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Consumption as a form of image self-creation of the young people

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CONSUMPTION AS A FORM OF IMAGE SELF-CREATION OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE

Summary

The aim of the paper is to analyze factors that shape the contemporary consumer culture by acquiring material goods that have a symbolic significance and constitute a form of communication expressing affiliation with a specific group as well as creating sense of their own identity. Choices made by the consumer are firmly based on the value system within a specific culture that constitutes the essence of both individual and collective identity. This identity is acquired by purchasing goods that have a symbolic significance and determine position of an individual. Choices made by the individuals in the consumption process enable them to make their own image. Exemplification of deliberations is based on the study conducted by the author in 2013 among 200 students enrolled in Wrocław universities (Wrocław University of Economics and the University of Wrocław). The polling method with the use of a standardized questionnaire on consumer practices related to their own image making was applied.

Keywords: product brand, communication by means of consumption, image self-creation

Introduction

The subject of deliberations in this paper is to determine the effect of the contemporary consumerism on the young people's image. Communicational dimension of the acquired goods will be analyzed as a form of communicated information about the users in particular. Consumer activity is not merely a way of meeting needs arising from the products' function. It also possesses a symbolic significance that results from life style affirmation and taste associated with acquisition of specific goods. Selection of a specific product is associated with purchasing social significance that is important from the self-image point

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of view.² Within this context, interdisciplinary approach to the product brand as a way of the individual's image making will arise. In the post-modernist culture, constantly changing relations with social surroundings redefine identity of the individual. The awareness of relativity of norms, authorities and value systems has deprived the individual of traditional identity markers associated with rationality, intentionality, self-knowledge and sense of coherence sustainability to a greater extent than ever before.³ In the consumption process the individual either seeks to confirm the achieved social position or aspires to a group that will confirm his new status position. A characteristic feature of the contemporary societies motivated by prestige is status uncertainty that arises from social mobility, fluidity of borders between various groups as well as anonymity that causes status imperceptibility. Among consumer behaviors aimed at gaining prestige, there could be distinguished both classical and new forms of behavior. The former are deposited on ostentatious consumption and branded goods acquisition. The new forms take into consideration other effects, *viz.*: demonstration of individuality arising from specificity of the life style and sublimation of taste that determines expression of affiliation to a particular subculture. Such a consumption style is characterized by simplicity, good taste, expertness in culture, possession of unique objects and a sophisticated way of spending leisure time⁴. In the behavior of young consumers, the so called imitation effect plays an important role. To a greater or lesser extent the individual is aware of it in relation to the object that constitutes a pattern of behavior. For a certain number of the young people, significance has a snob effect that consists in the desire to distinguish oneself by possessing goods without which one can function normally.⁵

Product brand within the context of image making of the individual

Amongst the definitional aspects of the brand, there can be distinguished two dominant ways of the definition from the perspective of the brand owner and its user. L. de Chernatony and F. Dall' Olmo Riley rank the definition of the brand among the twelve brand theme definitions. In their opinion, the brand presents itself as: a legal instrument, a logo, a name, a company, an added val-

² A.M. Zawadzka, *Dlaczego przywiązujemy się do marki*, GWP, Gdańsk 2006, p. 11.

³ K.J. Gergen, *Nasycone ja. Dylematy tożsamości w życiu współczesnym*, Wyd. Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2009, p. 173–174.

⁴ *Kulturowe determinanty zachowań konsumentów*, ed. W. Patrzalek, Wyd. Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2004, p. 29–30.

⁵ C. Bywalec, L. Rudnicki, *Konsumpcja*, PWE, Warszawa 2002, p. 78.

ue, a vision, a value system, a risk-reducer factor, an image in consumers' minds and an object of emotional involvement.⁶

In this paper the brand category pertaining to its user will be thoroughly analyzed. Within this context, the brand understood from the perspective of value, culture and personality will have a vital significance. Thus from the semiotic point of view, the brand is a complex symbol that possesses meanings of the following facets:

- features – associating the brand with certain features that belong to a given object,
- benefits – the brand is not merely a set of functional features but it also includes emotional features; by purchasing a product, a customer acquires both functional and emotional features such as: recognition, respect, admiration by other people,
- values – the brand provides utility values indicated by the manufacturer, and also such social values as prestige and status,
- personality – the brand can prompt associations related to a personality of strong features that distinguish it against the background of other people who belong to the same class, e.g. leaders, unique objects etc.,
- user – the brand suggests the type of a customer that purchases and uses a product. He entails persons who accept value, culture and personality of a product.⁷

Product choices made by the consumers do not merely entail purchase of a specific brand but also acquisition of social significance from the perspective of the image of a person who has made a particular purchase.

Self-image creation implies considerably more than just purchasing branded products. It involves a way of expressing one's own personality by accepting an individual style of communication with social surrounding in which that individual resides.

Communicative nature of consumption

In the consumer society objects have a symbolic significance, due to which they take part in social communication, during which individuals can express

⁶ L. de Chernatony, F. Dall'Olmo Riley, *Defining a brand: beyond the literature with experts' interpretations*, "Journal of Marketing Management" 1998, Vol. 14, No. 5, p. 417–443, L. de Chernatony, *Marka. Wizja i tworzenie marki*, GWP, Gdańsk 2003, p. 48.

⁷ *Kulturowe determinanty...*, p. 31; Ph. Kotler, *Marketing, analiza, planowanie, wdrażanie i kontrola*, Wyd. Gebethner & Ska, Warszawa 1994, p. 410–411.

their individuality and life style.⁸ The brand image possesses a specific social meaning that is transferred onto its user, as it permits to communicate the surrounding about the purchaser's life style, social status and personality by means of the product he holds.

Research conducted by many authors (F.B. Evans 1968, W.T. Tucker, J.J. Painetr 1970, A.M. Zawadzka 1998, J.L. Aaker 1999, M.K. Hogg, A.J. Cox and K. Keeling 2000, C.H. Kim, D. Han and S.B. Park 2001 et al.) proves that the purchaser gets attached to the brand that has similar features like he possesses himself. C.H. Kim, D. Han and S.B. Park (2001) have studied to what extent personality of a mobile phone is connected with the possibility of expressing oneself and getting attached to it. The researchers assert that there is a positive correlation between the brand attractiveness and consumer's identification with the brand through expressing himself and having a desire to recommend it to other users.⁹

In the Polish studies consumer typology is made on the grounds of a symbolic significance embodied in objects. Pursuant to the deliberations issues, attention will be drawn to behavior of young consumers in communicational dimension serving the self-image making. Young purchasers make use of trademarks available in the market to build their own unique image. They use contents that come from media, advertisements and their own subcultures by incorporating them in individual tactics of acquiring goods. The young people use aesthetics and individual styles to communicate with their peers. Image coherence is extremely important for them, therefore while purchasing specific goods they are driven by their individual style.¹⁰

Significance of consumption in the young people image-making within the author's study

In 2013 in order to determine whether the individual builds his own image by his behavior in the field of consumption, the author carried out a survey among 150 students of the University of Wrocław in the following fields of study: national security, biology and economics. In the study a survey questionnaire was applied. The sample selection was equipotent from particular field of

⁸ M. Marciniak, *Orientacja konsumencka młodzieży akademickiej. Perspektywa Baumanowska*, Wyd. Impuls, Kraków 2001, p. 24.

⁹ C.H. Kim, D. Han, S.B. Park, *The effects of brand personality and brand identification on brand loyalty: Applying the theory of social identification*, "Japanese Psychological Research" 2001, Vol. 4, p. 195–206.

¹⁰ *Nowa droga do zniewolenia? O życiu w społeczeństwie konsumpcyjnym*, ed. K. Romaniszyn, Wyd. Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2011, p. 99.

study and a quota sampling with the division into: gender, place of origin and an average monthly net income per one member of student's household was used. In the research procedure concepts operationalization, which seeks to explain fundamental theses of the paper, relates to consumption of a symbolic significance and self-creation of the individual. Consumption of objects that have a symbolic significance consists not so much in consuming its features expressed in the utility category but in its intangible properties related to the values attributed to a given object by others.¹¹ On the other hand, as far as self-creation is concerned, the consumer identity is made by building its own "self" by means of images and sent visual signals, i.e. circumstantial evidence that can be perceived by others and interpreted according to their own intention.¹²

The study aimed at determining the impact of owned consumer objects on the way the individual is perceived in terms of his social position and signs of the acquired social prestige (fig. 1).

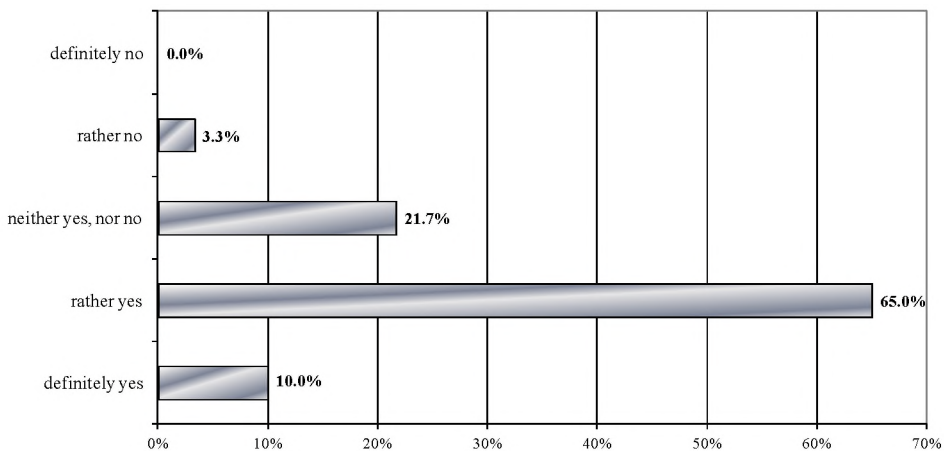


Fig. 1. Objects as determinants of social status

Source: research conducted by the author in 2013.

The study shows that majority of the respondents (65% of the total amount) believe that the owned objects can reflect on the material status of the individual. 10% of the surveyed expressed their unequivocal opinion on this question. Whereas 21.7% of the respondents do not have a clear-cut opinion on that. Objects that determine prestige of the individual have been analyzed within the context of the respondent's field of study. Most of the students believe that products do determine prestige of the individual, though differences occurred

¹¹ C. Bywalec, L. Rudnicki, *Konsumpcja...*, p. 17.

¹² Z. Bauman, *Wolność*, Wyd. Znak, Warszawa-Kraków 1995, p. 77-78.

according to the field of study. Students who study national security expressed their positive stance on that issue the most often, i.e. 70% of the respondents (definitely “yes” and rather “yes”), and the most seldom answer was given by student who study biology, i.e. 40% of the respondents (rather “yes”) – table 1.

Table 1

Impact of owned objects on prestige of the individual in %

Specification	Field of study			Total
	National security	Biology	Economics	
Definitely “yes”	10.0	0.0	10.0	6.7
Rather “yes”	60.0	40.0	45.0	48.3
Neither “yes” nor “no”	20.0	20.0	25.0	21.7
Rather “no”	10.0	35.0	20.0	21.7
Definitely “no”	0.0	5.0	0.0	1.7

Source: research conducted by the author in 2013.

In the further part of the study it was sought to determine consumer behavior during the process of goods purchasing within the context of their own style shaping. To this end, during the aforementioned process students made choices of specification according to the cafeterias included in table 2.

Table 2

Statements that determine the respondents during the process of goods purchasing to the best extent

Specification	Answers		Percentage of observation
	N	Percent	
When purchasing goods I pay attention to the factor that makes them suit my style.	35	22.2	58.3
When purchasing goods I pay attention to the factor that distinguishes me from others	6	3.8	10.0
I purchase goods that are currently in fashion	10	6.3	16.7
When purchasing goods I buy everything I like without thinking	4	2.5	6.7
I purchase certain products out of habit	8	5.1	13.3
When purchasing I pay attention to the quality of a product	34	21.5	56.7
When purchasing I pay attention to the price of a product	36	22.8	60.0
I purchase only those goods that I really need	25	15.8	41.7

Source: research conducted by the author in 2013.

The data analysis shows that when making purchase students are driven both by the price (22.8% of indications) and matching products to their own

style. Furthermore, 21.5% of the total amount of the surveyed draws attention to the quality of a product. Only 2.5% of the indications declare that they make purchase in a well-thought out way, that is, they do not buy everything they like without thinking. It is worth noticing that 15.8% of the respondents buy only the most necessary things. 3.8% of the surveyed do not wish to get distinguished by the owned products and 6.3% of the total amount of the respondents do not exclusively follow the fashion.

Within the context of the communicational significance of the individual's image, the surveyed were supposed to define the salience of the way that others perceive them in according to the sex division.

Table 3

Importance of the individual's perception by others according to the respondent's sex in %

Specification	Gender		Total
	Women	Men	
Yes	73.3	53.3	63.3
Neither "yes" nor "no"	13.3	16.7	15.0
No	13.3	30.0	21.7

Source: research conducted by the author in 2013.

The surveyed women – 73.3% indicated more often than men (53.3%) that it is important for them how they are perceived by others. For 30% of the polled men it was either unimportant (30%) or indifferent (15%).

As far the choice of cafeterias that make good impression on others is concerned, the respondents emphasized the importance of taking care of oneself (32.2% of the polled) and good look (22.2% of the respondents). A similar percentage of indications concerned the retention of a stable image which highlights the interplay between its constituent elements (tab. 4).

Table 4

Ways of exerting influence on others in the opinion of the respondents

Specification	Percent of the total amount	Percent of the observation
I try to look after myself	32.2	78.4
I try to look good	22.2	54.1
It is important to be well dressed	7.8	18.9
I try to keep myself physically fit	10.0	24.3
I maintain a stable image and make sure that everything interplays with each other	22.2	54.1
I control the body weight and its attractiveness	5.6	13.5

Source: research conducted by the author in 2013.

The next research issue concerned communicational exertion of influence on others by means of the respondent's clothing. The distribution of that variable was studied according to the respondent's place of origin in % (tab. 5).

Table 5

Significance of clothing according to the respondent's place of origin

Specification	The respondent's place of origin					Total
	Village	Town up to 10 thousand	Town from 10 up to 100 thousand	City from 100 up to 500 thousand	City over 500 thousand	
Permits to express personality	75.0	100.0	79.2	66.7	100.0	48
Permits to express the mood	30.0	40.0	37.5	33.3	40.0	21
Permits to determine our social position	30.0	20.0	41.7	33.3	20.0	20
Has impact on the way we are perceived by others	70.0	100.0	75.0	83.3	80.0	46
Does not influence the way we are perceived by others	0.0	0.0	4.2	0.0	0.0	1
It is hard to say	10.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	20.0	3

Source: research conducted by the author in 2013.

The surveyed who come from big cities (over 500 thousand residents) and those who come from small towns (up to 10 thousand residents) emphasized that clothing permits them to express their personality in most cases. In their opinion, clothing significantly influences the way they are perceived by others, particularly among the respondents who come from small towns (up to 10 thousand residents) and from bigger towns (from 100 up to 500 thousand residents).

It is worth noticing that the analysis results on the field of studies are quite interesting. Students who study all the above-mentioned fields of study (i.e. biology, national security and economics) predominantly claim that clothing permits them to express personality (80% of indications). However, their opinions differ in terms of determining their social position by clothing. Students who study economics indicated correlation between these categories to the greatest extent (90% of indications). Next, there are students who study biology (85%) and students of national security noticed that correlation to the slightest degree (55% of the total amount).

Conclusion

In the contemporary consumer societies the following belief is being formed: consumers can be determined by means of the goods they purchase. Consumerism is treated as a form of communication since individuals communicate information about themselves by means of the goods they own. On the grounds of the purchased products the consumer can be classified into specific social groups. Increasingly rare the acquired products serve their utility functions, and more and more often become a way of raising status of the individual.

Research conducted by the author shows that for the young people clothing becomes an element of expressing their personality and mood. By means of clothing and items of regular use they determine their identity.

The individual in the consumer society makes self-creation of his image. Students emphasized that clothing determines social position of its user. Therefore when they purchase products they try to make sure that the acquired goods interplay with their self-perception presented in the social space. Thus, they make choices of such products that suit their individual style.

The young consumers consider the way they are perceived by others to be important. Therefore they undertake actions to make better impression on them. As for the consumer behavior, the surveyed students try to take care after themselves, to look good and to maintain a stable image. Nonetheless, certain differences regarding sex arose. Women pay attention to the way they are perceived by others to a greater extent than men. Consumer practices of the surveyed groups of students are marked by rationalism and pro-quality orientation. Among their consumer attitudes the following belief dominates: one's own identity can be formed by means of proper purchase choices.

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KONSUMPCJA JAKO FORMA AUTOKREACJI WIZERUNKU LUDZI MŁODYCH

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza czynników kształtujących współczesną kulturę konsumpcyjną przez nabywanie dóbr mających znaczenie symboliczne i będących formą komunikacji wyrażającej przynależność do określonej grupy oraz tworzących poczucie własnej odrębności jednostki. Wybory, których dokonuje konsument mają swoje umocowanie w systemie wartości określonej kultury stanowiącej podstawę tożsamości indywidualnej i zbiorowej. Tożsamość ta nabywana jest przez kupowanie dóbr mających symboliczne znaczenie i określających pozycję jednostki. Wybory dokonywane przez jednostkę w procesie konsumpcji pozwalają jej na tworzenie własnego wizerunku. Egzemplifikację rozważań stanowią badania ankietowe pod kierunkiem autorki przeprowadzone w 2013 roku wśród 200 studentów wrocławskich uczelni (Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego i Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego) metodą sondażu z wykorzystaniem kwestionariusza dotyczącego ich praktyk konsumpcyjnych powiązanych z kształtowaniem własnego wizerunku.

Słowa kluczowe: marka produktu, komunikacja jako forma wizerunku

Tłumaczenie: Galina Bogucka