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Consumerism: A Globalization Concept

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Abstract

Consumerism has been the subject of considerable discussion over the last two decades. This social movement which has sought to help consumers attain safer products, more information, adequate selection and better access to redress mechanisms has been examined by researchers from numerous disciplines using a wide variety of research approaches. These researchers have sought to describe, explain, predict and control the overall consumer movement and the organisations, individuals and issues that have made up the movement. Put differently, one could say that these researchers have studied consumerism extensively on both a micro and macro level.

This paper contains a brief review of the research that has been done on consumerism during the last two decades. The review is not designed to provide exhaustive coverage of past research studies, but instead to point out areas where research has been lacking or where new research opportunities have recently emerged. Actually, the paper refers to only a small number of past research studies three of which are the studies that were presented immediately prior to the delivery of this "discussant's" paper. The review is organised to cover research seeking to describe and explain consumerism (on both a macro and micro level), predict the movement's future (on both levels) and control aspects of the movement (on both levels). Consumerism on a more micro level, being concerned with understanding more about the individual attitudes and opinions that provide some basic underlying support for the consumer movement. More macro-level empirical studies, examining how the strength and vitality of the overall movement has been affected by consumer attitudes and opinions.

Keywords: Consumerism, Globalization

Introduction

Consumerism as a social and economic order and ideology encourages the acquisition of goods and services in ever-increasing amounts.

Consumerism explains, economic policies placing emphasis on consumption. In an abstract sense, it is the consideration that the free choice of consumers should strongly orient the choice by manufacturers of what is produced and how, and therefore orient the economic organization of a society. In this sense, consumerism expresses the idea not of "one man, one voice", but of "one dollar, one voice", which may or may not reflect the contribution of people to society.

The term "consumerism" has several definitions^[5]. These definitions may not be related to each other and confusingly, they conflict with each other.

Consumerism is the concept that consumers should be informed decision makers in the marketplace. Practices such as product testing make consumers informed.

It is the market place itself is responsible for ensuring social justice through fair economic practices. Consumer protection policies and laws compel manufacturers to make products safe.

Refers to the field of studying, regulating, or interacting with the market place. The consumer movement is the social movement which refers to all actions and all entities within the marketplace which give consideration to the consumer.

It is related to globalization and in protest to this some people promote the "anti-globalization movement".

Consumerism is sometimes used in reference to the anthropological and biological phenomena of people purchasing goods and consuming materials in excess of their basic needs, which would make it recognizable in any society including ancient civilizations (e.g. Ancient Egypt, and Ancient Rome). Consumerism is typically used to refer to the historically specific set of relations of production and exchange that emerge from the particular social, political, cultural and technological.

Consumption Culture

This pattern was particularly visible in London where the gentry and prosperous merchants took up residence and created a culture of luxury and consumption that was slowly extended across

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the socio-economic divide. Market places expanded as shopping centres, such as the New Exchange, opened in 1609 by Robert Cecil in the Strand. Shops started to become important as places for Londoners to meet and socialise and became popular destinations alongside the theatre. Restoration London also saw the growth of luxury buildings as advertisements for social position with speculative architects like Nicholas Barbon and Lionel Cranfield.

There was growth in industries like glass making and silk manufacturing, and much pamphleteering of the time was devoted to justifying private vice for luxury goods for the greater public good.

These trends were vastly accelerated in the 18th century, as rising prosperity and social mobility increased the number of people with disposable income for consumption. Important shifts included the marketing of goods for individuals as opposed to items for the household, and the new status of goods as status symbols, related to changes in fashion and desired for aesthetic appeal, as opposed to just their utility.

Mass-Production

The Industrial Revolution dramatically increased the availability of consumer goods, although it was still primarily focused on the capital goods sector and industrial infrastructure (i.e., mining, steel, oil, transportation networks, communications networks, industrial cities, financial centers, etc.). The advent of the department store represented a paradigm shift in the experience of shopping. For the first time, customers could buy an astonishing variety of goods, all in one place, and shopping became a popular leisure activity. While previously the norm had been the scarcity of resources, the Industrial era-created an unprecedented economic situation. For the first time in history products were available in outstanding quantities, at outstandingly low prices, being thus available to virtually everyone in the industrialized West. By the turn of the 20th century the average worker in Western Europe or the United States still spent approximately 80-90% of his income on food and other necessities. What was needed to propel consumerism proper, was a system of mass production and consumption, exemplified in Henry Ford, the American car manufacturer. After observing the assembly lines in the meat packing industry, Frederick Winslow Taylor brought his theory of scientific management to the organization of the assembly line in other industries; this unleashed incredible productivity and reduced the costs of all commodities produced on assembly lines.

Consumerism has long had intentional underpinnings, rather than just developing out of capitalism.

Beginning in the 1990s, the most frequent reason given for attending college had changed to making a lot of money, outranking reasons such as becoming an authority in a field or helping others in difficulty. This correlates with the rise of materialism, specifically the technological aspect: the increasing prevalence of compact disc players, digital media, personal computers, and cellular telephones. Madeline Levine criticized what she saw as a large change in American culture – "a shift away from values of community, spirituality, and integrity, and toward competition, materialism and disconnection."

From business point of view consumers are the most attractive targets of marketing. The upper class's tastes, lifestyles, and preferences trickle down to become the standard for all consumers. The not so wealthy consumers can "purchase something new that will speak of their place in the tradition of affluence". A consumer can have the instant gratification of

purchasing an expensive item to improve social status. Now, in the 21st century, consumers are more aware about purchasing and dealing with product and services.

The Effects of Consumerism

It might be argued that we should have the mental strength to resist the influence of an advertisement or our friends, or that consumerism is nothing more than a minor irritant in our everyday lives. But that would be to underestimate its power.

Exposure to one advertisement can be powerful enough to influence someone. Otherwise, why would Coca Cola alone spend \$2 billion per year on advertising? But when we are exposed to thousands of advertisements a day (and have been from childhood), and consumerism is promoted in most of the mental inputs we receive, this can trap us within a consumerist bubble and can mould our entire worldviews – our aspirations, views, lifestyles and many other things. And this trap is very difficult to escape from. Indeed, such is its power, we may not even realise we are caught in a trap. So, the real power of consumerism comes from its cumulative effect - the fact that it has seeped into every aspect of our lives, and that these elements of our culture continually reinforce each other.

Some of the effects of consumerism on us are what one might expect from a culture that promotes consumption. We slip into a cycle of wanting more things whether it is the new iPod, another holiday abroad or simply a particular type of food and the pursuit of these things takes up our time, energy, stress and money (sometimes money we do not have one reason for the spiralling debt of Britons today). We also constantly compare ourselves with other people (both real and fictitious), wanting to be like them or in their position. This leads us into a state of constant dissatisfaction we are never happy with what we have and are always on edge. And this is just what the logic of consumerism wants, as it makes us more active consumers on a continuous basis. So, consumerism not only affects our behaviour (we spend more time on consumerist activities) but also our thinking (our aspirations, attitudes and worldviews).

Other effects are perhaps less immediately obvious but equally important.

What is wrong with consumerism?

There is not necessarily anything morally wrong in buying and selling things, nor even in promoting them (in an honest way and to a certain extent). But the extreme form of consumerism that now dominates the Western world has a number of unpleasant and even potentially dangerous characteristics.

It is intrusive

This is as good a reason as any to dislike it! Advertising, selling and product placement is simply an annoying imposition on one's peace and personal space. Advertising is everywhere, and spoils many experiences and pleasant views. It is like having a stranger following you and shouting at you for several hours a day.

It is manipulative

Both advertising and consumerism itself try to manipulate us into adopting a particular view of how we should live rather than letting us decide for ourselves.

One might argue that advertisements are simply there to make people aware of the products available to them and serve no purpose other than this. But this is not always the case. Many advertisements and other communications in our consumer

society go way beyond this function and attempt to manipulate people into making particular decisions.

Modern advertising is not just about telling people that a product exists – i.e. responding to an existing want or need someone may have. It is now about creating wants and needs that we might not have had before seeing the advertisement. In other words, it creates false desires and needs in us by manipulating us. The advertiser's ultimate purpose in creating these needs is always to make people want their product.

But how dare anyone manipulate us into having these wants and needs?

If I really wanted to do something - say, purchase a particular product - I would decide for myself that I needed it and then make my own mind up about which product to buy once I had seen what products were available. If however someone tries to persuade me that I need a particular product when I do not and then attempts to create (false) feelings of dissatisfaction in me if I do not have it, this is an aggressive attempt to exercise power over me. This 'mental aggression' is just as unpleasant as physical aggression, because its effect can be equally, if not more, harmful.

What can we do about it?

Consumerism is an idea that is woven into the fabric of our modern society. It is intricately linked with the particular economic philosophy that has dominated the West in recent decades – that of neoliberal capitalism. To move away from a culture of consumerism, we will therefore need to challenge the philosophy and values of this current economic system. Essentially, we need a cultural shift in our society and its values. Perhaps the current financial crisis gives us the ideal opportunity to think about the direction in which we're heading as a society, and to consider new ideas like this.

One of the key tenets of neoliberal economic philosophy has been the need to seek constant economic growth, as this will provide us with the best lives. As consumerism builds ever greater demand for goods and services, it is easy to see how it plays an important role in driving this economic growth.

This neoliberal economic philosophy is not working. And it's not surprising when you think about the faulty assumptions that it is based on. It is based on the view that human beings are rational calculating machines seeking to maximise our share of available goods. All of the systems and institutions that we go through in life and the communications we receive in day-to-day life serve to promote lives that uphold this view - so it profoundly affects and moulds our world views.

Our current choice of economic system is not only bad for our well-being. It is also one of the central influences exacerbating key global problems such as the environment (including climate change and the unsustainable use of natural resources) and social justice (including poverty and human rights abuses). Our own well-being and global problems are therefore two sides of the same coin. We urgently need a new system that will put these things right too.

We need to move towards a society that has a much broader and nuanced view of what gives people well-being and happiness, and use the economic system simply as one of the means we employ to achieve this end, rather than as an end in itself. We need to do all this within parameters of sustainability and social justice. This type of approach to society is often referred to as 'new economics'.

This is a system that sees real choice as a key aspect of the good life. It enables people to have real choices about the lives they want to lead, gives them the skills they need to

make those choices, and encourages them to pursue the lives they really want.

Conclusion

Volumes have been written on the subject of consumerism, but only a relatively small portion of this writing has contained reports on empirical research. The focus of the empirical work in this area has thus far been on understanding the nature and determinants of consumer discontent. A broader understanding of consumerism could be obtained through more research on consumer organizations, their supporters and clients, and the performance of their programs and initiatives.

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