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The Consumer - More than Jus a Number

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Abstract: In the consumption society, the human being risks to become just a number in the statistics. Questions as “the need generates new products?” or vice versa could be analyzed in economic key but in philosophical key too. How much the consumption is dedicated to cover real needs and how much is a rush for profit in any conditions? This paper opens only few subjects of reflection about the individual happiness in the consumption society where the profit and the competitiveness are basic rules of the businesses and the economy.

Keywords: consumption; choice; happiness

1. The Consumption between Need and Pleasure

This paper starts from the idea that conventional economic theory adopts a deeply utilitarian approach of the goods and services role for consumers.

Approaching the consumption strictly in terms of economic utility, the consumer will appreciate the good in terms of satisfaction felt by consuming a given quantity of that good. In order to measure the utility, the Gossen's law states that with increasing quantity consumed of a good, total utility increases increasingly less while decreasing marginal utility. So in other words as a consumer consumes a greater quantity of a good, the satisfaction he obtains or hopes to achieve (total utility) grows increasingly less, tending finally asymptotically to zero. Moreover, since a consumer consumes a greater quantity of a good, consuming of each additional unit of that good (marginal utility) generating a satisfaction which is reduced to zero and can reach up to dissatisfaction.

From this idea, it can be generated a debate with philosophical and even existential connotations: Why the consumer wants to increase the amount consumed of a good, if the result is decreased total and marginal utility? The consumer does not perceive, actually, the decrease of total and marginal utility, but perceive the decrease of intensity of satisfaction, so he reach saturation and then wants something else.

Deepening the theory of utilitarianism, according to John Stuart Mill “actions are right if tend to promote happiness and wrong if tend to produce unhappiness, happiness meaning pleasure and unhappiness meaning pain.” (Crăciun, Morar, & Macoviciuc, 2005, p. 165) Therefore, the consumption as a human action tends to be satisfied so as to cause happiness.

Again raise questions (and not just for a Socratic approach to analysis):

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Does happiness means pleasure? That hedonism can be the source of happiness? Or what is the line between need and pleasure?

Returning to the utilitarian function of goods and services in the consumption society, where is practicing an aggressive marketing, another question is raised (which can be like “what came first, the egg or the chicken?”): “the need generated the product, or vice versa?”

2. Ethical Advertising – Study Case

Going thus to the logic line of the history of human existence, practically the evolution of human thinking refined the needs.

By analogy with the above mentioned, in the today market economy are often criticized the marketing practices which trying to create needs. But the opinion that marketing creates needs is not in contradiction with the fundamentals itself of marketing? Because, in theory, the companies first identify the consumer needs, and then design products and services that satisfy them. We could say, in other words, if the marketing has an impact on consumer behavior, then rather it emphasizes existing needs or activates those that consumers do not realize, or do not feel them very strongly.

I have mentioned “in theory” because in practice it happens and vice versa: the manufacturers design the product that brings better potential profit and then create the need for it. Could be the example of unhealthy food - chips, carbonated drinks, etc.-which after they are designed and is expected potential returns, then they are excessively promoted and associated with events involving collective participation, so large numbers of consumers (such as eating chips during games). In fact these products do not meet a real need, even a social need (can be a spectator at a football game with friends and without consuming chips). Then why are bought? What the manufacturer counts on when he foresees the sales?

It is about pleasure satisfaction or the pleasure of taste. And according to the John Stuart Mill's approach, our action of consumption could produce us pleasure which is identified with happiness. On this feature of the consumer, of desire for pleasure satisfaction are based a lot of marketing actions of the companies.

Is striking the TV advertisement for medicine Colebil, where the consumer is encouraged to eat everything and as much he wants (on the visual background of an overabundance of meat and mayonnaise meals) because he has an ally, the Colebil, who put the lazy gall to work. How ethical is this promotion? Because here it is not about need. Namely, the advertising message is that the satisfaction of insatiable culinary pleasures of the consumer can be done now without limit, because there is that medicine. So the consumer will buy and take the medicine because subliminally, it will allow them to satisfy their unlimited desires.

Sure, essentially, that mentioned product, Colebil, is good, but the strategy for increasing the sales of this product is based on increasing its consumption even when consumption exceeds the need. Namely, the real need could be that if the consumer has a gall disease, than Colebil could help in some situations of consumption of inappropriate food, so the consumer will buy the medicine to treat the pathology. But, to increase the sales practically to any consumer, so even to persons who have no gall disease then the advertising message is acting subconsciously, by urging the satisfying pleasure of eating, which no longer exists now limits, due to the medicine that removes the consequences of food abuse.

What could be emphasized is that in the consumption society, often the companies' marketing strategies are based on the consumer trend to satisfy the pleasures and not the needs. The need can be satisfied, but the pleasure not, because it will always create new desires.

Therefore, multiplying unlimited desires, the companies can increase the sales based on their snowball effect.

The Marketing strategies of companies are based, largely, on consumption “per capita” in their field of work. Starting from the official annual statistics per capita with the consumption in different activity areas, the companies set their strategies to achieve a certain market share for their products. Within these strategies the consumer is an individual who already consume the goods, or is a target segment of the company's products. So for the company, but also for society as a whole, in terms of economic statistics, the consumer is an individual or a “per capita”, or just a number.

But the consumer is a human being. And the human being is a person, not an individual. The term of individual comes from individualism that is selfishness. And, in fact, what is the continue satisfaction of the own pleasure, mentioned above, if not individualism. And it is here about the desires satisfaction both of the consumers and the businessmen/investors.

3. Conclusions

Desire of consumption and buying goods far beyond the real needs makes annual 1.3 billion tones of food to gets lost or wasted¹, also, clothing to be thrown after being worn a season, because it was obsolete. Perhaps changing clothing related to self-esteem, to the need to be noticed in certain social groups. The same could be available also for the new machine, mountain villa, or for the yacht. And always will be something to buy because only in this way we feel that we are appreciated in society.

This individualism, translated into selfishness, has made human life to be conjugated with the verb to have instead of to be. Then it was generated the crisis related to “emptying oneself” felt by the consumer, gap which he wants to fill it continuously with goods, but which they do not fully satisfy him, and then he seeks for other goods, without, however, ever reach the full satisfaction. Thus, “the insatiability” of “having” has moved the center of gravity of the whole society to an excessive consumption, excessive desire for enrichment and focusing of human being only to oneself. John Stuart Mill considered the pleasure and the happiness as same feelings.

Aristotle considered “*The happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the trajectory and the end of human existence.*” (Crăciun, Morar, & Macoviciuc, 2005, p. 195)

In this case would be tragic if the satisfaction of pleasure through consumption is the purpose and meaning of life. It cannot be so. I said that human being is a person, not an individually. In Romanian language this terms have to be explained to understand the difference, but in Greek language these terms have distinct etymological meanings:

Individual in Greek is άτομο (atomo) which means a singular, individual person and

Person in Greek is πρόσωπο (prosopo) which means a person in connection with others.

Perhaps because there are no truer communion between people so the person became individual who tries to fill the existential gap with goods?

¹ FAO <http://www.fao.org/save-food/resources/keyfindings/en/>.

Is the consumer a passive victim of the consumption society where somebody else influences their needs? Or the consumer is an active participant in the market, seeking to satisfy their real needs, seeking to find their place and role in society, but most importantly trying to know himself?

And when he will find himself, in fact he will reach the last step of Maslow's Pyramid and he will notice that the need of each step was relative but absolutely necessary to reach the next step.

4. Bibliography

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***<http://www.fao.org/save-food/resources/keyfindings/en/>.