# Consumption and Modernity

## Introduction

The modern individual is engaged in an informal race to accumulate material comforts in the form of personal acquisitions. The competitive nature of acquisition occurs between individual family members, families as units, regions within countries and continents and more pronouncedly, between nations organised as formal economies. The race for the purchase of goods for comfort is a culture known as consumerism. From a modern economic perspective, consumerism can best be described through demand and supply, two economic phenomena that form the basis of measurement of economic growth. Consumerism, therefore, seems to be a result of organised economies. A critical historical examination, however, reveals a complex relationship between socio-cultural factors and economic necessity with regard to consumerism.

## The Consumer Revolution

Sassatelli (2007) asserts that the culture of consumerism traces its origins to diverse and distant historical periods and geographies. While many economic historians commonly point to the industrial revolution as the key period responsible for modern consumerism, Sassatelli argues that consumerism existed long before the nineteenth century. He noted that the societies that valued material accumulation emerged as early as the fourteenth century in Europe especially in Italy, the Netherlands, Germany and Britain. The driving factors at that time included the rise of international commerce and the need to maintain strong armies that were used to conquer new colonies for the expansion of the European empires. The emergence of upper classes such as the bourgeoisie and the nobility that lived in luxury stirred the desire for material accumulation among the peasantry and other lower classes during the feudal system. The industrial revolution and the resultant modern globalised market is driven by capitalism were a result of the culture of consumerism that had arisen earlier. In Sassatelli’s view, modernity (the culture of individualism, capitalism and liberal democracy) is a result of better goods and services. His view differs from others that view modernity as a consequence of consumerism. Rather, he asserts that consumerism existed since medieval times. The modern cities and homes are simply platforms for displaying consumerism. However, he agrees that the race for material acquisition is more pronounced today than in earlier days.

In post-modern days, the consumerism is not likely to change. On the other hand, consumerism will involve acquisition of environmentally friendly goods. The change to environmentally friendly goods will arise due to the acknowledgement that the environment is in danger of becoming unable to support life, hence the need to conserve it. The call for sustainable development from governments has gained ground among businesses that now compete to portray their operations and goods as “green” to win customers. Unfortunately, “green” goods are expensive and will provide the next race in acquisition.

## Consumption as Distinction

Veblen (2014) brings into sharp focus the role of class distinction in the culture of consumerism. He notes that social stratification is a result of the unequal distribution of resources in a society that gives each social class unequal access to resources and opportunities. Each member of his class seeks to live up to the expectations of the class and hopes to ascend to a higher class. The phenomenon of social identity plays an important role in driving individual consumption to maintain the current class while the desire to ascend higher is the impetus for increased consumption or acquisition to climb up the social ladder. He points out that higher classes rarely wish to identify themselves with lower classes and work extra hard to cumulate more possessions to distinguish them from the latter.

Bordieu (2000) in support of Veblen (2014) further explains that industries in general and marketers, in particular, acknowledge the individual consumer’s desire to maintain a certain class or to ascend to a higher in positioning their products. Cultural industries develop prototypes of their ideal consumer and bombard the market with the picture of the prototype to create the desire to conform. The result is a rush for the product, from the target class, and from lower classes in the quest to ascend the ladder.

In summary, the level of consumption and the commodities of consumption place the individual consumer in a particular class. The consumer identifies himself to belong to a specific social group and desires to belong to a higher social group. The current economic status of the consumer drives the buyer to purchase offerings for his class or a higher class whenever finances allow. As Graeber (2011) adds, the shifting lines of class and gender drive and are exploited by industry marketers in driving consumption to even higher levels than ever before.

## Commodities as Objects, Values and Signs

Marx (2014) examines the acquisition of commodities from the perspective of the value that consumers assign to them. He notes that commodities serve a purpose to the owners beyond their simple and obvious utility. The argument is that objects of utility possess a character that depicts the values of the owner and they become a sign of their character to the observer. In other words, commodities are an expression of the character of the possessor derived from the extent of the expertise of the producer and the time it takes to produce the object. In purchasing a commodity, therefore, the consumer is not just acquiring its utility but acquiring social value society attaches to the particular name and brand of the object. The social value of the object is the result of consumerism that drives individuals to seek goods and services that possess higher social value than the rest. This trend is the epitome of modernity with its at-times-unethical marketing that exploits the social value of goods. In a postmodernity world, “green” will be the most valuable social value of goods as people shy away from goods that lead to environmental destruction.

Üstüner and Holt (2009) in a study of the spending habits of the middle class in less industrialised countries aver that this class seeks to adopt the mythical Western lifestyle in their purchases. For the middle class in the less industrialised countries, therefore, acquisition of commodities is for the realisation of their dream to live the Western lifestyle. These findings are in agreement with Sassatelli’s (2007) earlier findings that lower classes seek to ascend to higher classes through their objects of consumption. The deterritorialization of goods ownership and culture will see the middle class in developing countries adopt “green” tastes in their purchases in a post-modern world.

## Consumption and the Self

In an individualization of the consumer culture, Featherstone (1987) explores the concept of lifestyle and the individual tendency to adopt a specific living standard. The author asserts that individuals seek to conform to certain standard expectations of their social group, they are also keen to distinguish themselves as unique individuals in their classes. The individual is conscious of their manner of dressing, the choice of clothes, the manner of speech, the home he lives in, the car he uses, the preferred leisure activities and pastimes and every aspect of their lives. The source of the individuality is the unique socialisation of the individual and the values they espouse because of that socialisation. The individuality of the consumer in his social class is visible for instance, in peculiar preferences for certain colours. The democratization of modern government includes laws that uphold the right of the individual to express themselves in any manner they prefer. The democracy entrenches the self-expression through material possession. Furthermore, the primary concern of modern individuals is the self, not the society as it was in the earlier times. In post-modern life, man will return to the concern of the society over the self through adopting environmentally-conscious tastes and behaviour.

De Certeau (2000) recognises the consideration of individual preferences in marketing and production of consumer goods. The author emphasises that consumers are not passive recipients of cultural messages, but they actively renegotiate the messages to fit their individual preferences. In product choices, the individuality of consumers will remain in post-modernity, provided alternatives exist. Marketers will continue taking into account the uniqueness of individual consumers in producing “green” goods and providing options within each class of goods. This need drives the need to review the market segments and positions of products by psychosocial considerations.

## Advertising

Advertising is an important player in the discussion of consumerism and the role of the individual consumer vis-à-vis the intentions of the producer of commodities. Bernays (1928) argued that it is possible to manipulate public opinion by simply understanding human motives, identifying the special interests of the target audience (market) and the scope and limitations of the mode of passing the message. Applying this thesis to advertising and consumer behavior, the argument assumes that consumers are passive recipients of messages and accept the presentation of commodities as provided by the adverts. Modern advertisers today use all manner of gimmicks to sway the choices of consumers, including falsities. In post-modern times, regulators will enforce stricter rules to minimize falsification of adverts, especially with regard to environmental and health concerns.

Galbraith (2014) complicates the role of advertising with his “dependence effect”. The Dependence Effect asserts that producers create wants in the manner they satisfy them, meaning that as they seek to satisfy existing wants, they create new wants that drive the culture of consumerism further. This culture of consumerism in modernity is responsible for the devastating destruction of the environment that has in turn forced society to hold discussion on environmental conservation. The future of consumption in post-modern times will seek to satisfy many wants with fewer products.

Sassatelli (2007) takes the middle ground that modern advertising takes into account the purpose and use of the commodity in the real world in designing its message. The implication is that advertisers and marketers seek to understand the needs of the consumer in constructing their message carefully to rhyme with the consumer needs. This approach works in tandem with the modern marketing approach that begins with the consumer and ends with the product. The converse is the Bernays (1928) approach that began with the product and ended with the consumer and sales. Post-modernity marketing will begin and end with the environment.

## Food and Fashion

An analysis of eating and dressing habits finds that unlike the old times when the two were basic needs, the modern individual expresses many statements in the choice of food and dressing. In other words, consumerism extends to food and fashion in the modern world. In a study of eating habits in London, Whelan et al. (2002) found that the main consideration for younger women in their choice of food was its price as these women were newly employed with low earnings. Older women with higher earnings considered the calorie intake and the composition of food with little disregard to the price. The health consideration is a pertinent issue in modern times when alarming reports indicate that most foods are unhealthy. In post-modern times, healthy foods produced in environmentally friendly ways will become the staples. With regard to fashion, Wissinger (2009) observes that most girls and young women live their fantasy of the fairy-tale Cinderella dream through fashion and for those who are capable, through modelling. The image of Cinderella also drives the choice of foodstuffs as women strive to maintain the lean Cinderella figure. The relationship between the model body and fashion with the food of choice is responsible for many eating disorders among girls and young women worldwide (Rosebury 2005). Post-modern choices will prioritize environmental concerns over personal preferences.

## Sites of Consumption

With the rise of consumerism as an indication of social class, came the development of public places for consumption as part of modernity. Leach (1984) describes the rise of luxury shopping malls and arcades as the direct result of the need to show off the commodities of consumption. The typical modern shopping mall consists of restaurants, pubs and recreation parks for children and adults. Backes (1997) noted that the emancipation of women drove them outdoors where they could exhibit their hairstyles and fashionable clothes to the peers as a show of their taste and class.

The rise of consumption sites drove the race for acquisition further as individual consumers desired to show off their purchases. The availability of the platforms for display has dr5iven consumerism higher in modern times. In post-modernity, the sits of consumption will not change but their design and construction will include environmental concerns. The rise of “green” buildings will grow and in postmodernity, they will become mandatory.

## Consuming Nature

The emergence of capitalism as the monopolistic economic system has raised major concerns about the sustainability of the natural ecology due to its attendant consumerism. On the one hand, are “green” politicians arguing that the emphasis of a capitalist economy on production is a threat to natural resources necessary for the production (Dunlap, Riley & Angela, 2001). On the other hand, capitalist apologists argue that it is possible to exploit the earth’s resource responsibly in what they call “sustainable development.” Clapp (2002) asserts that whichever view one may take, the constant reminder is that consumption is consuming natural resources at an alarming rate. In post-modernity, consumption of natural and renewable products will become the norm to protect the environment for future generations.

## Alternative Consumption and Anti-Consumerism

Consumerism as a modern phenomenon is accepted as real and obvious solutions are not in sight yet. The concern is the future of the society in meeting its wanton needs and wants in a period of post-modernity. The threat of consumerism on the physical environment leads to the emergence of alternative consumption and anti-consumerism as the solutions to the threat. Proponents of alternative consumption front new and harmless technologies in the production of commodities (Johnston 2002). Another alternative according to this school of thought is changing the source of satisfaction for unnecessary wants by using renewable sources of energy and consuming renewable natural resources. The anti-consumerists argue that there is need to change the overall culture of consumerism, suggesting that there is need to impose legislation to control human consumption (Varul 2008). Obviously, these suggestions face a lot of opposition from economists sitting in political offices (Glickman 2009). However, the shift towards environmental concerns and a view of consumerism as destructive will drive post-modernity where consumption must take care of the environment.

## Conclusion

The debate on consumerism, capitalism and their effects on each other is still intense. However, the major concern is how to control their effects while maintaining economic growth. An understanding of the symbiotic relationship between consumerism and the economy provides hope that there may arise a solution to the deadlock. This paper examined the deep relationship between consumerism and social class, individual distinction, fashion and food and human need to carve out their individual identity. Modernity is both a cause and consequence of consumerism. It is difficult to eliminate one without affecting the other. In post-modern times, consumerism as a race to acquire wealth and goods will not change. However, the quality of goods and their production will change in recognition of the impact of the current consumerism on the environment. The government, businesses and individuals will consider the environment in consumption choice. The solution requires individual action beyond political intervention through legislation.

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