Chapter 3
Consumer Culture and the Paradox of Choice in an Ambivalent Era of Emancipation of Individual Freedoms

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ABSTRACT

Consumer culture in modern societies is interpreted as a culture that maximizes the freedom of consumer choice. The emancipation of individual freedoms in the form of consumer choice is positively associated with the growth of material standards of living and the affluence of a society. At the same time, an ambivalent situation arises in the form of unintended consequences, whereby customers with increasing freedoms in the areas of consumer choice run into problems making decisions and the paradox of choice, all in a landscape that is becoming less clear and oversaturated with options and opportunities. The goal is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the ambivalent character of contemporary consumer culture in the context of intensified individualization and external options for consumer choice. The authors also seek to propose a theoretical model of consumer mentalities that is more resistant to the negative effects of the paradox of choice. This model is based on the Epicurean consumption pattern of voluntary simplicity, reducing aspirations, and delayed gratification.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary consumer culture is characterized by ambivalence in the form of a series of paradoxes, conflicts, and all manner of contradictions (Roubal, 2023).

Among the most serious problems facing the world are growing aspirations of societies (economically developed and otherwise) in terms of quantifying their material standard of living and the desire for more intensive and stable engagement in the sphere of ordinary consumption. This is linked to a hypertrophy of the consumerist lifestyle and a progression of hedonistic values, both of which are massively supported by the marketing industry. On the other hand, this has evidently led to a reckless plundering of natural resources, enormous pollution of the planet, and irreversible climate change, situations demanding an active approach of changing human behavior and thinking (Howarth et al., 2022). According to some researchers, the Earth is even becoming a place hazardous to life (Richardson et al., 2023).

The ambivalent nature of consumer culture is not an isolated phenomenon, but a reflection of broader and deeper changes in the social reality of late modern societies undergoing globalization trends in the form of structural changes in political and social life and the universalization and unification of many areas of the market environment of economic activities. At the same time, sociologists have reported findings on the accelerated pace of life and impulsive nature of consumer-oriented societies (Roberts, 2014), transformations of value orientations and the search for alternative (more economical and environmentally conscious) forms of lifestyles (Soper 2023), or intensifying individualization and problematic identity formation (Elliot et al., 2019). Last but not least, we cannot overlook the rapid development in the areas of digitalization, technologization, automation, and robotization, or the penetration of artificial intelligence into the routine activities of everyday life, along with the series of ethical and philosophical questions and uncertain prognoses of future directions from the perspective of humanity's values (Leonhard, 2016; Bridle, 2018).

Patterns of consumption behavior are also fundamentally changing, namely in the context of various events and developments such as the COVID-19 crisis in recent years (Ayman, 2023; Satish et al., 2021; Anastasiadou et al., 2020; Loxton et al., 2020). Patterns of consumption behavior have subsequently been undergoing another wave of social, political, and economic events and unexpected developments. In the context of the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis, and rising inflation, a thesis is emerging known as the cost-of-living crisis (Lapavitsas et al., 2023; Khan, 2022).

Despite all these social, political, and economic changes, which affect the different parameters of consumer culture with varying intensity, depth, and duration, what remains constant is the trend of strengthening individual consumer freedoms and the associated progression of options for consumer choice as a condition for the

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