The Consumption: Review of its Psychological and Social Attributions

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Abstract: Consumption, this humdrum act of acquisition and use of tangible and intangible objects has attracted a lot of researchers in diverse disciplines as sociology, psychology as well as marketing. Substantial body of research has focused on the investigation and the understanding of the consumption’s drivers and reasons. As a consequence, many approaches have appeared starting from the rational analysis to the sociological approach as well as the psychological one. In this article, we will review the main roles of consumption in our lives.

Keywords: consumption, rational analysis, sociological approach, psychology

INTRODUCTION

What do we consume nowadays? Is it the object’s functional utility or the signs that it conveys? Does the consumption satisfy a real urgent need? Does consumption help in consecrating the layman or it helps humans to better market themselves in the others’ eyes? And finally, is the consumption the real self mirror and a reliable decryption tool of any human personality? Uncountable are the questions that interpellate the psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists and researchers in marketing in order to understand the consumption reasons. Nowadays, consumption is more and more important; it is at the same time a pleasure source, a quest of oneself, integration and communication means as well as a cure for existential and psychological problems.

In fact, the contemporary literature abounds with research far from analyzing consumption from an economic or modernist angle looking at it as the synonym of “the use of goods for the satisfaction of human needs” (Grawitz, 1994, p.85) or a search for utility optimization according to available resources. Those studies have looked at the symbolism of the consumption, at its hedonic aspect, at its cathartic and conspicuous value, its communication ability as well as its constructive power of a balanced and loved self. Such academic attention to this concept emanates from the colossal and incessantly increasing budget that people allocate to consumption (Baudrillard, 1970; Henderson 1999; Csikszentmihalyi, 2000…), a revealing buget that called for a deep investigation of the real roles values of this routine human act. A reviset of the reasons of this act has highlighted according to Annabelle (2010) three main functions namely social, identity and hedonic.

In order to illuminate the diverse aspects, earnings and functions of the consumption, in this article, its main psychological and sociocultural values will be highlighted. It aims to analyze the consumption in its broad meaning as it was defined by Belk et al (1984) as it is not restricted to tangible goods but to all what the individual consumes places, time, intangible objects, souvenirs, artistic works, trips, brands… It should be mentioned at the beginning of this article that consumption will be apprehended from the Consumer Culture Theory or the CCT developed by Arnauld and Thompson (2005). The CCT is clearly opposite to the economic perspective of consumption and takes interest instead to the “sociocultural, experience, symbolic and ideological aspects of the consumption” (Arnauld et Thompson 2005, p.868). Such theory encompasses all the non-quantifiable and irrational aspects of the consumption.

Starting from the study of Firat and Venkatesh (1995) in which they highlight of the advent of the rediscovery era of consumption calling for its study from a psychological and sociocultural angle that is able to unveil its multiple roles. The article in hand is structured as following: firts of all the attention will be addressed to the presentation of the psychological value of consumption then light will be shed on its social roles.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL VALUE OF CONSUMPTION

Does the consumption in its large meaning help to recover, to improve the self image, to shape and remodel if necessary the consumer’s identity? Does this routine and almost daily act of purchase and use help in reaching the perfect self? Finally, does it allow to go in a journey to the unknown, to a world full of fantasy? The answer seems to be yes. In fact, several studies (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Sirgy 1982; Giddens, 1991; Dubois, 1994, Elliot, 1997/98…) have proved the existence of psychological reasons behind consumption. Being cathartic, constructive, compensatory or...
mood regulator via its hedonic aspect, the consumption has a huge value in the humans’ life and their mental balance.

THE CONSUMPTION AND THE SELF IMAGE

The self image is a concept that has intrigued a lot of researchers in different specialities. In spite of the plentiful literature relating to it, it is important to notice that there is no definition that was unanimously. While some researchers (James 1890 ; Belk, 1988) do consider it as all what the person can call « his » satrting from his body till all his possessions going through his family and friends, others consider it as the result of the surroundings’ perceptions that are introjected into the consciousness of the individual and that emphasize two self dimensions namely the « I » or social self and the « Me » or the personal self (Mead, 1934). However, these different apprehensions, sometimes antagonist regarding the formation of self image, do agree on its evolutionary aspect. In fact, the image that the person has of his own self is not static and constant and is not all the time positive, it goes through crises, weaknenss moments and problems that push it to seek solutions and remedies in the world of consumption (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967 ; Sirgy 1982 ; Giddens, 1991 ; Dubois, 1994, Elliot, 1997/98 ; Funk and Buchman, 1996 ; Duguay 2000…).

Funk and Buchman (1996) in their study on teenagers and the hidden reasons behind the choice of violent games, they discoved a strong link between consumption and self image crises that those teens go through (conflict between the real image and the desired one). According to those researchers, the individual often finds in the consumption a real remedy to his self image impairments, the consumption helps to recover and solve those problems and also perfect his self-image. As for Sirgy (1982) who takes over the definition of Rosenberg (1979) of self image as « the set of thoughts and feelings that one has of himself », he adds that the individual regardless his age lives a non-stop internal conflicts between his real self and the desired one. In order to reach this latter, he is always looking for products, shows, songs and highly symbolic and communicative places.

Adhering to this idea, Schouten (1991) asserts that the “consumption practices are important both for the maintenance and development of a harmonious and stable self” (p412). Based upon the work of Hoffer (1973) asserting the fact of “the incurable incompleteness of oneself”, the author argues that within the diverse consumption situations, the individual forges, improves, relooks and transforms his self or simply pursues a “self betterment”. Consumption is seen also as a catalyst for a possible change in self-image. Such a connection is observed in people that are changing in status or who move for instance from adolescence to adulthood. In fact, such a shift in the self image is accompanied by a change in consumption practices.

Joining the investigations on the consumption-self image bond as well as its constructive and compensatory role. Belk et al (1982, 1986) and Csikszentmihlyi (2000) assure that the art, the music, the traveling, as well as the tangible products improve self-esteem and satisfy the need for self-actualization. Mundviller (2011, p 35) went further in his analysis and argued that the self has become partially or entirely a purchasable product especially in artistic works that do present some idealized images.

From another angle, the consumption is seen as a rewarding and enriching experience since it offers “the opportunity to register in a story that allows self-renewal” (Ladwein, 2004, p2). In fact, the consumption of highly risked adventures, extraordinary activities and artistic works attract more and more the individual thanks to their ability to update the self, affirm it, control its weaknesses and facilitate its evolution. According to this author, the individual is usually motivated by the desire to live different, intense, outstanding and momerable thing or an experience that is able to transcend his self (Belk et al, 1989) and contribute to its good management. Ladwein (2004) adds that the consumption experience is perceived either as a means of self-transformation from which comes its teaching role (Foucault, 2001) or as a tool for restoring a self altered by the accelerated pace of the daily life. A rythm that prevent the healthy thinking and reflexivity that is essential to the creation of a well balanced self (Giddens 1991 ; Kaufmann 2004 ; Ladwein 2004). Such an idea was supported by Gul and Posendorfer (2004) who asserted that the individual seeks via consumption a certain self-control, a mirror that helps protecting this self or changing it to the better. Similarly, Schouten (1991) through the analysis of plastic surgery consumption has revealed the deep human will to control his self via his body that is considered as one of the most important and apparent dimensions of the self.

From another perspective, some researchers (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Schudson 1991; Williamson 1986; Ger 1997…) argued that the consumption is a tool of « self-cultivation » since it allows to unveil the individual’s talents, inspires his creativity and unleashes his hidden potentials. For instance, by consuming reality TV shows, the consumer sees himself in the actors’ personalities as well as their weaknesses. Also, by travelling to weird, undiscovered and exotic places, the individual discovers clearly his self and analyzes the need for a possible change. Thus, in all what we consume, we learn, we consolidate our strengths and we analyze the diverse means to deal with our problems. Simply, the individual consumes solutions and status (Estmon et al 1999).

In sum, in postmodern societies where the identity is fragmented, the alienation is accentuated and the self is extended in the possessions, the consumption is used to “build, maintain and communicate” (Elliot, 1997, p 285) the self-image and the individual’s identity. Moreover, the consumption is considered as a source of a good psychological health (Duguay, 2009). It allows to face the conflicting tensions between the real and the desired and between the concrete and the imaginary. It may be considered as an irrational response to “an altered or trivialized self in everyday life” (Ladwein, 2004, p12) as well as a healing means of a frustrated, lost, unsatisfied and isolated individual that reduces his self-malaise (Scitovsky, 1970). It is simply a tool of self-image creation (Ger, 1997).

THE CONSUMPTION: MOOD REGULATOR AND
ANTIDOTE TO ALL DEPRESSES

Beyond its cathartic, compensatory and constructive aspect that leads to the perfect self-image, the consumption is also a hedonic experience full of emotions. It is an activity that is able to distract the consumer and make him live in a world of wonders and dreams and thus forget his worries and life routine (Holbrook and Hirshman, 1982, Holbrook 1999 ; Guillen-Royo 2008). According to this approach, the consumption experience is « a phenomenon directed towards the pursuit of fantasies, emotions and fun” (Holbrook et Hirshman, 1982, p 132). It generates strong and positive emotions, improve the consumer’s mood state and helps him to escape all the worries. Hence, it is a main factor of joy (Costley et al, 2007)

Starting from the idea that the human beings are « feelers as well as thinkers and doers » (Addis et Holbrook, 2001, p50) and that they have «the desire to escape reality » ( p 136) and go in discovery of an imaginary world full of the unforeseen, fantasms and adventures, the authors assert that it is indeed within the consumption universe and its deep symbolism all those desires are satisfied. The consumption helps to escape the hard everyday rythm and be a part of a parallel world (Cova et Cova 2004, p12).

Supporting the same thesis, Chitturi et al (2008) postulate that the consumption is a highly emotional and hedonic experience that reduces stress and alienation of this life. Csikszentmihlyi (2000) adheres to this research thread and adds that the consumption “improves temporarily the mood of the individual” (p267) and has a lot of psychological earnings. In fact, it provides the consumer with an emotional energy and helps him to escape his problems. To this, Boutin (2009) adds that the consumption is a means of release; it is through it the individual gets rid of his troubles and takes another breath to continue his life. Briefly, the consumption is “the solution for his anger, his anxiety, his dissatisfaction and his boredom”, the daily act that turns his discomfort into happiness

Adhering to these studies, Levy (1959) has questioned the realism level of the classic approach of the consumer in which he is considered as a homoeconomicus governed by his senses and usually seeks products with high functional utility. The author shed light into other consumption reasons that are purely psychological and sociocultural.

Similarly, Csikszentmihly (2000) precised that the products that require a small level of physical efforts lead to a higher emotional output and more joy. To this Guillen-Roy (2008) adds that consumption-joy bond is clearer and stronger especially in poor and lower social classes that do find in the consumption a means to survive, to forget their misery and their inability to cope with the materialist world of nowadays.

In the same stream of studies and starting from « The theory of human need » developed by Doyal and Gouth (1991), Guillen-Royo et al (2008) have proved that consumption has a strong, positive and significant impact on the human’s wellness and happiness. Similarly, Frank (2004) argued that we purchase joy and not simple consumption objects. Campbell (1998) revealed the existence of two theories related to consumption one called the theory of need or the positivist theory (Coutant, 2009) and the desire one. According to this latter theory, more the consumption object is perceived as a positive change stimulator, more the happiness level related to it is high. In other words, the hedonism is not an intrinsic value in the consumption object but on the contrary it is the result of an irrational and personal judgement of its change and improvement abilities. This theory conceives a connection between the experience expected change and the perception of its hedonic value.

In a study on the consumption approaches, Holt (1995) argues that this human act was analyzed through three diverse perspectives. The first one considers consumption as an experience both constructive of the self-image and intense feelings creator. The second one looked at the consumption’s objects as an extension of the self and a part of the individual identity and finally the last one considers the consumption as a mirror of belonging to a certain community or social class and a means of people categorization. Accoding to this author, the reproach that can be adressed to those perspectives is that they ignore the entertainment as a consumption reason. This reason is clearly observed in the consumption of sport or artistic activities where the expected euphoria is the main choice driver.

Joining this stream of research focusing on the emotions related to the consumption, MacInnis and Mello (2005) and based on the « appraisal theory » argued that consumption is at the same time a hope source and a universe where dreams come true. Seen from this angle, the consumption is perceived as a means to reach existential and relational goals.

In conclusion, the advent of the experiential and symbolic approach (Cohn, 1974 ; Hirshman et Holbrook 1982 ; Belk et al 1982/1986 ; Gentina et Gomez 2006...) in the consumer behavior analysis has shed light on the importance of a new interpretation of the consumption values and roles. This routine act is no more analyzed from a cognitive and rational angle but rather from a psychological and emotional one. In fact, it is about a new investigation that opposes the positivist visions of the consumer behavior that analyses this latter through « the pavlovian theories of conditioning, the Maslowian ones on needs and the economic one on the rational buyer » (Coutant, 2009, p 2). Briefly, the hedonic consumption as it was introduced by Holbrook et Hirshman (1982) is based on « emotional and affective experiences, sensual pleasure, fantasy and fun that lead to a good mood » (Kronod et al, 2012, p2). Apart from is psychological virtues and the emotions that it generates, the consumption has also a social function that will presented in the following part.

THE CONSUMPTION SOCIOLOGY : A SELF MARKETING MEANS AND AN INTEGRATION FACILITATOR

Therewith its psychological aspect starting from its silent self healing to its mood regulation and creation of strong and positive emotions, the consumption reflects, speaks and conveys some messages about the individual to his close
family, his relatives and his social network in general. It allows certainly to construct and modify the self-image but also to display and present it since it is «constituted only when faced and met with others» (Ricoeur 1990). In fact, since the publication of the book of Baudrillard in 1970 on the consumption ideology where he argued that henceforth we should seek in the consumption universe a real social meaning, the writings and the studies have multiplied to bring a better understanding and more lighting on the sociological virtues of the consumption.

Nowadays, several descriptions are associated to consumption like conspicuous, symbolic even sacralized. In fact, according to many researchers (Hirshman 1988; Dubois: 1994; Duhaime et al, 1996; Engel et al, 1982/1995; Estmon et al 1999; Bauer et al …), the consumption reflects the self-image, the personal values, the norms, the status as well as the cultural ideologies of the individual. It also allows a good integration in a certain reference group or a community, it displays the cognitive independence of the consumer and it gathers the persons who are lost in this materialist world. Briefly, it is the most adopted and used language in this postmodern era (Baudrillard, 1970; Silverstone, 1981; Venkatesh 1998, Firat, Klein…).

THE CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION: A MARKETING MEANS OF A DIFFERENT SELF

We live in « a world of symbols and shows », this is the conviction of Firat and Venkatesh (1995, p250), we consume ideas, social values, lifestyles… thus we are conditioned by what is presented in the media (Baudrillard 1970; Cheal 1979; Livingstone 1976; Silverstone 1981; Hirshman 1988…) and what is said by our surroundings. Such a reality pushes the consumer to buy symbols but also to show them to others. Consequently, we don’t consume only to heal an altered self-image or to have fun or to change the mood but also to communicate, to show oneself and one’s singularity.

Starting from the idea that consumption is « self-reflective » (Hirshman, 1986) as it conveys messages about the self, the consumer identity, his values, his convictions, his taste and his ideological membership (Whang et al, 2004), it becomes legitimate to say that the individual consumes to be noticed and distinguished inside and outside his network. In this sense, Kleine et al (1993) and based upon « The theory of the social identity » argue that all the human’s behaviors are prompted by the physical or moral presence of others, the authors claimed that all what we consume reflect who we are and helps the hidden part of the self called “ The I” or “the personal identity” to speak loudly. Hence, consume to be noticed, consume to speak later on, consume to show one’s particularities are an integral part of consumption.

Promoting a unique self does not lie only in what could be observed by others, but what is intentionally said to them being loyal to the reality or on the contrary theatricalised or exaggerated. This social promotion of the consumption experiences is what is named “the narrative self” by Ricoeur (1990). According to this author, without consumption experiences marketing, the consumption act can’t be widely appreciated, it is simply when observing others fade with envy that the individual feels his uniqueness and singularity and hence his consumption generates positive effects on his self. Such an idea was supported by Turner (1982) who argued that « the experience is never really accomplished until it is expressed or communicated to others” (cited in Ladwein, 2004, p 18). Hence, the ostentation plays a mediating role between consumption and its psychological effects mentioned above.

In the same stream of research, Leibenstein (1950) argues that the continuous quest of exclusive objects, virgin destinations, authentic products and luxury brands is explained by a deep personal desire to be noticed and appreciated by others. Supporting the same thesis, Simonson and Nowlis (2000) precise that the persons who have strong singularity need are never attracted by sales adn discountes and are also rarely influenced by mass media. A viewpoint that was shared by Townsend and Sood (2012) who argue that the consumption objects choice reflects a need for self-assertiveness. In other words, the authors note that what the individual consumes helps in expressing his opinions, his feelings and his needs. To this, Amaldoss and Jain (2005) add that the consumption objects are not consumed for their functional value but for personal and social valorization goals. According to those authors, the individual invests more in the so-called "conspicuous goods” which are better able to send messages about his life and his social class and thus to satisfy the "need for prestige". Moreover, the consumers are more attracted by the rare products or the exclusive ones in order to be noticed (for instance in the haute couture sector).

In short, the consumption embodies a certain statuary and social dimension. The individual acquires and consumes the most empowered products to convey messages about his life and his social position (Chaudhuri and Majumdar, 2006). The price inelasticity noted in the luxury sector, for example, clearly underlines the importance of the reconsideration of ostentation as a reason for consumption. The example of the consumption of hygienic products presented by Baudrillard (1970) as a “faire-valoir” question their utility value and considers them as goods of distinction and social prestige. Apart from this singularity quest and differentiation display, the individual seeks to belong to certain social groups by adopting their lifestyles and their consumption products.

THE CONSUMPTION PROMISE: THE SOCIAL INCLUSION FACILITATION

Please to everyone is a human wish, being innate or acquired; it remains too difficult to see it come true. Being accepted, loved and appreciated by everyone is a wish that requires sacrifices and concessions but above all a strong tolerance and flexibility. The consumption seems to play a crucial role in the process of achieving this goal. In fact, from a social angle, the consumption allows the individuals integration and structures their relationships (Baudrillard, 1970; Botelho 2008). Digging into the history of the social function of consumption, Guillen-Royo (2008) argues that we mistake when we think that the consumption and social success bond is an exclusive characteristic of the postmodern society. In fact, the author highlighted that this connection dates back to the 18th century and finds its origines in the writings of the father of capitalism Adam
Smith (1776). This latter clearly claimed in his book “An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations » the instrumental role of consumption as a means “to achieve and maintain a certain social position” and thus he connected the personal opulence to the consumption basket. To this thesis, some sociologists as Rae (1834) and Veblen (1899) add that consumption serves as a basis of comparison between individuals and different social strata.

As such, consumption is intended to create links and contributes to social cohesion and relational success. Indeed, the simple communicated story of adventures, of extraordinary activities, of contemplated places, of experiences with high serenity, of authentic products and brands consumed is empowered to help the individual to integrate and find a place within a group or social layer (Ladwein, 2004). It is by adopting the style of dress or the musical taste or the consumed brands of a community that one can belong to it and create a relational exchange with its members. Hence, to each human group its consumption objects displaying to the public its identity and values. An identity materialized concretely through the objects of consumption certainly facilitates its adoption by others.

Since it's up to society to make sense of things, to define reality, to share it and to impose it (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Joas 1984), the individual draws the meaning of the objects he consumes from it. It is by adopting this sense and by internalizing these conventional social attitudes that the individual finds his place within a group or a community. It is by bending to the collective sense of objects that the individual feels protected, safe from criticism and thus a member to respect. This adaptation as a form of integration is called "conformism". It is actually to deny the individual self and opt for the collective one and to adopt the social group’s opinion. In fact, according to Brewer (1991,2010) in his « Optimal distinctiveness theory », the human beings are governed by two opposing needs one of them is « a need for assimilation and inclusion, a desire for belonging that motivates immersion in social groups ». In other words, the social identity is the result of a continuous conflict between the need for inclusion and the need for singularity and distinctiveness (Asch ;1951).

Similarly, Badoui and Lebrun (2007) postulate that the consumption of recognizable products by others serves as a basis for integration for adolescents. In fact, it is this identification through the objects and the practices of consumption that helps them forge a strong identity, build relationships and have a position in the public space. Insisting on the social and statutory status of consumption, Baudrillard (1970) argues that we usually consume the signs conveyed by the objects to better integrate a reference group or to withdraw from a group and belong to another seen as superior or ideal. Hence, the author sees in the quest of differentiation a kind of masked inclusion where the individual only migrates from one reference group to another. Such a shift could be seen as a desire to transcend one's self and improve one's social position.

THE CONSUMPTION: AN ACT OF RESISTANCE AND DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

In addition to its psychological virtues, its ostentation role, and inclusion and differentiation values, another stream of research highlights that the consumption universe communicates also a certain reactionary obstinacy or even a rebellion. According to many researchers (Baudrillard, 1970 ; Hebdige 1988 ; Schouten 1991 ; Belk and Ger 1994 ; Ger 1997…), consumption can sometimes convey messages of resistance, control, domination and refusal of conformity. In fact, as “the most beautiful consumption object” (Baudrillard, 1970), the body conveys also messages to the world. In addition to the social distinction and differentiation from others, the body is also a means of expression of freedom and existence. Supporting this thesis, Schouten (1991) introduces it as a means of resistance and independance. In analyzing the behavior of plastic surgery consumers, the author presents the exemple of a teenager who changed the shape of her nose only to show to her father that she is autonomous, mature and that she refuses blind obedience.

Joining this same idea, Ger (1997) précises that the consumption shows a certain resistance through “the recontextualization of the objects’ meanings ». It is by changing the meaning of the objects that an individual becomes able to display his opinions. The Harlem shake for instance was a simple dance devoid of any political meaning till its use by some Tunisian teenagers during the revolution of 2011 who gave her another meaning of rejection of archaic ideas. The growth of consumption of alcoholic products in Tunisia post-elections is seen by some sociologists as a message of resistance addressed to the fundamentalists and fanatics and their "attempt to homogenize” the Tunisian people...

CONCLUSION

All those facets, values and roles played by the consumption and all these adjectives that have been attributed to it led some researchers to question its probable or real religious connotation (Belk et al, 1988; Barna 2006; Djamaa 2007; Camus et Poulin 2009…) as well as its biological value and if it can be considered as an instinct (Saad, 2006/2012). Hence, all what is consumed places, art shows, fantastic activities, brands and others convey messages about oneself and encompass the promise to create the self-image, to improve it, to recover it, and to generate a good mental health, to regulate the mood as well as to facilitate inclusion across both conformity and differentiation. Consumption experience helps to build the identity, belong to a certain reference group and evade community and its similarities. In other words, we consume to convey at the same time a success message to ourselves and to others (Eastman et al, 1999).

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