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# JANUS' FACE OF CONSUMER CULTURE

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## Abstract

Consumer culture theories contribute to a more detailed understanding of transformations and reconstructions of symbolic, aesthetic and ritual meanings of material culture artefacts. It tries to understand the role of immaterial representations of market commodities produced by media environment of marketing communication when creating life styles, forming social roles and creating identities of consumers. However, until present, only a fraction of researchers' interest has concentrated on understanding more and more distinct manifestations of ambivalent phenomena, generated in the ever changing consumer culture environment. In this paper, we try to identify and clarify potential dichotomies and conflicts in concepts of joyless and experience economy as attributes in the current consumer culture.

*Keywords:* ambivalence, hedonism, joyless economy, consumer culture, experience economy

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, consumer culture theories emphasize, directly and indirectly, in many contexts, the role of media as an important source of community life changes in its different spheres [1]. The media environment can be characterized by strong acceleration of development, innovations and also by availability of information and communication technologies and effectiveness of their global and local application across wide range of areas of human activity [2]. Many economic, social and cultural aspects of life take place in a digital world of impulses of anonymous environment, representing new forms of realities of many stories, actions and events coexisting in parallel. At the same time, attributes of other institutionalized elements of consume culture thus become part of a complex reality of parallel worlds of both direct and medially mediated interactions. Some authors believe that digital realities and medially shared images are becoming still less and less clear and understandable as a result of an increasing volume of often contradicting information, data, symbols and stimuli, subordinated to imperatives of unprecedented speed of their technological generation and sharing, making the tendencies of a hurried and hectic life supported by an extensive consumerism and hedonistic consumption even stronger [3]. Moreover, the development of information and

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communication technologies is believed to bring about optimistic scenarios according to which this process will yield greater abundance and achieve larger production volumes from a less amount of resources [4]. The abundance should be represented not only by a greater volume of cheaper goods and also by more variety of choice, diversity and higher quality in many aspects of life in general. At the same time, we must note that attractive abundance derivative in the form of an increasingly stronger and more extensive product offering working as an attractive momentum of further emancipating individual freedom of consumers becomes less and less attractive – in many sociological and psychological studies, there is an empirically confirmed experience of cognitive burden in the form of a complication disorientation, uncertainty and need to take responsibility for the result of each decision [5].

Globally digitalized work of information flows and communication contents, typical for time and space compression and relative geographical-space boundaries [6], create entirely new conditions of life realities and results in revaluations and reviews of how time and space dimensions of life are perceived and experienced [7]. As a result, the present time becomes a series of fragmented moments when the focus of human experience is more and more subordinated to the impulsive nature of fleeting moments. This situation is captured in sufficient plasticity in the concept of the so-called ‘synchronic humans’ as a model of a media-information era consumer living entirely in the present mode without any ties to the past and any idea of the future [8]. In sociological life style theories this moment are included in the argument of allegedly increasing tendencies to orient life attitudes and activities in hedonistic direction of a post-modern ethos *hic et nunc* [9], bringing one experience and emotional stimuli on one side and more angst, fear, disappointment or feelings of isolation on the other side [10].

In the next part, we will focus on the issue of the unintended and spontaneous generation of ambivalent phenomena in the consumer culture environment that until now, that has been discussed in professional circles only to the minimum extent. With regard to the former, we will focus on the concept of ‘joyless economy’ with inherent conflicts and contradictions as part of the relationship of the increasing standard of living and material security of citizens of modern societies and expectations of positive effects of welfare in the subjective experience of more comfortable and happier life. With regard to the latter, we will identify potentially ambivalent elements in the concept of ‘experience economy’ as a system of innovative forms of production and consumption of goods and services, aspiring to ever increasing and faster economic effects.

## **2. Ambivalence of consumer culture**

In sociological theories of the late-modern society, particularly in the work of Bauman [11], many ideas and opinions concentrated on the phenomenon of ambivalence of in the life of current societies can be found. The ambivalent nature of social realities increased as a result of accelerating

globalization processes in recent decades [6, p. 224-256]. In these conditions, the world is more open, interconnected, and actions and events become quickly a (medially) shared and disseminated experience; there is an improved access to information and their availability. At the same time, as a result of the more free and independent arrangement of life, late-modern societies are more vulnerable, fragile and the numerous issues of security, control and protection of privacy become more and more topical. In the impulsive space of digital information flow, the explosive dissemination of data or massively shared and supported electronic forms of impersonal communication, there is an increased risk of effects of media over-saturation, anonymity, manipulation, abuse of human emotionality, "...even in media, the principle of duality, so typical for the hypermodern world and owing to which each experience is ambivalent, is present" [9, p. 48]. There are undesirable effects of more frequent and faster (but less transparent and understandable) media production of information, flowing and circulating through a complex field of the fast changing and ambiguous digital space, requiring significant investments of cognitive capacities, emotional engagement and critical thinking ability. "Functioning through standardization of technology and loosening of social relationships, hyper - modern era brings both chaos and order, independence and subjective dependence, restraint and obsession" [9, p. 60].

Not only is the ambivalent nature of late-modern society an abstract theoretical construct, general and universal social phenomenon, impersonal entity, but a phenomenon working at micro level of the 'experienced' social realities. According to Bauman, in this aspect, the ambivalence represents an ambiguity of thinking and randomness of actions which significantly complicates decision-making situations and future planning [12]. It brings about uncertainty, feelings of ambivalence, inner conflict and tension anchored in the simultaneously experienced state of attractiveness and repellency, interest and fear, hope and disappointment.

Ambivalent experiencing of life situations and events is to become even more apparent in the current atmosphere of penetrating and hypertrophying individualisation [9, p. 11-13]. An individualised human being who is in command of the modern world scene may find happiness in independence, an option to choose and decide freely, purposeful achievement of private objectives, changing and alternating life styles, as well to find unhappiness in feelings of isolation, rootlessness and uncertainty. The self-indulgence, ethos of consumerism, orientation at experiences, sensory joys, entertainment and commercialization of leisure time are accompanied by feelings of angst, fear, uncertainty, disappointment and being terrified from everyday life [9, p. 29]. At the same time, the related issue of human identity in conditions of accelerated individualisation and through the optics of post-modern interpretation suddenly has an entirely new - purely ambivalent dimension. The identity has become a work of art [11, p. 64], life-time project, authentic feat of creation and realisation of life scenario, act of independent dramaturgy and direction, producing episodes of an authentic and original story of life. Metaphorically said, the social

actors become actors, screenwriters, dramaturgy, producers and directors and their roles go through a continuous transformation, are subject of making permanent choices and decisions, individual creation and adaptation. However, the unprecedented scope of individual freedom of identity formation also brings an unprecedented high degree of uncertainty and angst. The problem is that the self-creation itself becomes a fate, necessity and unavoidable life circumstance, not a free choice and subject to authentic decision-making [12, p. 174-175]. The identity as a work of art becomes an assignment, the result of which is only a question of individual responsibility, independent effort and endeavour. The identity is an exciting 'homework' without the assignment and guidance, due date and place of delivery, without external help of parents and teachers, and everyone alone must fulfil it and check the result. Such situation brings about many doubts and uncertainty that is even made worse by the fact that an episodic and transitive nature, variability and volatility of sources of such work are typical for the formation of identity as a work of art. The identity as a work of art is both easily created and abandoned, constructed and deconstructed, similarly as the works of art are displayed and deinstalled during happenings and short-term expositions.

We assume that consumer culture as a system of values and processes forming the social reality and developing it in its different aspects is complementary to the ambivalent nature of the social reality. As mentioned above, the consumer culture is an environment where life policies [13] are realized, where consumer products represent certain 'communication system' of symbols and features as sources of construction of identity, fulfilment of social roles and modelling of life styles. However, some degree of ambivalence and inner conflict which we will refer in the next section of the text are typical for this whole process. The consumer culture may resemble the mythological Janus's face, symbolizing, through its hairy and smooth face, the simultaneous presence of opposites and co-existence of conflict. At the same time, the Janus's face refers to motives of change and transformation, motion and dynamics, transition or rebirth from one state to another, i.e. the motives of the very nature of functioning of the consumer culture.

### **3. Positive good and negative good**

Happiness that we seek in an increasing income, permanent access to rich offering of consumer choices and intensive hoarding of things and experiences usually assumes some pressure on performance, success at work and expected personal effort. Last but not least, it also includes a time investment into activities that despite being some source of material welfare, they are also source of stress, fear, restraint and other feelings that cannot be considered to bring joyful moments, content, quiet family life and peace of mind. Similarly, the explosion and expansion of choices to select and decide from the wide array of offering of types, models, variations and kinds of products attracts and awakes activity and excites emotions of many consumer, while binding and paralysing

them and making them uncertain every time when such choice is made or decision is taken. These and other situations are still of marginal interest in the local discussion regarding the consumer culture. Some inspiration provides the already classic concept of 'joyless economy' by the consumer theoretician, Scitovsky [14].

Around the same time when Scitovsky elaborates his concept of 'joyless economy' Easterlin [15] comes with a finding that increasing income and welfare do not have to copy the increased of subjectively experienced positive emotions, feelings of happiness and personal well-being as expected. More specifically, it says that welfare and happiness correlate only to some extent and that beyond some income threshold and material security, the statistical dependency of material and immaterial values of human feelings of happiness is null. By this, Easterlin described the situation of the 'joyless economy' and inspired other social-economic theories to consider consumptions an ambiguous phenomenon leading to both hopes of better life and simultaneously the risk of illusion and false expectations [16].

Scitovsky was interested in the fickleness of consumers and their fleeting interest in some products and their fast orientation to other consumption objectives. The reason might have been a desire of customers for change and new things, bringing positive feelings of satisfaction and joy. This seemingly typical hedonistic motive of escape from the uninteresting and dull routine, repetition of the known and seeking adventure in the unknown, unexpected and surprising it harbours a deeper conflict. According to Scitovsky [14, p. 59-80], consumption activity includes two forms of qualities – pleasures ('positive good') and convenience ('negative good'). The pleasure comes along a positive emotion when discomfort is removed. Logically speaking, as an assumption for every level of pleasure, there is some degree of discomfort. In other words, a shortage of something on one hand is a prerequisite for something to be fulfilled on the other hand. It is not entirely possible that the comfort and pleasure would simultaneously intensify and resulted in a single coherent and mutually multiplying positive emotion. As soon as we reach some degree of comfort, it means that we reach a certain level of habit, routine, sameness and boredom. Even though the comfort is comfortable, intimately known, but too static and uninteresting in the eyes of consumers is seeking new and exciting pleasure-providing goals. To come permanently closer to the pleasure, absorb it and emotionally experience, the comfort of the consumer should always have some margin of discomfort and be offered in a limited and incomplete state. The ambivalent nature of the entire phenomenon consists in the fact that the consumer must always choose in different life situation between increasing the comfort at the expense of less pleasure or increase pleasure at the expense of less comfort. Everything which is originally nice, new, attractive, and brings pleasure is subject to the process of becoming ordinary and gradually will, sooner or later, transform into the expected and non-surprising comfort. Everything that originally represented a motion and change will become a rigid routine. To combine pleasure and comfort is as futile as an effort combine slow and fast,

moving and static, original and false, new and old. Therefore, it is always up to the consumer what he will prefer and which effects he will find more attractive.

It appears that modern economically developed societies consumer show more tendency to prefer comfort over pleasure, as in comfort they find certain guarantees that they will avoid potential disappointment where they seek uncertain pleasure. In addition, they will also save potential time, financial and other costs related to the seeking and achieving potential goals of pleasure. Simultaneous, both fleeting and fast leaving of objects of pleasure may bring about unpleasant feelings and inconvenience. There is no doubt that the emergence of new technologies makes life significantly easier [4, p. 23-24], contributes to higher level of comfort, but at the same time, in line with the previous considerations, it provides less opportunities to fulfil positive delights. In Scitovsky's concept of 'joyless economy', the increasing standard of living and welfare contribute to maximising comfort, but is almost ineffective in providing pleasure and joy. By this the principle of 'joyless economy' can be explained, which contrary to all expectations, does not increase feelings of happiness, as consumer attitudes, particularly in puritan countries (e.g. USA) are based on maximising temporary benefits and pleasure, but maximising certainty and stability of comfort [14, p. 228-229].

#### **4. Experience economy and instant gratification**

The model of 'experience economy' is in some contrast to the concept of 'joyless economy'. While the work of Scitovsky clarifies reasons of the phenomenon when there may not be more intensive and more permanent state of hedonistic pleasure and life joy in conditions of increasing standard of living and material security, the approach of 'experience economy' may further discuss why more pleasure, sensory experiences and emotionality absorbed by consumers in different situations of consumption activities supporting and initiating values of hedonism also entails angst, disappointment and less certainty, stability, comfort and security. This thesis is discussed in different context and with varying intensity in some current theoretical and empirical studies. Usually, a hypothesis that hedonism should be a reliable life strategy of a happier life and a guarantee of more comfortable and attractive life style is used [17]. At the same time, many studies empirically demonstrate ambiguous relationships between the increasing standard of living, more opportunities for satisfying individual desires and wishes on one hand, and rather surprisingly stagnating or reduced degree of subjective feelings of happiness, life joy, followed by feelings of disappointment and disillusionment [18]. Also, partial findings that hedonistic consumerism and its hard application with an aim to achieve states of well-being and personal happiness rather lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness is noted.

The principles of experience economy are constituted in the processes of economic and social changes, and they contribute to the development of new trends in the consumer culture. The experience economy represents a strategic

innovation to the support of sustainable growth and more effective fulfilment of economic aspirations of business and firms. It is also a concept improving competitiveness of manufacturers and distributors of global, regional and local markets, using the principles of experiences as an integral part of the offered products and services. The fact is that different consumer products in form of material goods and immaterial services saturate many customers' needs and satisfy wishes of clients, but they gradually deplete their original attractiveness in their eyes and many of them become a dull and uninteresting daily routine. Even though the demand for services and goods does not need to drop, the value of such purchased goods may deteriorate in the eyes of consumers and they may also be less willing to pay more than necessary, or usual. This situation means some pressure on prices and reduced margins and in the end, less profit. However, the concept of experience economy should boost and support consumer activities, sending appetite and promote principles of pro-growth economy and creation of new jobs from the system perspective. As opposed to practical needs of physical and material world of consumers, experiences forming the content of hedonistic mentality cannot be depleted and are endless, in the same vein as the world of imagination, fantasy and fiction that cannot be easily controlled or fulfilled. The experiences have a potential of new forms and content of production pursuing the ideas of economic growth [19], permanently supported by mechanisms of emotional marketing and fun shopping [16, p. 75].

However, we must also add one important moment of the experience production, being the intensive orientation at the presence and instancy. The hedonistic absorption of experiences may only be effective at the present moment, in the current and acute intensity of the sensory and aesthetic experience. The patterns of hedonistic consumerism are typically modelled by motion, change, pursuit of fleeting impressions and burning desire to enjoy oneself, seek new emotional stimuli and delights, to maximize private well-being, discover secrets of new experiences. The experiences are goals that must alternate as fast as possible without waiting, unnecessary delays and postponements. The choices of types of entertainment are less stable and more impulsive. They cannot be delayed, as the object of experience as such changes fast in the explosion of an almost unlimited offering of new and new opportunities. Moreover, the experience can be hardly lived in parts and it would be hard to save some part of it for 'later'. The life philosophy of independence, of being indeterminate and 'inner orientation' logically results in the application of such life strategies that may support and develop such life attitude. The experience economy forms consumers to mobility, flexibility and social volatility. I.e. what can be seen as key attributes of emancipation of individual freedoms, values of independence, allowing an authentic experience of social reality that should not be really something which would limit or restrict social actors in their self – the realization.

According to Lipovetsky [9, p. 97], social actors release themselves from the guiding influence of social institutions, increase their independence on social requirements, values and norms, and become more flexible and independent of

social environment. However, this volatility and independence rather means loss of balance than reaffirmation of one's 'self' which becomes more and more vulnerable and uncertain.

The principle of immediate satisfaction is rather shaky, delight and pleasure come at the same time as quickly as they are depleted and disappear. Due to its character, the instant gratification is ruthlessly subject to progressive degradation of positive feelings that are fading away, and their function is rather a momentary refreshment than quenching the thirst. Soon assets change into liabilities, shares in worthless securities, interests transform into debts. The desire for experiences is accelerated by each preceding experience, the original intensity of which, being subject to mechanisms of hedonistic adaptation [20], requires further escalation of this intensity, which is susceptible to further and reliably occurring emotional wear and tear. This may be a complicating factor in lives of consumers as 'experience refreshments' with no ties to the past or future requires permanent ability of action and engagement to live an elusive and fleeting present moment, or a series of such moment, without clear sense of direction of more lasting meaning.

The desire for permanent restoration of the present and emotional wear and tear with regard to the perception of experience may be an exhausting battle with mundane daily routine and some curse as a result of adaptation processes of subjective experience, transforming initial excitement and extraordinary event, into secondary state of peace and apathy. The experience hedonism and its nature *hic et nunc* inverts entirely the original virtues of protestant ethics based on values of frugality and modesty, performance and hard work into the exact opposite of the value system of the ethics of entertainment, culture, moment and hedonistically oriented instant gratification.

## **5. Conclusions**

The concept of 'joyless economy' suggests that increasing standard of living and material abundance of consumer societies does not need to positively correlate on levels of subjective experience of pleasure and life joys, but rather initiate routine and uninteresting states of comfort. The pleasure and comfort become a contra position in the conditions of the current consumer culture when strengthening one polarity necessarily means of weakening the second polarity and vice versa. However, the elements of 'joyless economy' also penetrate into 'experience economy' as a concept serving to more intensive and effective growth of global capital of consumer-type societies. The economic system commodifying experience expects its subsequent decommmodification in the form of sensory effects working in the intimate environment of fantasies, desires and wishes in the acts of consumption. However, the fact is that these effects are subject to mechanisms of hedonistic adaptation and deplete and degrade over time. As the world of needs is entirely different from the world of desires and wishes, as it does not know any limits, it refuses to postpone pleasure and



intensifies the presence of fleeting moments and provides fickle and elusive sources of joy.

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