Culture of Consumption: Poles’ Consumer Attitudes

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Abstract: The purpose of the article is to identify selected processes and mechanisms of consumption culture. Are two factors, conveying cultural change: the media and advertising (which is a message communicated via the media), these “powerful” means of consumption enculturation and socialisation? Whether the level of consumption affects the subjectively perceived quality of life? Or maybe there are already significant signs of deconsumption that means conscious reducing consumption without loss of quality of life? The text uses a sociological perspective to question the validity of critiques of consumer culture. In polish literature the phenomenon of consumption is quite stereotyped: either as a practice of liberating or enslaving, offering a choice, or not giving any choice, etc. Therefore, there will be important to break the one-sided images of the consumer, capturing macroprocess of consumption in everyday contexts of polish 18 and 38– year-olds’ life.

Keywords: consumer culture, consumer socialisation, identity, Polish youth, media

Introduction

Approaches towards abnormal forms of consumption1 in the literature are generally critical.2 Studies on the impact of consumption on culture and of culture on consumption through the shaping of individuals’ lifestyles and identities by marketing are critical both of the very essence of over-consumption and of its social costs. The proposed analysis is not intended as a harsh criticism of consumerism. What is more, both the easy labelling of phenomena which, for various reasons, can mean a lot to some people, and the claims about the high efficiency of consumer socialisation, unsupported by sound analysis, are considered disturbing. The present article does not name or present the internal contradictions and weaknesses of consumerism to demonstrate its potential mediocrity, but in order to inspire discussion so as to improve reality.
The term ‘culture of consumption’ is becoming increasingly popular. However can we speak of culture in relation to consumption, if the latter is – according to Erich Fromm (2000) – ‘dehumanised’, irrational, non-functional and constituting only a panacea for a sense of incompleteness of existence, disappointment, frustration and inability to self-determine? It affirms the negation of life, since it inhibits the development of a creative personality. After all, a culture is supposed to give its members a wide range of possibilities to fulfil their culture-forming potential. People’s culture roots them in their environment, allowing them to experience social values deeper and more directly. It creates these values or at least emphasises their meaning, and sets standards of what is beautiful, noble, wise, fair, desirable and praise-worthy (Dyczewski, 1993, p. 197). It is spontaneous and active; it creates bonds and values, giving the individual a sense of autonomy and familiarity, and it humanises the man and the world around. It is everything that facilitates our development and enriches us. Therefore, is the term ‘culture of consumption’ not an unacceptable oxymoron?

The culture of consumption can be understood as a system of values, mainly prestigious material values, shared by a large group, and the rules of action relating to the fulfilment of these values and the symbolic realm related to it: ideology, knowledge and rituals. This culture is one of many cultures that make up the overall picture of the culture of society. The characteristics of these cultures can support, strengthen, but also weaken this whole. They may be more or less dominant determinants of identity. The Polish discourse on the meanings of the culture of consumption seeks to answer questions about their role and the scope of their co-existence in the culture of society. It also raises questions about the singularity of this culture. What meanings are communicated by this culture, both directly and indirectly, in media communication systems? What characterises it? In answering this question, it is necessary to investigate several areas which are specifically highlighted in the Polish literature:

Acceleration of the “new-old” cycle

It is argued that the ideology of consumerism has an inherently inscribed category of ‘obsolescence’ – fast going out of fashion and fast wearing out. Year by year, the speed of this cycle is increasing. Currently, the length of the life cycle of a new product in such industries as technology has decreased to 1 year; in the clothing industry, it sometimes lasts at most one season; that is, a few months. This is obviously related to the development of new technologies, but the fast-changing trends forced by the marketing offensive also play an important role. Consumers are drawn into a spiral of purchases that allow them to believe that they are up to date.

Primitiveness of hedonistic values

The essence of this culture is to sanction pleasure, amusement and excitement in any form, even if they are ephemeral and short-lived. It is characteristic to be convinced that life is more valuable and satisfying if it is more joyful. As a consequence, the importance and quality of leisure is increasing. People prefer easy, pleasant and quick
solutions. Immediate gratification is required. “Reality is seen as one big MacroCash – everything is ‘immediate’” (Melosik, 2002, p. 15). On the other hand, the need to make money, work, effort and stress often associated with money and other existential consequences are a big taboo of this ideology.

**Permanence and ambivalence of desires**

Zygmunt Bauman (2001) argues that modern man never really experiences satisfaction. The consumer seems to have almost achieved the ‘final point of happiness’ (for instance, an expensive car), but in a moment, he or she feels that the point of stability and satisfaction of desires is over, and further search needs to be initiated (Melosik, 2002, p. 15-16). The ‘state of happiness’ is fast-gone as it is associated with a particular form of leisure that simply ends (such as holidays in Thailand) or the purchase of a particular product (which will soon lose its appeal). Moreover, the pressure of the media and advertising can destroy each moment of stability. New ways of satisfaction are sought by means of consumption (Melosik, 2002, p. 15-16). Therefore, it is permanent dissatisfaction, and not satisfaction, that is the driver of a consumer’s activity. Over time, this continuous ‘consumer anxiety’ becomes a normal and common state.

These are not, therefore, articulated and rational needs that are important, but desires – elusive, unpredictable and appearing, seemingly, spontaneously as a result of elusive motivations, desires that do not require justification or explanation. The ideal consumer is an irresponsible person with conflicting motivations, desires and whims who “just like Donald Duck is running among stands and shelves in an obsessed manner. At any moment, he may hit on a crazy idea: he may buy a trinket from the eighteenth century or a video game, go on vacation to the countryside or perhaps to Thailand. The market is ready for anything” (Melosik, 2002, p. 15). Market researchers also mention the phenomenon of the infantilisation of adults, or even the “conscious cultivation of immaturity”. Everyday objects are designed in such a way as to look like toys (toyification). Toys are also produced for the so-called ‘kidults’ or “adults who care about their inner child” (Melosik, 2002, p. 15).

**Cult of the body**

In the culture of consumption, the body is simultaneously a symbol, a tool, an image and – especially in the discourse of fashion or advertising, and especially the female body – the object of worship, “the privileged medium of Beauty, Sexuality and controlled Narcissism” (Baudrillard, 2006, p. 182). The culture of consumption radicalises “a new ethics in relation to the body” (Baudrillard 2006, p. 174). – “superficial, epidermal religion of the body” (Baudrillard, 2006, p. 193) and even induces a cultural revolution concerning humans and their sexuality (Brocki, 2006, p. 75-90). The body is exposed beyond measure. Its presence is multiplied by images and reproductions of the whole and parts of it which refer to subsequent consumption-related meanings.

In this ideology, the body is not a natural body; it cannot be fully accepted, it must be improved, that is, consciously shaped and modified. The holder of the body should see it as an object constantly requiring correction. Thus, contrary to expectations, a
change in appearance fails to bring satisfaction or self-acceptance, especially when
the advertised images, standards or ideals of beauty are becoming increasingly
alienated from reality and unrealistically high.

Apparent freedom of choice and personalisation

The culture of consumption is supposed to offer liberation from the constraints of
normativity. It promises a semblance of freedom. Freedom of choice among
ambivalent behaviours and contents is, seemingly, not only possible, but also goes
unpunished (Krause, 2001, p. 109). It guarantees apparent sense. An identity
constructed in this way, determined by Zbyszek Melosik as the ‘supermarket’-type of
identity, is based on the belief that everything can be constructed and reconstructed
freely: “there are a lot of ‘you’ – you choose (buy) one of them for yourself for a
given moment. […] You can put everything into the cart … of your identity” (Melosik,
2002, p. 15). On the one hand, this creates an apparently incredible ability to define
oneself over and over again: “You can […] put on something different every day,
every day assume a different identity, every day imitate somebody else and take
advantage of the inexhaustible, seething reservoir of styles. This gives you some kind
of freedom – freedom by escaping social labelling, freedom by being able to imitate
different people, which fairly well reduces the effectiveness of social control”
(Szendak, Pietrowicz, 2004, p. 15). On the other hand, it is a very specifically
conceived freedom, i.e. freedom to take advantage of the offer that the market gives
us and nothing else. The desire to ‘be yourself’ encourages consumers to buy and use
exactly the same products as other consumers, for this type of individualisation is
followed, in fact, by uniformisation.

It is possible to feel a momentary fulfilment and satisfaction and to put new gadgets
into the ‘cart’ of one’s identity, in ever new configurations. At the same time, lack of
explicit instructions as to the shape of the identity causes ‘blurring’ and increasing
vulnerability to consumption patterns. Identities are shaped by a one-dimensional
key and consumer experiences provide only an appearance of being free in one’s
choices.

Economisation and apparent democratisation of culture

It is argued that the transformations of contemporary culture are mainly related to
the rise and development of ‘consumer syndrome’, meaning global
instrumentalisation and commodification of the culture itself. In order to effectively
sell products or make them stand out in the consciousness of the consumer
(positioning), commercial communications have to constantly mix or intentionally
’substitute’ the fields of economics and culture with each other, to project economic
phenomena onto cultural ones and vice versa (Krzysztofek, Szczepański, 2005).
Diverting the existing meanings from their original roots in a given culture and
transforming them in accordance with the interests of marketing leads to ‘opacity’ of
particular values, which ‘grow barren’ and lose their former semantic content during
their marketing processing and owing to associations with the advertised product.

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) points out the radical expansion of the symbolic goods market,
which is mainly related to the synergistic effect of the market, technology and
affluence of societies that consume more and more symbolic goods in relation to material goods. Jeremy Rifkin, in turn, points out the long-term process of transition from industrial production to production of cultural goods: “Increasing turnover is registered by modern trade and marketing of numerous cultural experiences, rather than traditional goods and services of industrial nature. Travels around the world, tourism, theme parks, entertainment, recreation, fashion and cuisine, sports and games, gambling, music, film, television, sex, virtual worlds of cyberspace and all kinds of leisure offers transmitted by e-mail are rapidly becoming the centre of the new capitalism, in which access to cultural experiences is traded” (Rifkin, 2003, p. 7-9).

The culture of consumption is to be a ‘democratic’ culture in which the participants can choose the identity they want. However, it appears that what is ‘good’ for them is decided by entertainment producers, because they consider what the consumer wants, that is, what sells best and brings the greatest profit, to be ‘good’. “If wide target audience becomes the most important thing, it means that you have to translate as many messages as possible into images to get through to the consumer that has trouble understanding the written word. An illiterate person is, after all, also a consumer – the advertising cannon-fodder of the pop culture. [...] And by the way, the consumers form a ‘Mcworldview’ that drives the consumers of such culture. A coupled system,” as Kazimierz Krzysztofek (2011) summarises.

“Marketability” of identity

The continuous, multiple choices of goods are supposed to fill the ‘vacuum of values’, to give sense to human existence, neutralise fears and anxieties, and shape the sense of possessing an inner content and consistency, measured by prestige, social approval and attractive appearance. Therefore, the sources of the popularity of consumption are contemporary concerns related to the loss of security, lonely and risky choices, lack of signposts, lost meaning, ambivalent, ambiguous and constantly re-constructed reality. Consumption is seen as a less risky response to postmodern dilemmas. In terms of individual identities, it becomes the primary resource for self-creation.

However, the identity offered by the market is ephemeral, temporary and ‘epidermal’, and is usually the result of an automatic reaction by the subject to the commercial proposal that comes from the world of consumption. Its essence is nothing more than a ‘pure’ and permanent change. Man has become a passive element, seduced by objects. And therefore, man is objectified. We change our views along with the changing circumstances and requirements of the external consumer reality. We function in accordance with the requirements set by the market (Bogunia-Borowska, Śleboda, 2003, p. 267-268). Identity is therefore moulded rather than shaped, and although the communication becomes more interactive, it manipulates rather than inspires, overwhelms rather than triggers self-conscious identity. There is no effort aimed at self-creation of the subject, enrichment of codes or a deeper insight into the world of cognised and shared meanings. On the contrary, consumption may break the world of meanings. The human being, subordinated to the creation of such a marketed identity, is not able to feel the essence of identity,
which is the consciousness of one’s own individuality, uniqueness, separateness from the environment, continuity and internal consistency.

**Effectiveness of consumer socialisation**

Consumption is considered to be at the forefront of contemporary social reality. Popular culture, media and advertising are regarded as the most effective channels for transmitting its ideology and completing the socialisation of the next generations of consumers in its spirit. They are referred to as powerful means of enculturation and socialisation, especially of young people. They replace the traditional authorities and socialising institutions. It is claimed that consumerism wreaks ‘havoc’ in society, pointing out the socio-cultural consequences of a flat model of consumerism that cannot be compensated with financial profits.

Macro-scale studies on the psychological consequences of excessive consumerism have been undertaken by Jessie O’Neill (1997), John de Graaf, David Wann and Thomas Naylor (2001), Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss (2006), and Oliver James (2007). The direct effects (increase in quality of life in all its dimensions) of so-called ‘affluenza’ have been investigated by John Cairns (1998, p. 109-123). These studies have also verified the relationships between materialism, life satisfaction level (Ryan, Dziurawiec, 2000) and quality of social relations. The studies searched for parameters of consumer attitudes based on gender (Kamineni, 2005), ethnicity (Chan, Zhang, 2007) and lifestyle (Wilkowski, 2002). Goldberg, Parrachio and Banossey (2003) analysed the influence of marketing communications on the level of materialism in children, their sense of happiness and fulfillment of school obligations. Children’s susceptibility to advertising went hand in hand with high indications on the scale of materialism, more frequent purchases, high interest in new products, low propensity to save, poorer school notes and strong influence on parents as regards market selections.

It was empirically confirmed that advertising affects the formation of materialistic values in children (Liebert, 1986 and Wulfemeyer, Mueller, 1992), appearance of conflicts in this area between parents and children (Atkin, 1980), and a higher level of frustration (Martin, Kennedy, 1993). Another group of studies concerned the issue of the influence of physically attractive male and female models appearing in advertisements on the self-esteem of adult women (Martin, Kennedy 2002 and Durkin, Paxton 2002), girls aged between 13 and 17 years old (Stice, Presnell 2002), and male (Gulas, K. McKeeage, 2000) and female students (Richins, 1991). All of these studies confirmed the negative impact of such images on women’s and men’s self-esteem.

In general, consumerism – or even the entire process of capitalist growth – is accused of reducing social capital and creating new forms of material and psychological poverty. Criticised also is the logic of wastefulness, devastation caused by ‘distinctive consumption’ or affluenza, meaning dysfunctional approaches to money and wealth (including the belief that happiness can be bought), which are followed by financial debt, stress and low self-esteem, inability to postpone gratification, inability to tolerate frustration, depression, compulsive behaviours, etc (O’Neill, 1997).
Poles’ consumer attitudes

A diagnosis of Poles’ attitudes also indicates that they have become more vulnerable to consumer education. The largest group of Polish society is the one that is distinguished by the desire to get rich quick, but not realising that the achievement of material success requires increased effort (Ciacek, Sztejnert, 2003). As many as 71% of Poles prefer to buy on credit rather than save money for this purpose before. Poles have fallen into the ‘credit card trap’. In 2011, their credit debt amounted to more than 280 billion zlotys, which is the highest debt level since the late 1990s and is growing exponentially [data from the National Bank of Poland]. At the end of 2011, the amount of private loans not paid back regularly amounted to more than 35 billion zlotys and was 42% higher than the previous year. Almost 2.1 million Poles could not manage to settle their liabilities in a timely manner.

The diagnosis is that Poles have internalised the symbolic and prestigious meaning of brand-name products. They constantly try to keep up with the ‘vanishing point’ of the abnormal consumption patterns of the richest and systematically reduce savings, which is accompanied by the previously-mentioned increase in household debt. Such involvement of all one’s activity on the market serves to bring negative consequences for all other non-commercial aspects of human life and push the intangible elements creating the sense of ‘dignified life’ to the background.

The researcher’s curiosity, however, demands a re-examination of the questions about social structures of dominant identities, i.e. — in this case — about the impact of consumer meanings on the reality of individuals and groups. Is consumption really the dominant discourse today?

The study of youth attitudes in this area is appropriate here, given that the behaviours and processes observed in this group are an ideal indicator of what will happen to society and culture in the near future. Therefore, with respect to this group, one can ask once again whether it is appropriate to talk today about a kind of consciousness drainage created by commercial media communications? To what extent are those transfers the subject of a specific perception that seems to be characteristic of the younger generation (distance, irony)? And to what extent are they one of the main factors that create young people’s reality, permeating through everyday life, forming a new language, creating a unique worldview and a completely new vision of the world? How well (if at all) can the world of consumption, which makes unreal and co-modifies everything it can, control the cycle of socialisation in which young people grow up? How effectively does it encourage young people to self-designate by means of appearance (body) and consumption patterns? Is Tomasz Szlendak’s statement, “not to consume is not to express one’s own self” (Szlendak, 2005, p. 9) justified with respect to this group? Or maybe young people are not defined by any common culture at all, even a culture manifested in the most variable forms of consumption?

Consumer attitudes of Polish youth in literature

The literature presents a fairly simple standpoint. It is claimed that the young generation strongly rejects the values of the older generation, which they see as
either not worth continuing or, sometimes, unclear. It is also possible to observe gradual distancing from cultural self-identity, measured by the weak degree of attachment to national traditions (Kociuba 2009, p. 222). “Especially for young people born after 1981, great literature is a boring set of obligatory readings that needs to be read [...] and forgot as quickly as possible, and the role models created by the ‘masters of the pen’ are no longer internalised and seem completely alien to today’s youth. Their knowledge of national history, and thus their national consciousness, is weak and nebulous. Young people know practically nothing about the past of their nation and state” (Sobczak 2009, p. 247). Cultural heritage seems to be insignificant and history is seen as a collection of boring facts. The consciousness of that generation is devoid of historical context, alienated from literary culture and unfamiliar with art and music culture (Sobczak 2009, p. 249).

Those young people are called the ‘9.99’ generation, because “what really appeals to them is ‘SHOPPING!’, endless hunt for promotions and discounts, search for what the newspaper called ‘indispensable in this season’. And the most effective time is the period of post-season sales” (Ciszewski, 2008, p. 425). This generation is also called the ‘zapping’ generation, owing to the volatility and speed of audio-visual sequences in transmissions addressed to them. In order to attract the attention of young people, the message must be attractive, colourful and nicely packaged. The message must entertain them and provide constant new stimuli, experiences and interactivity. It should not leave them time for reflection and understanding (Kerckhove, 1995, p. 29). Thus, the way the generation experiences reality is often superficial, non-linear, unstructured and lacking the key to decode the messages. Many young people are supposed to be deprived of the ability to read symbols, of linguistic sensitivity and the ability to absorb meanings. What is more, the term ‘generation’ is not adequate to describe the nature of this social group, since the very process of the emergence of a generation is commercialised. Therefore, we cannot speak about ‘generation’ in the meaning of its historical character, but rather in terms of media generations as marketing and pop-culture products created by artificial means and having nothing to do with the values fundamental to the generated differences, says Sebastian Ciszewski (2008, p. 413).

Does this really mean that young people manifest the infantilisation typical of the consumption society? Does their way of life only involve consumption and leisure, as these are the only simple forms of social practice that enable them to grow roots and drift with the change? Does their identity just follow the behavioural instructions of the market?

The issues of the effectiveness of consumer socialisation and its tools and influence on broadly conceived social attitudes relate to one of the problems that is most difficult to verify empirically because of both the long-term nature of this process and the problem of separating the effects of its influence from the effects of various other forms of social influence. Rarely, if ever, are attempts made to empirically determine the effects of (excessive) consumption on the identity of individuals. Therefore, it should be considered a disturbing practice that many critics of consumption identify their own negative interpretations, often resulting from individual experiences in the field, with objective analyses in the field of pragmatics,
that is, the reception and effectiveness of this influence. It is possible to agree that the very ideology of consumerism is not an intellectually demanding offer for the identity of individuals, but its all-powerful and destructive influence on those identities and lifestyles may be at least questioned. It is a methodological error to assume that the recipients are people incapable of a common sense analysis of and reflection on what they hear, see or buy. This has been indicated by the results of research undertaken within the framework of cultural studies many times. Maybe we should agree with Elizabeth Frazer, who says that “young people’s self-awareness and reflection in the reception of a text is something natural” (after: Gromkowska-Melosik, 2010, p. 168) and that they regard the products of the culture of consumption as fiction and do not identify with its models, or subject them to ongoing negotiations.

**Study of 18-year-olds – high school graduates in 2012**

For the purposes of this article, in June 2012, 18 in-depth interviews with grade 4 high school students were conducted. This group was chosen because it catches the students directly after their school final examinations when they have to define the shape of their future. The facility chosen was the 1st General Upper Secondary School in Lublin (a highly prestigious school). It was considered that, owing to the study being of young people with more ‘cultural capital’, the subject may gain clarity. All of their parents have university degrees, hold managerial positions and are doctors, scientists, lawyers or businessmen. These students are on their way to becoming the social elite and have a privileged access to consumption. How do they intend to use this capital? To what do they aspire? Who do they appreciate? How do they understand their tasks? Are these really selfish tasks focused on achieving their own benefits, mainly of a material nature? Or are those tasks socially-minded, involving them in cultural life or volunteer work? To what extent is pragmatic orientation present in their thinking and to what extent idealistic? Do they lead this exciting, shopping-type (Melosik, 2002, p. 14) life style, in which successful shopping, ‘being up to date’ and so-called ‘hype’ are what matters?

This study, because of its methodology, should be treated only as a prelude to further research that allows the design and verification of the research tools that have been created. It is also an attempt to outline a set of axiological orientations towards consumption of, we must emphasise, a group that is non-representative of the whole, but interesting because of its social position and assumption that social hierarchy is mainly determined by money.

It turns out that the young people surveyed have detailed plans for their lives. They know what they want, and they think pragmatically in terms of the implementation of these plans. Success, identified with highly remunerated work, is made possible by good choices of fields of study (law, management, computer science, economics, English language, psychology, chemistry, and economics). These choices do not always reflect their interests, but often derive from material aspirations. The market reality is for them obvious and natural. They recognise its rules, including the difficulties in the labour market, strong competition and the exclusion of large social groups. They have an optimistic view of the future. Although they usually define it in
terms of their own careers, most add that, thanks to those careers, they would like to ensure good standards of living for their future families. In addition to obtaining high professional qualifications and financial independence, it is important for them to set up a family. And, in general, creating satisfying relationships with people is an important dimension as regards the sense of meaning in their lives.

They are generally interested in volunteer work and cultural activities (but not political ones). Most of the surveyed graduates express willingness to implement socially important ideas, but almost half of them would rather "postpone" this activity. One of the study participants pointed to the possible selection of resocialisation as the field of study, to be able to help those who do not succeed in life, but he added that he would have to establish his own office to be able to "somehow make a living doing this".

Often, one and the same person manifests socially-minded attitudes next to individualism, the world of values next to the world of interests. When asked whether they would take up a very good job if it resulted in losing a friend, the respondents answered that "it sounds like a scenario of a bad thriller" or "a contrived story". In reality, it would be possible to reconcile this job with friendship after all. These young people seem to have overcome the opposition between individualism and a socially-minded attitude. They want to pursue their career goals, they consider themselves ambitious and resourceful, but also caring, loving and kind. Opposing normative orientations appear to be complementary in their attitudes. Such ambivalence may be their answer to the diversity of narratives and complexity of contemporary cultural patterns.

When asked how they imagine their financial situation in 20 years, eight people mentioned a house with a garden outside the city, or possibly an apartment in a large urban area, not necessarily in Poland. When doubts were expressed as to whether the plans are overly optimistic, most of them pointed out the ease of access to credit, others the support of their parents or just a good job. Asked about ways of spending free time, they admit that they like to spend time in shopping centres, but they clearly look for a rational justification of their purchases. They also go to multiplexes and popular music or rock concerts, meet in clubs, McDonald's or KFC restaurants, watch TV series, TV game shows and nature films. They emphasise that they have spent a lot of time on extra classes preparing them for the exam.

In their own group, the respondents discussed advertising forms and content. They create new texts based on their meanings. They are 'up to date' with technological 'gadgets' and are familiar with their 'updated versions'. They are proficient in using technology, consumer code, and the code of trends or fashion. They have no problems with enumerating ten major brands. Boys begin with brands of the technology industry and the girls those of the clothing industry. However, they do not have any problems either with providing dates and facts regarding important events in the Polish history. Among their favourite authors, they list Andrzej Stasiuk, Janusz Glowacki and Dorota Masłowska.

Asked about role models and authorities, young people distance themselves from the answers. If anything, they indicate people from their surrounding environment.
When asked about their attitude towards the ‘stars’, the majority declare that celebrities are not an inspiring ideal for them, but are rather “money-orientated,” “people with their own problems”. Attractive models, appearing in advertisements, are “people who earn a lot”. Thus, they first indicate the pragmatic intentions of the actors and then their attractive appearance. When asked whether “they would like to look like that”, five people mentioned techniques of computer graphics (retouching) improving the images and referred to websites where it is possible to see “what these women look like without makeup”. Other people said that they like themselves as they are. One person admitted that “she could lose some weight, but she doesn’t feel like doing it now. She will take care of that later”. In a word, media images are received in this group more as idealised representations of the media rather than a pattern with which they could easily identify. Those images are subjected to different kinds of textual activity and production of new texts based on the meanings related to them: numerous jokes about Doda (puns on pop star and pop wailer) or Lady Gaga (as Lady Zgaga, meaning: “Lady Heartburn”), and activity on forums “against mediocrity and poor taste”. It can therefore be argued that the young person copes creatively with media/consumer reality. The respondents actively seek their own identity and the dilemmas that appear here should be regarded as a natural phenomenon characteristic of the period of adolescence.

**Study of 38-year-olds – high school graduates in 2002**

Are graduates who left school 20 years earlier succeeding equally well in the ‘post-prohibition’ era? Of course, both groups are generally differentiated by their life experience. They have been ‘captured’ at different stages of self-realisation and it would be unjustified to make comparisons of their normative orientations. However, it may be interesting to examine how they have used their ‘cultural capital’ and how they have found themselves in this consumerist social universe. The results of eight interviews successfully carried out with representatives of this group clearly indicate that they do not consider work as a value in itself, and are not strongly inclined to engage in and devote their potential to employers. They perceive work as a part of life, but also a factor in their development, which should provide the expected wage and freedom of action, including the fulfilment of life plans. They are self-reflexive authors of their autobiographies. They are already aware that professional success and high social status will not give them happiness. They generally reject the reality in which “money rules”, although, as in previous studies, they rather accept the reality of capitalism with its possibilities and limitations. They would gladly engage in social activities if they had more time. Two people have attempted to stand as candidates for the town council.

The graduates of 1991 are mostly well-to-do people who occupy independent, managerial positions or run their own businesses. They usually do not have time for shopping and they do it “out of necessity”, preferably in places where they can buy everything at once. They describe shopping as a rather “tiring” activity, particularly purchases made in supermarkets and when there are a lot of customers. They treat money as a means enabling fuller self-realisation. Four people indicated that they
would spend money on travelling with their families, but they would avoid the type of leisure offered by travel agencies. Some comments related to the establishment of savings deposits, insurance policies, vehicle replacement, purchase of equipment for the house, or changing the apartment for a bigger one. They look upon the ‘stars’ of the younger generation with distanced irony. They, in turn, appreciate journalists (Tomasz Lis, Jacek Żakowski, Tomasz Mann, Janina Paradowska, Grażyna Torbicka), or famous people from socio-cultural life (Adam Nowak, Magda Umer, Jerzy Stuhr, Wojciech Waglewski), but – according to them – those people have no features of ‘stardom’. Just like their younger colleagues, they are familiar with contemporary fashion and trends. They are pragmatic, but also tolerant of difference and otherness.

Conclusion

The research shows that consumption is one of many diverse activities that the surveyed groups undertake. Consumption, to some extent, fills in the spaces of their everyday lives. It is a way to spend their free time, sometimes devoted to pleasure and amusement, but also an unpleasant necessity. Study participants have some knowledge of the techniques of influencing the consumer and they certainly do not lack the ability of rational choice. It does not appear that they abandon a part of their subjectivity in favour of consumption, or unthinkingly “throw products to the cart of... their identity”. On the contrary, consumption in their case is often very functional and rational, and also creative (communal deciding of travel routes by the family, house decoration inspiring aesthetic experiences, choice of gifts that evoke emotions). Based on these results, it is difficult to conclude to what extent consumption is an important source of their identity and their own way of “being in the world”. Certainly, especially for younger high school graduates, it is a field of semiotic activity and the source of some common codes and symbols, that is, one of the intermediary areas between them and the world of the community.

The culture of consumption is a fact. It is inscribed in the MULTIPLICITY of sources of postmodern meanings. It calls for recognition of its importance. It offers the human being in late modernity the possibility of searching for their own self. Consumption wants to assign meanings to different activities and identify rules that will allow us to pursue these meanings. We cannot discredit it, because it can mean a great deal to young people. After all, it includes phenomena that provide them with behavioural patterns and identification with others on the difficult road to negotiating meanings. It often becomes a field for the expression of rebellion and development of semiotic social activity. By exploring it, we can gain knowledge about the socially modelled imagination and thus produce good, wise and noble patterns. Consumption does not need to be a threat to the young person. We should look for hazards in the human interior, when people lack a cognitive approach to life and potential for development. Consumption (more or less developed) is necessary and – using Karol Wojtyla’s phrase – will be what people make of it.
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Notes

1. Consumption refers to people’s use of material goods in order to satisfy their needs. Consumerism is a broader phenomenon than consumption and is conceived as an ideology of consumption expressed in attitudes of abnormal use and attachment to material goods.


