concrete as making a living the hard way quickly moves away from being an important value. The target that relaxes individuals is to make a fortune for a life of pleasure and luxury instead of working and earning. Accumulation of fortune, spending, living a luxurious life and excessive consumption are all degraded to an instrumental position (Bauman, 2005, p: 107-108).

With credit cards, often several of them, and high and expandable credit limits, the consumer is free to spend all available funds and then, in effect, by running up credit card

debt, to spend income that will not be earned until well into the future. Even maximum limits are often fictions since as the consumer approaches those limits, they are automatically raised by the credit card firms. Thus, credit cards serve to greatly expand the amount of money that can be spent on consumption. The immateriality of credit cards, or more accurately the numbers associated with them, makes it easier for people to spend money and consume [...] They contribute to hyperconsumption (Ritzer, 2001, p.156).

According to an opinion, consumerism is a way of escaping from the realities of everyday life:

Masses are lost in the utter darkness of the dungeon of "myself" and cling every meaning that is brought forward; thus procrastinating the harsh existence of its own reality. In this regard we are facing the concrete truth that the popular culture industry keeps masses from thinking that does not want to encounter their own reality and presents them instantaneous life practices and therefore shows a kind of life producing function (Akdogan & Celik, 2006, p.3).

According to Benton (1998) consumerism numbs people; therefore referring Karl Marx's famous phrase we can consider consumerism *the opium of people*:

Consumerism is the drug that causes people to fall into moral sleep and remain silent on all kinds of public matters. As long as their little world of peace and relative prosperity is not disturbed, they are happy not to get involved. It is against this background of consumer complacency that all kinds of moral relaxation can arise [...] A consumer society is one that is prepared to sacrifice its ethics on the altar of the material 'feel-good' factor"

Consequently, the consumer culture took many of its structural features from the industrial society. Modernization, industrialization, and urbanization have become the preparer of this societal stage that has been experienced. In this context, the concept of leisure time was born. Regarding this concept, nowadays, most of the individuals prefer to spend their leisure time by

surfing on the Internet, in other words by using the online tools of new media. In this respect, it becomes necessary to put forward the relationship between the consumer society and its members' violent deeds.

3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VIOLENCE AND CONSUMPTION

It's a campaign of fear and consumption. Keep people afraid and they'll consume (The quote belongs to Marilyn Manson from his interview in the film *Bowling For Columbine*).

One of the areas in which consumption is a wide-spread phenomenon is the consumption of violence. One of the theories about the relationship between the consumer society and violence suggests that the consumerist essence of the modern times raises the level of violence in the society:

Persons living in a consumer society live a comfortable life at the expense of impoverished laborers and fragile ecosystems in other countries. Too often, they conclude that they must arm themselves to protect their commodities and the ongoing access to them. This position justifies war and violence (Cejka, 2003).

Today, the effect of the war scenes is not much more powerful than ordinary boxing matches. People, who die every day in series of diverse ways, became all humdrum images. Thus, the members of the society are becoming more and more unresponsive to these images. Therefore, concepts like active actor or who seize the initiative become a thing of the past. It is put forward by Smith and Donnerstein (1998) that being exposed to heavy levels of televised violence can create viewers who are unsusceptible to violence and more belligerent.

Akdogan defines the passive mass viewers who belong to the consumer society with these words: the viewers who cannot realize that they are *objectified* because they think that they are playing the *reality*; they fictionalize themselves as the *subject* but cannot see that they are actually becoming the *object*, because they think that the visuals of manifestation rituals of excitement,

conflict, and violence which reflect from the shiny surface of that black box are *totally real* and emerged by *its own accord* (2005, p.5).

Regarding consumer society's addiction to brands and materiality, living a comfortable life at the expense of exploiting others causes violence in the society aforementioned above. The consumerist approach makes people obsessed with commodity and makes them identify themselves with what they own. This tendency to possession and brands has considerably strengthened the parallel to the growth of violence in contemporary times (Sols, 2002). Also Carter (1999) supports this idea and further claims that the sources of youth violence can be partly the result of a society focused on consumerism. McGregor puts forward the "symptoms of violence in society structured around consumerism" with the following words (2001, p.6):

Witness the killing of youth by youth for brand name running shoes or jackets. Witness the violence present in advertisements, video games, music, videos, and children's programming on television. Witness the not so silent violence in the home due to dual income and single parents working to meet increasing costs of living. Witness the latch key kids, underfunded day care, and escalating violence in schools. These are symptoms of violence in a society structured around consumerism.

The problem within the context of branding, consumer goods and violent behaviour requires a wider perspective because some researches on the essence of brands underline that branding sometimes provides symbolic meanings besides the functional ones (Bhat & Reddy, 1998). In this respect, it is though that consumers built up their own identities from the products that are available on the market which are full of symbolism (Hirschman et al, 1998). Parallel to this idea Wallendorf and Arnould (1998) suggest that consumers choose what to consume based on both the product's functional usage and symbolic values. Consequently, if specific brands and goods are presented in the context of violence in most of the times, then it becomes inevitable that the consumers comprehend them as

containing a symbolic value that is interrelated with violent activities.

Furthermore, in this postmodern era, politics is about branding and disseminating the messages of the politicians that their brand image is consciously marketed via new media tools. In terms of political campaigns the 37th President of the United States, Richard Nixon emphasizes the truth about violence: "People react to fear, not love. They do not teach that in Sunday School, but it is true" (Safire, 2005, p.8). In this context, according to Glassner, products are marketed and services, from car alarms to TV news programmes, all follow the sine qua non of the idea about fear. Glassner also emphasizes that the "vendors of fear tap into our moral insecurities and supply us with the symbolic substitutes" (1999, p. xxviii).

Moreover, in the consumer society the place of sexuality is very important and this is also underlined by Baudrillard in his seminal work "The Consumer Society". According to this: "not only does sexuality tinge everything that is offered for consumption, but sexuality is itself offered for consumption [...] In the consumer society eroticism in its more commercial form comes to predominate and it serves to control and subvert the explosive potential of desire" (Ritzer, 2005, p. 14). Violence and sexuality are the two important features of the globalized consumer culture. Societies are used to these two elements through movies, serials, and television news. Especially the children and adolescences are vulnerable to violence and sexuality. In this regard violence and sexuality have become the centre of everyday life.

Besides that, in the consumption culture some children are bad and have a tendency for violent behaviour. Children toys are about violence and destruction. For instance, in one of the recent adverts for Mercedes Benz, which was released in this year and became instantly popular by reaching its audiences via Internet, the brand promotes the new Brake Assist System Plus. In the commercial this is done by giving the kids toy Mercedes Benzes that they cannot crash because of the magnets that were placed in specific parts of the cars. The tension in these dramatic and somehow amusing scenes has been made much more attractive with Edvard Grieg's

In the Hall of the Mountain King from Peer Gynt as the background music. This advertisement which can be considered as some kind of social experiment shows delirious children who try to crash the cars with each other but they cannot. Bauman underlines the place of violence in our age of *uncertainty* with the following words:

In our liquid, modern, individualized consumer society the wilting of labour-market regulation and the spectacular expansion of income differentials do not prompt social dissent and rebellion, but criminal acts. And so they do not conjure the spectre of "reds under beds" but of "squeegee pests" beggars and muggers as the "public enemies number one" (2012, p.70-71).

In the globalized consumer culture one can notice that the features that make a person human are constantly corroding. It is a fact that the mottos of eat, drink, get fat, get laid, frequently change your partners, try new things, fight, ready for violence, spend your leisure time, do not question the system, do not think, live today or do not worry about tomorrow are constantly pumped to the public via the tools of both the traditional and the new media. In the context of this article, in the next section, the role of new media tools in the dissemination of the messages of consumerism is explained because it becomes more and more important to answer a significant question of our modern era: do the new media encourage violence in the consumer society?

4. DO NEW MEDIA ENCOURAGE A CULTURE OF VIOLENCE IN CONSUMER SOCIETY?

Consumer culture does not only show itself on the basis of products. It also accelerates the pace of life. From cars to computers, life in big cities becomes faster. There is a constant hurry and rush among people. Experiencing consumerism explains the society's philosophy of living today and not worrying about tomorrow. Since new media tools are the products of consumer culture, parallel to this, social networks support the ideology of consumerism, and its consequences. People who have lost their jobs are finding it difficult to meet both their ends.

Kellner (2004, p.218) underlines the rise of “new online Internet culture” compared to the “old media culture”:

The fact that *new media* Internet service provider and portal AOL was the majority shareholder in the deal seemed to point to the triumph of the new online Internet culture over the old media culture. The merger itself called attention to escalating synergy among information and entertainment industries and old and new media in the form of the networked economy and cyberculture.

Regarding children and adolescents, the issue of new media tools should be handled more carefully because these adults of tomorrow have vulnerable minds and bodies that can be influenced very easily from the images disseminated by the Internet. Therefore, their vulnerability makes them one of the most important target groups of today’s consumer culture. In addition to this, factors like electronic games, communication technologies, entertainment and music, fashion, clothing and personal care, smoking, alcohol and drug abuse or sexual stimulation increase their sales proportions depending on their impact on children.

According to the data provided by The American Academy of Paediatrics, in the USA, one child spends an average of 6 hours in front of new media and this represents a 10-30% contribution to the violent behaviour. Sexual materials in new media double the risk of taking up smoking and sexuality at an early age. In the USA there is a 100 million dollar market of baby videos and these videos delay the development of speaking in children who are 8-16 months. Furthermore, violent messages cause insensitivity, nightmares and the fear of being harmed. The report prepared by The Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat) stats that 92,5 % of the children in Turkey watch television every day and start to use computers averagely around the age of 8. When they are 9, they start to use the Internet and at 10 the mobile phones (Hatun, 2015).

Consumerist industries like the television, new media tools and outdoor advertisements create violence and challenge consumption.

Especially in developing countries, among the societies that are not economically powerful, the new media tools have a more significant impact on the children from these groups in terms of causing violent behaviour. Moreover, it is a fact that the children and adolescence users of the new media could be exposed to high levels of violent and pornographic images, which could distort their cognitive abilities (Owens, et al. 2012).

Additionally, there are video games that are thought to present a perfect setting for unlimited violence which is very easy to reach for everybody from different age ranges: “this way of understanding computer games might be seen at work where they are understood as offering a carnivalesque space in which the violence and fear of the contemporary social order is made excessive and played out as a game” (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006, p.31). Regarding the argument that video games are the source for easy-to-reach violence Dovey and Kennedy quote from Guest (2005):

It has been estimated that up to 27 million people per week pass through virtual online worlds, a third of them from South Korea, which has the highest broadband penetration of any country. In Seoul, Inspector Byong Il-sung of the Korean Cyber Terror Unit estimates that his unit has to deal with 100 real life attacks on online gamers per month. Real embodied violence and pain spills over from the virtual world as players avenge themselves on one another for online defeats and betrayals (p.2).

Especially new media tools that ease communication such as: Twitter, Facebook and Whatsapp have become the foremost messaging applications of the social media which are used by all kinds of individuals from every part of the world. Among these, Twitter and Facebook are used by terrorist organizations to create inaccurate knowledge and disseminate it in order to deceive authorities. Moreover, religious and ethnic enmities are created and spread via the tools of new media to all levels of society. Besides this, new media tools are also used by these organizations to share information on bomb making or other explosive substances. Mumbai terror attacks that happened in 2008

could be one of the most significant examples of the usage of technology to create violence in society. These 12 attacks in one of the biggest cities of India were actualized with the help of Blackberries, GPS navigators and anonymous e-mails that lasted from 26 November till 29 November and caused the death of 164 people and left at least 308 wounded. As the products of consumerism, single-use or disposable software and hardware are used by the terrorists to be one step ahead of the state authorities. Regarding the usage of new media by the terrorists which makes them the "global guerrilla", in 2007, former U.S. Central Command chief General John Abizaid complained that despite the power of their communication tools "this enemy is better networked than we are" (Shachtman, 2008).

Among many of the products of new media, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook became irreplaceable tools that were used by most of the people from all levels of society, especially children and adolescents. More recently, they started to be used by the gang members to threaten and fight with each other and sometimes this leads to the killing of each other. This act of online violence which usually ends up in murder is called "cyber-banging" (Corley, 2015). With regard to this, strikingly a news item reports that:

A crime linked to Facebook is reported to police every 40 minutes. [In 2011] officers logged 12,300 alleged offences involving the vastly popular social networking site. Facebook was referenced in investigations of murder, rape, child sex offences, assault, kidnap, death threats, witness intimidation and fraud [...] In some cases, arguments conducted on the site led to 'real world' violence, while in others pedophiles used it in an attempt to groom children (Doyle, 2012).

Arendt underlines that: "the practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world" (1969, p. 80). In this sense, the transformation of the traditional society with civic values into a society which has its foundations on consuming everything rapidly causes this new kind of entity to be identified by the emotions of distress, lack of interest, estrangement, disaffection, and unhappiness.

Therefore, in an era in which new media tools rule the everyday actions of the people, the post-modern consumer society turns into an entity that speaks and writes fast, using short sentences. As the speed of life accelerates, consumption becomes continuous, life is procrastinated, people eat fast and gain weight faster and after that they want to get rid of this weight as quickly as possible. Disposable products become the ideological tools for consumerism. Single-use products include not just toys, clothes, furniture, food, houses, but also lovers, relationships, marriages, and friendships. People only look at the computer screen or the television set. In these times, social networks are not only used for fast consumption, but they also play an important role in organized crime, in creating gangs, spreading fear and acting violently especially by high-school teenagers.

5. CONCLUSION

CONSUMING VIOLENCE WITH NEW MEDIA

New media and its social tools have transformed the way in which individuals communicate with each other and share their experiences. The relationships become more interactive, people become more accessible. Actors started to follow the news not only from online newspapers but also from friend feeds of Facebook and Twitter. Discovering new people, constructing networks or starting and launching business became much easier requiring little money for advertising. The average individual's communication channels expand and their power to influence others has increased considerably.

Besides the ease of communication, freedom of expression or strengthening the business and social networks, this revolutionary effect of new media tools create some disadvantages for societies. Here, one might include consumerism, eroding intimate relationships, and dissemination of aggressive messages. Hence, all the tools of new media require to be used responsibly.

Consequently, this study reveals that new media strengthens consumer behaviours, fraudulence, and violent activities. The users of new media tools could take part in deviant

activities which contain violence, sexuality or drug abuse. Also, video games which contain violent images are not considered as being appropriate during the growth of the children who are vulnerable to outside stimulants. Thus, in the long run, video games are thought to cause criminal behaviours. Furthermore, today some terrorist organizations use new media tools to reach their gruesome activities.

The insecure feelings and fear that is pumped by the consumer society could be beneficial for the economy in the short term. However, in the long run, this would have some side effects. Manipulation of people, especially adolescents and children, by fear and anxiety could be devastating. Thus, fear can limit the capacity of individuals by capturing their energy and paralyzing them. On the other hand, when that energy reveals it might be irresistibly strong. It is the same as the violent revolutionary movements that gained their momentum and the support from the crowds who organized themselves using the communication tools of the new media and present a brand new society that is based on egalitarian values. Events such as the 2011 London Riots, Occupy Wall Street protests in New York, and Gezi Park demonstrations of Istanbul, show that this is a significant era which is shaped by rapidly emerging communication tools and therefore the essence of politics will be changed accordingly.

A well-functioning democracy has its roots on the proper dissemination of knowledge. The new media tools' easy adaptation to the political power and its reachable position to the public make it one of the strongest elements of post-modern consumer society. New media could be considered as responsible for the dissemination of faulty knowledge, violent messages that sometimes contain sexual elements and motivate individuals to increase consumption. However, people should accept their own responsibility and be conscious of what they consume as news or entertainment. By doing this, the actors could prevent consumption from defining who they are. Being a consumer should not constitute the sole identity of being an individual.

Every era has gone through several changes and currently we are experiencing the popular

culture and times of consumerism. Our society is one that adopts the consumerist culture in which the commodities and the idea of possession settle at the centre of the community. However, this is an ultimately precarious base on which to build the future. In a society like ours, where insatiability and consumerism are the dominant characteristics, we are living under serious influence of the new media.

The large and traditional media industry is not likely to be abolished in one night, nor will the habit of talking to people on the phone, sending them letters or communicate with them face to face. But the social tools of the new media present various methods of reaching other people, and information. If this is used as suitable for its purpose of getting knowledge about what happens in the world this makes new media an effective and useful source which facilitates the development of the humankind.

However, this phenomenon that affects our post-modern era big time is not always used for the relevant good deeds. The fact is that the definition of violence has not been clearly made; the explanations about the content that new media users consume and the potential consequential aggressive acts have not yet been totally revealed. Therefore, the big picture for understanding these issues has not yet been put forward. The hardship of determining the impact of consumption and violence in a solid way makes it harder to answer the question: Does new media encourage people to commit violent activities in consumer society? The hope is that this study would make a contribution to these researches, thus it aims at presenting the relationship between the consumer society, violence and new media. Therefore, it is essential to deepen the investigation in order to understand the effects of the new media tools and perform more scientific tests to decrease the number of criminal acts originating from social media, especially among children and adolescents. Regarding that, shutting down the computer could not save us, people, from our responsibilities. Friends, relationships cannot be deleted by just pressing one button. Citizens should be aware that danger does not need to knock on their door to become reality; violence is always out there even if we try to ignore it.

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