

**BRATISLAVA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS**

**The Pursuit of Happiness in the Age of Capitalist Realism**

**BACHELOR THESIS**

**Elvis Takahashi Mantello**

**Bratislava, 2023**

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**BACHELOR THESIS**

Study Program: Liberal Arts  
Field of Study: 3.1.6. Political Science  
Thesis Supervisor: PhDr. František Novosád, CSc.  
Qualification: Bachelor of Arts (abbr. 'BA.')Submission Date: March 10, 2023

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**Bratislava, 2023**

## **Declaration of Originality**

I hereby declare that this bachelor thesis is a work of my own and has not been published in whole or in part elsewhere. All literature sources used in this thesis are attributed and cited in references.

June 12, 2023 Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

In Bratislava

## Acknowledgements

I want to express my sincere appreciation to my thesis advisor for his support, Prof. PhDr. František Novosád, CSc.

This study was made possible also by consulting with Prof. James Griffith and PhD. Lukáš Siegel.

I finally want to thank my good friend, Adam Hamza, and Filip J. Lupsina for helping me translate to Slovak for some sections of the thesis and my family members for their unconditional love and care.

## ABSTRACT

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Thesis Title: The Pursuit of Happiness in the Age of Capitalist Realism

University: Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts

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Place, date, scope of the thesis: Bratislava, June 12, 2023, 23 pages (49 687 characters)

Academic Degree: Bachelor of Arts (abbr. 'BA')

*Keywords:* capitalism, consumerism, modernity, enlightenment, neoliberalism

Modernity has created a world where people are often objectified and treated like commodities solely for material productivity and capital gains. According to Milton Freedman, the freer the market, the freer the people, has not remained true to its motives. The ideology of neoliberalism encourages modern society to adopt a consumer and business-oriented lifestyle that leads to a world where people become estranged from one another. Neoliberalism, in turn, degrades the quality of life because it overlooks intrinsic fulfillment, such as developing better human relationships and striving for cohesive and collaborative societies. The ideas and promises of more remarkable development and progress associated with modernity often seem to stumble across paradoxes, such as with the concepts of individualism, tolerance, and scientific reasoning. In turn, the contradictions often diminish the inherent promises of modernity and leave many people to experience a world of secular and nihilistic realities that regresses their pursuit of a satisfying life.

This study examines the emergence of modernity and its relations to human conditions that have led to a society driven by consumerism and plagued by alienation. Drawing from seminal philosophical literature and several case studies, this paper explores the rise of hyper-consumerism. I argue-corporate media and late-stage capitalism have exacerbated division and alienation in the 21st century. The research also indicates that the correlation between corporatocracy, consumerism, and capitalism has given rise to financial logic and lessened individual sovereignty and autonomy.

## ABSTRAKT

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Názov práce: Hľadanie šťastia v dobe kapitalistického realizmu

Univerzita: Bratislavská Medzinárodná Škola Liberálnych Vied

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Miesto, dátum, rozsah bakalárskej práce: Bratislava, June 12, 2023, 23 pages (49 687 znakov)

Stupeň odbornej kvalifikácie: Bakalár (Bc.)

*Kľúčové slová:* kapitalizmus, konzumerizmus, modernita, osvietenstvo, neoliberalizmus

Modernita vytvorila svet, v ktorom sú ľudia často objektivizovaní a je s nimi nakladané ako s tovarom použiteľným čisto v rámci materiálnej produktivity a kapitálnych ziskov. Milton Friedman vyhlásil: „Čím slobodnejší trh, tým slobodnejší ľudia.“ Jeho výrok však nezostal verný svojmu motívu. Ideológia neoliberalizmu stimuluje modernú spoločnosť ku prijatiu konzumného a biznisovo orientovaného spôsobu života, ktorý neskôr vedie ku svetu, ktorý ľudí od seba odlučuje. Neoliberalizmus následne znižuje kvalitu života, pretože prehliada vnútorný ľudský rozvoj, ku ktorému patrí napríklad rozvíjanie lepších medziľudských vzťahov a usilovanie sa o súdržne spolupracujúce spoločenstvá. Nápady a sľuby väčšieho rozvoja a pokroku spojené s modernitou často narazia na paradoxy, akými sú napríklad koncepty individualizmu, tolerance a vedeckého zdôvodňovania. Následne tieto protirečenia často degradujú inherentné sľuby poskytnuté modernitou a zanechávajú mnohých ľudí v svete sekulárnych a nihilistických realít, ktoré brzdia ich snahu o naplňujúci život.

Táto štúdia skúma vznik modernity a jej vplyv na ľudský stav, ktoré viedli k spoločnosti riadenej konzumom a sužovanej odcudzením. Táto práca, vychádzajúc z kľúčovej filozofickej literatúry a niekoľkých prípadových štúdií, skúma nástup hyperkonzumu. Korporátne médiá a kapitalizmus neskoršej fázy zhoršili pocity odcudzenia v spoločnosti. Výskum taktiež naznačuje, že súvzťažnosť medzi korporatokraciou, konzumom a kapitalizmom viedla k finančne hnanej logike a znížila suverenitu a autonómiu jednotlivca v spoločnosti.

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## INTRODUCTION

Modernity's principles of progress and development have contributed extensively to many societies. The scientific and technological advancements fostered by modernity have forever changed how humans see themselves and the world around them (Brey, 2003). The constant evolution of technology and wealth creation has led to new consumption and material practices that transcend physical geographical borders. It becomes evidenced by multinational capitalism and image-driven advertising, and hyper-consumerism. Jameson (1983) calls such developments products of the post-modern age.

Importantly, modernity and its promises are often contradictory. Many people in modernity feel dissatisfied with their lives due to alterations in human experience, specifically, rapid societal and cultural transformations stemming from technological progress and the growing desire to quantify happiness through material acquisition. Arguably, the rise of the internet has affected notions of the self, causing individuals to see themselves not in the Cartesian sense but as self-formed in context to relations with others, often with individuals they have never physically met. As a result, the individual has become more of a networked self (Papacharissi, 2010). While optimists such as Henry Jenkins (2006) argue that the digital revolution has democratized society by connecting everyone to everyone, proponents argue that it has created more divisive communities driven more by emotions and feelings than rational logic and scientific facts. The abstraction of community in networked society has also spawned hyper-individualism. In other words, notions of subjectivity become increasingly negotiated in the virtual world.

Neoliberalism is an economic policy and an ideological project for the corporate capitalist class that intends to reshape society's principles (Harvey, 2016). Its market-oriented policies have helped shape a hyper-consumerist society. Characterized by its propensity to privatize public goods and services and reduce government spending and taxation, neoliberalism concentrates power and wealth on a small group of elites. The consequences of neoliberal politics and economic policies can be said to contribute to the rise of authoritarian populism, as emulated in the rise of Donald Trump, who personified how public discourse could become influenced by the mediation of so-called truths (McCarthy, 2019). Without a doubt, neoliberalism has hastened



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social inequality, degraded the importance of community, and aggravated environmental destruction.

As Jean Baudrillard (1987) contends, modernity and its contradictions reveal the historical and political impact of brutalism underlying colonial missions to tribal or traditional societies (p. 69). Modernity, for the French philosopher, acts as a conceptual and ideological force. He believes that modernity and its presumptions to formulate ideas whereby an entire civilization comes to rationalization, this cultural regulation falls into the traps of tradition due to its superstitious functionality. The forces of modernity create an ethos of universalization, with consequences that have led to the destruction of indigenous life habits. A good example is the Europeans' discovery and colonization of the Americas. The exploratory dreams of Christopher Columbus were financed by a nascent capitalist system that brought extreme violence against indigenous people, forced them into physical and (spiritual) slavery, and transported lethal diseases into their communities, eventually wiping out significant percentages of local populations.

This thesis examines the relations between hyper-consumerist societies and the contradictory nature of modernism. I argue that modern wealth creation and consumption capitalism have negatively impacted the quality of life by wrongly equating connectivity to 'togetherness.' I suggest that the paradoxical obsession with virtual subjectivities defined by their material world accentuates the processes of alienation. As a result, modern-day consumerism has become a central player in shaping contemporary public discourse and the post-modern condition.

In the first chapter, *Contributions and Achievements of Modernity*, I discuss the underlying historical, social, and political factors that led to the cultivation of Western values and ethics in modern liberal societies. These include Enlightenment ideals that gave birth to modern-day capitalism and globalization. Chapter Two, *Alienation and Modernity*, discusses the consciousness of modernity and its relations to the concept of estrangement. Utilizing the more traditional philosophical interpretations by Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno, I discuss the ontological problems of modern-day society, precisely the rise of the crisis of hyper-consumerist identity. In the third chapter, *Post-modern Reflection*, examines the loss of individuality in hyper-consumerist societies. I argue that consumerism has stripped

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people of their autonomy, leading to a sense of discontinuity with society. It explores the consequences of consumer-driven individualization, tracing its development from the postwar era to the digital age. By adopting a post-modern approach, the chapter critiques the so-called achievements of modernity and the contradictory nature of the Enlightenment period (Harrington, 2005). In truth, the concept of postmodernity challenges the nature of rationalization. The last chapter then addresses the rise of social network services that created the networked self and hyper-consumerist identities. It examines the role of social media and hyper-consumerist cultures' impact on identity and mental health issues.

## CHAPTER I: The Contributions and Achievements of Modernity

As a product of the Enlightenment era, modernity is often associated with a time of progress and the validation of science, reason, and technology. Philosophical inquiries into modernity by enlightenment figures such as Immanuel Kant argued that enlightenment was a “man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage ” (1784, pg.1). Kant believed individuals were innately capable of being rational agents and of having the capacity to utilize reason. He argued that individuals should critically assess their own lives without the guidance of another. He suggested this would lead to a more enlightened, virtuous, and advanced society. Kant’s concept of enlightenment becomes tied to notions of individual sovereignty and tolerance. It strongly opposed the brutal absolutism of monarchical rule and the dogmas laid down by the church. His writings asserted the need for a post-traditional way of social existence. As modernity became prevalent after the middle ages, Western society experienced rapid transformations such as industrialization, globalization, and a stronger emphasis on individualism. These included all social, political, and economic developments that changed how most people conducted human relationships and how people thought.

It goes without saying that capitalism played a decisive role in shaping the values and ethos of modernity as they now stand in a Western liberal society. Nevertheless, its reaction toward mercantilism is crucial to the rise of capitalism. Importantly, Adam Smith’s notion of a market-driven and consumer-based system was a fundamental alternative to mercantilism. Smith criticized mercantilism for its power maximization through nation-states with autarky pursuits. As Bassiry *et al.* (1993:622) write:

“In its quest for autarky, mercantilist political economy required a high degree of administrative centralization; it was thus consistent with nondemocratic political institutions as well as non-competitive (i.e., monopolistic) domestic economic structures. Mercantilism benefited producers and entrenched interests at the expense of consumers and the growing middle classes, who were forced to pay inflated prices for domestically produced goods which were shielded from foreign competition by various protectionist mechanisms.”

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For Smith, mercantilism neglects the customers' interest and benefits the producers and their entrenched interests. Smith argues that the free market economy was an idea that pursued individuals' interests that would contribute to enhancing a nation's wealth. Hence in Smith's view, mercantilism was an obstacle to creating a free market economy. He wanted to abolish the harsh restrictions and controls over trade, favor government subsidies to specific industries for people to be more competitive, and incentivize economic growth through free market capitalism.

Considering Smith's model of capitalism, the notion of fulfilling human and material needs for the whole of society was an achievement in modernity. It was premised on the belief that the welfare of citizens was intimately linked to providing goods and services, which reflected the market forces of supply and demand. Although, it is essential to note that the economic system proposed by Smith did not last long as one might hope. In practice, Smith's version of capitalism becomes less prevalent over time due to the overwhelming concentration of wealth and market power.

For Smith, self-interest is not based on greed or selfishness because he believes a rational person ought to be cooperative, fair, and prudent (Werhane, 2019). Put into practice in the coming centuries and the realities of the present day, it is hard to say what is so rational about capitalism's impact on wealth inequality, environmental problems, and exploitation of workers. However, simultaneously, if we revisit the concepts related to Smith's theory on self-interest, it is possible to expand certain perspectives of 'moral capitalism.' Ethical considerations of the capitalist economic system would imply that the distribution of wealth could provide inclusive growth and counter the issues of wealth polarization (Ogman, 2020). Ethical capitalism tries to create a system that benefits both the owners of businesses and the grand scheme of society and the world. Ethical capitalism can be realized in companies that include profit-sharing systems for their workers. However, in truth, the current reality is that contemporary capitalism crucially misses these moral and ethical considerations in terms of paying fair wages, giving adequate and safe working environments, and investing in social capital projects.

Furthermore, it is hard to separate capitalism and globalization. Globalization and hyper-consumerist society also go hand-in-hand because the global marketplace has impacted cultures worldwide and shaped notions of self. As Pieterse (2008:2) contends, “[w]ith capitalism comes the idea of the world market, which becomes extended in world-system theory and categories such as ‘global capitalism.’ With free trade, globalization created an interdependent world economy that affected different cultures and societies. Proponents of globalization emphasize that such interdependence would unite individuals from differing contemporary origins, reinforcing identity unchained from local traditions or the complexity of their civilizations (Arnason, 1990). Rather globalization would significantly increase the movement of investments and generate a steady flow of knowledge and ideas. In his seminal article, ‘Globalization: what it is and who benefits,’ Johnson (2002) notes four essential factors to the benefits of globalization. First, it amassed rapid communication of ideas. Second, the spread of ideas through globalization transformed them into material products and processes. Third, globalization has spread literacy and outstanding education worldwide. Fourth, globalization concretized the flows of integrative institutions and policies.

### **1.1 Individualism and Modernity**

However, critics of globalization argue that the phenomenon has exacerbated the increasing rise of hyper-consumerist identities, which has led to unsustainable and excessive consumption lifestyles, aggravated by the homogeneity of mass media narratives, advertisements, and consumer goods (Esposti, 2012). The notion of hyper-consumerist identity entails that the subject completely dismisses the state or a social group’s precedence to determine its independence value. As a product of modern individualism, hyper-consumerism opposes any essentialist identification of the individual. Instead, in modernity, people conceive individualism as something external to a group, unlike the premodern conception (Arlinghaus, 2015). Instead, modernity places the individual excluded from society or not bound to a group. Modern individualism prioritizes the democratic tendencies of individual reasoning. Influenced by the process of individualization in modernity, contemporary society orientates itself into a functioning system of a large sum of individuals. For Ham (2000), individualization also unleashes a scale of individual creativity that influenced entrepreneurship and bred a society in which people became selfish and self-centered.

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On the one hand, this chapter raises awareness of the contributions and achievements of modernity. As argued, modernity has positively influenced global cultures, politics, and economic relationships. Modernity strives to systematize itself on equality, tolerance, and individualization principles. On the other hand, products of modernity, such as globalization, have harmed local cultures, politics, and local economies. The next chapter explores the darker side of modernity by drawing from leading philosophical thinkers.

## **CHAPTER II: Alienation in Modernity**

Drawing from Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno, this chapter argues that consumerism has stripped people of their autonomy and led people to experience a sense of discontinuity in modern society. Considering these philosophers' ideas, there is a more nuanced description of capitalism's role in creating alienation. The common affinity between these philosophers is that it vehemently criticizes the alienating effects on people in modern society.

### **2.1 Karl Marx**

One essential and most well-known criticism of modernity comes from Karl Marx and his interpretation of alienation. Marx believed that the individual's alienation was a critical effect of modernity (Augoustinos, 1999). Marx contends that the economic relations born by capitalism, which arose during the Industrial Revolution, became a dominant pre-condition of modernity and drastically changed the lives of individuals. He argued that the worker's exploitation and their fruits of labor reduced to exchange value led to the conscious reality of alienation under the dominating sphere of capitalist modes of production. Marx (1884) writes, "[a]lienated labor has resolved itself for us into two components which depend on one another, or which are but different expressions of one and the same relationship. Appropriation appears as estrangement, as alienation; and alienation appears as appropriation, estrangement as truly becoming a citizen".

Concurring, Thompson (1979) states, "Throughout this development, alienation is a function of being estranged from one's product, labor, himself and his social relationships. This is a result of capitalist exchange relations". Being removed from direct interest or ownership in the products they produce, Marx argues that the alienated individuals and workers of capitalism become disconnected from their authentic selves. These alienated members of society are not dignified but instead belittled.

Marx then examines the temporal and material relations regarding private property and class struggles under capitalism. Alienation pivots around the social stratification of members of society by their specific job and income level (Burston, 2014). Often workers had nothing but

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their labor power and were valued for their work merely through exchange values while the capitalist reclaimed surplus for self-interest, which resulted in exploitation. “This common fate put them in hostile contrast to the capitalist, partly because they were exploited by him, and partly because modern machine production reduced them to human fragments, not allowed to exercise their rational faculties” ( Bendix, 1952). In return, Marx believed that the workers became dissatisfied and numb to their worth because the capitalists devalued them. For him, capitalist exploitation led to the decline of workers’ mental and physical health (Yuill, 2005). Marx points out that the capitalistic political and economic stances had workers often uneducated because they lacked institutional support. They were exhausted from their working conditions and stripped of their spiritual significance.

Although there have been numerous technological changes in the 21st century, the realities of alienation remain similar to Marx’s time. In advanced countries, polarization in labor market opportunities has become more prevalent. While there is an increasing number of well-paying white-collar jobs involving high skills in developed countries, these primarily depend on an invisible low-wage labor force from the global south. Automation and artificial intelligence increasingly make many jobs from the previous century redundant (Goos & Manning, 2003). This phenomenon accompanies the excessive division of labor in capitalism, for those high demand work in engineering or IT companies against the minimum wage workers and the decrease in opportunities. As Marx would argue, the division of labor under capitalism produces inegalitarian social structures. In modern-day corporations such as Amazon, automation becomes increasingly used as a surveillance tool and aids in deskilling labor and making them replaceable machine cogs. The excessive division of labor and workers ushered in through automation produces a new form of alienation in the capitalist system.

### **2.2 Friedrich Nietzsche**

Connecting Marx’s conception of alienation to Friedrich Nietzsche’s ideas on nihilism supports the critique of modern-day society and the human condition. Nietzsche foresaw a significant scale in the problem of modernity. He believed that in modern society, the gravest issues had to do with individual crises and the desperate condition of men falling into a state of inertia, that of nihilism. As Nietzsche (2001/2008:119-120) writes:



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“The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. ‘Where is God?’ he cried; ‘I’ll tell you! We have killed him - you and I! We are all his murderers. But how did we do this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns?’”

Nietzsche illustrates the madman rushing to a crowd to announce that God is dead and we, the people, have killed him. The madman is insistent with his proclamation and alludes to despair, meaninglessness, and bewilderment. The madman’s questions and uncertainties lead to a critical point for Nietzsche that directs toward the precedent of nihilism. He goes on to ask:

“Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren’t we straying as though through an infinite nothing? Isn’t empty space breathing at us? Hasn’t it got colder? Isn’t night and more night coming again and again? Don’t lanterns have to be lit in the morning? Do we still hear nothing of the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we still smell nothing of the divine decomposition? - Gods, too, decompose! God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!” (p.120)

The madman’s frustration signifies the realization of nihilism as a reality. Nietzsche believes that the madman helps to portray a vigorous critique of modern societies. He underlines that the growing distance of traditional authority, morals, and values hints at the gravity of nihilism entering the new world.

Often a handful of people fail to understand what Nietzsche’s point on the death of God meant. I suggest that Nietzsche was not triumphing over the death of God, as many naive atheists might hope he contended. Instead, Nietzsche argued that the emergence of Enlightenment stopped the possibilities of the existence of God. In other words, he suggested that traditional morals and customs would fall out of sync with the realities of the modern world. Although Nietzsche fervently criticizes Christianity, what Nietzsche worried most about was the death of God as a signpost of the growing lack of spiritual guidance in modern society and, in turn, the rise of

nihilism. He suggested that the loss of traditional ways of life and morals only heightened anxieties of modernity, leading to a crisis in society. Hence Nietzsche was convinced that the rapid collapse of conventional morals in the modern and secular world would inevitably lead humanity to despair, paranoia, devastation, and nihilism. Nietzsche saw that the growing social attraction to materialism would lead to massive decadence and bring the human condition into a dismal state of inertia. For Gurwitsch (1945: 187), this form of nihilism in the modern world has also experienced the emergence of totalitarianism. He says, “[t]he totalitarian movement is, so to speak, the culmination of nihilism: all its elements and all the tendencies originating therein may be found again in the totalitarian ideology.” Hence, modernity finds its consequences of a different form of oppression compared to pre-modernity.

### **2.3 Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer**

Although modernity and Enlightenment often prioritize progress and technological advancement, it also creates a scale of repression in people and nature. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2016), Adorno and Horkheimer argue that modernity’s roots in Enlightenment focus on advancing thought resulted in a dramatic social and intellectual movement in the 17th and 18th centuries. According to them, the Enlightenment attempted to replace the irrational superstitions and fantasies of the world with rational formal logic. They assert:

“Reason as the transcendental, supra-individual self contains the idea of a free coexistence in which human beings organize themselves to form the universal subject and resolve the conflict between pure and empirical reason in the conscious solidarity of the whole. The whole represents the idea of true universality, utopia. At the same time, however, reason is the agency of calculating thought, which arranges the world for the purposes of self-preservation and recognizes no function other than that of working on the object as mere sense material in order to make it the material of subjugation” (Horkheimer, & Adorno, 2016, pg. 65).

For Adorno and Horkheimer, Enlightenment assumes a superior position beyond tradition and myths, recklessly subsuming nature and people. They argue that knowledge limitlessly enslaves nature and people under power. They write, “ Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its defense to worldly masters” (pg. 2). For these

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thinkers, Enlightenment overpowered traditional religious beliefs using rational thought. They argue that the pursuit of knowledge impacts an individual's relationship with themselves to the point that their consciousness is no longer subjective but objectified. Not only does Enlightenment overpower the subject, as Adorno and Horkheimer argue, but it also subjugates nature through domination by knowledge. Like Gurwitsch, Amy Allen (2014) suggests that Adorno and Horkheimer's idea of Enlightenment could foster totalitarianism. She writes:

“On their understanding, the concept of Enlightenment is not in itself barbaric or totalitarian; rather, it is deeply ambivalent, in the sense that it contains the potential to descend into barbarism and totalitarianism. But it contains other potentials as well, including the potential to reflect on its own regressive tendencies, to hold up a mirror to itself, and to break through its own limits” (21).

For Allen, the two philosophers believed that under Enlightenment, human beings are apt to rule the world, but the cost of rulership, the domination of a few over the many, inevitably leads to alienation. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, Allen suggests that Enlightenment has a homogenizing effect that brings life to mob rule. A good illustration of this can be evidenced in the rise of totalitarian regimes in the 20th century, such as the Nazis and pseudo-Communist states which built their popularity on racial purity and the idea of superior nationhood.

Thus, Marx argued that alienation becomes a ubiquitous consequence of modernity. Workers under the capitalist mode of production transform into replaceable cogs of a machine. As a result, they are not simply dehumanized but robbed of their creative dignity and spiritual significance. For Nietzsche, modernity's focus on science eradicates the importance of tradition and leads to disillusionment, and many experiences a fatalistic vision of the world. He warns of the dangers of people devoid of purpose and meaning that would come after the decay of traditional morals and values. Finally, Adorno and Horkheimer address the processes of rationalism under modernity, specifically regarding the repressive tendencies that could evolve with enlightenment thinking. They believed the ethos of Enlightenment had forced individual subjectivity to become objectified. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the contradiction of Enlightenment was to construct values that supposedly meant to liberate individuals from the power relations of feudalism.

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However, knowledge and rationalism would only usher in new forms of domination and subjugation of the masses.

## CHAPTER III: Postmodern Reflection

In the era of Postmodernity, modernity asserts itself through the use of skepticism and criticism toward reason. The role of postmodernism as a philosophical inquiry is to deconstruct the belief system that gave rise to modernism and its attempt to perfect human life. For example, for postmodernists, the notion of freedom on which modernity and the Enlightenment become predicated is seen as illusory and a device to enforce productive labor and political rule under capitalism. This is why postmodernists constantly contest the grand narratives of modernity and their ideas of progress as imperative to social harmony and welfare. Postmodernism then provides a skeptical view of modernity's achievements and the rational project's promises as motivations from the Enlightenment.

### 3.1 Illusion of Freedom

In his seminal work, *Discipline and Punishment* (1995), French philosopher Michel Foucault examines the emergence of a state-centered disciplinary society in the 18th and 19th centuries. For Foucault, unlike sovereign-centered displays of power, in a disciplinary society, social control asserts itself through a disciplinary panoptic gaze (Foucault, 1995). Foucault believes that the disciplinary gaze spreads from various institutions – the school, the workplace, the prison, and the hospital. The purpose of the disciplinary gaze, Foucault argues, is to create docile bodies necessary for capitalism. However, unlike Foucault's disciplinary society, where individuals have little choice but to relinquish their free will, in his seminal article, 'Postscript for Control Society' (1992), Deleuze suggests that social control in modern society works through positive reinforcement. Like Aldous Huxley's dystopian *Brave New World* (1932), Control Society functions mainly through positive reinforcement. Control is better when it uses positive rather than negative reinforcement. And the majority do this without any hesitation.

Consequently, the sense of autonomy within the Control society has ultimately become replaced with the illusion of freedom. In other words, in the modern world, people voluntarily give up their private information, data, and independence to subversive forms of domination by state institutions and corporations. This can be evidenced by the perks and benefits offered in social credit systems, social media platforms, and frequent flyers or preferred customer cards. The

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Control Society aims to create docile and subservient bodies like a disciplinary society. However, rather than obedient bodies in the brick-and-mortar enclosed spaces of factories, prisons, schools, and hospitals, these subservient bodies are encouraged to engage in online activities and move through coded spaces that track and harvest their personal data. For Deleuze, these electronic systems and their algorithmic character use the illusion of personalization to shape user behavior and mold their consumption practices, such as participating in social media and enhancing their online memberships, whether they be Netflix, Amazon, or Instagram.

Moreover, Deleuze refers to the individuals as ‘dividuals’ because their identity transforms into a numerical abstraction through data harvesting. In other words, each person retains a data double connected to a myriad of personal information that is constantly monitored. So while in a disciplinary society, power is operated through surveillance of the physical body, in a Control Society, power runs through the surveillance of their numerical signifier or ‘dividual.’ Unlike Foucault’s disciplinary society, in a Control Society, power is exercised through algorithms that funnel individuals into like-minded groups (echo chambers) to heighten their engagement with content that purposely targets their deepest emotions – fear, hate, and anxiety.

Control society aims to prolong user engagement and to ensure that the user returns to the platform by responding in Pavlovian fashion to constant stream notifications throughout the day. In other words, the techniques and strategies of domination do not require negative reinforcement or physical enclosures (like within the disciplinary society associated with the prison, the school, or the factory). Rather control is based on individual connectivity and the behavioral data harvested from their actions. In turn, the behavioral data becomes utilized to target, persuade, manipulate, and nudge the individual for political or commercial purposes. Deleuze also argues that a society of control no longer sees capitalism as a format of production but rather which focuses solely on product marketization or strategies to sell them. Deleuze’s ideas of Control Society and what he had accurately predicted were the emergence of surveillance capitalism.

The Cambridge Analytica Scandal is a fine example of Deleuze’s conception of Control Societies. Cambridge Analytica harvested personal data from the profiles of millions of Facebook users without their consent (Wang et al., 2021). They went as far as to utilize those data to fill

Facebook users' news feeds with often persuasive and misleading political advertisements for both Donald Trump's election campaign and the Brexit UKIP party in 2016. Facebook breached its data protection laws and failed to secure its users' private information. No doubt was Cambridge Analytica Scandal successful in shaping public discourse. After all, it helped Trump to win his political campaign and helped Brexit to take place. As the control society focuses on its control method to individual connectivity and behavioral data, the Cambridge Analytica Scandal, harvesting people's information to shape public discourse, reflected an excellent example of Deleuze's theory.

Like Cambridge Analytica, computational propaganda accelerates social control by using sentiment analysis to target people's emotions. Nevertheless, Cambridge Analytica is not the only private company that shapes people's perceptions of the world. It is also Facebook, Google, and other social media companies, as well as hosts of advertisers, who have powerful effects on how individuals perceive themselves and the world around them (Woolley & Howard, 2018). Moreover, social media is an excellent reference to the social credit system in China. Our reputations and public relations are scrutinized by peer-to-peer image-obsessed online communities. Moreover, corporations and state institutions increasingly exploit our data doubles for economic and political means. Algorithms and big data harvesting now play a significant role in deciding university enrolment, future jobs, health care premiums, and bank loan applications (Newmark, 2012).

### **3.2 Augmented Discontinuity**

The advent of social media has accelerated hyper-consumerist subjectivities. As 20th-century French philosopher Guy Debord accurately predicted, modern society's excessive reliance on images and representations would only increase. Critically, Debord foresaw symbols and images supplanting reality. His work serves as an essential starting point for critical inquiry into the impact of networked society on modern-day consumer culture.

In *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967/2014), Guy Debord traces the postwar rise of consumer culture. Debord argues that capitalist exploitation and alienation reach a new stage far more significant than what Marx had earlier envisioned. Debord argues that capitalism finds itself in an

augmented form predicted not merely on solving fundamental issues of supply and demand needed for profit and survival. Instead, in *Society of Spectacle*, he suggests that capitalism now finds itself at a regenerated and finds its highest form in the accumulated image. He suggests that individuals become obsessed with images and representations, and as a result, they become divorced from reality. This image obsession manifests itself in the growing ocular-centric nature of mass media (less text, more image) and its identity-driven consumer culture counterparts such as Instagram, TikTok, and others.

Like Marx, Debord also believed graver consequences lurked in commodity fetishism. Capitalism in Marx's generation focused on the immense accumulation of commodities. However, for Debord, "[t]he spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes the image" (49). Commodity fetishism plays a new and integral role in this new stage of capitalism, personified in the world of advertising. In the society of the spectacle, consumers have become alienated from the creative process. Instead, they focus merely on consumption. In the current stage of capitalism, the things we utilize no longer require our time and effort to create them. Material things lack their inherent value, and their visual signifier surpasses them. The social appeal of the product means much more than the actual substance of the material item. Hence, Debord believes society today has receded into representations where symbols and images matter more than substance and reality.

### 3.3 Jean Baudrillard

Like Debord's philosophy on the spectacle, in *The System of Objects* (1996) by Jean Baudrillard, he points out that the birth of the symbolic exchange has created new responsibilities for consumers in the modern world, especially under neoliberalism. He writes,

"In symbolic exchange, of which the gift is our most proximate illustration, the object is not an object: it is inseparable from the concrete relation in which it is exchanged, the transferential pact that it seals between two persons: it is thus not independent as such. It has, properly speaking, neither use value nor (economic) exchange value. The object given has symbolic exchange value. This is the paradox of the gift: it is on the one hand (relatively) arbitrary: it matters little what object is involved. Provided it is given, it can fully signify the relation. On



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the other hand, once it has been given - and because of this - it is arbitrary, and yet absolutely singular” (Baudrillard, 1981, pg. 64).

The symbolic exchange is thus goods and services with no intrinsic value and becomes purely exchanged for symbolic reasons. Baudrillard then argues that symbolic exchanges have now determined an individual’s social stratification. In comparison, Marx understood social stratification through economic relations related to the means of production. Owners of production assume a higher status than their workers. However, Baudrillard saw class status in terms of the products of consumption. For example, the person who drives a Volkswagen Beetle is on a slower status scale than the person who drives a Ferrari. Baudrillard believed that credit and symbolic exchange had a new form akin to religiosity. Similar to the ideas that of radical consumerism. Baudrillard writes,

“Restriction of any kind on the possibility of buying on credit is felt to be a retaliatory measure on the part of the State; to do away with such arrangements - which is in any case unthinkable - would be experienced by society at large as the abolition of a freedom.” (1996, pg. 156).

Baudrillard contends that mass consumption is a new form of religiosity. New modes of credit and finance exist as a new dimension of work and life under capitalism. Baudrillard notes the vital role of advertising and its intersubjective relationship with the credit system. Baudrillard believes that the new ads are designed to psychologically manipulate people into consuming objects within image-based advertisements. Take the example of many McDonald’s promotions. Grinning smiles stretched across the McDonald’s customers’ faces in their advertisements while holding products such as ‘Happy Meal’ illustrates a new dimension to consuming objects. For example, the energetic sensations experienced among consumers of Coca-Cola in advertisement videos signify that pleasure is realized with the consumption of their product. These ads show a functioning order under consumer capitalism that settles on ideals and fantasies. Consumer religiosity becomes supported through the accelerated guise of the simulacra and the symbolic exchange.

### 3.4 Capitalist Realism

Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* (2009) exemplifies the post-modern condition. Fisher argued that within a neoliberal society, an individual's feelings or ambitions become molded by capitalist ideology. For Fisher, one of the great tactics of capitalism is to appropriate counterculture. Fisher points to how persons such as Cold War revolutionaries such Che Guevara became commercial icons whose images ended up on T-Shirts. Fisher also addresses Kurt Cobain as one of neoliberalism's significant victims who eventually became co-opted by the ideology diminishing the authenticity of punk music. For Fisher, the collapse of the Soviet Union heightened the idea that there does not exist any substantial alternative to capitalism. Under late capitalism, Fisher asserts that capital reaches into every aspect of life, commodifying all walks of social existence. Fisher contends, "...students want Nietzsche in the same way that they want a hamburger; they fail to grasp – and the logic of the consumer system encourages this misapprehension – that the indigestibility, the difficulty is Nietzsche" (2009, pg. 23-24).

Arguably, Nietzsche is not a consumable product filled with instant gratification like a McDonald's burger. Fisher suggests the superficial nature of consumer capitalism ignores deeper inspection of life, such as understanding of philosophy, instead "... credit pretends to promote a civilization of modern consumers at last freed from the constraints of property, but in reality, it institutes a whole system of integration which combines social mythology with brutal economic pressure" (Baudrillard, 1996: 162). Like Baudrillard, Fisher sees individuals in modern society as uncritically assuming they have a responsibility to purchase and consume.

Thus, to close this chapter, what is common to this phenomenon is discontinuity due to the lack of substance in social relations, whether with material things or interacting with other people. Again, what Fisher, Debord, and Baudrillard have in common, is that they see the destructive nature of consumerism in the post-modern world.

## Chapter IV: The Networked Self, Influencers and Hyper-Consumerist Identities

Social media has emerged as a paradigm shift in how modern subjectivity forms. Platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat allow for new ways for individuals to construct and negotiate their identities. According to media theorist Zizi Papacharissi (2010), new forms of subjectivity become created in which the "...networked modalities of sociality and identity performance develop around social network sites" (para. 1). She calls this new subjectivity, 'the networked self.' Unlike Descartes' singularity of the self-contained Cartesian Self, the networked self functions as a fluid state of the self made in concert with others, often made from an individual's private space, and with those who the individual has never met that is formed as a result of its connection to others. The self is reflexive, meaning they become accustomed to maintaining coherence in representing varied spectators and networks.

On the one hand, these new forms of identity creation could offer new dimensions to personal expressions. However, it also signals a community that dwells on superficial interactions and media consumption as a primary way it operates. This media consumption becomes tied to all parts of an individual's identity.

So the question arises, how do these new forms of identity creation lead social and material relations of the world to human satisfaction? The hyper-consumerist identity operates in tandem as part of the networked self. In other words, social media facilitates the creation of a hyper-consumerist identity by allowing it the conduit of communication and social affiliation. Social media provides the necessary platform for hyper-consumerist individuals to build and mold their identities through consumption patterns. The hyper-consumerist identity extends to the networked self because it has become a predominant tool for expressing individualism through social media platforms and reaching diverse social networks.

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The social media influencer is an exemplar of a hyper-consumerist identity. The influencer embodies the ethos of consumer culture – as their identity and social capital become linked to fame and monetary wealth. Thus, symbols and values for the hyper-consumerist culture mainly target audiences who negotiate their own identity along the same norms (Moravčíková, 2022). As Moravčíková argues, “The media and popular culture have created a modern system of social regulation and coercion. They force individuals to demonstrate their personal prestige through trends constantly, because only those individuals who follow such principles are worthy of other people’s attention” (144-145).

Thus, the social media influencers’ role in society is a signpost of the networked self and how modern subjectivities become linked to building social capital through consumptive activities. The tension arises when the networked self stumbles across influencers and the reflexivity of undermining individuals’ self-esteem. “...these tendencies question and downgrade our true understanding of -self and -selves and contribute to further fragmentation of our cultural identities and the sense of social integrity” (pg. 146). In this context, the excessive consumption pattern for social media users relates to influencers’ role in promoting branded items as a form of advertisement within their profiles. This digital marketing of the networked self affects individuals to be entangled with the associated brand and reflect on their self-esteem compared to the influencers as a desired and reputable standard. Consumer retention monopolized by social media companies also signifies the hyper-consumerist society.

“SNS has disrupted almost every single industry, from the way we shop, search for jobs, talk to loved ones, and everything in between. This symbiotic relationship between society, mobile devices, and SNS seems to strengthen more with every passing day, especially considering the advancements in mobile technology. New digital devices are engineered to be efficient, irresistible, and highly addictive” (Laeder, 2018, pg. 6).

According to Laeder (2018), social networking sites become deliberately designed to addict users to engagement and reinforce the precepts of consumer culture where social capital is vital to identity. Negative self-esteem and reflection made by the Networked self encourage them to find a representation of an idealized version of themselves. In return, people feel insecure and are

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overtly self-critical. Concurringly, Laeder argues, obsessive consumer culture has become omnipresent in creating social network services that endorse marketizing the networked self (pg. 7). He states that social media platforms such as Instagram entangle the usage of photo-centric images (selfies) that promotes users as a brand. Platforms like Instagram reinforce consumer retention/engagement by creating an environment that enables the ideas of authentic or personal branding. Instagram influencers also have the advantage of developing strong followership and partnering with companies to target meticulous audiences. As Laeder points out, “consumer culture relies on blurring the distinction between wants, needs, and must haves” (8). At this point, consumption becomes fueled by constant connectivity - no doubt instant gratification as a reinforcing tool shaping new dimensions of content consumption.

Interestingly, Wallace (2019) extends the concept of a networked self and the idea of a contemporary subjectivity formed in dialogue with others. She argues, “the self also changes over time, acquiring and losing traits in virtue of new social locations and relations, even as it continues as *that* one Self” (para. 5). It is an amalgamation of personal, physical, and social relations that constructs the individual in this case. But the more exciting part of the networked self is it is a process. Wallace highlights that consciousness is merely a fluid motion of attentivity. In that case, a psychological disposition is also naturally in flux – meaning that social traits also change. But it is important to recall that others must preserve some social characteristics to reclaim their identity. But the transitional self is in constant motion that is not fixed nor predetermined. But at the core, the self is merely a network notion. Wallace also argues that the networked self is not at all restricted to choosing a path of self-determination, but again mentioned earlier, it is a reflexive and self-understanding phenomenon.

Formulating the networked self’s basic structures helps navigate the conflictual identity creation in a hyper-consumerist society. The immediacy and competitiveness of social media companies’ consumption strategies reinforce internal conflict for individuals. As mentioned earlier, this could affect the individual to experience mental health issues but also the pressure to conform to norms and trends. The networked self does not necessarily become restricted in its self-determination; however, in a hyper-consumerist society, social network services deteriorate identity creation due to the encroachments of superficial conformism and distorted self-perception.

## CONCLUSION

This research aimed to identify why many people in the modern world feel dissatisfied or alienated. Based on qualitative research by focusing on case studies and historical overview and utilizing philosophical inquiries, the thesis concluded that many of the discontents of modernity felt by many revolve around a sense of dividedness, social disorders, and alienation. The result indicates that modernity and its relations to the consciousness of estrangement often influence many to experience a sense of discontinuity and nihilism.

This research was able to underpin some of the greater discontents of modernity. These ranged from the paradoxes of modernity to the more ontological impacts of the modern world at the individual level. Although philosophy was a great tool to analyze the discontents of modernity, it would have also been insightful to utilize more psychology to understand the human mind and its behaviors. Nonetheless, the ontological approach used in this study adds nuance and clarity to knowledge but also supplements a perspective toward the reality of modern people.

Practitioners could consider and explore a variety of philosophical theories in this study. To better understand the research and the results, future studies could help enrich some of the practical knowledge highlighted in this thesis to expand the quest to uncover many more discontents of modernity.

The discontents of modernity perceived through philosophy and qualitative research helped give new insights and better understand the world where we live. It helps to organize some of the main issues people go through in modernity and to raise some of the most critical questions to find ways to enrich human life. This study aimed to expand people's perception and assist them in being more skeptical of the appraisals met with modernity in general.

In conclusion, this study discovered that modernity underlines a significant role in changing societal, cultural, and economic relations. Modernity has brought positive outcomes in the world concerning social development. However, modernity has also impacted society to experience nihilism. The process of commodifying human life through consumer culture and the eroding roles

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of traditional morals and values have led many people in the modern world to feel alienated and exploited for their spiritual significance. The paradoxes of modernity signify that a better way to enrich human life requires once more a careful reflection.

## Résumé

V tejto práci skúmam vplyv modernity a hyperkonzumných spoločností na ľudí a kultúru. Tvrdím, že moderné generovanie bohatstva a konzumerizmus viedli k mylnému presvedčeniu, že „vzájomné prepojenie“ je zároveň aj „pocitom spolupatričnosti“ čo vedie k negatívnemu vplyvu na ľudí a ich kvalitu života. Tiež zdôrazňujem paradoxnú a prehnane obsedantnú povahu virtuálnych subjektivít, ktoré vplývajú na materiálne statky a zvýrazňujú procesy odcudzenia.

Zároveň argumentujem, že dnešná kultúra konzumu ovplyvňuje verejný diskurz a postmoderný stav. Výskum ukazuje, že neustály vývoj technológií a generovania bohatstva vytvoril nové konzumné vzorce a materiálne praktiky, ktoré prekračujú geografické hranice. Je to preukázateľné hlavne reflexiou o nadnárodnom kapitalizme, reklamou riadenou obrazom a hyperkonzumom. Výskum taktiež preukazuje prepojenie rolí medzi korporatokraciou, konzumerizmom a kapitalizmom, ktoré významne prispievajú k stavu postmodernej doby. Predznačuje to vzostup monetárnej mentality ako normy, ktorá je zakorenená v spoločnosti a záverečne sa prejavuje znížením suverenity a autonómie jednotlivca.

Navyše, vzostupom internetu zároveň vznikol aj hyperindividualizmus. V tomto kontexte je to subjektívna aktivita, ktorú je možné vykonávať iba vo virtuálnom svete. Rápidne spoločenské a kultúrne zmeny, ktoré idú ruka v ruku s technologickým pokrokom, ilustrujú rastúci pocit šťastia spotrebiteľov, ktorý je vypočítateľný skrz materiálne zisky. Vo veku digitalizácie a hyperkonzumnej spoločnosti sa predstavy o vytváraní identity zmenili skrz nové spotrebiteľské vzorce v rámci sociálnych médií, ktoré často premieňajú ľudí na povrchných, či príliš sebakritických jednotlivcov.

V prvej kapitole svojej práce píšem o prínose a úspechoch modernity. Skúmam historické, sociálne a politické faktory, ktoré kultivovali západné hodnoty a etiku v dnešných spoločnostiach. Dôkladne som analyzoval ideály osvietenstva, keďže boli kľúčové pri vytváraní súčasného kapitalizmu a globalizácie. Modernita vsutku zohráva úlohu pri ovplyvňovaní spoločnosti v zásadnej miere, a to pozitívnym spôsobom týkajúcim sa globálnych kultúr, politiky a hospodárskych vzťahov. Taktiež však ukazuje aj svoju negatívnu stránku v podobe globalizácie, ktorá poškodzuje miestnu kultúru, politiku a ekonomiku.



Druhá kapitola analyzuje procesy odcudzenia vo vnútri modernity. Využívam myšlienky filozofov ako Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Horkheimer a Theodor Adorno v rámci diskusie ontologických problémov modernej spoločnosti. Nadväzujem na vzostup krízy hyperkonzumnej identity a dôsledky modernity. Marx tvrdil, že odcudzenie sa prejavuje v povedomí modernity. Pracujúci sú dehumanizovaní a zbavení svojho autentického Ja a duchovnosti. Nietzsche videl vzostup nihilizmu v modernom svete. Opisuje ako sa modernita viac a viac zameriava na vedu, čo vedie k rozkladu tradičných, morálnych a hodnotových princípov. Taktiež podčiarkuje zarážajúci moderný svet a nebezpečenstvo nihilizmu. Nakoniec Adorno a Horkheimer diskutujú o procesoch racionalizmu v modernite a o tom, ako spôsobuje represívne tendencie spojené s osvietenstvom. Adorno a Horkheimer verili, že osvietenstvo bolo silou, ktorá zmenila individuálnu subjektivitu na objektivitu. Napriek tomu, že osvietenstvo malo konštruovať myšlienky oslobodzujúce jednotlivcov, Adorno a Horkheimer argumentovali, že poznanie a racionalizmus viedli k novým formám dominancie a podrobovania nás.

V tretej kapitole stručne a postmoderne reflektujem o strate individuality v hyperkonzumných spoločnostiach. Zdôrazňujem, že konzumná kultúra zbavila ľudí ich autonómie a vytvorila nesúrodú komunitu. Kapitola ďalej skúma individualizáciu, ktorá je riadená konzumerizmom a zároveň má črty asimilácie s digitálnou dobou. Výsledkom toho môžeme pozorovať, že najbežnejší fenomén kvôli povrchnosti vnútri sociálnych a materiálnych vzťahov je nesúrodá spoločnosť. Vo svojej podstate, kapitola uvádza postmodernú kritiku výziev v rámci nátury racionalizácie.

Posledná kapitola sa venuje vzostupu sociálnych sietí a ich vplyvu na tvorbu identity v modernom svete. Skúmam v nej úlohu sociálnych médií a vplyv hyperkonzumných spoločností na jednotlivca. Súťaživá povaha firiem vlastníacich rôzne sociálne siete a plánované stratégie spotreby, ako napríklad udržanie zákazníkov, posilňujú vnútorný boj firiem o spotrebiteľov. Zosieťovaný jednotlivec, ktorý nemá vopred predurčené Ja či obmedzené sebaurčenie, ale ktorý sa v dôsledku hyperkonzumnej spoločnosti dostáva do rozsiahlych vnútorných problémov, pretože ho tlak tejto spoločnosti núti prispôbiť sa novým formám spotrebiteľských vzorcov a materiálnych praktík. Preto sa jednotlivec v hyperkonzumnej spoločnosti často začína pozeráť sám na seba skrz skreslenú predstavu.

Táto práca dospieva k tomu, že modernita výrazne ovplyvnila spoločenské, kultúrne a

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ekonomické vzťahy. Opäť zdôrazňujem, že modernita priniesla aj pozitíva. Avšak zároveň vytvorila spoločnosť, ktorá môže čeliť nihilizmu. Spotrebiteľský životný štýl a komodifikácia ľudského života podkopali spokojnosť ľudí a zneužili ich duchovný význam. Táto práca sa zaoberá paradoxmi modernity a navrhuje hľadať lepšie spôsoby, ako obohatiť ľudský život, ktorý si vyžaduje starostlivú reflexiu o záležitostiach diskurzu a myslenia.

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