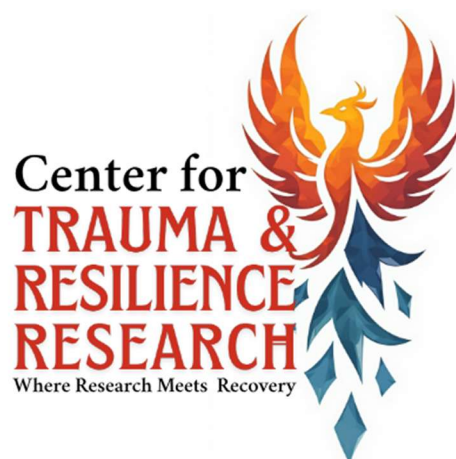


A Rational Society Steeped in Instant Gratification

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Abstract

This essay explores the paradox of a rational society immersed in a culture of instant gratification. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature from psychology, neuroscience, cultural studies, theology, and organizational cognition, it investigates how technological advancement and capitalist rationality contribute to emotional erosion, ethical shallowness, and spiritual disconnection. It argues for the cultivation of emotional depth, moral patience, and delayed gratification as counter-cultural practices essential for personal and communal flourishing.

Keywords: Rationalism, instant gratification, ethics, emotion, spirituality, cognitive science

A Rational Society Steeped in Instant Gratification

In modern societies shaped by technological advancement and capitalist logic, the intersection of rationalism and instant gratification has produced a unique cultural and psychological landscape. Rational society is often characterized by an emphasis on efficiency, logic, and optimization. Simultaneously, widespread access to digital tools and immediate rewards—such as social media likes, fast delivery, and streaming entertainment—has normalized instant gratification. The paradox of this coexistence is that while rational systems are designed for long-term gain and planning, they are now serving desires for short-term pleasure. This essay explores what such a society looks like, how it shapes individual behavior, and what implications it has for ethical, emotional, and communal life.

Rationalism and Optimization

Rational society prioritizes quantifiable outcomes, streamlined processes, and predictable results. Rooted in Enlightenment thinking, it favors reason over emotion and seeks control through data and systems. In this context, institutions such as healthcare, education, and government increasingly adopt performance metrics, automation, and behavioral prediction models (Foucault, 1977). Efficiency becomes a moral good, and rational decision-making is equated with societal progress. However, this focus on optimization may inadvertently erode humanistic values such as patience, contemplation, and moral complexity. Recent developments in organizational cognition highlight the expansion of this rationalist mindset into even unconscious and identity-based decision-making (Galavan & Sund, 2021).

Instant Gratification Culture

Instant gratification refers to the desire for immediate rewards and the diminishing tolerance for delay. Psychologists have long studied this phenomenon in relation to impulse control and self-regulation (Mischel et al., 1989). Today, digital technology enables instant

access to information, products, and social validation, reinforcing neurological pathways associated with dopamine-driven behavior (Alter, 2017). This trend has intensified through algorithmic systems designed to capture and commodify attention (Zuboff, 2019). The culture of instant gratification discourages long-term investment, reflection, or emotional endurance. As such, even in highly rational systems, decisions are increasingly driven by what is expedient or pleasurable in the moment. From a neurological perspective, this shift reflects the interplay between emotional-cognitive circuits in the brain, which are activated even in contexts typically regarded as rational or logical (Okon-Singer et al., 2015).

The Paradox of Rational Impulsivity

When rational structures are repurposed to deliver immediate satisfaction, a paradox emerges: rational means are used for irrational ends. Algorithmic recommendation engines, for example, are rational tools designed to maximize user engagement—but what they often promote are addictive, short-term stimuli (Zuboff, 2019). Similarly, economic rationality encourages consumer choices that satisfy present desires, even at the expense of future well-being. This dynamic reflects what Bauman (2007) called "liquid modernity"—a condition in which identities, relationships, and values are fluid and disposable, optimized for speed and novelty rather than depth or commitment.

Impacts on Ethics and Emotion

A society that emphasizes efficiency and gratification may undervalue emotional complexity and ethical deliberation. Rational systems often marginalize emotional knowledge, viewing it as a hindrance to objectivity. Meanwhile, the demand for instant results fosters impatience and a diminished capacity for empathy, suffering, or moral ambiguity (Turkle, 2015). As Gross, Sheppes, and Urry (2011) note, a failure to distinguish or integrate emotion generation

and regulation can lead to skewed interpersonal dynamics and truncated moral responses. Interoceptive processes—the body’s awareness of internal states—play a critical but often overlooked role in shaping self-awareness and moral cognition (Tsakiris & Critchley, 2016). Moreover, technologies designed for emotional extraction and modeling, such as emotion recognition software, can reduce affective states to data points, stripping them of nuance and context (Shao et al., 2019). This abstraction risks not only misrepresenting emotion but also reinforcing the rational-instant paradigm by commodifying feeling itself.

Emotional Aging and the Positivity Effect

Contrary to the prevailing narrative of emotional erosion, emotional capacity may deepen with age. Scheibe and Carstensen (2010) describe how emotional aging enhances affective stability and resilience, suggesting that older adults can serve as cultural anchors against the tide of instant gratification. Their findings align with broader research indicating that emotional maturity includes the capacity to tolerate delayed rewards, navigate complexity, and regulate emotional intensity in ways that younger populations, steeped in digital immediacy, may struggle to achieve.

Americans Living in a Rational-Instant Society

The experience of Americans in a society shaped by both rationalism and instant gratification reflects the tensions inherent in this cultural paradox. On one hand, American ideals are deeply rooted in Enlightenment values—autonomy, progress, and the pursuit of happiness—often pursued through rational planning and individual effort. On the other hand, the rapid development of consumer technology, entertainment media, and platform capitalism has embedded instant gratification into the fabric of daily life.

American work culture exemplifies this tension. Productivity tools and data analytics drive hyper-efficiency, while workers simultaneously turn to short-term coping mechanisms—such as social media, fast food, or retail therapy—to deal with burnout. The gig economy offers flexibility and immediate payment, but often at the expense of long-term job security and emotional well-being (Zuboff, 2019). In education, students are often encouraged to optimize performance through metrics and test scores, while struggling with the distractions of a constantly connected world (Turkle, 2015).

This cultural dynamic also influences moral and political behavior. Public discourse is increasingly shaped by viral soundbites, emotional outrage, and the pursuit of quick wins rather than sustained dialogue or complex problem-solving. Digital platforms, designed using rational algorithms, foster emotional reactivity rather than reflection (Alter, 2017). Consequently, many Americans find themselves emotionally exhausted and spiritually disconnected, despite being surrounded by tools meant to improve life.

For Americans to thrive in this environment, a cultural shift is needed—one that embraces both reason and restraint. Institutions must model delayed gratification through sustainable policies, while families, educators, and spiritual leaders can foster practices that build emotional regulation and ethical patience. Reclaiming space for silence, deep learning, and meaningful relationships may offer the balance required to navigate the rational-instant paradigm with greater integrity and purpose.

Rationalism and Instant Gratification in the Church

Church communities are not immune to the cultural forces of rationalism and instant gratification. While traditionally grounded in spiritual disciplines that emphasize patience, contemplation, and long-term formation, many modern churches have increasingly adopted

metrics of growth and engagement that mirror secular models of success. Attendance numbers, giving levels, and social media reach are often treated as key indicators of spiritual health, reflecting a rationalized approach to ministry outcomes.

This trend can shift the focus from spiritual depth to consumer appeal. Worship experiences may be optimized for emotional impact, while sermons are condensed for short attention spans. Discipleship programs may be designed for quick results rather than sustained transformation. The expectation that faith should feel good or yield immediate personal benefits undermines the historical role of the church as a space for lament, sacrifice, and waiting on God (Berry, 2002).

Moreover, the prevalence of "prosperity gospel" teachings in some American contexts reflects the cultural logic of instant gratification—suggesting that faithfulness will be rewarded quickly, materially, and visibly. This message can distort biblical understandings of suffering, perseverance, and the value of spiritual trials (Turkle, 2015).

To counter this trend, churches must recommit to practices that resist cultural expediency: contemplative prayer, communal discernment, and long-term mentorship. The liturgical calendar, for example, offers a counter-narrative to the constant urgency of modern life by anchoring spiritual experience in seasons of waiting, fasting, and preparation. By fostering a slower, deeper engagement with faith, churches can model an alternative to the rational-instant paradigm and re-center on enduring truths rather than fleeting rewards.

One significant impact of rationalism in the church is the shift toward managerial models of leadership. Pastors and church leaders are increasingly expected to function as CEOs, using strategic planning tools, data analytics, and brand management techniques. While administrative competence is important, this rationalized approach can displace the pastoral vocation of

presence, prayer, and shepherding. Spiritual care risks becoming a transactional process focused on output rather than a transformative journey shaped by grace and mystery (Zuboff, 2019). The logic of instant gratification further complicates this dynamic by fostering a "spiritual consumer" mindset.

Congregants may evaluate worship services, sermons, or church programs based on how quickly they deliver inspiration, comfort, or solutions to personal problems. This mindset is reinforced by online church platforms and social media, where messages are curated for virality and speed rather than depth and discipleship. Faith becomes a product rather than a covenantal commitment, and spiritual maturity is often replaced by emotional highs.

This environment can discourage long-term spiritual formation practices such as fasting, silence, or communal lament—disciplines that often yield no immediate emotional payoff. Historically, the church offered a counter-narrative to cultural norms by valuing endurance, mystery, and the unseen work of the Spirit. In contrast, contemporary Christian culture sometimes mirrors the instant gratification ethos by promising rapid transformation, miraculous outcomes, or emotional breakthroughs without the cost of sustained discipline or surrender. Reclaiming a more faithful witness requires churches to intentionally resist the lure of speed and scale.

Theological education and ministerial training can center on formative practices such as slow reading of Scripture (*lectio divina*), intercessory prayer, and the rhythms of the liturgical year. These practices train congregants to embrace delayed gratification as a spiritual virtue, echoing the biblical themes of wilderness, exile, and pilgrimage. By resisting both managerial rationalism and emotional consumerism, the church can reassert its prophetic role in a society that has lost its patience for mystery and meaning.

Conclusion

The intersection of rationalism and instant gratification forms one of the most paradoxical and influential dynamics of modern society. Systems engineered for efficiency and long-term planning have been co-opted to meet the demands of immediacy, comfort, and emotional stimulation. This shift has reshaped not only individual habits but also institutional norms, ethical reasoning, and spiritual life.

Through the lens of interdisciplinary research, we have seen how rational structures can serve irrational ends, how emotional intelligence is marginalized, and how attention and meaning are commodified. From neurobiology to theology, from education to ecclesiology, the pattern is clear: a culture of instant gratification undermines the very virtues—such as patience, reflection, and ethical depth—that are essential for sustainable personal and communal life.

Yet the presence of this tension does not demand despair. It offers a clear invitation to resist. Emotional aging research, theological practices of contemplation, and cognitive science all point to the capacity for resilience, adaptation, and countercultural integrity. Reclaiming delayed gratification and integrating emotional intelligence into rational systems are not merely nostalgic or idealistic gestures—they are urgent ethical imperatives.

By fostering practices that nourish inner depth, relational maturity, and moral imagination, individuals and institutions alike can chart a new path. One that honors reason without reducing it to utility. One that welcomes emotion without surrendering to impulse. One that seeks not only what is fast or profitable, but what is faithful, enduring, and truly human.

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