The Global Addiction and Human Rights: Insatiable Consumerism, Neoliberalism, and Harm Reduction

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Abstract
For the past several decades, the market ideology commonly known as neoliberalism has glorified insatiable consumerism as a natural human tendency under conditions of freedom. Yet various commentators predict that the current global economic slump will promote the “end of consumerism” and a “new age of frugality.” We contend that these proclamations are premature and largely untenable. To genuinely break from the rampant market culture that has contributed to the depletion of critical natural resources and human rights abuses throughout the world requires more than simply a few behavioral adjustments associated with spending less. We make the point that insatiable consumption has become a global addiction whose treatment mandates a paradigmatic shift that breaks completely from deep-seated values, habits, and structures associated with neoliberal capitalism.

Keywords
neoliberalism, consumerism, addiction, human rights, harm reduction

Introduction
Over the past several decades various commentators have used the concept of addiction to describe the hyper-materialistic mode of life first referred to as conspicuous consumption by Thorstein Veblen (1965) over a century ago.¹

¹ Consider the following quotes: a) “In a consumer society there are inevitably two kinds of slaves: the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy” (Illich 1973); b) “Addiction in one form or another characterizes every aspect of industrial society.” (Morris Berman, quoted in Shaw 2008); c) “Unsustainability is an unintended consequence of the addictive patterns of modern life” (Ehrenfeld 2008); d) “In a society without ritual the drug addict seeks not so much the thrill of a high as the satisfaction of the inner need for a participation mystique in the
Indeed, the dominant consumerist ethos associated with market capitalism and modern life is essentially a culture of addiction, one that encourages an unrestrained appetite for personal and material satisfaction. Yet as with all addictive behaviors, the acquired pleasures are typically short-lived and destructive. Ultimately, as with addictions to intoxicants, sex, and gambling, a culture of consumerism leads to a host of personal and social harms—from alienation, to environmental destruction, to human rights abuses.

Particularly in the US, the explicit associations people make between consumerism, personal identity, success, and worthiness encourage what sociologist George Ritzer (2005) refers to as patterns of hyper-consumption (Pp. 31-32). Ritzer argues that Americans tend to be hyper-consumers in that they consume more of virtually everything in comparison to people of any other country. One only has to review the recent events that took place in Valley Stream, New York in 2008, on the shopping day referred to as “Black Friday,” to realize that the American consumer junkie is a genuine addict.

Of course, Americans are not the only people afflicted with this addiction. With the expansion of market capitalism to virtually all corners of the globe, the consumer society has also been expanding. As Luigi Zoja (1989) argues, consumption has effectively become the primary ritual of modern society.