

Freedom of consumer society

Sociology



“Explore the claim that consumer society is characterised by the freedom of choice” Consumer society is a label used to refer to a society which is defined as much by how and what people purchase and use as by what they make or do (Hetherington, 2009). Market these days often claims that fulfilling wishes of consumers is their number one priority. Some people, although, may claim differently. They claim that a market dictates what and why to choose, leaving casual consumer with little to no choice at all. This essay will explore how choices of consumers characterize consumer society.

As well as inequality that is created within this relatively new type of society. It will also aim to explain impact of consumers choices on global scale as well as locally. The consumption of goods is growing rapidly. Either it is just simple necessities that ease our everyday life or expensive goods of luxury that play symbolic role and are often used to create image of status. The shift from Industrial Society, when factories and making goods played an important role, has been on-going since the Victorian era in Great Britain. People lifestyles have changed with time as well as their consuming habits.

These days consumption goes far beyond just buying stuff. Increase in economy allowed more freedom of choice, therefore giving an opportunity to consume experiences as well as things or services. Consumption became more about meanings of the items than about their use. As American sociologist Thorstein Veblen in his book “The Theory of the Leisure Class”, published in 1899, claims that people often buy things for particular reason: to make good impression about themselves or raise a social status. He referred to this behavior as conspicuous consumption – purchase of goods just to display owner’s success.

Unfortunately this type of lifestyle is available only for some, those who can afford it. More often than not, luxury goods, such as jewellery and antiques, are unaffordable for the middle class. According to the social scientist Zygmunt Bauman (1988) a consumer society promises choice and freedom to those who, because of their financial and social circumstances, are in position to consume effectively. He described these people as seduced. This type of people is probably the best reflection of freedom provided by consumer society.

For those, who can allow themselves consumers' lifestyle, market is always full of options. Although for some who are not in position to consume effectively, freedom of choice and market options are limited. Zygmunt Bauman (1988) referred to these people as repressed. It is only natural, that people are trying to fit into the society that they think they belong to. Markets in consumer society use this wish for their benefit. It is often observed that advertisements and social media tend to sell the promise of inclusion, if a certain item is bought. Quite often people wish to purchase items that they cannot afford.

Markets deepened this separation between the seduced and the repressed even more, by introducing shopping places aimed for those who can consume effectively. Since 1860s department stores began to appear in Europe. It was a safe place for people to shop and it provided many stores under one roof. Department stores provide a place where effective consumers could fulfill their wish of shopping and entertainment. Until these days department stores creates an image of luxury with their smart product placements and attractive window displays. One of the key concepts of

department stores is freedom of choice and seduction of customer's imagination.

Although department stores sell not only very expensive items, the promise of luxurious lifestyle is clear. Other large shopping centers, such as supermarkets, provide an option for those with less money to spend. It is usually a place of variety. In supermarkets these days you can find anything from food to vacuum cleaners. It might not seem as luxurious as department stores, but these stores offers consumers' goods for low prices therefore appealing to those, less wealthy. The idea behind their marketing is the promise of spending less and still gaining more.

Wide variety gives freedom to choose and buy more than usually is needed, since goods there are affordable for most. Less wealthy consumers often are seduced by this only because of the illusion that a full shopping cart might bring them closer to rich and luxurious people. Supermarkets these days play mayor role in society, since it is one of biggest places to buy necessities and food. Expanding network and convenient placement of shops is one of the main reasons why supermarkets became so successful. Low prices, wide variety, more value for money and long working hours made shopping there appealing for most.

But not everyone's opinion is the same towards the supermarkets. Some people argue, that supermarkets dictate what people should consume, propagate unhealthy lifestyle and inorganic produce by lowering their prices. Organic and healthy options usually are more expensive, therefore less appealing for those with lower income. Some may even claim, that this model is related to nationwide obesity problems. Supermarkets dictate

prices for local farmers, since they are major buyers of their produce. There are numbers of requirements that has to be met by farmers before supermarkets would be interested in buying their produce.

This model of sorting even can lead to annual loss for many farmers and has a huge impact on what we see for sale – suggesting that this is the right choice. Supermarkets claim that the reasoning behind is only a wish to fulfil expectations of their customers. The impact of supermarkets may not seem so great, but since their appearance more and more farmers and local retailers lost their customers. Temptation of variety and affordability is what people tend to choose. Everyday choices of consumers' forms market not only locally but globally as well.

Most of the cheapest goods, such as toys or clothing, are imported from third world countries. That is one of the main reasons behind affordable price and reasonable quality. Some may claim that import is a great way to raise the economy of a country, Japan being a great example. On the other hand, in countries such as China or Bangladesh factory's working conditions tend to be poor and wages are low. Some may say that this is one of the biggest drawbacks of consumer society – wish of cheap, good and now. Consumer society is characterised by freedom of choice. Choice to spend, display the success or just a simple wish to fit in.

Like in every society before, there always are those, who are less fortunate. Inequalities are formed and supported by those who benefit from them. Illusions of luxury and carelessness are created only to support society's wishes. Consumers form this society with every purchase they make. Demand will always be satisfied and wishes fulfilled by those who seek for

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profit. Before purchasing an item people should consider the origins and value of it. Only educated society can create healthy society. Formation of this society is in consumers' hands or, to be more precise, in their shopping carts.