

Reflections and Reviews

The Costs and Benefits of Consuming

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Consuming is defined as behavior whereby entropy is increased in exchange for existential or experiential rewards. Existential rewards are well known—for example, the satisfaction of Maslowian needs. But experiential rewards are perhaps just as important: these refer to the temporary improvement in positive mood people experience when they are acting in goal-directed, purposeful ways. Consuming is one way for obtaining such experiences. It is suggested that in order to evaluate the impact of consuming it is necessary to measure the entropy costs of the behavior balanced against the psychic benefits it provides.

Almost half a century ago, the social philosopher Hannah Arendt warned that advances in technology and the increase in free time were providing humankind with the opportunity to consume the whole world. “That . . . consumption is no longer restricted to the necessities but, on the contrary, mainly concentrates on the superfluities of life . . . harbors the grave danger that eventually no object of the world will be safe from consumption and annihilation through consumption” (Arendt 1958). At the time these lines may have sounded like hyperbole. But recent calculations suggest that if the rest of the world’s population was to develop a lifestyle approaching that of the United States or of Western Europe, at least two additional planets such as ours would have to be harnessed to provide the required energy and materials. Humans now consume 40 percent of all the net photosynthesized biomass produced on the planet, with the developed countries consuming at rates that are often tenfold those of countries with less developed economies (Henderson 1999). Since at this time we have no access to two spare planets to exploit, we should look

more closely at what leads us to consume, in order to better understand what motivates this behavior. It is no exaggeration to say that the future of the world may depend on it.

There are many ways to define “consuming,” depending on what aspect of the phenomenon one wishes to highlight. In the present case, I wish to bring attention to the most inclusive context in which consuming could be viewed: that of the physical consequences of the process in terms of energy exchange. From this point of view, a definition might run as follows: *Consuming consists of energy expended to improve the quality of life by means of increasing entropy.* In other words, consuming entails an exchange of psychic energy (usually in its symbolic form, i.e., money) for objects or services that satisfy some human need. These objects are relatively high in potential energy to begin with, but through the process of consuming they are broken down into useless things with low potential energy.

This definition seems paradoxical in that entropy—or the decay of ordered systems and objects to more random states with less potential energy—is a natural process for which no energy input is usually needed. The Second Law of Thermodynamics specifies that with time entropy must increase in all closed systems. So why are we willing to pay for something that would happen anyway? Why do we go to great lengths hastening the onset of disorder in the universe? The answer is, of course, that we expect to benefit in certain ways from increasing entropy.

For example, the steer that produced the rare steak one buys at the supermarket took a great deal of effort and energy

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to raise, feed, butcher, and transport. It contains a relatively high number of calories, proteins, and other substances that can be transformed into work. Because of this, it has a certain value. After the steak is consumed, however, its materials are broken down into waste with low potential energy and no value.

But as the food is transformed into waste, energy is liberated and transferred to the consumer. So the process of eating is not wasteful because the energy that went into the production of the steak goes to increase the diner's energy (however, one might point out that compared to eating other foods, eating steaks is relatively more wasteful). By contrast, most consumption provides little or no return of this kind to the consumer. Let us imagine, for instance, a father who feels the need to demonstrate his love for his small son by buying an expensive electric car for his birthday. Building the car took some raw materials, manufacturing effort, a great deal of marketing, salesmanship, and transportation costs. The price tag took a not indifferent bite out of the father's pocketbook. For a few hours the boy plays with the car, and father and son have some mildly pleasant time out of it. But soon the novelty wears off. The car does not run well on the carpet or the sidewalk, so the boy takes it out more and more rarely. Now it sits in the basement, a useless hulk slowly turning to rust, taking up space. Is the result of such consumer behavior a net increase in entropy or not?

Of course if one took into account the entire cycle of production and consumption we might see a different picture. Production entails a negentropic activity—one that takes raw materials and turns them into useful goods. Yet production also creates disorder in the planetary system: agrobusiness leaves dangerous chemical residues and washes away fertile topsoil; manufacture creates pollutants and exhausts limited natural resources. So to calculate the net effect of consumption one first needs to add up the positive outcomes: the increase in order due to productive processes, and the improvement in the quality of life. Then one should subtract from this the negative outcomes: the entropy caused by the processes of production, and the entropy caused by using up the goods produced. If the result is negative, it means that consumption is accelerating the rate of decay; if positive, it suggests that it helps the evolution of order in the universe. In the present essay, I am going to focus only on one term of this equation: how does consumption improve the quality of life?

HOW CONSUMER BEHAVIOR MEETS EXISTENTIAL NEEDS

Because consumer behavior is largely driven by the desire to satisfy needs that have been programmed in our minds either by the genes we inherit or the memes¹ we learn from

¹A "meme" is a concept introduced by the British biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) to refer to programmed behavioral units that are learned, rather than inherited genetically. It derives from the Greek word for imitation, mimesis. Several writers have found the concept useful for describing the production, selection, and transmission of cultural information (e.g., Blackmore 1999; Csikszentmihalyi 1993; Wright 2000).

the culture in which we live, it is useful to start the analysis with a consideration of human needs. Of the many taxonomies developed by psychologists, the one by Abraham Maslow (1968, 1971) is one of the most succinct, and one that is familiar to students of consumer behavior (Kilbourne 1987). The model involves only five factors or levels, and it is reasonably comprehensive. We might, therefore, use it to help with a preliminary classification of what motivates consumer behavior.

The "Lower" Needs: Survival and Safety

According to Maslow's theory, the most basic needs that motivate a person are physiological survival needs: to eat, drink, have sex, breathe, sleep, be warm, and eliminate. When these needs are not met, the person will turn all of his or her psychic energy to the task of satisfying them. But as soon as these needs are met, a "higher" set of needs will usually attract a person's attention. A great deal of consumer behavior is directed to satisfy survival needs: food, clothing, and shelter being paramount. However, as we shall see later, rarely does a product or service satisfy only basic needs; it is more usual for a whole range of lower and higher needs to be involved in every consumer exchange.

Next on Maslow's hierarchy are safety needs: to live in a stable, predictable environment and to be free of anxiety. Many consumer decisions are prompted by safety needs, from buying a house in a "good" neighborhood to buying a handgun or antidepressant drugs. Other exchanges, including paying to get an advanced academic degree, or investing in retirement annuities, are also prompted at least in part by the desire to achieve security.

Love and Belonging

Midpoint in Maslow's scheme, the need for love and belonging is rooted in our fear of isolation and loneliness. Social animals like humans are genetically programmed to seek out the company of other members of the species. When alone (and especially when no pressing task demands attention), the quality of experience for most people declines; depression and bad mood take over (Csikszentmihalyi 1991). In addition to this generic need for human company, human beings have also evolved a more specific desire to be close and to share the experiences of one or a few other persons, usually of the opposite sex. Thus, a need for affection, to love and be loved, is also fundamental to human motivation.

The implications of this set of needs for consumer behavior are many and diverse. For example, bars, restaurants, sport arenas, museums, and concert halls provide opportunities to mix with others, to see and be seen. The entire entertainment industry is predicated on experiencing good times vicariously in the company of virtual fellow revelers. The psychic energy of consumers is targeted with ads that show masses of young people partying on beaches or in bars. If you buy this product, the subtext says, you will not have to be alone ever again.

The need to belong is also served by conformity. When we dress according to fashion, use the latest kitchen appliance, or take a vacation at the “in” resort we feel that we are part of a group we aspire to belong to, and that we are accepted by its members. Again, advertising builds heavily on this need that once was known as “keeping up with the Joneses,” but which is apparently as old and universal as anything is in human nature.

Consuming relates to the need to love and be loved by providing opportunities to demonstrate one’s feelings through gifts. From extravagant baby showers to elaborate funeral arrangements, through graduation presents and diamond rings, we express our feelings for each other by allowing the loved one to own things that took a great deal of energy to make or bring about, so that he or she can dispose of it and preside over its disintegration.

Goods used to express belonging or love have symbolic value. It is generally assumed that the more expensive the gift, the greater the appreciation or love felt by the giver, and thus the greater the obligation the recipient should feel in return. Thus, the energy expended on the gift is returned as goodwill. Objects that convey love and belonging need not be valuable in economic terms, however. The most cherished things in people’s homes are rarely items that were bought, but rather things that embody the psychic energy of a loved one, like a quilt sewn by one’s grandmother, or an athletic trophy won by one’s child (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1980). Thus gifts cannot be reduced to lower-order needs involving instrumental goals and calculation of exchange; at least occasionally they are expressions of relatively selfless agapic love (Belk and Coon 1993).

The Higher Needs: Esteem and Self-Actualization

The need for self-esteem—to feel competent, respected, and superior—is present already in children, and is presumably active even when the lower-order needs are not entirely met. But they become fully active after survival, safety, and belongingness needs are more or less taken care of. At that point we can indulge in purchasing goods that show our uniqueness and separate us from the rest of the crowd. As Belk (1988) notes, “Evidence supporting the general premise that possessions contribute to sense of self is found in a broad array of investigations.”

Goods that fulfill esteem needs are symbolic in nature, even though they often serve other motives as well. For instance, one’s car could be used to drive to work, and thus satisfies survival needs; it could also have been purchased because it is safe and reliable. But if we pay extra for status attributes, the car will then become a symbol indicating our superiority and social worth.

Not all objects consumed for esteem reasons are competitive status symbols. Many are acquired because they allow the person to practice and perfect a special skill which is important to his or her identity, such as musical instruments, tools, photo equipment, books that reflect the person’s interests, sports and gardening equipment, and so forth. In our study of the meaning that household objects

had for their owner, reasons dealing with self-esteem were among the most frequently mentioned, sharing first place with goods that were cherished for reasons of belongingness and love (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1980).

The need for self-actualization, according to Maslow, becomes preeminent after the other four more basic needs are satisfied. It would seem that of all the needs, self-actualization has the least predictable impact on consumer behavior. A person driven to achieve personal growth is more likely to lead a frugal life, perhaps to retire to an ashram or monastery, than to invest heavily in goods. The kind of persons Maslow used as models of self-actualization—Thomas Jefferson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Albert Einstein, Albert Schweitzer—were not big spenders, and in many ways strove to become independent of the market. Yet it has been argued that certain features usually associated with the sacred realms of life, such as ritual, mystery, and *communitas*, can also accompany mundane consumer behavior (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989).

In fact, on closer look it seems that many consumer decisions may be driven by the need for self-actualization. After all, traveling to sit at the feet of a genuine Buddhist guru entails buying at least a round-trip airfare ticket to India. The scholar in his study consumes esoteric knowledge that is expensive to produce and to preserve. Art, music, and the appreciation of luxury items may also produce transcendent experiences. Perhaps only a few extremely dedicated altruistic individuals, such as Albert Schweitzer, Mother Theresa, and the saintly moral exemplars described by Colby and Damon (1992) can be said to have pursued self-actualization without increasing entropy in their environment.

A yardstick such as Maslow’s model suggests that it may be possible to measure the value of consumer behavior in terms of how various choices satisfy basic existential needs. It may be possible to answer such questions as, How expensive, in terms of energy expended, is it to satisfy security needs? Or esteem needs? For person X or Y? For a given community or nation? Having such information would allow us to make rational decisions about the value of consumer choices that currently are made without conscious awareness of the real costs and benefits involved.

This would be possible if consumer behavior were driven solely by the predictable, universal needs that Maslow and others have identified. Unfortunately, consumer choices are made for a variety of other reasons that are even less clearly understood and that may place just as great a burden on planetary resources. We might designate this other class of needs as experiential needs, to distinguish them from the existential needs discussed thus far.

HOW CONSUMER BEHAVIOR MEETS EXPERIENTIAL NEEDS

The Maslowian model suggests that individuals are always motivated by some discrete, specific need for survival, safety, and so on. In reality this is not the case. In everyday

life, people often find themselves in an existential vacuum where no clear need suggesting a specific goal presents itself to consciousness. Normal American teenagers, for instance, when they are paged at random moments of the day, report 30 percent of the time that what they are doing is not what they want to do, and that they cannot think of anything else they would rather be doing instead. Although this pattern is strongest when teenagers are in school, it is also typical of responses at home (Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider 2000). While we have fewer data from adults, what there is suggests that they also spend quite a large part of their days in a state where, as far as they are concerned, "there is nothing to do."

This pattern is significant because when a person feels that there is nothing to do, the quality of experience tends to decline. One feels less alert, active, strong, happy, and creative. Self-esteem declines. Contrary to what one might expect, such a negative experiential state is more likely to occur at home in free time and less often at work, where goals are usually clear and attention is more readily engaged (Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre 1989).

What this suggests is that in addition to the existential needs described by Maslow and others, we also have a need—perhaps peculiar to human beings—to keep consciousness in an organized state, focused on some activity that requires attention. When there is nothing to do and attention starts to turn inward, we begin to ruminate, and this generally leads to depression. By and large, when we start thinking about ourselves rather than about what we need to accomplish, attention turns to deficits. We are getting old and fat, we are losing our hair, our children don't worship us as they should, or we haven't accomplished much in life. As a result, our mood begins to turn sour (Csikszentmihalyi 1993, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi and Figurski 1982). The downward spiral of rumination is interrupted only when attention is again engaged by some need that suggests a goal: preparing dinner, taking the dog for a walk, or, if all else fails, watching the news on TV. Yet trying to fill unstructured time with passive entertainment does not work well; the quality of experience while watching TV is barely more positive than that of the slough of despond that awaits the unfocused mind (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

The experiential need to keep consciousness tuned is responsible for a great deal of consumer behavior. It could be said of shopping, as MacLuhan said of television, "the medium is the message." In other words, it often does not matter what we are shopping for—the point is to shop for anything, regardless. It is a goal-directed activity, and thus it fills the experiential vacuum that leads to depression and despair. The fact that we have to pay, that is, expend the equivalent of psychic energy, for what we acquire lends an additional importance to the activity. If we spend money, it must be worthwhile. As Linder (1971) pointed out, the value of the goods we consume in leisure becomes a measure of the value of our time. If in one hour's time I drink \$20 worth of a single-malt Scotch, while listening to a stereo that depreciates at the rate of \$5 an hour, in an apartment where

rent prorates at \$10 an hour, then it means that my time is worth at least \$35 an hour—even without counting the cost of clothing, furniture, and so forth that may also be contributing to the value of my time.

Thus, consuming is one of the ways we respond to the void that pervades consciousness when there is nothing else to do. Shopping and surrounding ourselves with possessions is a relatively easy way to forestall the dread of nonbeing, even though it may have serious consequences in terms of increasing entropy.

Yet consuming, beyond a certain point, seems to contribute little to a positive experience. Contrary to popular opinion, things that can be bought do not enhance happiness by much. The evidence for this statement, while circumstantial, is quite convincing. A number of studies show that beyond a rather low threshold, material well-being does not correlate with subjective well-being (Csikszentmihalyi 1999; Diener 2000; Myers 2000). For instance, while the average American's income measured in constant dollars has doubled in the last 40 years, the level of happiness they report has not changed. Winning the lottery creates a small blip of happiness that lasts a few months, after which the lucky winner's happiness returns to what it was before. In a current longitudinal study tracking over 800 American teenagers through high school and beyond, we find that teens from the most affluent suburbs tend to be less happy and have lower self-esteem than those from middle-class communities, and even than those living in inner city slums (Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider 2000). Several researchers have shown that excessive concern with financial success and material values is associated with lower levels of life satisfaction and self-esteem, presumably because such concerns reflect a sense of "contingent worth" predicated on *having* rather than *being* (Kasser and Ryan 1993; Richins and Dawson 1992).

In one study we correlated the happiness that American adults reported experiencing in their free time with the amount of fossil and electrical energy that the activity they were doing at the time consumed (Graef, Gianinno, and Csikszentmihalyi 1981). If a person was reading a magazine when the pager signaled, for example, more energy was expended than if he or she had been reading a book, since producing a magazine (in terms of manufacturing paper, printing, sales, distribution, and so on) requires more BTUs of energy per unit of reading time than it takes to produce a book. Thus if there were a direct relationship between energy consumption and quality of experience, a person should be happier when reading a magazine than when reading a book. Instead, we found the opposite: a slight but significant negative relationship between the average BTU load of activities and the happiness people experienced while doing them. There was an interesting gender difference: for men BTUs did not relate to happiness at all, whereas for women the relationship was quite strong in the negative direction. According to the Department of Energy, about 7 percent of all the energy consumed in the United States is spent on discretionary leisure activities, from traveling to

snowmobiling, from skiing to TV watching. It is important to realize, therefore, that a substantial amount of this energy could be saved without impairing the quality of life, and perhaps actually improving it.

Why is there a negative relationship between energy consumed and happiness? The answer to this question may suggest a new way of thinking about consuming, one that maximizes the quality of experience while minimizing the amount of entropy produced as a result. The reason activities with low external physical energy requirements result in greater happiness is that they usually require greater inputs of *psychic* energy. Having a good conversation makes very little demands on environmental energy, but it demands concentrated attention and mental activity, and can be very enjoyable. So are activities such as reading, gardening, painting, working on crafts, writing poetry, or doing mathematics. In general, people report being happier when they are actively involved with a challenging task, and less happy when they are passively consuming goods or entertainment (Csikszentmihalyi 1997, 1999).

CONSUMING IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

Ever since Adam Smith, we have learned to say that production is justified by consumption; that the needs of the consumer dictate what the economy should provide (Borgmann 2000; Smith [1776] 1985). This relationship was so obvious to Smith that he did not believe it was worth arguing; ever since, it has become a mantra of economics. In reality, however, the situation has turned out to be exactly the opposite: it is the imperative to produce that is dictating the need to consume. Economic forecasts are based on increasing demands: unless people buy more houses, more cars, more sporting equipment and clothes, the economy will falter. To buy—even if one does not have the means and has to fall ever deeper in debt—is a patriotic act. To refrain from consuming is antisocial; it is seen as a threat to the community. We have locked ourselves into a vicious cycle that forces us to increase entropy in the environment without providing commensurate value.

Is there a way to break out of this cycle? Obviously, we could not simply reduce consuming to the level appropriate to satisfy Maslow's survival and safety needs—even if we wanted to—without weakening the productive sector and causing unemployment to run rampant. But it might be possible to reinvent consumption in such a way that it would satisfy both existential and experiential needs at minimal energetic costs while at the same time preserving the economy.

The first step in this direction involves a clear accounting of the real costs of different consumer choices. Eventually this should lead to a new sense of good and bad, beautiful and ugly. If the true entropic costs of a sport utility vehicle were kept in mind, for instance, even the most attractive vehicle of that sort would seem indecently coarse. Instead we would marvel at the beauty of a car made of bamboo

and powered by sunlight. But to facilitate this transformation in taste, it will probably be necessary to legislate a new fiscal policy—one that taxed goods in proportion to the amount of entropy their production and consumption entailed.

Craftspersons, chefs, athletes, musicians, dancers, teachers, gardeners, artists, healers, poets—these are the workers creating goods that increase human well-being without degrading the complexity of the world. Is it impossible to develop an economy based on a majority of workers of this kind? Where consumption involves the processing of ideas, symbols, and emotional experiences rather than the breakdown of matter? Let us hope this transition is not impossible, because otherwise the future looks grim indeed. And if the transition does come about, the *Journal of Consumer Research* will be filled with articles about music, art, poetry, and dance—the creative energy of the new economy.

In the meantime, what suggestions does this perspective provide to those doing research in the field? Perhaps the main message is that ignoring the causes and consequences of consumer behavior is dangerous. It would be unacceptable for neurologists to study an addictive drug without taking into account the pros and cons of its use. Similarly, research that deals with consumer behavior without considering the context in which it is embedded cannot claim to contribute to basic knowledge, and remains little more than applied market research.

Science proceeds by developing an agreed-upon set of measurements and definitions. For consumer research to advance in the direction foreshadowed here, it seems that agreement on the following dimensions should be useful:

What are the costs of a specific unit of consumer behavior, in terms of the consumer? The social network of which the consumer is a part? The ecological network? Such costs may best be expressed in the common language of entropy. Even though entropy is manifested differently in psychological, social, and biological systems, at each of these levels it refers to an increase in disorder and loss of capacity to do work.

To balance the costs of consumption we should be able to measure accurately its benefits. These tend to be of a negentropic kind, that is, they involve greater order and greater disposable energy at the levels of the person, the social system, and the environment. These benefits are not always congruent with each other. For instance, the purchase of a Ferrari may help the self-esteem of an executive pushing 50, but cause conflict with his wife.

Also, it is important to keep in mind that the relation between costs and benefits is usually quadratic rather than linear. Up to a certain point, material resources add greatly to the quality of life. But where is the point of inflection after which the relationship may no longer exist, or actually become negative?

We already know that material possessions alone do not improve the quality of life. We know that excessive concern for material goals is a sign of dissatisfaction with life. We know that trying to avoid the mental chaos of everyday life

by resorting to acquisitions and passive entertainment does not work very well. Yet we insist in the vain hope that we can achieve happiness through consumption—regardless of consequences. Certainly one of the greatest services that consumer research can do for humankind is to document these realities, and diffuse them to as wide a public as possible.

Vague as these concepts are at this point, the progress of scholarship in the field will greatly benefit from taking them seriously. Eventually it should be possible to develop reasonably convincing cost/benefit analyses for different options, to allow consumers to make choices at a much higher level of rationality than is possible with current criteria.

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