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Selected psychosocial and psycholinguistic aspects of a consumptionist lifestyle

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Annotation · A consumptionist lifestyle is present and not seldom dominant in most developed countries. It treats reality from a pragmatic, hedonistic point of view. The main activities in life center around the aim to collect goods, provide pleasant experiences and a sense of security. Not only objects and experiences, but also other people are perceived as commodities that may be acquired or traded, whose value lies in the degree of pleasant experiences they provide. Consumption – its amount and type – becomes a part of one's identity and a way of communicating about oneself. It also functions as a means of satisfying one's needs of all types, from physiological ones, such as hunger to higher psychological needs like emotional attachment or achievement; even spirituality serves the consuming human being in the center. The psychosocial threats of a consumptionist lifestyle include an immature, narcissistic personality, addictions, an egocentric attitude towards relationships, family and procreation. The language in consumptionist discourse reveals the underlying conceptualizations of the world and the cognitive structures that shape the way one thinks, behaves and speaks. Figurative expressions about food and sex, or about relationships and trade, point to obvious conceptual links between these domains and their corresponding axiological load. Certain linguistic expressions especially strongly stimulate the needs to be satisfied by consumption. As a reaction to consumptionism and its threats, various intellectual and social trends arise that result in different initiatives aimed to provide an alternative, more sustainable approach to life. The paper presents selected aspects of consumptionism, such as anthropological, psychological, pedagogical, psychospiritual, social and psycholinguistic ones.

Key words · consumptionism, consumerism, psychopedagogy, cognitive linguistics, family, lifestyle

The contemporary human being, unlike in the earlier centuries and epochs, and apart from various small isolated cultures throughout the world, is usually a member of an increasingly consumptionist society. Consumptionism, also called consumerism, is a view or attitude based on egoistically understood happiness that subordinates all life aspects, including the emotional, intellectual and spiritual to the material, hedonistic and instinctive ones, focuses on pleasure and materialism, glorifying consumption and making it a determinant of the quality of life (Furmanek, 2010; Mróz, 2015; Goco, Janowski 2002, p. 742). In the contemporary western society it often becomes a lifestyle.

Consumption is an integral aspect of human life and as such is neither bad or good. It serves human development and is thus morally justified. The human being has the right to satisfy the needs, make an effort to enrich oneself and not fall into poverty. What is problematic in using goods that are available is a lack of moderation. Morally threatening and psychologically destructive consumption takes place when it results from utilitarianism and materialistic pragmatism. Such attitudes to goods and to life lead to a satisfaction of needs that becomes artificial and becomes a lifestyle, focused not only on using a sufficient number of goods and services that are necessary and have a sufficient quality, but also on their brand or certain connotations, such as prestige, etc. Instead, what becomes binding is a constantly evolving set of standards that a given group or society respects, concerning behavior, clothing, lifestyle, forms of work, nutrition, leisure activities, understanding of comfort, values and views on what one considers to be necessary to call one's life valuable or happy.

1 Anthropological context

Consumptionist ideology and practice is based on the concept of a human being as a solely material being, *homo consumens*, where spiritual aspects of being are either not present or subordinated to the material reality. Human life aims at collecting goods, pleasures and providing a sense of temporal happiness and security. Possessing a large number of goods and using them in an easy, fast and pleasant way becomes worth striving for in life, a goal and a criterion for assessing one's own life as satisfying ("I consume, so I am happy") and a criterion for assessing others as valuable („he/she possesses and consumes, so he/she is worth a lot"). In a consumptionist society, consuming becomes a primary value, while the human being becomes an object, him/herself becoming an object of desire by others (this threat especially concerns

pan-sexualism, pornography, in vitro insemination) or the reverse, an undesired object (e.g. by euthanasia, abortion, contraceptives) or becomes a good to be sold or purchased (e.g. in prostitution, surrogate maternity), aiming to provide comfort and pleasure (Mróz, 2015).

However, if one defines oneself and other people in terms of the commodities one can buy, then one reifies oneself and others by treating humans as objects (de Beaugrande 1997). Reality is evaluated from a pragmatic, hedonistic point of view, and personal utility. As a result, an integral vision of the human being becomes blurred.

2 Psychosocial context – general issues

The progress of civilization towards a consumptionist lifestyle has led to such organisation of social life, production and the market, as well as such pressure in the media that manipulation there is almost invisible. The human being is helpless in the variety of the offered goods and services, and lost due to the various covert forms of pressure. In the social sphere, one uses consumption to communicate about oneself, one's achievements and well-being.

Consumptionism appeals to human needs, but focuses only on selected ones. Taking into account the classical hierarchy of needs, e.g. Maslow's pyramid, we may notice that consumptionist ideology primarily concerns the lower, physiological ones, related to satisfying the needs of hunger and thirst, discharging sexual drive, satiety, security, new stimuli, a sense of power and domination. The negative consequences of a consumptionist attitude to life concern various aspects that include the following ones:

A consumptionist civilization expands the scale of human needs, strengthens certain needs or combines them so that a given object or service is especially valued. For example, consuming nutritious food is not only about satisfying the need of hunger in any way, but satisfying it by consuming products of appropriate brands that claim to provide not only nutrition, but also – according to the advertisements – unforgettable sensual experiences, nice company, good feelings, personal attractiveness, prestige, etc. (Mróz, 2015). As a result, goods are becoming increasingly valuable, as they are able to refer to the consumer's greater number of needs, often such as ambition, pride, recognition, status, appreciation, uniqueness, new stimuli.

Consumptionist society creates mechanisms that increase consumption like a snowball (it is never enough), e.g. a given product is endlessly being improved, and the given need is satisfied by an infinite number of new goods,

e.g. prestigious is no longer a mere possession of a car, but its appropriate brand or production year.

Excessive consumption of goods is expanding among social groups and age groups and reaches even the lowest or specific groups, e.g. those who vow poverty (convents), children and adolescents (Austin, Rich 2001). Consumptionism is present in every social class and group. We all possess much more than we really need.

Consumptionism glorifies the matter and degrades the human being, one denies the value of one's own humanity, the concept of the human being and one's true good becomes distorted. The human being, self-humiliated, sinks in the cumulated matter, while the *carpe diem* (seize the day) rule comforts a brainless hedonistic existence.

A consumptionist mindset threatens the sense of life, if one praises such values as health, physical beauty, young body, strength, physical fitness, long life (at any cost), or maximizing pleasant experiences, comfort, and minimizing discomfort or pain, effective functioning, unlimited freedom of choice, then such system of values is a criterion of assessing the sense of human life. However, these criteria are impossible to be met, which causes that one feels permanently unhappy, inefficient, miserable, with a low self-esteem, and blames others (Mróz 2015).

Consumptionism is a typical example of a lifestyle "to have", not "to be." The desire to live better is beneficial, but a lifestyle focused on "to have" is harmful and in the long run turns against the human being (Furmanek, 2010). The human being is looking for possessing, collecting, experiencing more and more, counting credits, reckoning ever more original, attractive, shocking experiences. We may say that *our consumer self is so overdeveloped that we spend most of our time there. You see it walking around – we usually interact with others from our consumer self and are most spoken to as our consumer self* (Leonard, 2010)..

Being a consumptionist means that one becomes narcissistic and focuses more on one's own good than on the common good, e.g. gains more property and experiences, develops one's interests, even at the cost of e.g. the family. Such attitude deepens egocentrism, egoism, narcissism and individualism (Gregoire, 2013). The sensitivity to the needs of others decreases, while one's own desires and whims increase. However, one "suffocates oneself," unable to make oneself a selfless, free gift to other people, becomes trapped in one's own immature self.

A consumptionist lifestyle is related to moral permissivism, based on an ethic of individualism and situationism, which easily leads to various

deviations. The personal, social and long-term economic consequences of them may be devastating.

Consumptionism functions as an addiction – the human being is trapped by the necessity to possess or experience, and the fear of possibly not achieving something is frustrating, annoying, causes anxiety, jealousy, envy, aggression and violence. By striving to satisfy the need of possession or experiencing, one robs or humiliates others unfairly, treats as an instrument, source of exploitation or an object. The majority of crimes (thefts and murders) are committed for this reason – to have and gain another person's property.

A consumptionist attitude distorts the sexual sphere of life as a source of unlimited experiences that should be maximized in any possible way. This means promoting an eudaimonic ideal of life, acceptance of utilitarian and material values. The understanding of love becomes distorted, and love is equated with sexual activity, especially its physiological manifestations. The other person is treated as an "object of desire", and evaluated based on how useful he/she is to provide a physical pleasure of emotional gratification. The sphere of sex and procreation becomes a space of consumption, where the rules of competition, supply and demand operate. Sexuality becomes a commodity (Evans, Riley, 2014, Mróz 2015). Thus, the interest in sexual techniques or perceiving intersexual relations mainly relating to reducing tension and „playing together", frequently changing partners, detaching sexual activity from procreation or marriage, conditional acceptance of a conceived child, as well as demanding the right to have a child in the case of procreational failure. The excessive use of the body as a source of physical pleasure caused a necessity to control the consequences of unlimited freedom in the area of sexual and reproductive health, as well as a development of the contraceptive and abortion market.

A consumptionist way of thinking disturbs the development of personality, in that it fixes psychological immaturity. A child-adolescent attitude of focusing on oneself or a tendency to spontaneously satisfy one's current needs, maximize experiences and subordinate everything to oneself that persists until one's adult life (narcissistic individualism – Mariański, 1995, p. 35; Gregoire, 2013) is related to a lack of resistance to difficulties in life and a tendency to get discouraged and avoid responsibility.

A consumptionist viewpoint is of a receptive character, in that it is tuned to receive, acquire, get and use goods, services, media, food, etc., especially in an easy, fast-food manner. The result is that one has little chance to develop an active attitude, creativity and imagination, to discover or have one's own initiative that differs from the overwhelming mainstream.

Excessive consumption may be a direct or indirect threat to physical and mental health, especially if dominated by one type goods, services, experiences, food or any other stimuli. This may cause disharmonious development, addictions and a degradation of other spheres of life and experiences or even lead to behaviours and attitudes that are hazardous and risky for one's physical, spiritual or mental life.

Consumptionism absolutises comfort and pleasure. Reality is assessed from the perspective of pleasure, and the means allowing a pleasant and easy life are not subject to any moral evaluation (Mróz, 2015). This gives an illusion that it is possible to live a life without pain, suffering or problems, the only question being the choice of the right product or service that would provide this state – which results in constant disappointments and continuously seeking new potential remedies.

3 Psychosocial context – the family

In relation to the family, a consumptionist lifestyle has impact on various aspects of human functioning; the values, behaviours and choices, such as the ones below.

In a consumptionist society of “adult children” it is difficult to build mature, successful families. Partners become focused on satisfying their own needs, and if the accompanying person is assessed as useful in this respect, the relationship persists, but he or she fails to be, the relationship is broken, regardless of any other circumstances, such as common children or illness, without a sense of responsibility for the other persons.

A consumptionist attitude generates a fear of a material deficiency, a fear of the future, threatens the need of security, weakens personal courage, trust to God or fate and hope to cope in the future, blocks generosity in extending the family and limits procreation, perceived as threatening. The partner may be perceived as disappointing if he or she does not provide enough resources for the family, which may lead to mutual blaming, conflicts, dissatisfaction about the marriage, divorce, abortion, euthanasia, betrayal and various crises.

A consumptionist lifestyle discourages parents from procreation, as children may complicate their personal, professional or material development plans. If one excessively values pleasure, comfort and satisfying primarily one's own needs, not only the family as such may be potentially inconvenient, but especially children are perceived as a threat to consumption, a luxury the parents cannot afford. The child is not seen as a value as such, as a person, but

as a means to satisfy the parents' emotional needs or ambitions. Therefore, after the birth of one or two children, the emotional needs of the parents are satisfied and having more children becomes a subject of calculations, like with a purchase of any luxurious goods, which, additionally, is not always socially welcome (cf. Kowalska, 1999). Not everyone can afford "treating themselves to a child". Moreover, the individualist orientation makes the spouses concentrate on providing economic comfort to the family, while any subsequent children generate costs, thus reducing the family life standard. According to the theory or "rational choice," the decision to have a child is based on a balance between the material costs and the psychological benefits, where the latter ones are greatest with the first child and decrease with the subsequent children (Frątczak, 2003, p. 87-88).

A consumptionist approach focuses on the economic well-being, where children are a threat, not a resource. The related birth control that leads to having less children also reduces such values in family life as sacrifice or generosity. Besides, in the western society children do not participate in providing economic resources and are not necessary for the family's economic survival even if the parents get old, but rather the contrary, are seen as threatening their parents' economic status.

For consumptionist parents, a child is treated as one of many potential objects of desire. If one desires to have it, all means of satisfying this need are justified. As a result, the child is not treated as an autonomous personal being, but instrumentally. Planning a child is often "on the wish list" of various life goals, waiting in the line, alongside with various other achievements desired. Moreover, the right to have a child seems to resemble the right to other possessions. As a result, in the case of infertility, artificial techniques of raising to life are used, and if the resulting child does not meet the expectations, e.g. concerning its sex or health, then the "right to have a healthy child" takes over and justifies eugenic abortion. Other forms of acquiring a child include hiring a surrogate mother or buying information on unborn children whose mothers wish to give them up for adoption – or even, buying the very child on the black market (Mróz, 2015).

In a consumptionist society, the family is pushed to earn more and more to constantly consume new goods and services. However, because consumption of the constantly offered and promoted goods absorbs financial resources, they must be earned by extended work hours or saved by refusing other goods. The family members cannot share everyday life, but are oriented at isolated "quality time moments" of being together. For example, one works longer and spends less time with the family over a long period of time in order to afford

to take the family on a short exclusive holiday. One spends time earning money without the time to spend it and enjoy it, not allowing other, higher needs to come to light, sacrificing various important life goals or even duties resulting from one's life situation, such as parenting.

4 Psycholinguistic aspects

A strong consumptionist message is obviously present in the language of advertising, meant to encourage to consume, buy the given commodity. De Beaugrande (1997) mentions a whole agenda that advertising texts contain, of a multi-layer semantic structure, composed of lexical, grammatical, prosodic, and cognitive pragmatic aspects.

Consumptionist language, used not only in advertising goods and services, but also in everyday discourse, spoken and printed, reveals the underlying conceptual structure of consumptionism. The words used in consumptionist discourse often refer to physical sensations and bodily activities and are figuratively used for other areas of life, mostly referring to food and eating it, sexual desires or sensual pleasures and relaxation. The basic sense of 'to consume' is 'to eat', so the term 'consumptionism' is cognitively linked to 'absorbing'. Also, words with connotations primarily concerning one physical aspect of behavior, are figuratively used in contexts that concern a different one, connoting certain similar features, such as intensity. For example, food is often spoken of using words that refer to the sexual sphere and the concept of lust, suggesting to be irresistibly tempting and providing similarly strong and pleasant experiences. The extreme sensory pleasure of consuming food is often called 'foodgasm', a combination of 'food' and 'orgasm', suggesting a cognitive link between these experiences, which frequently appears in descriptions of desserts, often in combination with the word 'sinful'. If food is perceived as both harmful and irresistible, it is referred to as 'foodporn' (Kartik 2016). And the reverse, the sexual sphere is spoken of figuratively using words that refer to food, the activity of eating and the pleasant experience of consuming it.

Another manifestation of consumptionism is the language of interpersonal relationships, where such commonly used figurative expressions like 'to invest one's feelings in the relationship', 'a credit of trust', 'have a clean account', 'the balance', 'he stole my heart', 'debt of gratitude', 'it does not pay', 'the price is high', (cf. Leszczak 2012) are obviously based on conceptual metaphors that refer to the domain of trade, like human relationships are business or affection is a financial deal/a commodity.

In its often figurative language, consumptionist discourse refers to various underlying conceptualisations of reality (conceptual metaphors), such as: greed is good, based on the more is better metaphor or the you are what you buy (consumption is identity) metonymy (see Turner 2010). Health and beauty are prioritised and spoken of as a commodity, often in the context of commodified femininity, where physical beauty is a criterion of assessing the value of the commodity (Ringrow, 2016). In this discourse, various strongly axiologically loaded conceptual metaphors, such as: ageing is bad/ageing is enemy, fat is bad/fat is enemy, body hair is bad, etc., give rise to linguistic expressions, and thus, language of fight is often used, e.g. 'to combat fat', 'to fight cellulites', alongside with references to shame, e.g. 'to conceal imperfections', 'to make wrinkles appear less visible' and references to liberation 'free from sweat and unwanted smells.'

Consumptionist language is especially common among adolescents. Young people are found to especially often relate to brand names and consumer activities that identify them as members of a peer group and *all speak the same language of brand consumption* (Moses, 2000, p.4) that is present in all areas of life. Not surprisingly, a study by the Language Research Team at Cambridge University Press on the English language referring to Christmas revealed an increasingly consumptionist aspect of the way one talks about Christmas recently, in comparison to the language used in the 1990s, where words like 'carols,' 'pantomimes,' 'pudding,' 'stockings' and 'crackers' used to appear much more frequently in relation to Christmas, while at present the most associated words tend to be 'sales,' 'spend,' 'shopping' and 'retailers'. Other words that were observed to be appearing more frequently today are 'party,' 'goodies,' 'bash,' 'frolics,' and 'knees up;' moreover, the researchers found that also 'hangover' has recently joined the top 50 words commonly associated with Christmas (Ackermann 2015).

The term 'affluenza,' coined to refer to consumptionism functioning as a disease is a compression of two concepts of an opposite axiological load, i.e., 'affluence,' a positive notion, and 'influenza,' a disease, from nature bad and harmful, something that is painful and needs to be cured. Its counterpart in Russian has a stronger negative connotation, combining an axiologically neutral concept of 'consumption' with a negatively charged one of 'prostitution' in the words *потребля́тельство* (potreblatstvo) or *потребля́дство* (potrebladstvo) in Russian (Leszczak 2012), which refers not to suffering, like the English term, but to the loss of dignity and humiliation.

5 Selected psychospiritual aspects

A consumptionist lifestyle turns its back on the human being, by not recognizing the deeply spiritual aspect of being; on the contrary, it persuades the human being to deny this sphere of life. One loses sensitivity to the spiritual and lives as if this aspect of life did not exist and the strive for the Absolute, a longing for God was not even in the deepest areas of human soul. The matter becomes godly and worth worshipping, the human being is seen as self-sufficient, not needing any superior beings. Perceived as the ultimate center, the human being satisfies the spiritual needs using objects, experiences and power. (Makowski, 2004).

Christian personalism is a trend in philosophy that may be seen as opposing the assumptions of consumptionism, in that it views the human being as the highest autonomous value that demands affirmation to its existence and rights, based on the Bible, the Tradition and teachings of the Christian church. For personalism, the human being is the highest value among the creations based on the fact that the human being was created in the image of God and has an orientation towards God. Thus, the human being may not be used as a means to achieve any goal, nor made into an object of anything – the human being is a subject that never loses the personal dignity, even if unconscious or dependent on others in the earliest or latest period of life. The Bible refers to consumptionism as harmful, because accumulating earthly goods overshadows or blocks the ability to notice the neighbor, God and the world, and thus makes it more difficult for salvation to be received (Mt 19:21-30), and encourages sharing goods with others (Deut 24:19-22) and giving alms (Rom 15:26; Acts 11:29; 1Cor 16:1; 2Cor 8-9; Gal 2:10). In the teachings of the Church, material possessions are assessed as good as long as they do not enslave the owner and are shared to promote social justice (CA 36). “Blessed are the poor in spirit” refers not only to material goods but to a general attitude of simplicity and freedom from earthly “achievements” that are not goals in themselves, but rather means to achieve higher ones. All major world religions call for an attitude of moderation in bonding with possessions.

In the spiritual aspect, consumptionism perceives God or any spiritual forces as entities made to serve the human being in a way to provide pleasant experiences, health and prosperity and help to realize personal plans, if not in a church, then at fortune-tellers, astrology or magicians.

6 Reactions to consumptionism

It is commonly believed that consumptionism is harmful, but resisting it is a difficult task in the modern western society. While consumption has been constantly increasing, the subjective well-being of the society has been decreasing since the 1950s, according to data by the American Psychological Association (de Angelis 2004). *"Compared with their grandparents, today's young adults have grown up with much more affluence, slightly less happiness and much greater risk of depression and assorted social pathology," David G. Myers, author of The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty, wrote (quoted after Gregoire, 2013).*

Although a large part, if not the whole, western society is affected by consumptionism, various intellectual and social trends, ideas and initiatives are arising in response to it. Their authors are individuals, groups, organizations and institutions who realize the costs of consumptionism, obviously not only the sociopsychological ones, but also medical (obesity, addictions) and environmental ones (pollution, waste disposal). The initiatives and trends vary in their scope and type of activity, from a complete denial of any forms of consumption to moderate approaches and sustainable visions of the human being in the world. They include the idea of ethical consumption, critical public pedagogy (Sandlin 2010), various academic studies and health programs (Austin, Rich 2001, Wang et al 2008), trends like voluntary simplicity and slow life (Bylok 2016) and a general turn towards a broadly understood sustainable society (Turner 2010), economy and humanity.

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