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Consumption and Environment

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Introduction

This article concerns consumption and its connections with environmental concerns. In the market economy, consumers play a dual role. On the one hand consumers are objects of marketing and promotional efforts. On the other hand they are active agents who engage in consumption work. Through their activity, consumers have capabilities and possibilities to influence decisions regarding environmental conditions made by firms and the state.

Recently, consumption and environment has received increasing academic interest. In Finland Liisa Uusitalo has approached the issue from the standpoint that consumers are coproducers of collective goods; and her focus is on consumer rationality (Uusitalo 1995). A second recently used approach was to link consumer values and attitudes with environmentally conscious behaviour. Puohiniemi (1995) examined whether consumers belonging to different value types vary in their disposition to environmental problems and in pro-environmental behaviour.

What is consumption in contemporary society

Consumption as a human conduct is typical of all societies and all periods in history. But the function of consumption and its significance for an individual and for society has shifted. What makes consumption such an important topic is that consumption, the economic system, and value system are interconnected (Uusitalo 1979). In the modern market economies consumption is indispensable, and we live in a society where consumption has a central status. It is even

claimed that consumption has taken the place of production and labour work. (Bauman 1992, 49). For example, consumption is seen as more important than work as regards individual self construction and the composition of societal divisions.

As consumption is a significant domain of the everyday life it should not be considered only selecting, purchasing and using of goods and services but should be defined broadly. The sociocultural significance of consumption should also be recognized. Douglas & Isherwood (1979) put forward the idea of consumption as essentially symbolic activity which creates order in the mental world of individuals. Their idea has been widely accepted and applied. In contemporary society, consumers are active in attaching symbolic meanings to goods and services. Actually they are eagerly seeking the meanings and significance of goods. Contemporary, modern and postmodern, consumer theories admit that consumption is social activity by which symbolic meanings as well as social codes and relations are produced and reproduced (Baudrillard 1975). In these theoretical perspectives consumption is viewed as full of hidden meanings, as creative work where everyday life and cultural patterns are actively produced and reproduced.

Furthermore, consumers can influence structures as well as their own position by their own activity (Uusitalo 1995, 20). Since consumers actively select their roles and positions in society they may adopt a life style according to the situation and current trends, and in this process, they consume material or non-material commodities. A central theme regarding the new consumption forms is their capacity to change the balance of consumption and environment towards more favourable to the environment. That is to say, the focal issue is whether green consumption is ever possible.

Is there postmodern consumption?

The new paradigms of consumption, frequently referred to as postmodern paradigms, emphasize the idea of an independent, self-constructing consumer. According to these new streams of thought consumers are capable of self-reflection of their own preferences and actions. They are active in reinterpreting and accommodating signs to their own culture (Bauman 1993). At the same time there has been a shift in morality, that is from the universal morality towards private morality. Each individual is to make his or her own decisions and is personally responsible for them. The postmodern theorists further suggest that

individuals are characterized by weak commitment, they are not committed to any single task but are partially interested in several issues, the interest shifting from one issue to another (Bauman 1993,198). Consumers are responsible only for themselves, and they are weakly committed to collective issues, such as environment. Thus, a question arises whether environmentally responsible consumption is possible within the postmodern paradigm.

The postmodern perspective provides, however, an alternative to the excessive consumption of material goods. Since consumption activities are seen as surpassing reality, what is consumed are signs and symbols rather than material goods (Baudrillard 1988). Real goods are replaced by simulations, and a new reality is created which has lost its reference to the original. In effect, nothing else but symbols are consumed (Baudrillard 1988). Accordingly, consumption becomes a play by which symbols are created and manipulated. This is, according to Baudrillard, the world of hyperreality. The image of purchase as well as the actual act may motivate the consumer to obtain resources which facilitate consumption. Consumption resources are obtained through paid labour, which is more and more a matter of creating real and imaginary consumption possibilities. As it is symbols and ideas that are consumed, we may suggest that consumption goes beyond the physical and observable acts. Self-construction may occur at an imaginary level.

Aspects of consumption

The previous consumer research has put forward several models or theories which describe the various aspects of consumer behaviour. While consumer research is an exceptionally diverse and multidisciplinary field, I bring up a few perspectives. Especially, attention is paid to the contemporary paradigms (see e.g. Sherry 1991; Belk 1995).

Consumption as work Daniel Miller (1987) has advocated the view that consumption is work. According to him, consumption work is realized as mass-produced objects are recontextualized so as to make them more accessible. Through consumption work, the consumer becomes familiar with the whole culture of a given consumption domain, he or she learns the rules, norms, expectations and proper behaviour. Environmentally favourable rules of behaviour should be included in consumption cultures, e.g. in leisure-time patterns, in food-preparation patterns. In

consumer socialization these rules could be easily internalized.

Consumption and the sense of self In the contemporary society, an important function of consumption is self-definition and expression. Belk (1988) presented an interesting view about the relationship between possessions and sense of self. He maintained that consumers regard some of their possessions so highly that these possessions become a part of their selves. Certain goods may extend individuals knowledge, abilities, or sense of self. Goods may have important functions in individuals' lives.

Maximizing utility According to the economic consumer theory, commodities are purchased and used because of the utility obtained from them. The economic models rely on the assumption that consumers prefer more commodities, thus consumers are thought to maximize their utility within a budget limit.

Enjoying The idea that the pursuit of pleasure is the motor of consumption in contemporary society was put forward by Campbell (1987). He argued that distinction should be made between satisfaction of needs and obtaining pleasure. Generally, needs can be satisfied through particular material objects while images, dreams, and feelings can bring pleasure. People daydream, and always desire new goods which have the potential to fulfil their desires. The possibility for pleasurable experience is in new goods, but not necessarily material goods. Imagined experiences can bring pleasure, but on the condition that the consumer possesses imaginative competences and capabilities. Various forms of consumption, e.g. leisure shopping are sources of pleasurable and aesthetic experiences for consumers (Featherstone 1991).

Struggling for societal position In so far as the significance of consumption for an individual has surpassed labour work, social divisions and hierarchies are marked by consumers' life styles, consumption styles, and goods and services (Bourdieu 1984; Uusitalo 1979). Thus the struggle for power and legitimated taste in society is within the field of consumption. Consumers are busy earning economic and cultural capital so as to be able to show their competitive position in relation to other consumers. Competence and distinction could be displayed in the field of environmentally conscious consumption. It is possible that the legitimated position is attached to the individuals with knowledge and capabilities concerning

environment and consumption.

What skills and competences consumers need to avoid negative consequences of consumption?

Consumption is integrated in the everyday life of individuals; it is typical of various time periods and various societies. Moreover, individuals construct their sense of self and their sense of society through consumption. But unfortunately this positive phenomenon has also inevitable negative consequences. Especially extensive packages, rapid and short fashion cycles, constant flow of innovations etc have caused damages attributable to consumption. In the western industrialized world, at least, consumption is now under scrutiny because of its harmful consequences. The protection of environment concerns everybody: sorting of garbage is regulated by laws and public norms, recycling is facilitated by money incentives. At the same time, consumers are becoming aware that they can, through their choices, influence what is produced and how. Recycling and sorting are gradually becoming compulsory. "Green" goods and services, and "green" labels are widely available. But consumers are not happy with the green labels only. More and more, also environmentally friendly production methods as well as social responsibility is required from firms.

Practical skills

Today consumers are eager to take the responsibility and to use their time and energy as they follow the recommendations to reducing, recycling, repairing, and reusing. They are gradually obtaining the knowledge, capabilities, and resources which are necessary for environmentally responsible consumption. In addition to the institutions responsible for socialization and education, commercial institutions such as retail chains have undertaken the informing of their customers and providing the facilities and equipment for recycling and sorting of garbage.

Skills in attaching meanings

In contemporary society there are few "independent" or public authorities or other instances who would dictate the appropriate meanings attached to diverse goods. The freedom and burden of creating meanings is on consumers themselves (Sack 1992). Consumers are not, however, totally alone. Guidance is offered by such sources as advertising, design and big retail chains that actually play a crucial role in the reproduction of consumer culture. Who offers the meanings that dictate the priority of a good quality of environment? If the responsibility rests on the

commercial institutions, are images attached properly and favourably from the perspective of good environment? The contemporary approaches to consumption assume that consumers are capable of actively and critically treating the information offered by advertising and mass media.

Cognitive skills

In their daily choices consumers have to cope with an overwhelming amount of information. Thus they have adopted strategies which help them cope with the information environment and select product and promotional stimuli that they perceive as relevant to their needs. These strategies include selective perception, tactics concerning perceptual organization and integration (Assael 1995). Especially perceptual categorization and loyalty may be viewed as cognitive coping strategies which help consumers to avoid extensive information processing. Pro-environmental information, norms and guides should be designed so that they facilitate effective information processing. What is more, non-commercial public pro-environmental information and promotion should be competitive with the commercial information.

Moral skills

Consumers have their private morality, norms guiding them in making good and right choices and decisions. As consumers select or make decisions about which goods and brands to consume they rely on their ideal world, the moral codes about what to consume and how to choose and consume (Lunt & Livingstone 1992). Although the postmodern consumer theories maintain that consumers are motivated by hedonistic desires there still remains an important economic driving-force, thrift (Miller 1995). As regards household necessities, consumers strive for certainty and stability of their finances. Thus they are concerned with good value and low prices for goods and services. The virtue of thrift seems to pass the environmental concerns. Consumers are willing to buy pro-environmental products, but often only on the condition that they do not have to pay premium for the products or devote energy for obtaining them. Educators and other institutions who are responsible for socializing children and young people should promote environmentally favourable moral skills.

Conclusion

Consumption is sociocultural activity situated within a social environment, entailing interaction with other consumers.

Consumption is thus not only about purchasing and consuming particular goods, but is also about producing and reproducing culture. The pattern of consumer culture include ideas about how to consume, what to consume, what consumption of certain goods and services means, and about the links between individual character and consumption behaviour.

The contemporary consumer theories assume that an ordinary consumer is an active, critical and creative person. At the same time, consumption is viewed within the social and cultural context. The central idea is that consumers actively produce and reproduce culture in their everyday life and activities.

Consumers' actions influence social and cultural conditions, and also the norms and structures which form the conditions where consumers must live. Environmentally conscious consumers are active agents rather than manipulable objects. They have opportunities for resistance, and they have the survival strategies. Meanwhile, they have responsibilities. So as to conduct environmentally conscious consumption and choices, consumers have to obtain new skills. In addition, it is necessary that they become more committed to the quality of environment and conscious of the consequences of their decisions and actions.

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