

## J.D. Salinger's Critique of the Postmodern Consumer Society in *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)

Chabira Hanane\*

hanane.chabira@univ-mascara.dz

Laboratoire de l'ingénierie des programmes de langue dans les filières de spécialité.  
University of Mustapha Stambouli Mascara

Dr. Messaoudi Lila

lila.messaoudi@gmail.com

University of Mustapha Stambouli  
Mascara

(Algeria)

Received: 11/11/2022

Accepted: 8/12/2023

Published: 02/06/2024

### Abstract:

The postmodern world appears to be characterized by the ubiquitous existence of material objects as they have evidently transformed the modern society into a materialized one. The unfulfilled pursuit of personal gratification, comfort, and social aspiration has led people to over-consume. This article explores the intricacies of consumer culture in J.D. Salinger's, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Set in 1950s America, the novel provides a satirical depiction of the protagonist's self-discovery journey amidst the chaos of a consumer-driven society. This paper aims to demonstrate that *The Catcher in the Rye* presents a critique of the American consumer society and its effects on the characters' identity and psyche

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, consumer society, commodities, *The Catcher in the Rye*, identity.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The act of consumption has always been ingrained in both social and personal behavior since food, clothing, and accommodation are, unquestionably, the necessities that ensure basic human survival. Consumption actually predates the industrial city and modern civilizations; however, the United States only began to develop a genuine interest in the culture of mass consumption in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Murphy, 2017). Lavish consumption evolved into a daily practice that is not exclusively confined to the affluent and upper socioeconomic classes. As mass production has taken over the capitalist economic system, commodities have now become standardized and accessible to the public and products that were once regarded as prestigious and high-end have transformed into commonplace luxuries that the average working-class man may comfortably

\*Corresponding author

obtain (Bocock, 1993). This increment in mass - production, combined with the impactful role of media and advertisement has led to the proliferation of a society dominated by an abundance of widely accessible and relatively affordable consumer products.

*The Catcher in the Rye*, written by J.D. Salinger in 1951, is a satirical novel that focuses on the alienation and perplexity that the American Man experienced in the 1950s. The novel has garnered conflicting reactions among critics and readers since its initial release. Salinger received some condemnation and was criticized for both his overwhelming use of obscene language and profanity, as well as his monotonous narrative style. Regardless of this wave of criticism, many praised Salinger for his impressive transparency in recognizing and reflecting on the inner thoughts and struggles of adolescents. One of the many favorable reviews is that of the New York Times, wherein Nash K. Burger described it as “an extraordinarily clever debut novel” (as cited in Salzman, 1991, p. 4).

In fact, Holden Caulfield, the novel's protagonist, is commonly considered as an iconic American fictional character, with the likes of Huckleberry Finn, for reinterpreting and representing the American adolescent's identity (Steed, 2002). The 1950s are frequently thought to be a time of extreme prosperity. While it was a period of opulence and material consumption, such economic growth had inexorably impacted both social and personal life. Individuals found themselves caught between preserving their authenticity and conforming to the new materialized lifestyle. J.D. Salinger's portrayal of the American postmodern consumer society in *The Catcher in the Rye* helps to channel these contemporary societal and cultural upheavals. *The Catcher in the Rye* is known to be among the most significant books that have emerged in American literature, the intense focus on the issue of conformity in the American industrial society as well the character's disintegration from his culture has rendered it a literary masterpiece among both readers and critics.

The novel provides a distinctive perspective of the society of the 1950s; it sheds light on the psychological and cultural ramifications of consumerism from social inequity and excessive consumption to the question of identity and individual alienation. It is through the main character's life experience that J.D. Salinger identifies the issue of consumer culture. The following paper aims to argue that, through *The Catcher in the Rye*, J.D. Salinger mirrors the superficiality of the postmodern culture that is preoccupied with nothing but material possessions and social aspiration. It further highlights the psychological implications of consumerism, particularly, stripping individuals of their identity and encouraging the construction of a new one based on objects, as it is analyzed and epitomized by the main character.

## **2. The Rise of Modern Consumer Society:**

Steven Miles in his work *Consumerism as a Way of Life* traces the establishment of modern consumption or mass consumption to the post-Second World War epoch where the expansion of the production system was mainly boosted by the Fordist mode of production. The principles of Fordism hold that businesses can increase productivity by assigning workers repetitive tasks within a specific time frame, this led to an upsurge in product quantity that was sold on the markets at an obtainable cost (Miles, 1998). It could be opined that during the time, the public was propelled to become mass consumers, and individuals were encouraged to seek gratification through commodities. In some ways, goods were presented as personal services that were purposefully produced to meet human needs; yet in reality, the production system industrialized the meaning of human needs so that they can only be fulfilled by the maximum possession of commodities.

Many factors contributed to the creation of the modern consumer, but one that has altered conventional consumption habits is technological advancement,

particularly in the field of media and communication. The media is undeniably the most powerful platform for communication, as it can easily reach and engage a wide range of people. In the postmodern society, mass media plays an integral role in the expansion of consumption; advertisements have successfully conditioned and distorted people's perceptions of the reality of their needs. Further, the newly found power that media holds over individuals' consumption choices is mainly derived from the advertisements' ability to manipulate signs and products through the illusory glorification of objects. The postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard attributes the propagation of consumerism and the omnipresence of commodities to the production system in which media and advertisement are strategically used to manipulate and push individuals towards more consumption.

Fredric Jameson in his interesting work *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, argues that the postmodern era can be best described as a "media society", "multinational", "late capitalist", or a "consumer society" (Jameson, 1991, p. 55). According to his view, postmodernism can be perceived as a new social and cultural phenomenon that broke the binds with the traditional capitalist society. He expands on this argument further by claiming that this age represents the purest form of capitalism.

### **3. The Issue of Individual Alienation in the Consumer Society:**

The term "alienation" refers to the feeling of an impersonal, foreign environment, as well as psychological fragmentation, helplessness, and lack of relationships with oneself and others (Jaeggi, 2014). It is often seen as psychopathological behavior which manifests itself in forms of mental issues, rebellious attitude, depression, or antisocial behavior (Seeman, 1959). In the modern age, it has been acknowledged that the problem of individuals feeling alienated from their society has become rather prevalent; this may be attributed to the development of the capitalist economic system. With this economic growth and the increase of job opportunities throughout the 1950s, there was a noticeable shift in the way that American society was constructed, thus, the pursuit of affluence became the new social norm (Bocock, 1993). The intense growth of commodities and the steady appropriation of material objects created a consumer-saturated society. This phenomena triggered an anxious and overwhelming reaction from people who found themselves conflicted between adapting the lavish lifestyle or preserving their conventional one, thus, they felt alienated from their society and even themselves.

#### **3.1 A Postmodern Perspective on the Concept of the Fragmented-Self:**

The theme of fragmentation is a prominent characteristic in the postmodern discourse which can be detected in a variety of literary works. It is seen as a late ramification of the rapid social, technological, and cultural changes that took place in the years following the Second World War. Several postmodern writers and theorists believed that the flux of chaos and disorder that are encountered in real life needed to be reflected in their works which often feature fragmentation, discontinuity, and juxtaposition. In order to understand the concept of postmodern fragmentation, it is necessary to acknowledge Jean Baudrillard's account on the matter. According to Dr. Mario Rodriguez in his article "The Ecstasy of Communication" as Critique of Media Events", Baudrillard contends that the consumer culture is typified by disorder, diversion, and acute fragmentation. He premises his analysis of the fragmented self upon the clinical psychologists' description of schizophrenia (Rodriguez, 2015). Analogous to the schizophrenic and his fragmentation because of the overwhelming overexposure to reality- Baudrillard believes that because of the media, the postmodern man is bombarded

with instant shifting realities, and communication among people is filtered through media lenses which has reduced their natural and authentic human interactions. As a result, individuals have become confronted with confusion, fragmentation, and alienation.

### **3.2 The Alienated Consumer in *The Catcher in the Rye*:**

J.D. Salinger sought to infuse and reflect on the various social and cultural factors that are central to the creation of the 1950s materialized society, and indeed the novel delivers an accurate depiction of the alarming issues that the postmodern man was and still is encountering. Holden's chronic feeling of bewilderment and dissociation from his school, family, friends, and society as a whole, resulted in developing a rebellious propensity against social norms, as he feels frustrated by the presence of what he describes as generated "phonies". The expression "phonies" is used in reference to any character or situation that Holden perceives as materialistic, shallow, and unauthentic; he explains: "one of the biggest reasons I left Elkton Hills was because I was surrounded by phonies" (Salinger, 1951, p. 15) and "even the couple of nice teachers on the faculty, they were phonies, too" (Salinger, 1951, p. 174). This aligns with Jaeggi's explanation of the alienated person who cannot relate to the social, political, and cultural milieu he inhabits, which subsequently deteriorates and impairs his perception of reality.

Holden's ultimate ambition in life is to live in a cabin near the woods, far away from civilization, where he can pretend to be deaf-mute so he "wouldn't have to have any goddam stupid useless conversations with anybody... and they'd leave [him] alone" (Salinger, 1951, p. 119). From his several school dropouts and absence of genuine friendships to his unstable relationship with his family as well as his lack of any religious belief, Holden is the epitome of the young fragmented and alienated character. Okan Baldil believes that the decline in the impact of traditional and religious value systems, as well as the ethical beliefs of societies, contributes to the acquisition of a new morality from other resources, such as progressively fragmented life styles, which compel the psyche and identity to be adrift (Baldil, 2016). This shift can lead to a lack of cohesion, shared values in communities, resulting in a sense of alienation, and disconnect among individuals

### **4. Materialism, Conspicuous Consumption, and Media in *The Catcher in the Rye*:**

It has become a human trait in postmodern society to use material possessions to distinguish oneself apart from others. According to T. Kasser and A.D. Kanner, there are two primary influences on people's inclination for materialism: the urge to conceal and compensate for feelings of insecurity through the conspicuous consumption of high-end products, and the media's implicit and explicit signals that encourage people to consume more (Kasser and Kanner, 2004). To a degree, individuals have set purely materialistic life goals and actively pursued them, leading to completely materialistic lifestyles. However, what reshaped and redefined the idea of materialism was the internalization of the need for more items through the saturation of products that the media reinforced. It is not surprising, then, that consumption has come to play a major role in everyday American life. Jean Baudrillard in his book *Consumer society: Myths and Structure*, views the consumer society as a cultural phenomenon because social life is now less structured due to the overproduction and the accommodation of goods (Baudrillard, 1998). Thus, it created an unstable meaning that is characterized by the overflow of commodities and consumption.

#### **4.1 Material Culture and the Capitalist City:**

The novel is set in the capitalist cities, New York and Agerstown, Pennsylvania; hence, consumption is clearly defined by the existence of common objects such as clothing, baggage, food, products. Throughout the novel, Holden

takes pride in his non-conformist mind-set and has a deep appreciation for genuine individuals. On the other side, he is completely resentful and rejects his society's materialistic practices. From a logical standpoint, it is implied that Holden is less inclined to be an over-consumer, yet as a by-product of an upper-class upbringing, he cannot help but engage in such behavior. Even though he emphasizes that money “always ends up making you blue as hell” (Salinger, 1951, p. 69), he still expresses that “[he]’d spent a king’s ransom in about two lousy weeks... [He’s] a goddam spendthrift at heart. What [he] [doesn’t] spend, [he] lose[s]” (Salinger, 1951, p. 114). This would indicate that money is not a concern for Holden, as he further adds, “I sort of counted my dough. I don’t remember exactly how much I had, but I was pretty loaded” (Salinger, 1951, p. 57).

Holden appears to be ambivalent about consumption in this case; he condemns his entourage's consumption behavior while simultaneously partaking in it. Clotaire Rapaille addresses the conflict in *The Culture Code*, suggesting that cultural values and ideas are imprinted in children at an early age through their familial and social background, and these codes subconsciously affect and establish their future decisions (Rapaille, 2006). Therefore, Holden’s irresponsibility with money is expected considering that he hails from a wealthy family that provides him with financial security, as evidenced by his frequent attendance at prestigious boarding schools throughout his childhood and adolescence. In fact, Holden states: “my father’s quite wealthy, though. I don’t know how much he makes...but I imagine quite a lot. He’s a corporation lawyer” (Salinger, 1951, p. 114) and even his grandmother is described as being “quite lavish with her dough” (Salinger, 1951, p. 57). The observation that Holden possesses the privilege to enroll in prestigious and costly educational institutions, coupled with his capacity for unimpeded and effortless travels, lends significant credence to the assertion that his family belongs to a high socioeconomic stratum. This ultimately affords him a diverse array of opportunities and experiences.

Interestingly, Holden's overspending habits can be explained by the satisfaction that he gains from consuming. Jean Baudrillard believes that there is no actual evidence on whether products can provide satisfaction, yet he writes: “from the point of view of the consumer's own satisfaction, there is no basis on which to decide what is 'factitious' and what is not. The enjoyment of TV or of a second home is experienced as 'true' freedom; no one experiences these things as alienation” (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 73). Whether or not there is a concert illustration of the gratification that is created by products; it is the consumer who feels inner satisfaction by confining in products as a form of escapism.

#### **4.2 Social Status and Conspicuous Consumption in *The Catcher in the Rye*:**

In consumer society, social relationships and consumption are closely linked. People use goods and services to express their identities, build relationships, and gain status. *The Catcher in the Rye* captures this relationship through the character's interactions. In this literary work, the importance of consumer goods goes beyond their practical use, becoming a means for people to gauge and connect with one another, thereby highlighting social class demarcation. Throughout the novel, Holden Caulfield expresses clear dissatisfaction with social disparities, especially between those from wealthier backgrounds and the less privileged. This constant conflict mirrors Holden's conviction that money often results in corruption, deceitfulness, and “phoniness”; thus, intensifying his aversion to superficiality. Holden's criticisms of the wealthy are first shown when he talks about his roommate at Pencey Prep School, Ward Stradlater. He criticizes Stradlater for his shallowness

and describes him as a "secret slob" who puts on airs by appearing poised and charming while hiding his true nature, and the only reason he bothers to clean up is to appeal to the social norms and "because he was madly in love with himself" (Salinger, 1951, p. 114). It is apparent that the majority of Pencey Prep School's students belong to the upper-class. Much like Stradlater, they seem to lack any actual depth or substance to their personality, as they "never want to discuss anything... They never want to discuss anything intellig[ent]" (Salinger, 1951, p. 29) and "only very sexy stuff interested [them]" (Salinger, 1951, p. 21). In a parallel manner, Sally Hayes, a member of Holden Caulfield's social circle, is depicted as a person who actively seeks affirmation from her affluent counterparts and is predisposed to adhere to established societal conventions. During their interaction at the ice-skating rink, Sally exhibits considerable vexation towards Holden's nonconformist views and inability to mingle with the "right" sort of people and she urges him to embrace his parents lifestyle which renders him "depressed as hell again" (Salinger, 1951, p. 79).

In his encounters with people from this social class, Holden observes that they place a high value on maintaining their status and conforming to societal expectations, even if this means being dishonest or hypocritical. This is best exemplified as seen by one of the bartenders at the Seton Hotel who "was a big snob. He didn't talk to you at all hardly unless you were a big shot or a celebrity or something" (Salinger, 1951, p. 85). Furthermore, Holden is enraged by society's fixation on material possessions, as he does not understand the reasoning behind men's meaningless enthusiasm for cars; he explains that people are "crazy about cars. They worry if they get a little scratch on them, and they're always talking about how many miles they get to a gallon, and if they get a brand-new car already they start thinking about trading it in for one that's even newer" (Salinger, 1951, p. 78). His resentment for individuals who prioritize physical looks and possessions above personality characteristics like sincerity or integrity is evident in this point of view. In his perspective, people who embody these superficial tendencies demonstrate a fundamental misunderstanding of life's true essence, as their actions and priorities are unapologetically materialistic and shallow.

Contrary to his disdain for the elite, Holden exhibits a respect for those from the working class who show honesty and modesty in their lives. This is evident through his experiences with taxi drivers like Horwitz who he sees as a "pretty good guy" (Salinger, 1951, p. 51). Although he occasionally faces opposition from such individuals, Holden admires their unassuming nature and tries to have deep discussions about life. He esteems their candid demeanor and capacity to form a genuine connection, far removed from the superficial display he observes in many members of the upper class. Despite having a non-religious outlook towards life, Holden appreciates his encounter with the nuns at the station. He immediately notices that the nuns do not wear fancy clothes, and their luggage is old and worn-out which represents a refreshing simplicity and authenticity that he is not used to. In that sense, their presence serves as a stark contrast to the pretentious and superficial world around him. He admires them for going "around collecting dough in those beatup old straw baskets" (Salinger, 1951, p. 102). On the other hand, Holden affirms that the "the only way [Sally Hayes's mother] could go around with a basket collecting dough would be if everybody kissed her ass for her when they made a contribution" (Salinger, 1951, p. 69). His admiration for the modest lifestyle increases when he compares the working-class individuals' genuine behavior to that of his fellow New Yorkers, many of whom were engrossed with wealth and social standing.

However, Holden himself is guilty of judging others based on their possessions, as he comments,

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They were these very inexpensive-looking suitcases-...I hate it when somebody has cheap suitcases. It sounds terrible to say it, but I can even get to hate somebody, just looking at them, if they have cheap suitcases with them (Salinger, 1951, p. 114)

It worthy to note that not only Holden's dissatisfaction with suitcases was with strangers, but he also further recalls his memories with a former roommate, Slagle Dick, solely based on the quality of his suitcase, Holden narrates: "I roomed with this boy, Dick Slagle, who had these very inexpensive suitcases. He used to keep them under the bed, instead of on the rack, so that nobody'd see them standing next to mine. It depressed holy hell out of me" (Salinger, 1951, p. 115). These suitcase incidents exemplify postmodernism's obsession with objects. In fact, Holden even admits that "it's really hard to be roommates with people if your suitcases are much better than theirs... It's one of the reasons why I roomed with a stupid bastard like Stradlater. At least his suitcases were as good as mine" (Salinger, 1951, p. 67). For this particular reason, Holden's character tends to be perceived as a hypocrite. On one hand, he condemns affluent people for parading their wealth and struggles with accepting his fortunate upbringing; on the other hand, he embraces the privileges of his social class and even at times judges others according to their material possessions.

Incidentally, objects are personified in the sense that they are no longer associated with a specific function or necessity, rather, they operate as moving items used to symbolize and monitor persons' connections and interactions. Baudrillard asserts that the consumer society has given rise to a new form of value to commodities, which he coined as "sign-value" (Baudrillard, 1996). This latter indicates that objects function in accordance with a system of other objects to represent social status and affluence.

In the novel, consumerism is manifested in the form of depersonalization of human-to-human and human-to-world relationships, they are ameliorated by money and status. In this sense, relationships are symbolized by the commodification of formerly unmarketable environments, such as educational institutions. This statement is further highlighted in the following passage,

Mr. Haas, [the headmaster of Pencey] was the phoniest bastard I ever met in my life...On Sundays, for instance, old Haas went around shaking hands with everybody's parents when they drove up to school. He'd be charming as hell and all. Except if some boy had little old funny-looking parents... I mean if a boy's mother was sort of fat or corny looking or something, and if somebody's father was one of those guys that wear those suits with very big shoulders and corny black-and-white shoes, then old Hans would just shake hands with them and give them a phony smile and then he'd go talk, for maybe a half an hour, with somebody else's parents. (Salinger, 1951, p. 15)

Consumption has been employed as a device to demarcate between social classes and groups in postmodern societies, resulting in consumption being implemented as a system that classifies, defines, and signifies social status. According to Thorstein Veblen in his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, high-class social groups are constantly improving their consumption behavior in order to maintain their prestigious lifestyle. Therefore, a new social phenomena based entirely on prestigious consumption evolved, which Veblen refers to as "conspicuous consumption". Salinger occasionally uses the idea of conspicuous

consumption and status consumption to counterbalance the extravagant lifestyle of the upper social class with that of the lower and middle classes. One strategy used by these cultural elite to distinguish themselves from other social strata is the practice of prestigious hyper-consumption.

### 4.3 The Representation of Media in *The Catcher in the Rye*:

There is an inevitable discussion of media and advertising in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden is consistently preoccupied with media manipulation and purposeful misrepresentation of reality. Media, which encompasses magazines, television, and even movies, plays an indispensable role in deconstructing and recreating the ideal picture of humans. For example, Holden offers an interesting insight into how his school is depicted in magazines, in which “they... always showing some hotshot guy on a horse jumping over a fence. Like as if all you ever did at Pencey was play polo all the time. I never even once saw a horse anywhere near the place” (Salinger, 1951, p. 3). This, as seen by Baudrillard, is a simulated form of media manipulation wherein images may be used to mask the absence of something real; thereby, magazines present this immaculate and romanticized vision of the school to cover for their incompetence.

Interestingly, media promotes the idea of the body as a precious possession that can be easily adjusted and altered. Media promotes people to feel more attached to and love their bodies by displaying the ideal model of men and women. In that respect, they alienate the human from the body, which the capitalist believes to be a valuable resource for investment, just as any other commodity. Holden is often exposed to pictures of “phony, lean-jawed guys named David in it, and a lot of phony girls named Linda” (Salinger, 1951, p. 59). Media is also presented in a way people of certain social classes started to adopt this advertised version of men, Holden notices that “on [his] right there was this very Joe Yale-looking guy, in a gray flannel suit and one of those flitty-looking Tattersall vests. All those Ivy League bastards look alike” (Salinger, 1951, p. 91). Clothes in this sense are used as items to identify social groups from one another and they contribute to creating a distinctive collective identity. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu initiated the term “cultural capital” which denotes that there is a collective preference for consumption among different social groups (as cited in Miles, 1998).

The existence of media in the novel extends far beyond the manipulation of advertisements, as a matter of fact; it is deeply penetrated in that society, to the extent of interfering in the construction of identities. In many events, Holden clearly states his hatred for movies and the entertainment industry, even going as far as labeling his brother, D.B., as a prostitute for losing his authenticity in the process of becoming a Hollywood writer, as Holden articulates, “now he's out in Hollywood, D.B., being a prostitute. If there's one thing I hate, it's the movies. Don't even mention them to me” (Salinger, 1951, p. 3). In light of this, the pursuit and acquisition of fame and wealth often transpire at the cost of sacrificing one's authenticity and compromising their moral integrity.

Nevertheless, despite Holden's awareness of the scheming patterns of media and advertisement, he is a part of that society and so he is forcibly exploited to that inescapable manipulation. Against his beliefs, he admits “[he] started imitating one of those guys in the movies. In one of those musicals” (Salinger, 1951, p. 32). This creates a sense of indecisiveness within Holden's personality. From this point of view, because he is inundated with media and advertisements in his everyday life, it is quite challenging for him to have an autonomous identity. Amidst the myriad of lifestyle choices, it became easy for individuals to choose a certain identity to communicate who they are to others and even to their own selves. Steven Miles concludes that material possessions have exceeded their functionality or their social symbolic; they are used as means to define and shape people's identity (Miles, 1998). Because of this, people frequently get themselves caught in a downward



spiral where they constantly resort to wealth for validation instead of investing their focus in personal development and fulfilling experiences.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, J.D. Salinger provides an insightful critique on social inequity and psychological issues that consumer culture can cause. By the end of the novel, the reader's reaction stands at a blurred line of a mixture of solicitude, puzzlement and sympathy. Through analyzing Holden's journey, one can trace the patterns that the capital successfully follows in proliferating consumption which leads to the commodification of culture and individuals' relationships. In the postmodern American society, everyone partakes in some type of consumption regardless of their income, gender, or age. What people consume does not only demonstrate their product preferences or their material desires, but also commodities are used as signifiers to symbolize social status, gender, and ethnicity. To maximize consumption within societies, production companies strongly depend on advertisements and media to influence people's decisions by bombarding them with images on a daily basis. Although Holden Caulfield's character was written in a different century than ours, he represents a generation that is still living in today's societies. Taking into consideration the factors under which the postmodern society was formed, Holden's character did not only exist but needed to exist as a natural consequence of such circumstances.

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