

# *From Consumption of Goods to Consumption of Symbols—Analysis and Views on Baudrillard's Theory*

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**Abstract:** It is possible for people to consume material and spiritual goods since they have been produced. The form and substance of consumption have also changed after the development and transformation from traditional society and industrial society to post-industrial society, which makes consumption no longer a pure economic behavior but more integrated with cultural and social factors. This paper aims to point out the practical significance and defects of Baudrillard's theory by analyzing it.

## **1. The Substance Evolution from Consumption of Goods to Consumption of Symbols**

### **1.1. Consumption in Traditional Society and Industrial Society**

Consumption and production are inseparable, which is reflected in the facts that after human being gradually developed from the initial slash-and-burn cultivation to the plow-and-bull cultivation, the production of material materials has become easier, and the accumulation of material materials has also started, which has become the most basic guarantee of consumption. The initial consumption can be divided into two stages, that is, consumption in the period of self-sufficiency and consumption in the period of barter exchange. The former is confined to its own production circle and has a very simple purpose, that is, to satisfy its own survival. While the latter has got rid of its own production circle in terms of scope and started to complement each other in other production circles. As a result, there is a diversified trend in the types of consumption and a flow of consumer goods. The further development of exchange has promoted the emergence of currency, the variety of consumption styles and so on. In this period, the most obvious feature is that the civilian spiritual consumption began to appear in large quantities (in earlier times, spiritual consumption was only the privilege of the princes and nobles). In the consumption of traditional and industrial society, it is easy to find that people take a very large proportion of the consumption of means of subsistence, and consumers value the substantial meaning of consumer goods more, or in other words, they pay more attention to practicability. Essentially, their consumption is consumption of goods.

## 1.2. Consumption in Post-industrial Society

The two industrial revolutions witnessed the great enrichment of material means of production in society and the great change of people's thinking in production and life. During this period, more luxury goods emerged, covering a wide range of goods, and many people were chasing for them because of their high prices and relatively long history and certain connotations. Besides, people begin to pay more attention to the quality-to-price ratio of ordinary consumer products. It is not difficult to find that this kind of consumption with the attribute of unlimited expansion of consumption circle accompanied by global integration is a consumption that has begun to get rid of the use value of goods and more points to the symbols contained in goods.

## 2. Consumption of Symbols as the Core of New Consumption Culture

Consumption culture is accompanied by the emergence of consumption, and its change and development to a certain extent reflects the value orientation of a country or society as a whole. In traditional society, because of the opposition between the two classes, there were two modes of consumption culture in that time, that is, the royals and nobles preferred fresh and unusual items by virtue of their status, while the common people focused more on practical use in consumption. In the industrial era, the consumption culture was no longer divided into two classes as in the traditional society, but more complicated due to the further differentiation of the classes. Each class had its own consumption culture, but with common characteristics at a certain point in time, which were "manipulated" by machine production.

The industrial revolution not only brought about the improvement of the production technology and the quality of life, but also intangibly added many thoughts of industry into the way of thinking of people, which went through the entire industrial society. After entering the post industrial society, people's thinking mode in many fields had changed into a dimension, and consumption was a typical example. In the post-industrial society, a brand-new consumption culture emerged, which was a more macroscopic and more abstract consumption culture, regardless of classes and types of consumer goods. "In this society, we have changed from being enslaved by things to being dominated and disturbed by symbols. Modern consumer society has become not only a world of goods and things, but also a world of symbols and a kingdom of symbols" [1]. In the kingdom of symbols, all the consumption of people is covered by the symbols. Whether it is people's discussion about buying cars or cosmetics, or whether they like to use the same thing for a period of time, they are all affected by it. Clearly, consumption of symbols is at the core of the new consumer culture. In Baudrillard's view, this new consumption culture centered on consumption of symbols is different, or even opposite. In traditional consumer culture, practicality is often considered, but in new consumer culture, other elements are weakened because symbols dominate. For example, under the guidance of the old consumer culture, more attention is paid to the quality and comfort of a tie, but under the guidance of the new consumer culture, more attention is paid to the symbolic value behind the tie, such as the history of the tie manufacturer.

## 3. The Development of Consumption of Symbols and Online Games and Consumption of Luxuries

### 3.1. Consumption of Symbols and Online Games

Online games, the product of network technology development, have entered innumerable families and contribute more and more to the economic development. Moreover, as one of the most

important products in the industrial age, online games have received much attention. Because the online games are developed by means of the network platform, they are virtual to some extent, that is, when playing the online games for entertainment, there are more spiritual than material enjoyment. After creating a game account, players will use the resources provided by virtual platforms to develop in a variety of ways, thus completing one task after another, to some extent satisfying their own vanity or things that cannot be done in the real world. If the economic benefits of online games are stripped out, then there are only some virtual symbols left. Essentially, as a form of non-real economy, online games are not of high value in use, but there are many hidden symbols behind them. Therefore, the online games have developed very fast in this period under the guidance of the new culture of consumption dominated by the consumption of symbols.

### **3.2. The Development of Consumption of Symbols and Luxuries**

In a broad sense, luxuries are already available in slave society when they are rare things that only the royal highness and the nobility can enjoy. Instead of discussing luxury goods of that period, here is a series of luxury goods that have gone through the history of industrial society and have been pursued by people in post-industrial society. Luxury goods then mainly have the following characteristics: brands with certain historical background; once or being used by a certain noble; high prices, etc. When people are asked why they chase after luxuries, they will say "in order to let others see the difference in their identities". Luxury goods, to some extent, make use of symbols such as noble use to make them the objects that everyone would like to pursue. In an era of highly developed industrial production, it is not difficult to produce a commodity by means of machines, but if it is handmade and culturally endowed, the commodity has a symbolic value that goes beyond the use value, and if measured by money, the symbolic value is more valuable because it symbolizes the underlying meaning and a long history. Modern people's pursuit of luxury goods has completely got rid of the use value of goods, because in their eyes, whether the goods have too much use or not is not important because the symbolic meaning behind the goods can change their status. If the economic elements of luxury goods are removed and only the symbol is retained, then luxury goods are more suitable for collection rather than consumption (of course, collection is also a kind of consumption).

### **4. The Practical Significance and Deficiency of Baudrillard's Theory**

First of all, in theory, Baudrillard analyzed the industrial society and the post industrial society deeply, pushed the theory of materialization and alienation of the Frankfurt school to a new stage and developed them to the criticism of the symbol field, which was a great innovation in theory, making people more deeply aware of the various crises of modern society. Secondly, on the practical level, Baudrillard's theory on the value of symbols can guide some enterprises to do their own brand and corporate culture, so as to achieve good results in the cruel market competition. The deficiency of Baudrillard's theory is that his thoughts contradict each other in the early and later periods. In the earlier period, he did not completely deny the referential characteristics of symbols, but in the later period, he completely negated the referential characteristics of symbols and "entered the kingdom of symbol games" [2,3]. According to his theory, people are completely ignoring the practicality of goods while consuming, but only caring about the symbols of goods, which is inevitably radical and proves that his logic is fundamentally inverted at the end.

### **References**

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