

Background text:

Why do we consume? The functions of consumption

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We live in a world in which greater well-being and happiness are closely linked to greater material prosperity. There is a common conception that the more we consume, the better off we are. A consumer society of this nature operates on the basis of a constant drive to increase perceived needs by means of advertising and cultural patterns, but also political incentives (e.g. car scrapping premiums) and thereby ensure that consumption levels keep on rising. Meanwhile, happiness research studies show that above a certain income level, higher material prosperity no longer correlates with increased happiness and satisfaction.

Another reason to question the consumption model and the throw-away society is the increasing scarcity of resources. The most important prerequisite for the existence of a consumer society is access to cheap fossil fuels and other cheap resources, and a cheap workforce enabled by global division of labour. In effect, industrialised nations are supplying themselves at the cost of the Global South. Their position of power enables them to shape world trade regulations so as to guarantee this access.

This is what makes low-cost mass consumption possible, as external costs are not taken into account. If the manufacture of a product causes social or environmental damage such as climate change, air pollution, falling groundwater levels, deforestation or health hazards, the manufacturer generally does not pick up the bill for the resulting clean-up costs. Instead, these costs are borne by society. In other words, the general public pays for the damage indirectly – in the form of higher taxes, or in the price of water, for example. Including these costs directly in the price of the product would make it significantly more expensive.

These costs aside, consumption serves the purpose of satisfying material and non-material needs. Consumption gives us greater mobility, a more varied diet, more convenience, individual freedom and personal comfort, variety and novelty. Material goods are important to us not just for their immediate practical value, but also as a result of what they signify both to ourselves and others (about ourselves, our lives and loves, our wishes, our successes and failures). For instance, cars are often associated with social status, sexual success, personal power, freedom and creativity. Like so many other commodities they are highly charged with cultural significance.

Functions of consumption:

Tim Jackson distinguishes between the various functions of consumption as follows:

1. Satisfaction of basic needs

Consumption serves to satisfy a limited set of basic material needs. These mainly include the need for adequate food and shelter (a roof over one's head and clothing). These basic needs can be satisfied with a very low level of consumption.

2. Well-being/happiness

Consumption is supposed to result in increased well-being by making things easier and more convenient (e.g. a car gives us greater mobility, many electrical appliances simplify certain tasks, and so on). Furthermore, we consume certain goods or services for pleasure (e.g. games, leisure cruises).

3. Attractiveness/affection

People feel the need to be desired, which can be explained in biological terms by powerful emotional and sexual drives. It is a matter of social and sexual competition, attention and affection. In a consumer society, these needs are satisfied by consuming certain goods (e.g. a posh, expensive car makes its owner attractive, or a particular perfume or shower gel makes people sexier). This is a phenomenon which advertising is quick to exploit.

4. Identity/belonging

Our behaviour as consumers is closely linked to our personal and collective identity. We are what we own. Certain consumer goods play a major role in the process of identity formation such as clothing, music or food. People wear the latest fashions in order to identify with a particular social group, to position themselves within it, to differentiate themselves from other groups and to show which ideals they adhere to. We consume in order to communicate. The products we consume are often of symbolic importance to us, e.g. buying organic produce symbolises our quest for a better world.

5. Social importance

Consumption can serve to demarcate our position in society, giving us a certain degree of social importance. This kind of consumption serves to position the consumer in relation to others, gaining them a certain status in society. For instance, our neighbours go on an extravagant holiday abroad, gaining an advantage over us in the competition for social status. We react by going on an even longer trip to somewhere even more distant, which in turn simply prompts our neighbours to react to our new-found status. And so on.

6. Habit

We consume certain things without realising, out of habit. We do not question certain purchases because they are a life-long habit, reflecting the habits of our parents or society at large. This is known as the lock-in effect: societies make themselves socially and materially dependent on certain consumer goods. This can take the form of cultural dependence, which consists in our becoming accustomed to a certain level of material possessions (car, smartphone, brand name clothes, dishwasher...), or technological dependence, i.e. social organisation becomes dependent on technological devices such as computers or mobile phones.

Sources:

Jackson, Tim: *Paradies-Verbraucher. Aufstieg und Fall der Konsumgesellschaft*, <<http://www.umweltethik.at/detail.php?id=291>>, 1.12.2012; Ropke, Inge: *Konsum: Der Kern des Wachstums*, in: Seidl, Irmj, Zahrnt, Angelika: *Postwachstumsgesellschaft. Konzepte für die Zukunft.*, Marburg 2010, S. 103–116.