

CONSUMPTION AS SOCIAL PROBLEM

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Abstract

The authoress using the theoretical material, the results of the sociological research, life stories method analyses the features of consumption, which is significant phenomenon of modern society. After long years of ascetic socialist consumption, the beginning of new era can hardly be imagined without the explosion of consumer 'hedonism' or without the satisfaction of long restrained needs and desires. In the article is stressed that consumption sphere means now the orientation at Western culture, involvement of many new styles, the manifestation of new tastes. According to P. Bourdieu, life style is an expression of class position; the styles of consumption are the means of exhibiting 'cultural capital'; social distinction is marked by tastes which are formed as part of class habitus.

Nowadays consumption is the element that structures (isolate or integrate) people in a new way; goods are important for the society as the marks of social situation. The level and structure of consumption, social attitudes to consumption depend on some variables, such as social class, age, sex, education. The authoress presents the features and the peculiarity of the Lithuanian advertisement; in the article the conceptions of Z. Bauman, C. Campbell, P. Sztompka, (and others) are analyzed, the material of student's sociological research is presented.

Key words: consumption as social phenomena, private property, social distinction, consumption of space

Introduction

The process of globalisation has rapidly appeared over the last few years in many social and economic fields (Tomlinson, 1999). It influences the people activity, social movements, encourages new human and social relationships, the cultural and values systems (Bauman, 2002). In social sciences the process of globalisation is influencing the change of methodologies of investigations, increases the knowledge, improves the interpretation used in the analyses and research carried out in Lithuania. It is very significant to investigate now the private sphere (Rossler, 2005), real power of people - at home, in household, in works institutions, their influence to family and to all society. In Lithuania now exist many different subcultures or social worlds of people - officials, politicians, youth (especially students), women, artists, cities or villages inhabitants. Some of them are expressing their interests and features of life style in public and private life, in mass media. The problem of identity has been brought in recent years into the focus of social scientific and public debate. For the people of postsocialist country the very actual question is to have a new identity

which is related with modern western values. Sometimes it is not clear for them exactly what to do to get it. For the Lithuanian people to have an identity it means to answer the questions 'who am I' or 'where to I belong'. According to P. Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1992) lifestyle is an expression of class position; the styles of consumption are the means of exhibiting 'cultural capital'; social distinction is marked by tastes which are formed as part of class habitus.

As **methodological background** of this research, the conceptions of Z. Bauman, C. Campbell, P. Sztompka, P. Bourdieu are analyzed; as the **method** of investigation are used sociological theories and materials of sociological research. The **purpose** of this article is to discuss the peculiarities of the consumption as the social phenomena, to show the difference in this sphere.

The actuality of this problem is related with the research of private life characteristics, which is very significant for modern people now; their construction of the conditions of life is similar to new identity formation.

After long years of ascetic socialist consumption the beginning of the new era can hardly be imagined without the explosion of consumer 'hedonism' or without the development of mechanisms, enabling people to satisfy long restrained needs and desires. National independence of Lithuania also manifests itself the orientation to Western culture, way of life, social and political norms of civilization. In public consciousness this phenomenon is reflected as the search of cultural pluralism, involvement in diversity of choices, transition to the world without frontiers.

The sociologists are paying very much attention to consumption research: P. Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1992), C. Campbell (Campbell, 1994), M. J. Featherstone (Featherstone, 1992), M. K. Gailbraith (Gailbraith, 1973), R. Bocoock (1993), G. Ritzer (1999), M. Bogunia-Borowska, M. Šleboda (2003) and others.

Growing pluralism in post-socialist Lithuania is connected with the process of democratization, national freedom, economic, social and cultural reforms and new reality. The earlier social structures, old patterns of behaviour have been destroyed, the new modes of life are being discussed in the society. The slow-down in post-socialist transition in Eastern European societies is described by the Polish sociologist P. Sztompka (Sztompka, 1993: 89) with the help of the concept of "civilizational incompetence", comprising deficiencies in: 1) entrepreneurial culture, 2) civil or political culture, 3) culture of discourse, 4) everyday culture, indispensable for daily existence in advanced, urbanized, technologically saturated and consumer oriented society. Some of the components of everyday culture include: perso-

nal neatness and cleanness, punctuality, body care, fitness, healthy eating, skills in handling household appliances and the like. Decades of socialism not only hindered the formation of civilizational competence, but in many ways helped to shape quite an opposite cultural syndrome - civilizational incompetence.

Nowadays, new claims and ways of life are being discussed in the society. People tend to take responsibility for their social relations; new social movements (those of landowners, businessmen, women) give a potential for new styles of life, new needs and interests.

Over the recent period the composition of the Lithuanian population has fully changed. Business now takes part of the Lithuanian free market system. Theoretically, business brings "equality" of gender. However, the results of the investigation show that the target of "equality" has not yet been attained. Even in business women face obstacles, since business is still considered to be men's job. It could be assumed that openness of the market and poor chances of employment elsewhere have offered specific opportunities to women and stimulated them to engage in business (Aidis, 1999: 60). Condition for starting business have become much more tough. Presently, governmental structures and non-governmental organizations could facilitate the solution of the problem by emphasizing men and women role in business and by familiarizing the public with their social and economic contributions, which is conducive for a favourable image of them. Expansion of the activities and services of NGO (of women) is highly desirable. Cooperation with local and international organizations and universities could increase the weight of businessmen in the society. The socio-economic status of Lithuanian women is changing: as reveals the data of their self-evaluation; dynamic data from the surveys carried out every year during 1991-1998 show a slow increase in the number of women who identify themselves with the higher steps of the socio-economic status.

The features of consumption in Lithuania

Consumption is a process related with the reproduction of the way of life of people; it is a system of organized relations among the society and environment. Not only production or free time activity, but the consumption level also is the basis for the differences in society.

The attitudes and patterns of behaviour in the consumption sphere are as the important resource of new life strategies, especial in the independent Lithuania. The system of public opinion is characterized by pluralism of political views, difference in attitudes to state and private property, new consumption forms and a new concept of everyday life comfort. The Lithuanian society moves away from post-socialist state of lawlessness by gaining experience in different activities, connected with newly purchased ownership, private property. Social actions are becoming more oriented towards such achievements as acquisition of material goods and property. The necessity of new choices in the society leads to confusion. More and more different interest groups emerge who want their material, political and cultural rights to be represented in different power fields. National independence of Lithuania also manifests itself in the orientation at European culture, way of life, so-

cial and political norms of civilization. In public consciousness this phenomenon is reflected as the search of cultural pluralism, involvement in diversity of choices, transition to the world "without frontiers", turning to new directions, toward the confusion order of post-modern. People of the post-soviet countries are preparing to live in a social space, in which the distribution of wealth and risk overlap. According to N. Luhmann, liberal ideology contains a hidden program for adjusting society to risks.

Foreign goods were important for the society not only with regard to their function, but as the symbols of availability, marking the end of the constant shortages of different consumer goods in the soviet period. These goods also made it possible to get familiar with the European, Asian, American consumer culture and way of life.

Consumption and everyday experience tend to standardize tastes and values. Many middle-class families have replaced Russian-made cars (which are out of fashion now) by Western cars (Audi, BMW, Volvo, Opel, Mercedes and others). This process reflects the social and cultural change, the orientation of people at Western goods and culture. The display of material goods is part of a system of people reputation and the mark of struggle for the taste. People are using today the consumption behaviour to signify who they are to other people, from whom they hope to gain approval.

In consumption process people are meeting with various production (f. e., the enterprisers from various Lithuanian localities offer agricultural production, competing in Vilnius market places). In this way small producer communities are searching for their identity formation and expression of local features under regional or national labelling. The contribution of different localities towards total Lithuanian culture are their ethnographical performances in Vilnius. The degree of centre's involvement in the production and cultural sector of country is depending upon the level of centralisation. After Independence we have many discussions focused on the production and dissemination to other places of various goods and services in society. The advertising of various (material and spiritual) goods of local places can invite the potential consumer or visitor to be a member of this imaginable community, to form his or her identity according to its features. That events express difference and similarity of various places of country and form their particular images in the social and cultural consciousness. So Lithuania is constructed from invented, historic and cultural versions of identity.

Increasing types of health-related products, preoccupation with 'outer' appearance, 'body work' and the aestheticization characteristics in the modern everyday life illustrate the development of the civilizing process, the cultural and symbolic capital. But there are some different thinking, f. e., within feminist thought there have been those "who have condemned fashion for perpetuating the inequalities between the sexes by converting women into objects for the male gaze". They advocate more 'natural' and 'functional' modes of dress which are avoided the sexual allure of the wearer.

Now in Lithuania we have the situation when a feminine consumer subject is widely defined and constructed; 'active' as opposed to 'passive' feminine is emphasizing

(Negrin, 1995: 72). Much images of men and feminine body are produced by photographers, TV and it is a part of the culture, of the culture of the self (in M. Foucault's terms).

Despite of difficulties in economic life the population has preserved a relatively high purchasing power, which it can now use in Lithuanian shopping centres sized and structured according to Western standards. Earlier, people had to travel long distances to the shops in other cities or even in other republics of the USSR to satisfy their consumer needs.

Nowadays consumption is the element that can structure (isolate or integrate) people in a new way. Based on the content and the level of consumption we can distinguish several specific subcultures: those of rich people, commercial circles, of the poor, of young people, of women, of pensioners, of town-dwellers and people living in the countryside, of people who are oriented towards foreign goods and those who prefer domestic products. The level and structure of consumption, social attitudes to consumption depend on some variables, namely: social class, age, sex, as well as on the situation (every day activities or festive occasion).

Our study (about 100 people interviewed) of the consumption behaviour and strategies of life of old people in one of Vilnius old-city district reveals the differences in living conditions and consumption, that depend on income, family structure, health. Many interviewed people did not like the questions about the quality of their life, since it was not pleasant for them to admit their poverty. Most of them felt hurt because they had been deprived of their savings. Their consumption has a domestic character. Women are acquiring more responsibility and power than men in the process of distribution of means of subsistence. The role of women is very significant in preparation of traditional meals for holidays and celebrations. Such meals are a cultural symbol, a component of historic memory.

The identity of pensioners is usually connected with the image of outsiders, who need assistance and compensation to be able to pay for public utilities. Some of them are feeling fear and have no strength to fight for better life. Unlike elite or middle class (who are constantly looking for new fashions, new styles of consumption, new sensations and experience), the pensioners have a model of consumption that is determined by their poverty and living conditions. The city space of these inhabitants is very narrow, limited by shops, and occasionally, the church and the market. In summer they spend their time in a public park near Vilnius. The spiritual experience of old people is often related to suffering that can be explained by small income and poor health. Some poor people, unemployed people and socially neglected persons get charity food in special dining rooms.

At the same time, officials, politicians, top managers, owners of companies buy expensive, high-quality clothes in special shops with foreign goods. Well-off people, having cars, often visit wholesale depots. However, rich people have their own problems. They worry about their property, about their families and their own physical safety. Psychiatrists maintain that often personal affluence changes the psychological state of the very rich.

Self-expression through consumption (especially clothes) is characteristic for the young, especially women.

Young people are the frequenters of large market places where they are looking for cheap fashionable goods. The needy and the artistic clients like second-hand shops. The dresses are the factor expressing the female subjectivity, they take the possibility for the women to construct their identity. F. e., in the later 19th century the bourgeois women wore morning dresses, morning gowns, walking dresses, travelling dresses, riding suits, tea gowns, evening dresses and so on (E. Tselon). Women dress continued for a long time to be imaginative, playful and aesthetic. With female decorativeness we associate their expressiveness of beauty.

In new time the formation of many women's identities is closely related to the process and experience of consumption. The young girls especially active participate in the process of the aestheticization of everyday life through the perception of the rapid flow of signs and images which saturate the fabric of life. The postmodern thinking emphasizes the new role - and the central one - of images in the consumer society (Featherstone, 1992). Young people are oriented at new professions, such as cultural intermediaries, managers, artists. They become more open to visual forms of art. The old distinction between high and mass culture is gradually disappearing. The number of picture galleries, studios, exhibitions is increasing, that testifies again to the aestheticization of life. The artists, the new taste-makers, are perceived as heroes in the subculture of the young, whose lifestyles are influenced by their art. The subculture of young people has some features, characteristic of the postmodernism - transformation of reality into images, living in the simulation world, in an aesthetic hallucination of reality, in hyper-space. The understanding of consumption as an indispensable matter for existence ("the proper end of taking food is the preservation of the body by nutrition" as noted f. e., Thomas Aquinas) is discussed in social opinion with the thinking about actual status of consumption in modern and postmodern society. The consumption has become a central mode of people existence. The movement towards mass consumption is accompanied by a general reorganization of everyday life and experience. We see the tension between self-discipline and pleasurable consumption. The generation of needs does not stop after one of them has been satisfied, new needs "come up all the time" without being necessary.

The cultural and technological changes, the norms of civilization have made the women body the significant topic of public opinion. The process of aestheticization of life, the growth of mass sport and leisure have identified personal worth with the beauty of the body. In some spheres of social life the 'quality' of women body is very important, its presentation is connected with her and her family's worth and social prestige. In the public debates exist the views that the women body is a social construction, it is produced by social practices. Now we can see in Lithuanian TV, press and in magazines especially much erotica; we can speak about new image of sexually engaged women (and sexually aggressive who wish to be beautiful and rich). As noted M. Foucault.(Foucault, 1999), the body has become in modern societies the target of endless, minute and detailed forms of surveillance, discipline and control.

Conspicuous consumption is a category of intentional actions in which the goal is to bring about an impro-

vement in the opinions which others have of oneself. As noted T. Veblen "wealth confers honour", the individuals consciously seek to "gain the esteem and envy of (their) fellowmen" (Veblen, 1925: 888). The fluctuations in an individual's perceived wealth will lead to changes in self-esteem. The emulative motive or desire to excel in their manifestation or 'impress' others 'is very significant for women. The function of food for the modern hedonic consumer is no longer just to satisfy hunger. Clothing purchases began to be more and more impulse shopping, 'self-fulfilment', or following the fashion.

Private cars are primarily used for the purpose of travel to and from work, for leisure time trips. Nowadays, many of young people are dreaming about leisure time consumption. Many girls and women are driving the private cars which had purchased in a one of old-cars markets of Lithuania.

The significant features of civilization is the abundance of both choices and temptations people face as consumers. In the behaviour of women the feeling of the tension between self-discipline and pleasurable consumption is noted. Even when one need is satisfied, another will soon replace it. The control of one's consumption means the control of oneself, the relation to oneself, it is the question of the self-forming activity or asceticism. Some women are seeking for conspicuous consumption as to a way of improving their social standing. In this case consumption is viewed as largely a matter of gratifying wants and desires by means of goods and services that are viewed as non-essential (luxuries), in which case it is typically regarded as an arena of superficial activity. Consumption can be contrasted with real, significant activities such as work, religion, or politics. For others the preparation of meals, the control of consumption in family are the means which reflect their dynamism and activity. The analyse can be about the changing meanings of products: national and foreign, everyday or festive, prestige or not. Through the examination of the situation of women in consumption sphere we can speak about their satisfaction with the quality of life. The cosmopolitisation of way of life influences the features of national kitchen, the meanings of food, beliefs and attitude systems of commensality, entertainment. The tastes are changing, they are becoming as symbols of multiculturalism. The choice of products is for people like the act of individualisation.

The changes in consumption of space

The national rebirth and independency, the reformation of social and cultural structures in Lithuania include the change in the space division. We can see that distinct functional zones of space are using for industry, production of market (postmodern shopping malls) and commodities, universal cultural means, communication, travel and s. o. As noted M. Lefebvre the space is always socially constructed. In postmodern sociology the terms like "locality", "landscapes", "places" are very frequent in both empirical and methodological study. The very acceleration in the flows of people, the physical movements, the tendencies in to globalisation has brought place in to focus of investigation. We have the tendency to think of the world as a coherent place, whole-earth, where the contours of place

seem to be in flux. New division and regeneration of space is represented in the social discourses associated with major projects of place renovation where the attitudes and expectations of different social groups are reflected. As noted D. Massey (Massey, 1993: 61) places have multiple identities: "The people are connecting with places physically, by phone, or by post, or in memory and imagination... Places are constructed out of a particular constellation of relations articulated together at a particular locus (comprising)... particular interactions and mutual articulations of social relations, social processes, experiences and understandings, in a situation of co-presence".

The actions of mass consumerism in postsoviet reality are among the most powerful place building process connected with the dynamism of people activity. Visiting commercial place (f. e., eating out place), buying goods we form our consciousness of places; it helps us construct new ones ephemeral through their meanings. The composition and images of places are influencing the cultural experience of people.

People are paying more attention to domestic space; through consumption they are seeking for aesthetic identity and absorption of sights and cultural meanings. The ideas of the good life are influencing the cultivation of new tastes, the aesthetics play within spaces of consumption. Women are experiencing a wide variety of self-expression forms. Many stories telling are related with consumption events. The home is as a site of everyday, aesthetic practices of consumption. It provides not only an ontological security, but also a 'magical' and tactile resource for the making of identity. Expenditure on alcohol at home, eating and drinking in restaurants, expenditure on travel (domestic trips and travelling abroad) and on recreational and cultural services are increasing. Many other women seldom ever leave home, their immobility is similar to their grandmothers. With the Independence of country the process of people mobility, the liberation of exchanges, images and information is increasing. The freedom of mobility, the possibility for the people to be in the situation 'without frontiers borders' is becoming the value, which is associated with the Independency of the country (because the soviet period was characterized by prohibition to move to the foreign lands). The possibility to visit Western countries means a significant contested value and the indicator of social stratification.

The new places of consumption and recreation established in country space are connected with new styles of life, new needs to move from post-soviet anomie to new modes of social self expression.

The Lithuanians are mobile people; some of them are becoming as 'sedentary in travel' (J. Clifford). As noted M. Benedikt, "the very significance of geographical location begins to be questioned. We become nomads - who are always in touch" (Benedikt, 1998). Nomadism and mobility come to various people in different forms. Travelling patterns are changing too. If in the soviet times tourism was identified first of all with shopping tours, now this experience includes the consumption of signs, symbols, culture. The character of leisure varies for different groups of people. F. e., for the "nouveaux riches" vacation is more associated with spending money and consumption than

for other groups. Some post-socialist tourists are similar to Western tourists, who “are searching for authenticity in an increasingly meaningless world” or live in such a social environment, where travel is the marker of status. For others travelling is a pleasure, a compensation for everyday efforts, communication with their family, friends, culture and nature.

In a globalizing capitalist economy tourism is an organized activity driven by the inherent and defining social dynamics of that system. In tourist sphere we can see universal cultural space, postmodern shopping malls, leisure centres, landscapes. Tourism incorporates diverse cultures, people, sights, places, behavior for tourist experiences. D. MacCannell (MacCannell, 1976: 1) defines the tourist as “actual tourists: sightseers, mainly middle-class, who are at this moment deployed through the entire world in search of experience.....The tourist is an actual person, or real people are actually tourists. At the same time, “the tourist” is one of the best models for modern-man-in-general. I am equally interested in “the tourist” in this second, metasociological sense of the term. Our first apprehension of modern civilization, it seems to me, emerges in the mind of the tourist “.

International tourism we can define as a visiting foreign lands, as pleasure and participating in consumer culture, as voluntary actions. In tourist places students are meeting with images, symbols, signs and narratives of places; representations of visited places are disseminated by souvenirs, postcards, travel guides, photography. The textual and visual forms of travels memory produce discourses of ‘otherness’, cultural events, past of places, peculiarities of cities, relationships among tourists and local people, tour guides. People are using photography (video cameras) to recall memories of the trip; a picture is like the act of seeing itself, it helps to affirm a new identity with self and some places. Students, f. e. have many different interests and reasons for travels; their motives are very eclectic. Young tourists are attracted to places that they find beautiful, that have cultural sites of interest, sometimes students search for authenticity; they want to see life ‘as it is really lived’. In postsocialist time travels for religious purposes (pilgrimage) between students are popular, too. In the native and foreign holy sites they reaffirm and strengthen their religious identities. Lithuanian students now have possibility to go to so called exotic countries – unusual, different, charming, distant in time, intriguing. Traveling abroad (and living abroad) help young men and women to appreciate the life and culture of their native country. As A. A. Berger (Berger, 2004: 37) noted, “Not traveling abroad is considered surprising now, and those who do not travel tend to be seen as, somehow, deprived”.

Conclusions

1. The actuality of this problem is related with the research of private life characteristics, which is very significant for modern people – it is similar to new identity formation.
2. Consumption is now a part of the formation of civilizational competence.

3. The development of consumption means the orientation at European culture and way of life.
4. Conspicuous consumption is a category of intentional actions in which the goal is to bring about an improvement in the opinions which others have of oneself.
5. The significant features of civilization is the abundance of both choices and temptations people face as consumers. In the behaviour of women the feeling of the tension between self-discipline and pleasurable consumption is noted.

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Vartojimas kaip socialinė problema

Santrauka

Remdamasi Z. Baumano, C. Campbello, P. Sztompkos ir kitų teoretikų sociologinėm nuostatom bei sociologinių tyrimų rezultatais, autorė analizuoja vartojimo kaip socialinės problemos modernioje (ir globalioje) visuomenėje charakteristikas. Tai ypač aktualu postsocialistėje erdvėje, po ilgo asketinio vartojimo periodo. Šiuolaikinėje visuomenėje vartojimas tampa vis reikšmingesne demokratinės plėtros, o ypač privачios gyvenimo sferos vystymosi dalimi. Straipsnyje pabrėžiama vartojimo kaip tam tikro hedonizmo protrūkio, orientacijos į Vakarų kultūrą raiška. Autorė remiasi P. Bourdieu gyvenimo stiliaus (išreiškiančio kultūrinio kapitalo, socialinių skirtumų

sklaidą) samprata. Straipsnyje yra atskleidžiami Lietuvos visuomenėje vykstantys vartojimo pokyčiai (daiktų, produktų išigijimo gausėjimas, naujų skonių įsisavinimas). Pabrėžiama, jog vartojimo įvairovė skiria ir jungia žmones į įvairias grupes, tai tampa jų socialinės situacijos apibrėžties bei naujų identiteto formavimosi rodikliu. Vartojimo struktūra ir lygis, nuostatos į įvairius šio reiškinio aspektus priklauso nuo žmonių socialinio sluoksnio, amžiaus, lyties, išsimokslinimo. Tyrinėjami būtino, išsiskiriančio bei moterų vartojimo ypatumų bruožai, vartojimo kaip gundymo bei savidisciplinos santykio reikšmės. Straipsnyje analizuojami mobilumo bei turizmo raiškos aspektai.