

NOTES FROM: *Spent*, by Geoffrey Miller

SUMMARY: Evolutionary psychology is a fascinating lens through which to observe modern techno-consumer capitalism, and that's exactly what Miller does here in this book, one of my absolute favorites. In my gross oversimplification, he looks at "trait display" and "status-seeking" and other things with respect to human mating, and how the things we buy are used to present ourselves to potential mates in the best possible light.

That being said, Miller explains that consumer capitalism is one the *least* efficient ways of doing this! Through conversation, mutual exploration, and group dynamics, we're already very good at determining whether someone we're meeting for the first time is higher or lower on the Big Six personality traits – openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism (mental stability), and generally intelligence. We don't *need* to mindlessly buy things – and waste our vital powers doing so – in order to find the communities to which we most suitably belong.

There's a ton of nuance in this book, and reasonable people may disagree with some of Miller's conclusions, but he basically says that consumer capitalism is responsible for some of both the best and the worst features of modern societies. The answer isn't just to 'disband' capitalism or adopt some new system – rather, the thing to do is mindfully approach our consumption patterns and recognize when we have gone too far.

"Many products are signals first and material objects second."

"Human instincts for trying unconsciously to display certain desirable personal traits + current social norms for displaying those mental traits through certain kinds of credentials, jobs, goods, and services + current technological abilities and constraints + certain social institutions and ideologies + historical accident and cultural inertia = early twenty-first century consumer capitalism."

"Each of these individuals and groups has exaggerated both the pros of primitive life and the cons of modern life. Each intuitively correctly that a Cro-Magnon lifestyle was a more natural environment for the human body, mind, family, and clan. Yet at the same time, each forgets that, stripped of romantic idealization, Cro-Magnon life was also ignorant, insular, violent, and unimaginably boring. I would not want to live without civilization's key inventions – trade, currency, literacy, medicine, books, bicycles, films, duct tape, shipping containers, and computers. Unlike many malcontents, I consider the three best inventions of all time to be money, markets, and media. Each has radically increased the social and material benefits of peaceful human cooperation. But together they don't necessarily add up to consumerist capitalism in its current forms."

"At its heart, consumerist capitalism is not 'materialistic' but 'semiotic.'"

"Men increase the conspicuousness of their consumption when they are most interested in mating."

“Consumerist capitalism produces almost everything that is distinctively exciting about modern life and almost everything that is appalling about it.”

“I loathe malls, but I respect the free market as the most ingenious system yet devised for people to enjoy mutual gains from trade under conditions of peace, freedom, and autonomy. I hate the way that corporate lobbyists corrupt democracy, but I recognize that our quality of life in the developed world is a fragile, fortunate exception to the global historical norm of toil, oppression, poverty, disease, and death.”

“I started to see that marketing underlies everything in modern culture in the same way that evolution underlies everything in human nature.”

Businesses are responsible for most of the alienation and exploitation still prevalent in modern societies, but many of them also function very effectively to meet the demands and satisfy the desires of customers in the marketplace.

“Almost all advertisements appeal to status-seeking, or pleasure-seeking, or both.”

“Basic survival goods are cheap, whereas narcissistic self-stimulation and social-display products are expensive. Living doesn’t cost much, but showing off does.”

We’re already very good at assessing the traits of other people – traits such as mental health, physical health, intelligence, personality, etc. – and so the purchase of consumer goods in order to display these traits is largely redundant.

“The result is that we greatly overestimate how much attention others pay to our product displays, through which we are unconsciously striving to show off our key bodily and mental traits.”

Pretty much every single social ritual we engage in is about accurate trait and personality assessment.

“Only a few mental disorders are really hard to identify from superficial interaction: psychopathy, specific phobias, sexual disorders and dysfunctions, and some addictions. When it comes to judging people’s sanity, most experienced adults are rather accurate. We may not be able to diagnose each peculiarity using the current psychiatric terms, but the basic difference between normal and abnormal behavior is highly salient.”

“The accuracy of person perception tends to improve with age, as we learn, gradually and painfully, which behavioral cues are the most reliable indicators of personality, intelligence, and moral virtues. We learn which situations reveal the most diagnostic information about someone’s true character. We learn how to see through first impressions.”

“This is a core message from evolutionary psychology: the most precious, complex, intricate, and wonderful things in life are the biological adaptations common across all humans – especially the adaptations that signal our individual differences so conspicuously. We already have everything we could possibly need to impress our fellow humans, yet every major human ideology conspires to make us forget this fact – because every ideology seeks power by convincing us that we need something beyond our naked bodies and minds to be socially acceptable and sexually attractive. Consumerism has become our most potent ideology because it so contemptuously dismisses our natural human modes of trait display, and it keeps us too busy – working, shopping, and product displaying – to remember what we can signal without all the products.”

One of the big lies of consumerism is that above-average products can compensate for below-average traits when you’re trying to build long-lasting, fulfilling relationships with other human beings.

“Trait-enhancing products can fool some of the people in the short term, but they can’t fool any of the people in the long term.”

“These advances in gem production raise the possibility that in biological evolution, too, traits that began as fake alternatives to certain signals of quality may have evolved to be more useful and even more desirable than the original traits ever were. For example, verbal humor may have originated as a way for subordinate youths to imitate and mock older, more physically dominant sexual rivals – until eventually, humor became even more attractive than dominance.”

“All ads effectively have two audiences: potential product buyers, and potential product viewers who will credit the product owners with various desirable traits. The more expensive and exclusive the product, the more the latter will outnumber the former. Thus, most BMW ads are not really aimed so much at potential BMW buyers as they are at potential BMW coveters, to induce respect for the tiny minority who can afford the cars. This explains why BMW sometimes advertises in mass-circulation magazines: it is an inefficient way to reach their target market of potential BMW buyers but it is a very efficient way to reach the BMW coveters who might respect the BMW buyers. Their true target market recognizes this fact, because they, too, sometimes read mass-circulation magazines, and see that their less-successful peers are being educated to understand the semiotic power of the BMW 550i. This is how any signal bootstraps its way from arbitrary association into common knowledge.”

“We’re seldom honest with ourselves about why we buy things, and advertising euphemisms don’t help. Which slogan sounds better: ‘L’Oreal: Because you’re worth it,’ or ‘L’Oreal: Because you want to look younger than the skanky Starbucks barista who’s always flirting with your husband?’ How about these: ‘The 2006 BMW 550i: Poised for performance,’ or ‘The 2006 BMW 550i: Poised to leave burning tire smoke in the spotty faces of those Subaru-WRX-driving punks who threaten your masculinity as a divorced 47-year-old orthodontist.’”

“The truth is, science sometimes hurts.”

“Half the work that is done in the world is to make things appear what they are not.”

“Animals, including humans, often show off the most expensive signals they can afford, whether those signals are peacock tails or Hummer H1s. In each case, reliable signaling demands some sort of ‘conspicuous waste’ - a highly visible expenditure of resources that brings no material benefit, but that simply signals the expender’s ability and willingness to waste those resources.”

Desirable products usually evince Waste, Precision, or Reputation. Waste products show that you’re doing so well that you can afford to not care about waste. Precision – things like expensive watches – show attention to detail and an appreciation of craftsmanship. Reputation products, like prestigious university educations, appeal in their own way as well.

“We all get to enjoy about 600 million breaths, then we die.”

“In the developed world, emotional stability predicts overall life satisfaction more strongly than does income or any of the other Central Six traits.”

“In the space of human personality traits, we have what statisticians call a multivariate normal distribution: each dimension is a bell curve with most people near the average, and each dimension is independent of the others. Given our six independent dimensions, if we split each into just three levels (low, average, or high), then we’d have three to the sixth power possible combinations, or 729 different personality types – rather larger than the number of types typically posited in astrology, Jungian psycho-analysis, or most market segmentation.”

“As the science historian Thomas Kuhn pointed out, once a science finds a winning formula – a way of making predictable, cumulative progress – it achieves the status of a ‘paradigm.’ When paradigms are chugging along happily, and normal science is being done, radical ‘paradigm shifts’ become less likely to succeed. This is as it should be: the more we know about some domain, the less likely it is that a random new idea about the domain will be correct. The more complex the organism, the less likely it is that a random mutation will improve its fitness. The more complex the society, the less likely it is that a major political revolution will improve everyone’s welfare.”

“You know some costly signaling is going on when thousands of teenagers spend three years each learning a long-dead language just so they’ll score better on an IQ test that pretends it’s not an IQ test, so they can spend four more years and a hundred thousand dollars to get a college degree that pretends it’s not an IQ guarantee. Imagine if we tried to display a physical trait such as aerobic endurance in such a costly, indirect fashion. We could just run naked and barefoot along a five-mile dirt track while others timed us with an Accusplit Survivor II stopwatch (\$8.93 retail). But that would be so gauche, so crude, so infra dig. Much better for each person to spend twenty years building a three-hundred-foot-high ziggurat of imported marble, to show that they can run up and down it forty times within an hour – preferably while wearing embroidered silk robes and carrying a solid-gold torch, while a 250-piece marching band plays. This would preserve the rich cultural tradition of Ziggurat Ascension, with its medieval vestments, nostalgic anthems, and bittersweet Sisyphean symbolism. Plus, it would be good for the economy. Parents would have to take out second mortgages to cover their kids’ ascension rites. The marble importers, vestment embroiderers, and band musicians would ferociously denounce any reductionistic attempts to measure aerobic capacity with mere dirt tracks and stopwatches.

While they might acknowledge that the ziggurat system had some inefficiencies, they would that these could be reduced by progress in ergonomically optimized ziggurat stairs, lighter platinum torches, and trombone-playing robots. Contemporary higher education is our ziggurat ascension: an absurdly expensive, time-consuming way to guarantee intellectual and personality traits that could be measured far more cheaply, easily, and reliably by other means.”

“More subtly, the iPod and the BMW 500i both contain the letter ‘i’ to suggest the intelligence of their users.”

There is limited incentive for people to fake their levels of openness or agreeableness etc, because some groups and contexts favor the expression of these traits more or less. But there is virtually a universal desire to display higher rather than lower intelligence.

“Very high openness is a dangerous game, with potentially high payoffs in creativity, but potentially catastrophic effects on mental health. In a complex, media-rich society, perhaps only people with very good mental health can tolerate a high degree of openness without losing their equilibrium.”

“These findings suggest a hypothesis that I admit is highly speculative, but that is nonetheless intriguing: people may use conspicuous displays of openness as a guarantee of their mental health – especially their resistance to developing schizotypy, schizophrenia, or other forms of psychosis. If you’re a young woman, you want to avoid falling in love with a guy when he’s seventeen, having two children with him, and then seeing him develop debilitating schizophrenia when he’s twenty-three. So, adolescents play with fire, exposing themselves to ideas, experiences, and drugs that would induce psychosis if they did not have good psychosis resistance. They test themselves to extremes, and though they sometimes misjudge and go psychotic, mostly they do not.”

“A person of limited intelligence but high conscientiousness can make a valuable employee; a person of higher intelligence but very low conscientiousness is almost unemployable.”

“The highest-status professions are those in which sustained conscientiousness is required for long-term career success, but in which there are minimal sticks, carrots, and bosses to motivate short-term performance.”

“School, work, and credit – three pillars of consumer capitalism – are also, not coincidentally, the most reliable and conspicuous indicators of conscientiousness. All other consumer purchasing depends on these three pillars, so they are fundamental to conspicuous consumption.”

“Agreeableness is not just one of the Big Five personality traits. Construed more broadly as a personal capacity for empathy, kindness, and benevolence, and as a desire for egalitarianism and social justice, agreeableness is at the heart of human altruism and social progressivism. It is the rare product of natural selection and sexual selection that makes our species seem to transcend the otherwise selfish imperatives of the evolutionary process. It is our last, best hope for the salvation of our species, but also our most persistent source of hypocrisy and runaway self-righteousness.”

“This could be called the centrifugal-soul effect: runaway consumerism leaves us feeling superficial and empty, because we project ourselves outward to observers too promiscuously and desperately. We forget the virtues of restraint, reticence, and dignity. We lose our capacity for self-contained, self-sufficient self-judgement.”

“The standard self-display strategy in most developed societies is to seek the highest-paying full-time employment permitted by one’s intelligence and personality, and to use the resulting income to buy branded goods and services at full retail price. Weekdays are spent working; evenings and weekends are spent shopping.”

“If you still must have the new, branded, full-retail-price product, and nobody will give it to you, it is at least wise to calculate and acknowledge whatever display premium is built into the product’s retail cost. For example, earlier in this book I discussed how most basic electro-mechanical products, ranging from small appliances and electronics through large appliances and cars, cost about \$10 per pound. If an electro-mechanical product costs more than about \$12 per pound, it is probably a premium brand or newly marketed item that includes a substantial conspicuous-consumption surcharge above its manufacturing cost. For example, a Toyota Camry costs about \$7.00 per pound (\$24,000 for thirty-four hundred pounds), whereas a Lexus LS costs about \$16.50 per pound (\$71,000 for forty-three hundred pounds). The Lexus luxury-car premium is obvious from its much higher cost per pound, despite its being assembled of similar materials to a similar level of precision by the same parent company. So, if you must have the Lexus, that’s OK, as long as you consciously accept two things: (1) apart from its higher mass, you are paying an extra \$40,000 for the Lexus badge, and (2) everyone who sees you driving the Lexus, and who has read this book, will assume that you could think of nothing in the world more creative, kind, or conscientious to do with \$40,000. To the 2.8 billion people who live on less than \$2 a day – or anyone who cares about them – this lack of imagination might seem a bit blinkered.”

“Informal norms must do 99 percent of the daily work of shaping human behavior in socially desirable directions. This principle has been clearly understood by every sane adult in every functioning society for thousands of years; Euro-American liberal academic subcultures of the late twentieth century are the singular exception.”

“These moments one-on-one consciousness raising, compiled across individuals, in-groups, and history, are probably the main routes by which all social change occurs.”

“When you point out the consumerism is a really inefficient way to advertise personal traits, you can praise someone’s traits and tickle their vanity even as you’re cluster bombing the central ideology around which they’ve organized their education, career, leisure, identity, status seeking, and mating strategy. As well-trained consumer narcissists we are such insecure, praise-starved flattery sluts that a little social validation goes a long way. A friend or lover can imply that we have wasted our lives chasing consumerist dream-worlds and status mirages, as long as he or she reassures us that we will appear intelligent, attractive, and virtuous. (Don’t forget to mention that, or people will cry.)”

“An evolutionary perspective gives us confidence that each new generation will find its own ways to turn new technologies into new trait-display modes and economic opportunities. It makes us aware that something else will soon replace the current system of consumer capitalism and its key features: credentialism, workaholism, conspicuous consumption, single-family housing, fragmented kin and social networks, weak social norms, narrowly economic definitions of social progress and national status, and indirect democracy distorted by corporate interests and media conglomerates. These seemingly natural features of contemporary society will seem as alien to our great-grand-children as mammoth hunting, field plowing, and typewriting now seem to us.”

“Cultural evolution, like biological evolution, is much smarter than we are.”

“We should be free to choose what we buy and how we live, as long as we pay the fair price for every harm we do to others in the process.”

“We take wondrously adaptive capacities for human self-display – language, intelligence, kindness, creativity, and beauty – and then forget how to use them in making friends, attracting mates, and gaining prestige. Instead we rely on goods and services acquired through education, work, and consumption to advertise our personal traits to others. These costly signals are mostly redundant or misleading, so others usually ignore them. They prefer to judge us through natural face-to-face interaction. We think our gilding dazzles them, though we ignore their own gilding when choosing our own friends and mates. This is an absurd way to live, but it’s never too late to come away from it.”