What Makes Us “Happy”

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“Ideology: a concept from the work of Louis Althusser, ideology is the system of beliefs and assumptions, the entire system of common-sense knowledges through which we all make sense of our ‘selves’ and our place within culture. Ideology always seems ‘natural’, but is in fact fully political and saturated by relations of power. Althusser explains that subjects are brought into social life in ideology through the mechanism of interpellation.” (p. 214 Interpreting Everyday Culture)

Ideology is something most people do not even notice or recognize their entire lives. “Life has become the ideology of its own absence.” (Theodor Adorno). Without knowing what ideology is, anyone can go on living his or her ideological way without ever even noticing it. Ideology, especially in American twentieth century culture, completely surrounds us in practically every way. From the way you answer your mother to the way you arrive to class before the bell rings, ideology is something we cannot escape.

Ideology exists in every suggestion we make. For example, when students wear backpacks, or book bags, to school, we are partaking in ideology. This is because the backpack is the assumed bag for the student,
along with the brief case for the businessman and the bowling bag for the bowler. Another example would be a simple hard hat. The hard hat is headgear for a construction worker, as is the helmet for the athlete, the top hat for the socialite, and the mortarboard for the graduate. These simple hats are symbols we all employ for different people, things, and etcetera. This is ideology. Little do we know, the level of ideology in our country is much worse than hats and bags. Ideology is what we all assume as something and is also what everyone can relate to each day.

“Interpellation: A term coined by Louis Althusser to designate the mechanism by which ideology ‘calls on’ individuals and constitutes them as subjects of and to itself. Althusser uses the metaphoric example of a policeman calling out in the street ‘Hey, you there!’ When an individual recognizes this call is directed at her or him, s/he turns around in answer, and has then been successfully interpellated by the policeman’s call. Similarly, when we recognize that the call of ideology is meant for us (it is always meant for us) we are interpellated by ideology.” (p. 214 Interpreting Everyday Culture)

The term used when ideology occurs is interpellation. Using Althusser’s example with the policeman, interpellation is basically what becomes of ideology. Another example, similar to that of Althusser’s would be the relationship between teachers and students. When a student is seated in a desk before a chalkboard he or she performs interpellation. There is ideology behind students sitting attentively in desks while the professor performs their
daily routine before the blackboard. This is interpellation, and interpellation is performed everyday.

*Interpreting Everyday Life* outlines the ‘everyday’ in five principles: “1. The time of everyday life is repetitive and cyclical, but punctuated by the unpredictable. 2. The spaces of everyday life are spaces of familiarity. 3. The feel of everyday life is the feel of ‘normality’. 4. Everyday life has a history 5. Even though it feels ‘natural’ and innocent, everyday life is actually inhabited and shaped by politics and power.” (p. 2-4) These principles define what exactly includes the everyday in which interpellation occurs. By number one, one can define the everyday because it includes things that we do routinely, such as brush our teeth, get dressed, and go to work. However, the everyday is also defined by the ‘unpredictable’, those instances, such as minor car accidents or getting a raise at work, that are not extremely catastrophic or traumatic. Secondly, ‘spaces of familiarity’ are places we often go, such as your neighborhood or the city in which you live and the convenience store in which you routinely purchase coffee. The feel of ‘normality’ addressed in number three, is simply a feeling completely used to the situation you are in. By the everyday’s history, number four relates to the fact that everything we routinely do is part of our cultural history. And number five, of course, ties into the fact that everyday is controlled by political ideology.

The everyday, to twentieth century Americans, undoubtedly includes consumerism. Consumption is a major part of our lives, as pathetic and shallow as that may be, is true. Many Americans do not even realize the
control consumption has over our society and that the vast majority of American citizens are controlled by the dollar. The dollar is something we all strive for, Americans work hard to get money to provide for their families by consuming what they need, and don’t need. Since consumption plays such a major role in our lives, it is interesting to investigate all aspects both ideology and consumption simultaneously reach. Ideology and the consumer can be related in many ways.

“Advertisement: A notice, such as a poster or a paid announcement in print, broadcast, or electronic media, designed to attract public attention or patronage.” (The American Heritage Dictionary)

Advertisement has gone so far beyond this definition; one giant aspect of ideology relating to consumption is through advertising. As Sut Jhally states, “20th century advertising is the most powerful and sustained system of propaganda in human history and its cumulative cultural effects.” (Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse). On average, Americans see thousands upon thousands of advertisements everyday without even giving it a second thought. Whether it a billboard, a commercial or even a simple matchbook, we eat, sleep, and breath advertisements. Advertisement is an obvious in-your-face example of the ideological lives we lead. When examining an advertisement, to identify the ideology within, we must look beyond the tactics used to draw us, the consumers, in. We then see the underlying reasoning for these tactics and the relationship to our culture. Two examples found in a typical American gossip and celebrity magazine, People, were advertisements
for *The Perricone Weight-Loss Diet* and Chase credit cards.  

*The Perricone Weight-Loss Diet* is apparently a book designed for losing “fat, wrinkles, and years in 3 easy steps!” This advertisement is geared to the insecure buyer who wants to rid their mummy tummy and the crow’s feet around their eyes. However, who is to say that Dr. Perricone really has the answer? All of these “groundbreaking” diets are lies geared to make you buy and buy these diet books, pills, and videos. What this depressingly expresses about our culture is that we are driven by the media not be our natural selves. Our culture bans weight and aging, both natural developments in the human body. The average human does not even recognize how ideological it is that we all believe that weight-gain and aging are horrible crimes, when really, they are not. Because our media, which we have all been trained to worship, is, for the vast majority, thin, beautiful, and timeless. That is what we “want”, is it not? Why? We believe this because we commit interpellation, and assume that this is what we are supposed to be. If Americans were to stop and think about why we are idolizing these people, we would realize that is simply a matter of ideology. The creators of these weight loss advertisements are completely aware of how assumptive these viewers are, making them perfect targets for interpellation. The people in whom these advertisements are geared to are insecure; by using these alluring promises of a better body, there is a sure way to draw them in. These insecure readers perform interpellation by assuming that this book is their way to a beautiful self.
The second advertisement is for Chase credit cards. Chase is attempting to lure shoppers into obtaining their credit card and thus receiving “double the rewards”. This ad is ideological in more ways than one. Next to an image of a woman gazing with admiration at her half gallon of milk, reads “love your everyday purchases twice as much”. Apparently, with a Chase credit card, your relationship with your milk will improve immensely. Beneath this reads, “Your choice. Your chase.” This must mean that you have complete and utter freedom to choose your credit card, right? So, does that also mean you have the complete and utter freedom to run up a high bill and ultimately go into debt? What this advertisement retains about our society is our obsession with buying and consuming more and more goods, the more the better. Our ideological selves do not even realize that media is simply sucking us into more consumption, thus more money for them through high interest rates. All the while, we believe this credit card company to be so generous for doubling our rewards.

Through advertisement, all viewers commit interpellation, and for the majority, we do not even know it. The false promises, images of success and happiness, and other marketing techniques are blatant lies in which we all assume to be true. Inserting ideology into advertisement is genius because we cannot escape it. We cannot avoid being victims of interpellation because magazines, billboards, and commercials surround us.

Advertisements not only apply to diet books and credit cards, but also to cinema. The way movies are advertised is ridiculous. Commercials for new
films coming out in theaters are common and almost always show up at least once in a commercial break. Since that is the case, that must mean that there is a large variety of movies in theaters. If so, then how come every single movie is known as “the year’s best comedy” and “this summer’s greatest love story”? This is blatantly false advertising because how can two movies both share the title “greatest chick flick of 2005”? They can because the marketing agent used the same false catch phrase to make viewers believe that this movie really has something to offer. Commercials for movies are just another example of the lies we ideologically believe in; furthermore, we support the box offices with our money.

Another ridiculous form of ideology within television commercials is using children as victims. Children are perfect little targets for marketers. It is no coincidence that on channels geared to children, such as the Disney Channel or Nickelodeon, there are loads of toy commercials. Innocent children are made to view these commercial for fancy gadgets. They then assume that this is what they want, and the advertisers have won. Something else that has not gone unnoticed is how much more frequently these toy commercials are shown around the holidays. Since children are assuming that these toys, made popular by commercial, are what they want, they are immediately put on their list for Santa. Again, the advertiser has won.

Relating to our obsession with celebrities are tabloids. Tabloids are nothing but garbage and lies about celebrity lives that we believe and worship. False stories and rumors about celebrities are simply marketing tools
to make people read and believe. Every time a tabloid, or practically everything in the marketing and media world, lies to us, we perform interpellation. This is so because we assume that these rumors are true, and even worse, we revolve our lives around them and use them as gossip for our own conversations. In all honesty, who really cares if Jennifer Aniston just got a chin implant?

Going beyond advertisement is the actual consumption in which ideology still plays a role. Depending on the type of store visited, there are different levels and modes of ideology. Each store, or type of store, has its own mode of interpellation, in which most buyers completely take no notice of. They do all share one thing in common, their priority is get their buyers to believe and consume.

One store visited by all Americans is the grocery store. The grocery store is most commonly a giant box lined with shelves categorizing foods by types. However, the placement of these items is not overlooked. Again, children are used as consumer tools. It is no coincidence that the children’s fruity sugar-filled cereals are stored at a kid’s eye view. They are kept there precisely so that each kindergartener can reach out and grab the brightly colored box and force their parents into buying whatever awesome cereal they see on television. Kids, nevertheless, are not the only victims of this modus operandi. Adults too are drawn into an act referred to as ‘impulse buying’. Standing in the checkout line there are always items bordering the cash register. It is no coincidence that these items are flashlights, films, and
batteries amongst many others. When faced with these items, shoppers cannot help but wonder if they need batteries for their remote or maybe film for their camera. As a result, a couple rolls of film and a pack of AA’s are thrown into the cart.

A second store directed at strictly for kids, is the toy store. The toy store is a young one’s dream world, and why not? The store is designed for them to buy, buy, and buy, literally. Similar to that of the grocery store, items are placed by height. Starting with the infant toys at ground level, and rising as maturity heightens, toys are stocked so that they can be reached. Who exactly is reaching for them is very important. Likewise, the eleven-year-old is at perfect height to reach the videogames and the four-year-old for the coloring books. Moreover, it is also no coincidence that all of the stuffed animals are out for children to pet and become very acquainted with. Their adorable faces and plush furry bodies are irresistible to children. Could they be more inviting?

As far as using children as bait for buying, the mechanisms used are very fascinating to study. Is it any wonder that the cereals that are loaded with sugar are associated with adorable cartoon bunnies and leprechauns? Children love cartoon images and when they associate them with teeth-rotting cereals, they want them. It is not uncommon to find a kid begging their mom for the box of Lucky Charms™ over the box of Chex™. This is because the children want the one with the jolly little leprechaun. Nor is it unnoticed that every cereal box at kid-eye-view is brightly colored? What child would not
want the glittery unicorn fruit snacks over the brown box of oatmeal? Logos for all toys are everywhere, making Barbie™ items undoubtedly recognizable to all American children. What is even worse about the fact that children are surrounded by these entire trademark labels, they are collaborating with one another to even further their impact on children. McDonald’s™ has it so that Barbie™ and Hot Wheels™ toys come with happy meals. Children are becoming increasingly more familiar with these brand names at younger ages. Are marketing companies already brainstorming about how they will brainwash children as young newborns with their flashy logos?

The third store, with completely different merchandise, is a clothing store. A clothing store is ideological in more than one way. One way lies in the way vendors display their clothing. The mannequins always appear to have the ‘ideal’ body. When a shopper enters a store and admires what is out on display, they ultimately assume that these items are designed to fit bodies similar to that of the mannequin. Interpellation occurs when the shopper ultimately leaves the store with the clothes they hope looks as stunning as they did on the mannequin. A second example of ideology is one similar to that of the grocery store. The way gift certificates are placed at the register of clothing stores is simply there for ‘impulsive’ reasons. While waiting in line, a shopper very well may feel an impulse to pick up a gift certificate for their niece’s birthday, might as well right?

Another idea relates less to body type or age. Video stores, and
libraries the same, carry different movies for different reasons. Major video rental stores, such as Blockbuster™, do not all carry the same movies at every branch. They do not do this because they base it off of demographic, which is completely ideological. Why must a neighborhood made up of mostly African Americans have rental options with a large selection of black comedies, while a white neighborhood has a much larger selection of Shakespearean plays? By using subtle changes in movie rentals, members of different communities assume that certain film genres are for them, and not for others. In actuality, every Blockbuster™ should carry the same films in every branch. That way, no matter where you live, what color skin have, or faith you follow, you can see whatever film you desire. This may seem like a small example, but it is an example nonetheless of the suppression big corporations create. The same applies to bookstores; wherever literature is being sold to society, there should be no demographics involved, everyone should be exposed to equal information.

Another way large companies control us through consumerism exists in places such as stadiums and movie theaters. These places ban food and drink from the outside. When entering a baseball game with the bottle of water you brought from home, you will be asked to dispose of it in order to enter the stadium. That way during the game you will become thirsty and you can go stand in line for a five-dollar bottle of water, a five-dollar hot dog, and a ten-dollar beer. An even bigger mistake would to be bringing your child in line
with you. How could he or she resist the eight-dollar blue slushy in the mascot shaped cup? Forget about making it back to see the ninth inning, you will be stuck with a whining child who passed the loads of vendors with mascot hats, backpacks, and stuffed animals, demanding to have one. Again, both the adult and the child have been made into perfect prey for these big corporations. We are made into money spending robots. Similar to that of a big corporately owned stadium, movie theaters apply the same rules. No outside food is permitted, you are forced into buy their greasy popcorn and syrupy sodas, all for the price of fifteen dollars; not to mention, that is a size small popcorn and an extra small soda. On top of that, we now pay eight dollars to see a movie that used to charge less than half that price a few years ago.

Americans relationship with ideology is only getting stronger as our desire for stupid gadgets, outrageous concert tickets, and unhealthy foods, grows. Another quote by Theodor Adorno: “if across the Atlantic the ideology was pride, then here it is delivering the goods”; this is so very true. So many people are involved in these agencies designed to draw the buyers in, yet they themselves are targets for their own companies. The degree of advertisement and consumption is so deep that many Americans are helpless. Even Americans completely aware of what the system does to make us into these merchandise-hungry people, prove to be unstoppable shoppers. It is unbelievable the hold they have on everyone influenced by big labels and consumption. We all assume that we are happy with these new televisions,
but we are not. The moment of satisfaction is erased as soon as we set our eye on the next prize. The statistics show that we are all so surrounded by this propaganda and it is extremely unavoidable. What makes matters even worse, we are all supposedly educated people standing for these marketing ploys. We compete with one another for the next best buy. There are several brilliant minds out there completely aware of our capitalist society and the severity of our consumption. There are many people writing and educating about this, yet they too cannot avoid the propaganda. It literally covers the globe. Who is to blame anymore? The people in control are also controlled by what they represent. They too are victims.

Despite how depressing the knowledge of ideology may be, it can be quite enjoyable to seek out all of our ideological tendencies during the everyday. Ideology is unavoidable and will forever co-exist as our society consumes and conforms more and more. As the cost of commercial airtime skyrockets, more people will be reached by the lies they sell. As Sut Jhally believes, “As it achieves this it will be responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of non-western peoples and will prevent the peoples of the world from achieving true happiness. Simply stated, our survival as a species is dependent upon minimizing the threat from advertising and the commercial culture that has spawned it.” (Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse) In order for our society to ban the disgusting amount of marketing propaganda we take in, Americans must realize that this ideology even occurs. From there, Americans will hopefully not stand for the way we all are made into
puppets. Our everyday habits and activities, and most importantly consumption, are true and happening examples of ideology in our society. In conclusion, ideology exists undoubtedly and will remain and thrive in our society as time progresses, unless we take responsibility for our shopping.

Works Cited
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Jhally, Sut “Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse”.


