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# Consumption and Life-Styles

## A Short Introduction

Dieter Bögenhold  
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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

**Abstract** In contemporary societies, nearly everything can be seen as a kind of consumption. Consuming as buying, eating, drinking, wearing clothes or travelling is processed as a kind of taking and using goods or services. Consumption processes are part of many different academic disciplines. Consumption does not only involve a series of different processes like choosing a product, buying, using and repairing something or managing waste, it is also about the legitimacy of products and their markets. How we consume is dependent not only upon the concrete society and time in which we live but also upon our preferences, depending upon our lifestyles and related tastes, which are almost always related to our position in the system of social classes. What do we want to possess, which goods are part of our dreams, for which purposes do we save money? All of these questions provide answers as to how human beings furnish their lives, also in relation to material goods.

**Keywords** Consumption · Consuming · Markets · Taboo markets

In contemporary societies, nearly everything can be seen as a kind of consumption. Consuming as buying, eating, drinking, wearing clothes or travelling is processed as a kind of taking and using goods or services. In a broad understanding, consumption is just taking something in order to receive or to use it, e.g. a baby consuming its mother's milk, a boyfriend consuming his girlfriend's love and vice versa, both of which are



built upon a very normal regulation of giving and taking in modern societies. However, in a narrower sense, consumption is almost always identified as a formal or informal contract which accompanies processes of payment. Accordingly, only processes related to an exchange of money or to reciprocal expectations are regarded as acts of consumption. In this understanding, consumption can be measured economically as a waste, in terms of items getting eaten, burned or, literally, in the common sense of the word, consumed.

Consumption processes are part of many different academic disciplines. In economics, consumption is closely related to processes of demand while sociology investigates the symbolic expression of acts of consumption and relates those observations to classes and lifestyles. In business administration, in contrast, different fields cover different aspects of consumption processes. For example, marketing tries to help sell products so that they become more attractive to potential consumer markets while entrepreneurship is more concerned with questions as to how to create opportunities and the supply of related products or services in order to establish new markets or to enlarge existing ones. Bridges between the islands of academic knowledge are becoming increasingly rare. This means that forms of scientific knowledge, disciplines and intra- and interdisciplinarity are fading ever more into the background. The paradoxical effect is that the apparently relentless growth of economics, psychology, business administration and sociology is responsible for the ongoing fragmentation of insights. Subjects lose out in numerous respects since they are scarcely able to communicate with one another any longer, appearing to have become fragmented theoretically, methodically and practically (Hollis, 2002). Today they are characterized by their impressive plurality in terms of the diversity of topics and methods. As a result, these subjects themselves have diverged still further, to the extent that it is even more difficult to conceptualize them as closed, single-type (Bögenhold, 2017; Cedrini & Fontana, 2018; Marchionatti & Cedrini, 2017; Rosenberg, 2012).

All of these processes take place in permanently changing societies, with different histories, markets and cultures determining the rules of the game. Norms in a society define which services or goods are legal and which are classified as being illegal or criminal. In some countries, alcoholic drinks are forbidden while in other countries everybody is allowed to buy alcohol in supermarkets. The same is true for other items commonly labelled as hard drugs, which are sometimes legal, sometimes

illegal, or which serve as opportunities to earn extraordinary amounts of money when selling the stuff (Baumol, 1990). Those reflections can be extended to many other kinds of goods, services or markets, including markets for adopting children, for human blood or semen or organs, for sexual services or erotic toys, where consumption processes occur but are sometimes located in statistical and/or normative zones of darkness so that they are labelled as taboo consumption (Mayr, 2018).

Consumption does not only involve a series of different processes like choosing a product, buying, using and repairing something or managing waste (Campbell, 1995, p. 102); it is also about the legitimacy of products and their markets. In the words of Michael Sandel (2012), reflections about consumption are always reflections about the social embeddedness of markets and their moral limits as well (Sandel, 2012). From a formal perspective, firearms for children or adults, dental braces, medical surgery, forged passports, hard drugs, vibrators or organs for transplantation are just goods with different prices and functions: from a sociological, legal, anthropological or psychological view, these goods are related to different forms of use and meaning, with different degrees of social acceptance and different forms of markets. In that respect, they differ in their product stories from markets for oranges or lemons, which provide the cases for classic textbook introductions with the related curves of supply and demand. All theorizing about marginal utilities in economics is done in accordance with the assumption of rational preferences in human beings as well as of clear and symmetric information in and about markets, which is an axiomatic setting without any empirical proof. Zelizer (2011) also made clear that markets for seemingly priceless goods can very well include subtle forms of price systems. In the end, consumption processes are obviously connected to fluid borders between formal and informal markets and their organization.

How we consume is dependent not only upon the concrete society and time in which we are living but also upon our preferences, depending upon our lifestyles and related tastes, which are almost always related to our position in the system of social classes. Therefore the discussion in the following chapters centres around the link between consumption and lifestyles in order to explain the rationality as to why people opt for this or that way to create their own life paths and world of consumption. What do we want to possess, which goods are part of our dreams, for which purposes do we save money? All of these questions provide answers as to how human beings furnish their lives, also in relation to

material goods. Lifestyle determines very much of our taste and our criteria for happiness. Gans's (1974) differentiation between popular culture and high culture is very much about the difference between regular consumption of practical value and distinctive forms of consumption as described more broadly in the works of Veblen (2007 [1899]) and Bourdieu (1984). Consumption practices always have the side effect of demonstrating and underlining the social position of the owner in a stratified society (Goffman, 1951). Likewise cultural capital is related to the ability to contribute to social processes of inclusion and exclusion (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Another impressive field of research is the question as to how people who are below middle or upper middle classes come up with practices of consumption. Being close to poverty, in particular, does not allow a broad variation in strategy or issues of style beyond just managing material survival. Combining those perspectives with further variables such as gender or age opens up a variety of further research questions (Katz-Gerro, 2004).

Over the last twenty years, we have experienced two further remarkable trends in consumption: first, the evolution of electronic markets, which has transformed the nature of what used to be geographically fragmented markets into one central global market. Amazon or Ebay are the best-known examples of recent electronic markets which provide new forms of consumer behaviour. Digitalizing consumption and processes of product evaluation and buying have become features of recent times (Belk & Llamas, 2013).

In the course of those digitalization processes, consumers are accorded increasingly hybrid functions so that they change partially into prosumers (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), i.e. actors who are partly consumers, but elsewhere also entrepreneurial producers, or labour or wage dependent citizens who are more than just simple consumers. Prosumers must be regarded as being embedded in many different roles so that the term indicates those ambivalences. Binary constructions of consumers versus labourers are all too often too simple, especially in times of digital markets. A second trend is the increasing greening of societies in the sense of a growing awareness of the topic of sustainability. Societies worldwide are experiencing serious changes in consumer behaviour in relation to product quality, the nature of production processes in combination with ecological and social parameters and issues of fair trade, all of which must be taken as new facts which also empower consumers. Especially consumers in the digital age are better

informed than consumers in earlier times so that they multiply negative information about brands or companies in the social media world-wide very fast, which sets up new rules for international competition processes.

This book is about selected topics of consumption. It tries to summarize different aspects of the discussion which the authors became familiar with while teaching and researching in different parts of the academic world. The subtitle is “A short introduction” to consumption and this, in fact, is the serious intention of the authors, namely to provide a comprehensive but very concise introduction to consumption and lifestyles. The market has some excellent books on the topic: Keller, Halkier, Wilska, and Truninger (2017) give a broad overview on different topics while Storey (2017) and Warde (2017) are impressive for going into depth but there is no book which serves as a short, incisive introduction.

All readers are—in their private lives—consumers as well but our knowledge of consumption is often limited or incomplete. The term consumption is vague and even in academic disciplines, the term is used in different ways. Consumption research asks how earnings and spending are related to each other. It asks how consistent preference structures are due to changing empirical backgrounds of time, space and related culture. The book is an interdisciplinary journey through the world of consumption covering different topics and including sociological, economic and marketing aspects.

The final book is a comprehensive introduction which may be used in classes on sociology, marketing and management, consumption economics, aesthetics and design, architecture and a few other disciplines. Although quite brief in terms of length, several people helped the authors by contributing different sorts of input, providing comments and corrections, helping to create a reasonable layout and to re-format figures, checking for an adequate command of English and providing many other forms of contribution and help. Of course, all remaining shortcomings are due to the imperfections of the authors but special acknowledgements go to Helen Heaney, Kornelia Kanyo, Cornelia Mayr and Karen Meehan. The authors are grateful for having had the support of these colleagues. The argumentation also benefitted from the critical comments of two anonymous reviewers. Additionally, heartfelt thanks go to Rachel Sangster, editor and head of Economics and Finance Publishing with Palgrave Macmillan for her time, patience, trust and final support in getting the initial idea realized.

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