

# Fromm's Consumption Alienation Theory and Its Enlightenment to China

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**Abstract:** *On the basis of Marx's alienation theory and Lukacs's materialization theory, the concept of alienation consumption was What Fromm believes is that people become goods in the society of consumption, the purchase of goods is no longer for their use value, the consumption of people also changes from means to purpose Fromm creatively added the perspective of psychology to carry out the Fromm creatively added the perspective of psychology to carry out the analysis on consumption alienation on the basis of Marx's alienation theory, who had always followed the principle of humanism. When it comes to the theory of consumption alienation put forward by Fromm, it has a profound enlightenment for our country, which When it comes to the theory of consumption alienation put forward by Fromm, it has a profound enlightenment for our country, which has also played an important guiding role for the perfection of the actual consumption problems in our country.*

**Keywords:** *Fromm; Consumption alienation; Consumer society*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Fromm was one of the key members of the Frankfurt School. Along with Marcuse and Adorno, he launched a strong social critique of developed capitalism. However, Fromm's theory of social criticism inherited the traditional Marxist theory and Freud's psychoanalytic doctrine, and demonstrated the uniqueness of his theory by providing another dimension of criticism of capitalism from a new perspective of social psychology. He saw that in the consumer societies of the developed capitalist countries, alienation was not alleviated but rather intensified, that society produced more goods in order to create the possibility of a more dignified life, but that the production and consumption that actually took place was no longer a means but an end, and that people went mad with production and consumption. "In a 'pleasure' consumer society, instead of the good promised by consumption, people achieve a false pleasure and thus lose the pleasure of creation. Fromm argues that people should not express themselves through the possession and consumption of goods, but should realise their value through their existence and creation, and that they should develop a healthy way of consumption in order to achieve a 'healthy society'.

## **II. Key elements of Fromm's theory of consumer alienation**

### **(i) People become commodities**

In the consumer society of developed capitalism, not only does the relationship between man and things become alienated, but more exaggeratedly the relationship between man and himself also takes on a state of alienation. "Man does not only sell commodities, but he also sells himself, he sees himself as a commodity of some kind. The manual worker sells his physical strength, the merchant, the doctor and the clerk sell their 'personality'." [1] In such an alienated society, man is no longer evaluated by judging whether he has developed freely and fully, but by the degree of success he achieves in a consumer society, i.e. what kind of work he does in society, how much wealth he brings to this work, how much exchange value this person has in the competitive market. The human being has been turned into a commodity, his or her position and social relations have been objectified, and social evaluation criteria have hidden in a corner the freedom, happiness, creativity and dignity of the human being.

"Since the modern man experiences himself as both a seller and a commodity in the marketplace, his self-esteem is dependent on conditions beyond his control. If he 'succeeds', he has value; if not, he is worthless." [2] (P145) Fromm notes that transactional personality has become a dominant phenomenon in consumer society, where people's so-called 'success' becomes a reproducible case, where people's identification with themselves is mainly derived from the market's feedback on their external conditions, and where this distorted and alienated personality has gradually become commonplace in consumer society. This distorted and alienated character has gradually become commonplace in consumer society.

### **(ii) Purchases are no longer made to obtain the use value of the goods**

Whereas goods were originally produced to satisfy the demand for their use value, they are now often purchased to get their added value. Even if the person who is the subject does not understand a particular field at all, he or she can become the best in that field through the injection of money. There is nothing to lose except the loss of money. "People are often satisfied with the possession of the object to be preserved, rather than with the possession of the object to be used. People take pleasure in preserving an object because the fetish of possession is satisfied and its social status is shown." [3] But people cannot achieve true happiness through possession; they get only transient happiness. "If one obtains existence only in one's mind, and not a feeling of fullness of happiness from within, then this is at best a pseudo-pleasure, or a pseudo-happiness, not related to a real emotional experience, but a feeling thought." [4]

### **(iii) Transformation of consumption from a means to an end**

Consumption has always been used as a means to promote the full development of the human being, and its initial purpose was to satisfy the needs of people at all levels of society, but if consumption ceases to be an autonomous act and becomes one act of "exchange" after another to satisfy the desire for possession in a transactional context, people may endlessly seek more goods than they really need and see consumption as an end in itself. The growing need for consumption "The ever-increasing need to consume compels us to keep buying, thus making us dependent on this inflated consumer demand and on those people and institutions that can satisfy our needs." [5] Consumerism has intensified the desire to consume throughout society, turning people's consumption into a blind, irrational lack of behaviour. Everyone wants to consume to obtain the latest and best

goods on the market as a way of showing their personal status and superiority, but how to properly use the value of the goods and enjoy it becomes secondary.

At the same time, the psychological trait of forgetting the old and the new is intensifying as the desire for consumption is further intensified. Desire drives people to consume new goods, even if the use value of the old ones has not disappeared. Fromm argues that in the context of consumerism, the attitude of the middle class towards commodities has changed dramatically. Whereas at first the middle class was attached to the products it possessed, today the middle class is attached to new commodities only in the initial phase of novelty, and the rapid iteration of products has led to a situation where people's consumption needs are dominated to the greatest extent by their desires. This is the alienation of consumption and, above all, the alienation of human beings.

(iv) Measuring everything in terms of money

In the modern consumer society, people are used to measuring everything around them in terms of money, and the whole process of living is like an investment for profit. Money was originally a pure form of exchange, but in today's society people see money as an end in itself, human interaction has become more instrumental and all interactions have become more calculable through the measurement of money. The individuality that should characterise human interaction has been uniformly replaced by an attitude of measuring things on their own merits. "They position themselves through consumption, including branding their individuality and ego, forming a self-identity, showing that they are different, and different from others; expressing their values, cultural tendencies, and lifestyles through consumption." [6] This attitude of measuring everything in terms of money also extends to people's leisure activities, especially in the allocation of their leisure time. The allocation of people's leisure time is not a free act, but a mobilised, deluded domination that follows the act of consumption. This pastime of leisure activities does not bring about any change in the human heart, but at best a certain memory of enjoyment left after some act of consumption. The use of money as the measure of everything is the alienation of life brought about by a consumer society.

(v) Indifference in consumer relations

The alienation of modern consumer society is also present in human relations. Due to the extremely fast-moving and changing nature of modern society, clan and blood relations are no longer as unbreakable as they once were and human relationships are full of indifference. This relationship is also present between businessmen and consumers. "For the businessman, the customer is merely an object at his mercy, he does not see the customer as a specific person to be served. We can also see that people have become tools by their attitude to their work." [7] In the eyes of the businessman, the consumer is just a machine to be dominated so that the consumer can pay for the goods, and the businessman will use various means to ingratiate himself with the customer in order to facilitate his consumption, but when the whole process is complete, the businessman will quickly put away his ingratiating attitude and replace it with an indifferent consumer relationship. Likewise, consumers are indifferent to merchants, for whom the mall is merely a place to satisfy their desire for possession, and once they need to upgrade their consumption, they develop entirely new consumer choices and habits. "Merchants and customers each use the other as a means to an end; they become instruments to be used by each other rather than by each other." [8]

### **III. REASONABLENESS AND LIMITATIONS OF FROMM'S THEORY OF CONSUMER ALIENATION**

#### **(i) Reasonableness**

##### **1. adds a psychological perspective to Marx's theory of alienation**

Marx's theory of alienation was discovered through an analysis of aspects of social relations of production and social institutions in which human labour is alienated. On this basis, Fromm focused on the subtle psychological activities of people in a consumer society, explaining the reasons for the alienation and alienation of people in all aspects of consumer society. Whereas Marx's theory of alienation has a more macro perspective, exposing the phenomenon of alienation in capitalism from the most basic point of view, Fromm is combining the theories of Marx and Freud in different fields, explaining the phenomenon of alienation in modern society through a more micro-level psychoanalysis, and critiquing the phenomenon of alienation in capitalist society where people compensate for the psychological fear and emptiness of reality through consumption. This analysis from the perspective of micro-psychoanalysis is a further enhancement of the study of alienation theory and provides a completely new way of thinking for subsequent research in alienation.

##### **2. follows the principles of humanism**

In today's consumer society, people's material living standards have reached an extremely rich stage, but the construction of the spiritual world is extremely lacking. Modern people are used to compensating for the emptiness under the fast-paced social life with a lot of consumption behaviour. Fromm was concerned about this and actively advocated the all-round development of the personality on the basis of following humanism. Fromm advocated that people should reduce their desire for possession of objects and focus on the progress of their lifestyles, so as to realise the richness and integrity of the human being and enable people to make active choices and develop freely and comprehensively.

In his analysis of capitalist consumer society, Fromm expresses his concern for human existence and the plight of reality. He has always combined his theories with social issues, giving a sense of the humanistic concern of his theories. The humanist concern that Fromm embodies in his theory of consumer alienation has a key value for us to build a society of harmonious coexistence.

#### **(ii) Limitations**

##### **1. idealistic in its practice of eliminating alienation**

When faced with the problem of eliminating alienation, Marx argued that it had to be achieved by means of violent revolution. Fromm, however, advocated a peaceful and moderate approach to the problem, opposing violent revolution and hoping for a psychological revolution to eliminate alienation.

On this aspect of the elimination of alienation, Fromm's views are full of contradictions. On the surface, Fromm is coldly critical of capitalism and also very vocal in his prayer for the complete elimination of the negative results of the bourgeoisie. In reality, however, Fromm is mostly idealistic in his practical approach, ignoring the essence of the Marxist revolution and failing to correctly apply the revolutionary experience drawn from the relevant Marxist-Leninist theories at the practical level. It can only be said that Fromm, on the basis of his affirmation of Marx's socialist ideas, offers unique insights and contributions to the correct understanding of alienation and the summation of social laws.

It can be seen that Fromm was naïve and 'gullible' when it came to the elimination of alienation, and although he had a profound understanding of the importance of changing capitalist society, he failed to find the right practical means to improve the social malaise. Even though Fromm had identified that the key to the alienation of capitalist society was the problematic ideology and social system of that society, his path to reform did not reflect a hard-line approach to change. Perhaps this is also because Fromm's critique of capitalist society as a bourgeois scholar was not comprehensive and revolutionary, and his hopes for the elimination of alienation rested purely on the micro level of psychological reform, which inevitably led to an idealised and ultimately unrealisable path of practice.

#### 2. lack of intrinsic connection with Marxist theory of alienation

Marx's theory of alienation was at first mainly at the level of labour alienation. The early alienation of labour was more influenced by Hegel and Feuerbach and was expressed as alienation on a humanistic level. But Marx, after further exploration and especially on the basis of the establishment of a materialist historical view, formulated alienation as the materialised relationship between capital and commodities and labour in society.

From a humanist perspective, Fromm's understanding of Marx's theory of alienation is monolithic; he simply places Marx's theory of alienation in the context of humanism and does not pay further attention to the theory going deeper into social history; Fromm cuts off the internal logic of the Marxist system of alienation theory completely, which makes Fromm's system of alienation theory always lacking in social history and difficult to overcome the system's own Limitations.

### **IV. IMPLICATIONS OF FROMM'S THEORY OF CONSUMPTION ALIENATION FOR SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF CONSUMPTION ALIENATION IN CHINA**

Despite the limitations of Fromm's theory of consumer alienation in some respects, his understanding of the loss of subjectivity and creativity in a consumer society is worth acknowledging. Fromm's theory of the alienation of consumption makes us fully aware that consumption should not be a simple act of possession and enjoyment, but should be a process in which human subjectivity is fully expressed and the value of the act of consumption is reflected. Moreover, consumption should be in accordance with the principle of "moderation"; blind and excessive possession is irrational and undesirable, not only for the individual, but also for the harmonious relationship between man and nature, and between man and society. Although there are many differences between capitalist and socialist societies in political and economic terms, there is still much to learn from each other on issues such as human needs and future survival and development. Therefore, Fromm's theory of consumer alienation still has an important reference and guiding significance for contemporary China with regard to the issue of consumption. Since China has entered a new era, there are still certain shortcomings in the establishment of social institutions, the improvement of supporting facilities and the regulation of individual consumption behaviour. In this regard, the following section will take the above-mentioned shortcomings as a starting point and elaborate on the inspiration of Fromm's theory of consumer alienation for China.

#### (i) The state should follow the laws of the market and improve the relevant social system

The state should take a variety of measures to address the blind consumption behaviour of the population. Income is always the most basic prerequisite for consumption, and serious imbalances in income levels inevitably

lead to extreme inequalities in spending power. Therefore, the state also needs to pay continuous attention to the needs of low-income groups and put the social security system into practice. The stage of victory in the fight against poverty in China is undoubtedly worthy of recognition, as it allows the whole country to truly solve the problem of food and clothing in a comprehensive manner, allowing the whole country to truly feel the "care" of the new era. However, the "disease of the rich and the poor", which is "big at both ends but small in the middle", is still serious, with wealth in the hands of a few people and the pressure of life on the majority. A series of social problems such as "difficulty in going to school", "difficulty in seeing a doctor" and "difficulty in housing" continue to exist. The obvious contrast between the rich and the poor has led to a serious "generation gap" between consumers, and many people have even developed a pathological consumer mentality, such as excessive borrowing and blind consumption, due to the psychological impact of the gap between the rich and the poor, which not only greatly affects the normal conduct of personal life, but also undermines the harmony and stability between consumer groups in society. Therefore, the state should further strengthen the construction of people's livelihood, improve the efficiency of the conversion and implementation of the social security system, and guarantee the basic needs of the residents; strengthen the construction of social infrastructure, reduce the gap between urban and rural areas, and pay attention to the medical level, education level and other aspects closely related to people's lives in less developed areas; improve our tax policy system, raise the starting point of personal income tax, implement progressive tax rates, and further raise the consumption tax rate on luxury goods and increase the taxation of consumption taxes (mainly on high-grade and luxury non-essential goods, as well as consumer goods that are not suitable for health and are destructive to resources and the environment). [9]P83

Secondly, the state should also take measures to curb the prevalence of a consumerist culture. Consumerist culture, initially concentrated in the developed capitalist countries, is characterised by a kind of consumption-oriented behaviour that intensifies the desire for possession within consumers. With the acceleration of globalisation, this unhealthy concept of consumption has gradually spread to China, and with the stimulation of new media, the speed and scope of its influence has worsened. Therefore, the state should pay more attention to the phenomenon of consumerist culture, expand the breadth and depth of publicity on moderate and reasonable consumption, play the role of the heritage of good Chinese culture, awaken people immersed in consumerist culture, and always promote the good practice of Chinese people to be frugal and simple. At the same time, it is important to understand and grasp the positive features and favourable factors of the new media, to give full play to its "speed and scope", and to make flexible use of the new media to convey to the general public a positive consumer culture in line with the core socialist values and to build a bridge between the state and the people for the efficient dissemination of "positive energy". The new media should be used flexibly to transmit positive consumer culture in line with the core socialist values to the general public and to build a bridge between the state and the people to efficiently spread "positive energy". Moreover, it is still necessary to control the new media as an emerging field with clear laws and regulations, to purify the online environment, to ensure the freedom and openness of information, to purify the online environment as much as possible, and to reduce the negative impact of the uneven online culture on the public.

(ii) Society should correctly grasp the foothold of consumption and improve the corresponding supporting measures

The impact of consumer issues on citizens at the societal level should be more direct and concrete than at the national level. First of all, when it comes to consumer issues, all sectors of society should always be guided by the point of need of the consumer and not only by their own interests, let alone by the use of behavioural analysis methods such as big data to manipulate consumer behaviour and habits.

Secondly, enterprises should pay attention to environmental protection in the production process, stop wasting resources, always adhere to the concept of "green water and green mountains are the silver mountain of gold", always pay attention to "carbon neutral", "carbon peak" and other related environmental protection policies, and take the initiative to assume their own social responsibility and social obligations. We should always adhere to the concept of "green water and green mountains are the silver mountain", always pay attention to the relevant environmental protection policies such as "carbon neutral" and "carbon peak", and actively take up our social responsibility and social obligation. We actively adopt a sustainable business strategy, cultivate a long-term development investment approach, and develop a strategic vision of social and economic integration in order to achieve the goal of harmonious social development and thus build a good consumer environment.

Finally, enterprises should strengthen the construction of their own comprehensive level and improve the synergy between various enterprises. As one of the important subjects of society, enterprises must keep abreast of the times, policies and developments. Only through constant institutional innovation and technological innovation can they always maintain their vitality and provide sufficient resources for the consumer market to be accurate. At the same time, enterprises should correctly recognise that vicious competitive relationships not only jeopardise the interests of enterprises, but also affect the vested interests of consumers, and that enterprises should treat competitive relationships correctly, strengthen cooperation and stand on a win-win basis to achieve mutual benefits.

(iii) Individuals should consciously value their role in the consumption process and regulate their consumption behaviour

Personal consumption is the most fundamental component of the consumption process, and the development of correct personal consumption habits also plays a vital role in the overall consumer environment.

Firstly, from a personal point of view, it is important to be deeply aware that consumption is for us a means to obtain the needs of a good life, not an end, and not to put the cart before the horse in the idea of consumption. Individuals must reduce their low-level desire for material possession, shift more energy from material to spiritual consumption, and raise their level of personal integrity in order to strengthen their ability to discern the culture of consumerism, which can at the same time repair and enhance the creative and critical abilities lost under the onslaught of consumerism.

Secondly, as individuals, we must change our consumer mentality. Since the onslaught of consumerism, people's desire for pleasure and quick success has become more and more serious. This simple attribution of the pursuit of life to sensual pleasures is an extremely narrow-minded view and behaviour, and even a pathological value. We should establish the right consumer mentality, see the all-round development of the individual as the goal of life, and learn to explore the true meaning of life's journey so as to gain a stronger sense of satisfaction in life. At the same time, as individuals we should abandon the misguided idea of quick success and quick profit. As society progresses, the emergence of a large number of talented people is bound to bring about greater social

competition pressure, which is an inevitable trend from the perspective of social development. In dealing with this trend, we should actively deal with the sense of pressure and frustration in competition, overcome all kinds of negative emotions, enhance self-confidence by constantly improving our own abilities, and stop a series of negative behaviours such as blind consumption under high pressure.

Finally, individuals should make good use of their leisure time to improve their capabilities. In a context where the gap between rich and poor is still serious and consumerist culture is prevalent, the term 'leisure class' has gradually emerged, a group of people whose lives are dominated by leisure and entertainment, almost divorced from productive activities, which is the negative impact of consumerism on one's leisure time. As individuals, we should make use of our leisure time to expand and deepen our capabilities, rather than making the recreational satisfaction of consumption the main theme of our lives. We should learn to seize the opportunity to use our leisure time to add to our own capabilities, to complete our pursuit of self-worth in life and work, to explore elegant needs and to realise our ideals.

## V. CONCLUSION

Fromm's idea of alienation combines Marx's theory of alienation, Lukács' theory of objectification and Freud's psychoanalytic doctrine, and sharply criticises the problem of consumer alienation in capitalist society on the basis of the disciplines of psychology and sociology. Moreover, Fromm is highly motivated to explore social change and psychological issues from the height and perspective of humanist concern, encouraging society to focus on the return of human subjectivity and gradually overcome the idea of consumer alienation.

It is undeniable that Fromm's alienation theory is somewhat idealistic, but as a stage theory of alienation, part of his analysis of the phenomenon of consumer alienation is worthy of our reference, especially the unique insights put forward in the elimination of the psychological dimension of consumer alienation bring us a new way of thinking, which has a very important reference value for our correct understanding of the current problem of consumer alienation in China. At the same time, it will also help us to build a more harmonious consumer environment, to pay more attention to human and social needs, and to achieve the return of human subjectivity and free and comprehensive development as soon as possible.

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