The Meaning of Consumption
A Conceptual Analysis of Contemporary Consumption Leading to a Preliminary Argument for Consumertisation as a Conceptual Frame

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Abstract

The thesis starts by the consideration that consumer society has become a key term to a degree where to talk about it may be to talk about modernity itself; it is unavoidably a major part of peoples’ lives, just as consumer culture is a picture of the marketed, commercialised and commoditized culture we experience every day. This connects to contemporary social scientists, prominent among them Zygmunt Bauman, who argue that we live in a world where society and culture is defined via consumption.

Inspired by Chaffee’s (1991) framework for concept explication, the thesis investigates and analyses the conceptualisation of consumption, mainly as found within recent sociological literature, beginning with a detailed consideration of Bauman’s consumer-analysis, in an attempt to understand the consequences of consumption’s influence. By reference to the modernity-analysis by Giddens, Beck and Bauman, the historical study of the evolution of consumption and a number of classic texts on the ‘meaning’ of consumption, the thesis discusses and elucidates the major theoretical positions on consumption, including an exploration of key terms like ‘consumer’ and ‘consumer society’. This entails reflecting on, for example, how consumer-objects may be used as communicative means and the relationship between thinking, choice, rationality and consumption. To supplement the conceptual explication, the thesis, furthermore, reflects on two prominent themes: the relationship between rationality and consumption and the topic of advertising, as a way to ground the analysis, provide perspective and reflect on some pressing questions in relation to the concept explication. To conclude, the thesis turns to a preliminary argument for ‘consumertisation’ as a potential meta-process and conceptual frame, to complement parallel movements of individualisation, globalisation, mediatisation and commercialisation. It is argued that consumertisation may serve to explain consumption’s rising significance and the effects of this on both micro and macro levels - societal, institutional or individual alike. By proceeding in this manner, the thesis provides a comparative study of the conceptualisations of consumption and an original contribution to the field of consumer studies.
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1. Introduction

I happen to believe that questions are hardly ever wrong; it is the answers that might be so. I also believe, though, that refraining from questioning is the worst answer of all (Bauman 1999b: 8).

The consumer has become a, if not the, central figure in society. Objects of consumption are everywhere, a fact we are met by every day. We are all consumers, individuals who on a daily basis are tempted, approached or possibly even manipulated by brands or products, people who are spoken to and buy into particular self-images vis-à-vis our role as consumers. Written as a truism, in the consumer society consumers are forced to consume. For some scholars this signifies how consumption has become the principal form of labour in society (Appadurai 1996: 82) and as we shall see in the following, for others it suggests reinterpreting a number of seminal categories in the light of consumptions’ contemporary function.

The figure of ‘the consumer’ looms large over a vast amount of discussions. For the student of cognition and communication, for example, the consumer (broadly understood) plays a vital role in models of communication, playing the part as the receiver or subject communication is aimed at. Likewise, a major part of cognitive science is, at some level, conducted with the consumer in mind, given that diverse discussion of, for example, rationality, nudging or priming is about whether, or how, it is possible to influence peoples’ behaviour, why we act as we do and how judgment plays out. To be sure, consumption is fundamentally tied to both cognition and communication. It involves judgment, thought-processes, values, rationality and has to do with our intentions, self-understanding and the proliferation of choice. And it is tightly linked to communication about social, personal and cultural identity, simultaneously involving topics like i.a. information, media, transmission, influencers and advertising.

On a broad perspective, consumption links how we want to live with questions of how society is organised - and the study of consumers feeds into an understanding of the link between individuals and society, emotion, identity, morality and the future. In a nutshell, consumption has everything to do with how we understand ourselves and each other – a meeting ground of cognition and communication. At the same time, consumption has been awarded an increasingly important place as countries’ GNP increasingly has been connected to consumption; it has gained a new level of commercial intensity following in the wake of the mediatisation of society; and according to quite a few sociological frames of explanation it has replaced or overtaken the role given to class-societies in what Ulrich Beck (1992) would refer to as first modernity.
Within the scope of this thesis it is my aim to develop a fuller understanding of consumption. Thus, the thesis took its beginning in questions like: what is consumption? When do you consume? What makes a consumer? What are the individual consequences of being a consumer? Could you not be a consumer? How does consumption sway our communicative and cognitive experience of self and other? What is the relationship between society and consumption? How did consumer society come about? What are its necessary conditions and does it even exist? To me, these questions all seem to be intimately connected to what it means being human in this day and age, and throughout the literature there is wide agreement that the questions this thesis raises are indeed central, not only to the study of consumption, but to the understanding of society itself (cf. Warde and Shove 1998).

Nevertheless, instead of trying to answer the above questions in a satisfactory way, a challenge beyond the scope of the thesis, the thesis will evaluate and discuss the theorising on consumption, aiming to establishing a fuller understanding and clarification of its conceptualisation. Through a critical view on how the consumer is framed in the scholarly literature, the thesis will by detour grasp at understanding what it means to consume, be a consumer and live in a consumer society. In short, it will look at the role of consumption by focusing on the conceptual meaning of what I, in lack of a better term, will name ‘consumer-concepts’.

On a personal note: while this thesis started by an interest in consumption and its influence on us, the consumers, focus changed as it became obvious that what consumption and consumers are, became less and less clear to me. In fact, some of the major issues discussed in the following, and some that immediately disturbed this thesis, are connected to semantics: the meaning and our shared knowledge of terms or concepts. Straightaway, this cast the thesis as a both communicative and cognitive problem – and in a more direct way than I had imagined. To this end, one premise in communication is that we share a mutual understanding of the words we use to communicate. In one sense, this is exactly what this paper sets out to questions in relation to the use of the consumer-concepts within the literature. The thesis’ legitimacy should then be found both in the in-depth analysis of the different positions it identifies, the issues a conceptual explication unravels – and its arguments on why this should be of importance beyond its initial scope. Thus, through the critical evaluation of the literature, this thesis provides a comprehensive analysis of the use of the different consumer concepts, before ending on a consideration of consumertisation as a conceptual frame to complement those of mediatisation, globalisation, individualisation and commercialisation.
Purpose

As follows from the above, this thesis is partly motivated by an apparent opaqueness in the use of consumer-concepts and the following shortcomings in the understanding, interpretation and usage of these. In short, the thesis aims at unpacking the concepts surrounding the consumer and consumer society. Following this, the problem formulation is as follows:

Contemporary social scientists, prominent among them Zygmunt Bauman, have argued that we live in a world where society and culture is defined via consumption. Inspired by Chaffee’s (1991) framework for concept explication, the aim of this Master’s thesis is to investigate, analyse and understand the conceptualisation of consumption, mainly as found within recent sociological literature, with an emphasis on individual consequences, i.e. what it means to be a consumer in a consumer society. Through this conceptual clarification, the thesis discusses and elucidates the major positions within the writings on the ‘consumer-concepts’, including a meaning analysis of key terms, like ‘consumer’ and ‘consumption’. This is followed by a reflection on two prominent themes: the relationship between rationality and consumption and the topic of advertising, before the thesis turns to argue for ‘consumertisation’ as a potential meta-process and conceptual frame. In doing so, the thesis provides a comparative study of the conceptualisations of consumption and an original contribution to the field of consumer studies.

The character of this thesis will be part critical literature review, part conceptual clarification and concept explication. Its guiding idea is that a meticulous consideration of the concepts related to ‘consumer society’ will provide us with two insights: first, a thorough understanding of what consumption ‘means’; and second, a number of valuable questions that research – cognitive and communications included - on people (consumers) should keep in mind.
Scope and Delimitations

The overall aim of the thesis is to tackle the literature on consumers and consumption head on, to gain an understanding of the interrelationship between consumption, consumers, individuals and identity as it is inscribed herein. On this, one of the issues the thesis raises is to what degree understanding the role of consumption in everyday life is essential to understanding people per se.

The thesis will refer to the scholarly work surrounding the concept of the consumer, presented in books and academic journals related to consumer studies and the sociology of consumption. The thesis does not assume to provide a complete analysis or full concept explication of all available literature, but I have intended to include what appears to me to be the most influential sources, including a consideration of a number of the founding texts on consumption, in order to provide the necessary background and contextual information.

For reasons of space, there are, at the same time, writings left out. For example, I will to a large part neglect economic and political writings and sociological classics that could have been interesting (e.g. Marx, Weber, Simmel, J.S. Mill or Adam Smith). Also, my purpose here is not to survey or discuss consumer critique, meaning that, e.g., reference to the Frankfurt School of critical theory will be minimal¹. In fact, while it is my experience that consumption is often used as a pejorative label, this is not an understanding directing this thesis. Here, the very meaning of consumption is central and will as far as possible be considered in the neutral.

The discussion of consumer society has a long and complex history, but to narrow the scope of the thesis, attention is on literature from within the last two decades. The explanation can be found in a change in world politics, e.g. the end of the Cold War, the influence of postmodernism and the publication of a number of very influential sociological texts, e.g. Giddens’ “Modernity and Self-Identity” (1991a), Beck’s “Risk Society” (1992) and Bauman’s “Modernity-series” (1987; 1989; 1991), which have had an immense impact on theorising. But, as with all similar choices, this is to some degree a matter of convenience or default: beyond poststructuralism there is simply no singular, evident reality and no arguments beyond dispute. Reality is narrated; narratives are constructed (*sic*).

The aim of the thesis, then, is to reflect on the use of the different consumer concepts, and I will consequently not focus on related questions such as the effect of consumption on the climate or trending issues like the ‘political’ or ‘ethical consumer’. Nor will I aim to reiterate the

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¹ Nevertheless, the attentive reader will be able to connect many of the thesis’ themes to strains of Frankfurt-style consumer critique. For a consideration of its legacy and influence, readers may refer to Slater (1999: 106-30); for a review of consumer critique see Schor (2007).
critique of consumerism, just as the implicit ‘promise of happiness’ and status anxiety often connected to consumption is left to a side. Through the same prerogative, the thesis will disregard theories on ‘consumerism’, as I do not believe that using consumption as an ‘ism’ or ideology is useful for present purposes. I think the use of consumerism disguises more than it explains, just as I believe that the really interesting story this thesis sets out to tell can be found among and within the basic consumer terminology. This said, there will, of course, be discussions related to many of these issues, as the critiques often are formed as indictments referring to the effects of consumption on peoples’ characters.

Another misnomer is that the following discussion of consumer society or consumers is meant as a discussion of western consumers/society, a troublesome term which in general refers to a particular affluent group, i.a., Europe, the U.S. and Australia, but is part of a blind spot in the literature that most often consider the consumer in the abstract. Here, I cannot help but consider the consumer exactly in the abstract, partly as my analysis must reflect the literature under analysis but also because to explicate a concept is primarily to treat it abstractly.

As is apparent from the above, the thesis will not involve an empirical study, in the sense of establishing how people understand themselves in relation to their patterns of consumption or their status as consumers, even though this could surely be an equally interesting study. Instead, I survey a number of different readings of contemporary consumption to discuss and speculate on its consequences and implications and the following comparative study should then provide us with a number of insights unearthing the importance and relevance of the consumer-concepts in relation to consumptions role as a primary definitional character of society.
Structure

In the following, I will begin by describing Chaffee’s framework for concept explication, including its use, where I part with Chaffee and how Blumer’s sensitizing concepts may provide some solace. Following these methodological considerations, the next part will consist of two introductory chapters: First, an introduction to key sociological theory, focusing on Giddens, Beck and Bauman and, second, an introduction to the historical study of consumption. This will provide a valuable horizon in regards to the themes that are particularly important to the conceptualisation of consumption, partly as the particular sociological theories have proven important in newer consumer-analysis and because the historical study of consumption has provided the frames of explanation and historical tint that are used to explain the development, past-present-future, of consumption. As such, this will be of importance to our later conceptual understanding.

Moving on, the primary part of the thesis follows. It starts by an introduction to some founding texts - writings that formed and inform the field of consumer studies and the sociology of consumption - including short considerations of the themes, arguments and definitions in these texts. Then, after a reflection on the lexical meaning of the consumer-concepts, I begin work on analysing the conceptualisation of consumption by a reflection on Bauman’s consumer diagnosis, a consideration that I have found lacking in consumer studies. By awarding Bauman an elevated position, I hope to provide the thesis focus early on. Following this, work on the conceptual explication follows, including the analysis and discussion of the use of the consumer-concepts in the literature. Following Chaffee’s model this includes a meaning analysis connected to the usage of the concepts and the conceptualisation of consumer society in general. In all, this can be considered a critical literature review of the academic writings on consumer society, conducted via reference to Chaffee and a number of specific themes. As a partial conclusion, I present a schematic consideration of my findings, together with a thematic overview, a short consideration on the conceptualisation of consumption and an attempt at a novel definition.

Following the conceptual analysis, I finish by drawing attention to a number of implications that I take the focus on consumption to have. Thus, following excursus into rationality and advertising, I conclude by advancing a preliminary argument for ‘consumertisation’ as a meta-process and conceptual frame, the aim of which is to provide an analysis that can feed into discussions of what it means to be a consumer in a consumer society. Lastly, the thesis draws to an end by a short reiteration of its main points, findings and argument.
2. Method

Work on this thesis has proceeded in a manner similar to Grounded Theory, consisting of a continuous interplay between analysis, data collection and theoretical considerations (cf. Bowen 2008; Bolsen 2010). On the study of consumption this meant that the themes, characteristics and categories of analysis, arrived from the data instead of being defined before work on the thesis began. Hence, an intention to comprehend the influence of contemporary consumption and consumer society, led to an attempt at understanding, discovering and interpreting the theorising on these subjects. As a consequence of this, my attention was drawn to the conceptualisation of the consumer-objects *per se*. This because concepts are essential, not only to empirical science, but to research as such, as they are central in making the world intelligible (cf. Blumer 1954: 4; Carey and Christians 1989: 370), but also, because I found the conceptualisation on consumption to be confusing and in need of clarification.

Concept Explication

The reading of the consumer literature was inspired by Steven Chaffee’s work on concept explication (1991; see also Kiousis 2002). Chaffee (1991: vii) argues that “explication is an intellectual process to be applied to any concept one intends to make the focus of planned research, or to discuss seriously.” Usually, concept explication is the first step in a larger empirical study, applied to establish the meaning of concepts that will be important to later empirical research. But as I have decided to make the conceptualisation of the consumer-concepts the topic of analysis, the thesis will not move beyond the vision of conceptual clarification, something which can be a legitimate strategy if concepts are unclear or have been heavily contested (Kiousis 2002: 356). To me, this point to the *raison d’être* of the thesis: the more I read on consumer society, modern patterns of consumption or contemporary consumers the less I understood the subjacent concepts.

Chaffee (1991: 1) focuses explicitly on explication in communications research, but his points seem equally valid to other academic fields. Basing his argument on the idea that we use verbal concepts to “represent what we observe and imagine” he states that “without explication, our words are nothing more than words, and our data add nothing to them (ibid.: 14).” This is a reminder that mutual understanding hinges on explication; that explication and theorising is connected and that “[t]heory, or more exactly *theorizing*, consists of an interplay among ideas, evidence and inference (ibid.: 14).” That is, the need for concept explication is caused by the meaning-carrying qualities of concepts or terms. But as ‘meaning’ has a tendency to become unclear, this can lead to a similar opacity in the discussions and the theory that employ these
concepts. While concepts act as the glue that binds perceptions to theory – the link between everyday-use and theory - the purpose of Chaffee’s framework for concept explication is to “improve the quality of conceptualization (ibid.: 2)”. This is both to strengthen the bond between theory and practice, but also because clear concepts and clear thinking are intimately connected. Explication consists of the thinking that relates theory with research, examining the meaning of the concepts that become extremely important, both when we conduct research but also when we are trying to conclude from research to broader societal themes. In this sense, explication should help us in, for example, realising whether “we are falling short of studying what we really intend (ibid.: 5).”

The above figure of Chaffee’s framework establishes concept explication as an iterative process. Practically, Chaffee’s method starts by identifying a focal-concept, in the case of this thesis consumer society and derived concepts like consumer and consumption. Within Chaffee’s explication-at-work one important analytical tool is the distinction between primitive terms that are accepted as commonly understood and derived terms that are built of primitive terms (ibid.: 7), another the mentalistic distinction between an object and its attributes (ibid.: 8). In the following, similar questions of the use of seemingly simple terms are interesting in relation to the consumer-debate, as, for example, the theorising on ‘what, when and why we consume’ or ‘what an object of consumption is’ are key issues. Importantly, what we label either primitive or derived terms is a matter of choice, so while the following study orients itself towards consumption, it will involve a
number of other terms that could be the subject of yet an explication. Chaffee (ibid.: 62) states that “the value of concept explication lies in its use, not as a set of prescriptions but as a series of questions to be considered throughout the research.” Following this, the value of concept explication for this thesis lies in the number of steps and questions that it leads us to. Asking into the consumer-concepts, we are thus to accept primitive terms like ‘person’ or ‘time’ but question derived and complex terms like ‘commodity’ or ‘consume’. Likewise, we can begin by acknowledging a preliminary definition of, for example, ‘the consumer’, but set out to question its use in the literature. We can discuss empirical descriptions and nominal definitions as part of a meaning analysis, describing the meaning of consumer-concepts in the literature, before moving on to compare and contrast the differing definitions. And we can discuss validity: to what degree the consumer-concepts actually represent what is being talked about. Most importantly, concept explication is a way to discuss and evaluate the different conceptual meanings and definitions that have been assigned to the consumer-concepts. To Chaffee (ibid.: 25-29) the meaning analysis can be done in two ways: through distillation or by list. That is, a process of boiling down definitions to their fundamental concepts or a process of listing all the minimum requirements that makes up a concept. In all, Chaffee’s model is in the business of improving conceptual definitions both to improve empirical work and settle theoretical disputes. Within the scope of this thesis, though, my aim is somewhat narrower and I do not intend to provide any final definitions, even though I present schematic and distilled considerations as a conclusion to the explication.

Chaffee provides a 10-point checklist of what should be included in a concept explication, but as the primary aim of the following study is to discuss and evaluate the usage of the consumer-concepts in the literature, I will provide an abridged version of Chaffee’s framework. Hence, motivated by Kiousis (2002: 356) the following steps were included in the thesis’ concept explication: (1) Establish preliminary concepts including a general background of consumption; (2) Survey relevant literature; (3) Process the literature through relevant themes, discussions and theoretical underpinnings; (4) Provide a meaning analysis related to individual scholars and key concepts; (5) Review and discuss definitions and the implications hereof; (6) Discuss the implications in relation to prominent themes and future research

**Concept Explication through Sensitizing Concepts**

With a different agenda than Chaffee, Blumer (1954) advanced the idea that the concepts of social science, at least the portion that stands as part of empirical science, should be taken as sensitizing instruments and that definitions leading to definitive concepts was an inapt way of understanding
concepts in this field. As such, Blumer argued for the use of *sensitizing concepts*, defining definitive and sensitizing concepts as below:

A definitive concept refers precisely to what is common to a class of objects, by the aid of a clear definition in terms of attributes or fixed benchmarks. This definition, or the benchmarks, serve as a means of clearly identifying the individual instance of the class and the make-up of that instance that is covered by the concept. A sensitizing concept lacks such specification of attributes or benchmarks and consequently it does not enable the user to move directly to the instance and its relevant content. Instead, it gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look (ibid.: 7).

In the light of this argument, Blumer argued that concepts like culture, institutions, social structure, mores and personality are sensitizing concepts; concepts that do not allow for a clean-cut identification and instead “rest on a general sense of what is relevant (ibid.).” Following Carey and Christians (1989: 371), these methodological considerations should not be seen as a way to guard the intellectually immature, but as a consequence of believing (i) that there is an essential difference between the social sciences and the natural sciences and (ii) that all human activity is interpretive; that systems of meaning and value are continuously reproduced in interpretive processes by human actors. At the same time, though, both Blumer (1954: 8) and Carey and Christians (1989: 371) argue that sensitising concepts should and can be tested, illustrated differently, improved or refined in relation to the condition, situation or structure, which they are said to explain or define. Thus, establishing sensitized concepts still lets us formulate categories that are able to elucidate large areas of social experience.

Diverting from Chaffee’s original intend, in the following I will consider the consumer-concepts as sensitizing concepts. On the one hand, this goes against Chaffee’s positivist, empiricist and deductive aim of proposing or refining operational definitions, but on the other hand, it still lets me follow Chaffee in wanting to explicate, illustrate and improve conceptualisation as such. Hence, I still follow Chaffee’s method of concept explication as a way to structure and understand the conceptualisation of the consumer-concepts, but while inspired by Chaffee’s framework in the analysis and collection of the traits of the consumer-concepts, I will not follow the model to its logical consequence by attempting to provide a definitive operational definition. This said, I will instead suggest a number of the characteristics that any kind of definition should not be able to surpass, just as I will present a number of the dominant conceptualisations that are present in the literature in a schematic form. In the following, then, using Chaffee’s method to evaluate and sensitize the consumer-concepts, the aim is to analyse and make sense of “the categories in which we think (cf. Carey and Christians 1989: 358).”
3. Modernity and Consumer Studies

Before we move to the literature review and the unpacking of the consumer concepts, a short introduction to two specific areas seems pertinent. In the following, I will then shortly reiterate major points from contemporary sociology and outline the evolution of the consumer as related to the historical study of consumers. This to establish a general background for the following conceptual discussion, as it is my understanding that it is untenable to study these concepts without a general idea of the historical and academic perspectives they are settled in.

Modernity Changed

Around the early 90s Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman published a number of highly influential texts on how people relate to themselves and society. Since then, these have provided an influential theoretical setting to social science and heretofore also to consumer studies’ considerations of the consumer, as is apparent from the interviews conducted with each of the three in the Journal of Consumer Culture (Beck and JCC 2001; Giddens and JCC 2003; Bauman in Rojek 2004). To give an introduction to the milieu that has shaped the discussions within the sociology of consumption and consumer studies, I will here shortly outline their theories on the changes in modernity. This will provide an understanding of the circumstances that, according to the above three\(^2\), characterise the consumer’s lifeworld and, additionally, how s/he is understood within consumer studies and the sociology of consumption.

Second Modernity

All in all, Giddens (1991), Beck (1992) and Bauman (1987; 1989; 1991) agree on a basic starting point: that modernity has undergone radical changes, which have left a number of its original promises and premises behind. This has, following Beck (1992; Beck et al. 1994; Beck and JCC 2001), created a ‘second modernity’, which differs from ‘first modernity’ on a number of points.

First, following Bauman’s argument (1989) that Holocaust was a child of modernity made possible by the industrialisation, specialisation and effectiveness that are part and parcel of the rationality and organisational ideal in modernity, it is clear that the central ambition of modernity was connected to order-making, that is, a drive to rid the world of ambivalence. But, as it turned

\(^2\) To be sure, Beck, Giddens and Bauman do not agree in every detail. For example, Giddens and Beck disagree on the meaning of reflexivity (cf. Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994) and the nature of risk (Giddens 1991), while Bauman disagree with both on the ontological status of modernity arguing against ‘late modernity’ (Giddens), saying we cannot know if it is late, and ‘second modernity’ (Beck), calling it an ‘empty container’ (Bauman and Tester 2001: 97).
out, this is an ambition that was built to fail with its systematic categorising leading not to order but even more ambivalence. Essentially, modernity came with a promise of security, order-making and indefinite progress, which was closely connected to the expected effects of the industrial revolution, but it did not deliver. To Beck (1992), who perhaps created the most poignant example with his metaphor of ‘Risk Society’, we are instead experiencing the unintended consequences of the industrial society. Alas, the victories of industrial society have created a diffuse number of threats against humans and nature, a majority of which are invisible, forcing us to consider abstract and theoretical connections and making us rely on experts, who we then realise are frequently wrong. According to Beck, we have gone from the production and redistribution of wealth to the production and redistribution of risks (1992: 19-24) - and while we were always faced by dangers and risks, their character has changed. From being mostly random, many risks can now be considered as systematic consequences of industrialisation.

Second, Giddens, Bauman and Beck agree that we have seen a demise of traditions connected to a waning importance of social distinctions. In this ‘post-traditional condition’ (Giddens 1991a), class differences are receding, the nature of work has undergone immense changes, and the importance of kin, gender, caste and lineage, all things that used to be closely knitted to identity, are fast breaking apart. In essence, with the disappearance of class, the ‘dismounting’ of women from their ‘status fate’ and the changes in work routines, e.g. through flexible work-hours and decentralisation (Beck et al 2001: 203), the social categories that used to direct our lives have lost the sense of direction they awarded us, or as Beck (Beck and JCC 2001; Beck et al 2001) argues, terms like family, class and the nation-state, are simply ‘zombie-categories’, dead yet still alive.

The ambitions of first modernity, then, i.e. progress, control, the exploitation of nature and full employment, have caught up with reality. In second modernity, these ambitions have fostered globalisation, individualisation and global risks, e.g. the breakdown of financial markets or systemic underemployment, and they all seem to be consequences, unforeseen mind you, of first modernity’s victories.

**Doubt and Modernity**

The above are all effects of modern welfare society and the economic changes that were brought forth by industrialisation, but they are also the cause of the paradox that motivates the diagnosis that the subject is freer than ever, but forced to choose. In short, because of changes in income, welfare society and the decreasing social distinctions we are free (*sic*) to choose and create our own lives. We are, so to say, set free from industrial society and its macro-structural connections (class,
inequality, family), but we are not free *per se*. Instead, we are met with ambivalence and dependencies connected to consumption, work and education. In this radicalized modern society what has changed is that the belief in progress and science has eroded. We live with a growing awareness of the destructive potential hidden within industrialisation and the realisation that truth-claims are only temporary. To this analysis, mass communication has proved invaluable to both individuals and organisations in providing and interpreting knowledge, but it has also undermined the notion of truth and created a radical doubt, which is caused by knowledge incessantly being revised and reconsidered. And this doubt, which is the primary feature in the debates over postmodernity, has had immense effects on self and identity.

Second modernity is connected to a rising individualisation and the demise of traditions, which on the one hand sets the modern subject free, but on the other hand increases existential angst. The risks we experience are simply followed by measures of ambiguity, anxiety and ambivalence, as we become aware that the post-traditional condition opens up for the experience of a methodological doubting of knowledge and authorities, the breakdown of collective orders, unceasing pluralism and a never-ending array of new choices and experiences that are mediated through new means of communication and facilitated through globalisation (cf. Slater 2005). As noted by Beck (1992: 136), in contemporary society

“[o]ne even has to choose one’s social identity and group membership, in this way managing one’s own self, changing its image. In the individualised society, risks do not just increase quantitatively; qualitatively new types of personal risk arise, the risk of the chosen and changed identity.”

While the increasing individualisation, meaning people’s liberation from traditional roles, frees the individual from traditional constraints, it also leaves the individual with the sole responsibility to create and recreate social ties, while cultivating one’s own identity-formation. Following Giddens (1991), self-identity becomes a reflexive project, meaning that identity comes to require constant work and reflection. Choice, therefore, becomes a critical measure of success, as our choices are reflected in the biographical narratives we constantly have to create and maintain. As Giddens (1991: 54) argues, “a person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor - important though this is - in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going.” Furthermore,

Each of the small decisions a person makes every day – what to wear, what to eat, how to conduct himself at work, whom to meet with later in the evening – contributes to such routines. All such choices (as well as larger and more consequential ones) are decisions not only about how to act but who to be (Giddens 1991: 81).

Thus, what characterises second modernity is the biographical narratives we constantly have to create, narratives that must not only tell who we are, but how we came to be who we are. As a contrast to first modernity, where social distinctions would provide a narrative for us, what
characterises second modernity is, as Giddens puts is, that “we have no choice but to choose” (Giddens and JCC 2003). In this world of risks beyond our control, we then experience a sort of double-bind: the sense of increased likelihood of self-fulfilment combined with a fear of choosing wrongly. While people to a large degree feel as if they have become champions of their own destiny, this new setting includes the individual responsibility of failure. Faced with globalisation and the aftereffects of individualisation that, according to Bauman (2000), have hollowed personal connections by demanding that they continuously prove themselves valuable and worthwhile on an individual level, we are in the radicalised modernity faced with the paradox that is forcefully portrayed by Beek’s (1992: 137) saying that “under these conditions, how one lives becomes the biographical solution of systemic contradictions […]”

In sum, with the failure of first modernity to meet its ambitions combined with the radical changes that have created second modernity, the individual has, to a large degree, become the sole responsible of his or her actions, appearance and self-identity. It has become an individual job to create a coherent sense of self, a consistent biographical narrative and legitimise choices made. Obviously, this may be a lonely job, but it does also hold implications for our understanding of and relations to consumption. While the above has not traced the place of consumers and consumption within Bauman, Beck or Giddens, all three have thus argued that the changes in modernity are congruent with a change in the importance of consumption for consumers in regards to identity. The coming chapter on identity and consumption will trace this issue, just as Bauman, who has written extensively on the consumer, will appear in the discussion related to concept explication.

Consumption in History

The last twenty or so years have seen a reinterpretation of the role of the consumer, connected to the sociological re-imagination of modernity, with a number of historical moments playing a major part in the development of consumption as a category and the consumer as a character. This chapter sets out to give a brief introduction to the circumstances that are frequently used as points of origins in the narrative on ‘the evolution of the consumer’ and the historical incidents that preceded and made consumption what it is today.

To begin, a small disclaimer might be appropriate: the idea that there is something new to present-day consumption is controversial. Many of the authors focusing on the historical trajectories of consumption contend that arguments on a newfound ‘consumerist era’ are unfounded and that there, contrary to the inclination of the ‘social science imperative’, is simply no evidence suggesting that we have witnessed a historical shift in consumer practice (Trentmann 2005; Brewer
and Trentmann 2006; Schrage 2012). Instead, it is argued that consumption has always existed in some form and that the only thing changed is how the consumer is framed. Trentmann (2006: 26), for example, argues that it was only during the nineteenth century that the meaning of consumer went beyond that of a referring to individuals “who used up energy resources or basic utilities (water, gas, coal, electricity)”. Interestingly, the argument states that prior to a certain point the ‘consumer’ had little bearing in relation to the social and political identities that are now among its foremost quality. Semantics, then, is certainly one crucial feature connected to the consumer-concepts. Later, this discussion will be part of the concept explication, but there is also something to be said on the terms’ development here.

Schrage (2012: 17) includes a longer treatment of consumption’s semantic roots, from its 14th century French original ‘consumption’ connected to respiratory effects, to 15th century meanings of destruction and waste and the abstract 17th century usage connected to ‘a destructive employment of purchased goods’, leading to a contemporary understanding of consumption designating the way goods are used (up) by private households. In particular, he hints at an individualisation of consumption that has gradually altered the understanding and usage of consumption, while making the consumption of commodities relevant to social science in general and the taxating state, political economy and theories of commerce in particular. He traces how “the new concept of consumption is a crucial aspect of the arising modern capitalism: it made consuming acts appear as mere individual decisions (ibid.: 8).” As a historical concept, consumption has evolved alongside capitalism within modern economic thought. And as Schrage (ibid.: 16) states, it has done so in relation to and as a counter-concept to production. Exactly this theme of consumption and production is a major theme in the literature, where one frequent argument is that the society of consumers has replaced the society of producers – a change that has called for a reconsideration of workings and implications of contemporary society.

**The Turnovers of Consumption**

Alongside the above, it is interesting to consider the multitude of other frames of explanation that are oft-mentioned in the literature in regards to the consumer. And while the origins of the consumer may be unclear (cf. Trentmann 2009), a large part of the literature still draws on historical explanations, including the industrialisation, Fordism, welfare-policies, the post-war ‘age of affluence’ or globalisation in the explanation of how consumption has evolved. In the story oft-told within the sociology of consumption, the industrial revolution helped spawn mass consumption in
the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, as it, by managing to mass-produce goods, made it possible to mass-consume\textsuperscript{3}. This made the industrialisation causally connected to a deepening and broadening of consumption – emphasising the kinship between production and consumption. Furthermore, by way of the industrialisation a new type of mass production and mass consumption followed. Fordism, so-called, involved a standardising of mass production leading to price-reductions, which again increased the availability of consumer goods, making them obtainable to more people. By coincident or not, all of this overlapped with a shift in social structures within the industrialising countries, where the middle-class grew markedly. As argued by Schrage (2012: 14):

The establishment of Fordism fundamentally changed the scene. In the specific form it acquired in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, mass production differed from preceding capitalist strategies to maximise profit by expanding the quantity of products. It was the significantly increasing status of standardized consumer goods that made the difference.

Moreover, the development of welfare policies, occurring in relation to WWI, played an important part in consolidating the consumer as an end-user: an individual who had a minimum standard of living and whose livelihood was an important measure in providing peace, wealth and welfare both internationally and within the nation-state.

All in all, these different historical incidents played a major part in changing the role of the consumer, not least by altering the relationship between production and consumption. Prior to the industrialisation, production had been all-important, principally because it had been connected to and dependant on strong states, but from the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century it is possible to identify how production increasingly relied on consumers (Trentmann 2006:46). This is a tendency that can be traced to the current sociological diagnosis, arguing that consumption has replaced production as the maker of identity, in what may be referred to as the ‘post-industrial society’ (Schrage 2012: 5). It also seems clear there has been a growth in commodification emerging from the post-war world, connected to ‘Americanisation’, which has seen a connection to “McDonalization” (Ritzer 2009) or “Disneyization” (Bryman 1999), and globalisation’s ‘world-in-flux’ that has been given due analysis in a breathless amount of texts (cf. Bauman 1998; Beck 1999; Giddens 2002).

Turning back towards Schrage’s detailed semantic analysis, the historically sensitive reading made by Frank Trentmann (2005: 11) argues that

\textsuperscript{3}While the industrial revolution undoubtedly has played a major part in the role ascribed to consumption today, readers should be vary of identifying the growth in (and importance of) consumption exclusively in connection to this phase of industrialization (cf. Sassatelli 2007: 14; Askegaard 2009: 237).
The fundamental change in the twentieth century, therefore, is not that the consumer has become a boundless figure, but rather that the expanding language of the consumer has managed to absorb diverse practices of consumption as commensurate activities (while excluding others). This has involved the unification of consumers initially differentiated and bounded by particular practices – water consumer, the consumer as shopper, the consumer of art.

Simply put, being a consumer can mean a number of very different things, but it entails a certain perspective, a perspective that settles people as consumers most of the time and a perspective that, for example, has made it reasonable to understand patients as consumers of hospitals, students as consumers of university or citizens as consumers of social welfare (Askegaard 2009: 242). This is a change in understanding that is related to rights and while this is important to politics it also legitimates our focus here, which is to understand and discuss the meaning(s) of these terms, to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be a consumer and reflect on the present role of consumption.

The Modern Consumer

Through history and to this day, attitudes towards consumption has gone from understanding it as an engine of wealth and civilization to associating it with greed, extravaganza and people depending on the opinion of others (Trentmann 2006: 24). Its meaning has gone from denoting very specific instances to incorporating almost anything and anyone. What consumer ‘means’ and signifies, the subject of the next chapter, may be unclear, but that it has evolved into a dominating category is beyond dispute. Fine (2005) argues that on a theoretical level two archetypical pictures of the consumer has existed: homo economicus, the famed rational man (sic) often connected to Adam Smith, who sets about maximising utility; and the consumer in consumer studies, who has been the concern of advertising, marketing and communications, a woman who, in opposition to homo economicus, is completely susceptible to manipulation and artificially constructed needs. Similarly, Trentmann (2006: 19) argues that three approaches on the consumer dominate, namely, the consumer as a universal economistic model, as a product of the commodity culture that expanded alongside the industrialisation or as an active agent, connected to a recent postmodern strand and neoliberal capitalism, the latter invoking a shift from the mass consumer to the consumer as a more active and self-reflexive being as connected to the sociological analysis (Trentmann 2005: 1-5). These are considerations for the next chapter to reflect upon - considerations for the explication of the consumer-concepts to cogitate.
4. Literature Review and Analysis

Contemporary scholars of consumption should be aware of the binary oppositions implicit in their language and metaphors, to avoid that evaluative pendulum which makes consumer culture into a ‘fetish concept’, a ready-made jargon rather than an object of study (Sassatelli 2007: 123).

This chapter starts by outlining some preliminary concepts, followed by a reflection on the ‘classic consumer texts’. Both will serve to provide baseline information for the following analysis, which will move through a number of contemporary texts on consumers, consumption and consumer society. Starting by a rather thorough consideration of Bauman’s consumer diagnosis, I will move to a less narrow synthesis of the literature, where the focus will be first on identifying, later discussing and finally distilling the themes, concepts and definitions related to the literature on the consumer-concepts. Primarily, the chapter will be concerned with a methodological run-through of texts and themes in the service of concept explication as established in the beginning. Given the introduction and background to consumer studies and the number of essential issues we have come upon in the previous chapters, this chapter will focus more narrowly on the use of the ‘consumer-concepts’, before we, in the following chapter, take two brief excursus and end by a preliminary argument for consumertisation as a conceptual frame. Importantly, the intention with the following is not, as I have stated elsewhere, to define the consumer-concepts in any strict sense. Rather, it is to account for the diversions, oppositions, issues, the resemblance and differences that influence how consumption is spoken of and understood - something which eventually sways how we think and act upon our understanding of consumption, the consumer and consumer society.

Consumer-Concepts 1on1

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English in my possession - the 1978 edition - tells one story of the concepts under analysis. Consume, the dictionary states, is: 1 to eat or drink; 2 to use or use up; 3 (of a fire) to destroy; 4 to spend wastefully. Moreover, it states, in relation to 3, that it can be used figuratively, in the sense that one, for example, can be consumed by sorrow, hate or desire. Following this, the consumer, then, figures as “a person who buys and uses goods and services.” It holds no explanation of consumer society or culture, but on this topic, oxforddictionaries.com equates the consumer society with “a society in which the buying and selling of goods and services is the most important social and economic activity,” with alternative definitions including “a consumer society is a culture in which consumption of material goods is encouraged, and the

http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/consumer%2Bsociety
economic health of the society is dependent on the spending of the population\(^5\) and “a community in which the buying and selling of mass-produced goods and services is promoted through mass media and is the dominant economic activity\(^6\)” At one end of the following concept explication related to the consumer-concepts we, then, in its simplest form, have a verb, consume, a subject, the consumer, the objects of consumption, for example, commodities, goods or stuff and two categories ‘the consumer society’ and ‘consumer culture’.\(^7\)

And where does all this leave us in relation to primitive terms, one might ask? The trick about discussing several concepts at once is that they all, at times, are considered primitive terms. At one point ‘the consumer’ might be a neutral term, when discussing consumer society and the same might go in regards to ‘consumption’, when discussing the consumer. The person, society or commodity is then accepted as primitive terms at times, but commodities or the objects of consumption might, at other times, be the centre of attention, for example when discussing the immateriality or dematerialisation of consumption. Another way to go about discussing the consumer-concepts is, with reference to Chaffee, to consider them as variables. In this train of thought, questions like ‘what are the minimum requirements it takes to be a consumer?’ and ‘what attributes characterises the consumer society?’ springs to mind, with the level, method and character of consumption playing an obvious part in any answer. And so it does for most of the following theorists, who in various ways describe, for example, how the patterns or significance of consumer-behaviour have changed, including the wider implications this holds. Regarding consumption, which is an obviously important variable, for example in regards to global warming and the economic crisis, its history and different meanings have previously been mentioned. To me, it does not seem intuitive to grade and define the consumer in regards to their ‘consumerness’ and the amount of consumption they go through, a tactic that for other purposes might have proven a valid assumption. Neither is this an argument that to my knowledge is represented within the literature.

To cut a long story short, in regards to consumption it nowadays appears as if ‘consumption’ primarily refers to two opposite meanings, one of ‘purchase’ and another of ‘using-up’ (Warde 2005: 137), an analysis that will serve as a starting point here, as the theme and

\(^5\) http://www.ehow.com/about_6601602_definition-consumer-society.html
\(^6\) http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/consumer+society
\(^7\) Readers should note that on a few occasions the use of ‘consumer culture’ may appear. If so, I will understand culture as a primitive term, referring to the attitudes, feelings, values and behaviour characterising society or a social grouping. This said, I fully acknowledge the troubled nature of the term culture, especially pertinent through Cultural Studies. For excellent considerations of culture, readers can refer to Baldwin (2005) and Dorfman (2007).
distinction between purchasing and using up is, sometimes implicitly, prominent to many of the following discussions. With this in mind, what is of particular interest in the following, then, is what the consumer and consumer society are and what this does to our understanding of consumption, including the derived effect on our cognitive dispositions.

**The Classic Consumer Texts**

As noted, it is my belief that in order to appreciate the conceptualisation of consumption, we need a thorough understanding of its background. For now, I have outlined some of the primary sociological theories that have influenced the contemporary study of consumers and given a brief consideration of the historical study of consumption. Here, I will briefly discuss some of the foundational texts to give a sense of the historical development and common understanding that exists between the scholars studying and discussing the above conceptualisation. As such, this chapter will offer an initial primer on the *leitmotifs* that are guiding the sociologically inspired study of consumers, as well as an introduction to the themes that will be of importance for the rest of the thesis. As reasoned in the delimitation, it will limit itself to the consideration of single works by Veblen, Baudrillard, Bourdieu and Douglas and Isherwood.

**Veblen - Consumption as Prestige**

At an early stage, Veblen (1994 [1899]) placed the separation and distinction between mundane and prestige consumption as a key to understand the motivations behind consumption. By creating the concept of *conspicuous consumption*, Veblen was able to indicate not just how consumption cannot be understood merely through utility maximisation, but how consumption was inevitably connected to status and honour. Veblen’s analysis sprung from the general idea that there is a direct proportionality between esteem and wealth. That is, the more wealth the more esteem. In addition, Veblen found that a structuring principle of society and history was that status was measured through distance from the mundane. Goods functioned by the indication of social position and display pecuniary strength, with costly objects fashioning a distance to the world of necessities. Conspicuous consumption then became an ideal way to displaying status even, or especially, to those who did not know you, simultaneously becoming an aid in the defending of social status. Here, ‘good taste’ equals distance from work and practicality and worries regarding economy was opposed to the cultured. In battles of class, goods became weapons in definitions and redefinitions of status, or framed in a different way “a powerful weapon for a class which itself had no social function (Schrage 2012: 14).” In Veblen’s understanding, the logic of consumption, then, was one of imitation, with lower classes striving for the luxurious status-markers displayed by the very rich.
Moreover, different from standard economics, preferences are determined socially, by non-utilitarian objectives, in relation to the social hierarchies of taste, which equals hierarchies in society, propelling the rich into buying ever new status objects able to demonstrate their social position. In short, to Veblen society was characterized by emulative consumption causing consumption to be driven by envy.

As such, Veblen’s general idea lets us understand consumer society through social stratification, where ‘inferior’ groups are trying to move through the ranks of society through tactics indebted to imitation, and ‘upper-classes’ are trying to prevent this from happening, for example by closing ranks, mocking the imitators or engaging in even more conspicuous consumption. This connects Veblen’s analysis to ideas on envy, imitation or status symbols, which are still forceful ways of understanding consumption. Alternatively, Veblen’s analysis is, from a critical standpoint, in danger of reducing consumption to one logic alone that neglects the “historical constructions of a distinctive cognitive, emotional and moral outlook (Sassatelli 1999: 69)” and refrain from understanding consumption as anything but imitation.

**Baudrillard – Consumption as a System of Signs**

In an analysis quite different to Veblen’s, Baudrillard (1998 [1970]) argued that the process of consumption may be analysed in two ways: as a process of signification and communication, a system of exchange equivalent to language, or of classification and social differentiation, wherein objects are ordered as status-values in a hierarchy (ibid.: 60). Baudrillard analysed the consumer’s experience as one that takes place in a material culture consisting of a system of signs, which refer to each other and gain their meanings in relation to each other, in the sense that goods derive their meaning from their relation to each other and their position relative to social codes of, for example, function or aesthetics. As Baudrillard’s analysis goes, with the advent of capitalism, signs have gone from referring to real needs and real objects, which must be satisfied, to being connected to objects that, because of their exchange-value connected to social differentiation, does not refer to the real world. In short: we no longer consume products but signs, the sign has become autonomous, codes dominate both production and consumption and they structure reality, not the other way around.

From this analysis, Baudrillard objects that needs explain very little of individuals’ relation to objects, as there is no longer any way to establish needs or understand what they might be, arguing against the idea that objects has an original or natural use-value, instead claiming that the value of objects is primarily connected to its meanings, but that these meanings – or signifiers – have gained autonomy by the manipulation of media and advertising. As such, he argues that needs
are manufactured by practices of marketing and advertising in what he (ibid.:72) refers to as “the total dictatorship by the sector of production”, meaning that it is not the individual who exercises power in the economic system, but that consumption is primarily linked to the overall economic structure, not the individual consumer. To Baudrillard, then, consumer society is characterised by the way consumption and production are disciplined to favour the reproduction of the economic structure by marketing providing consumers with life-style concepts and social identity, as the consumption of signs replace the consumption of goods. Baudrillard points to how the analysis of consumption has been based on the tautology “I buy this because I need it”, as if needs were magical. Instead he argues that

The truth is not that ‘needs are the fruits of production’, but that the system of needs is the product of the system of production. This is quite different. By system of needs, we mean that needs are not produced one by one, in relation to respective objects, but are produced as consumptive power, as an overall propensity within the more general framework of the productive forces (ibid.: 74).

What is created is a need for need, not a need for a specific object. To Baudrillard we have become consumers in a very broad sense where need and desire is self-referential, where needs are less connected to physiological satisfaction and more to the stabilising of capitalism. This means that we do not buy objects because of their concrete qualities but because of their significance: “The washing machine serves as appliance and acts as an element of prestige, comfort etc. (ibid.: 77),” with only the latter function really being connected to that consumption. As a consequence, he argues that value is not created in production but in consumption. It is the sign-value that affords the object its significance and in this way the function of a fur coat or a washing machine is merely an alibi, making status symbols appear to have natural or rational functions. It is also in this way that Baudrillard (in)famously argues that all kinds of objects could potentially be substituted with the washing machine as a signifying element.

The fact remains that, at the distribution level, goods and objects […] form a global, arbitrary, coherent system of signs, a cultural system which, for the contingent world of need and enjoyment, for the natural and biological order, substitutes a social order of values and classification (ibid.: 79).

To be sure, Baudrillard does not argue that there ‘are no needs or natural utility’, but that consumption can only be understood as a concept in contemporary society if we realise that it has been reorganized into a system of signs, were talk of natural or biological order has been surpassed by a system of signs answering to the social order of values and classifications. With the advent of

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8 Importantly, this argument is not connected to the direct manipulation of people, as they are ‘simply’ met by in a world of self-referential signs, which it is impossible to rebel against.
mass consumption, consumption is no longer connected to the bettering of the human condition. Consumers do not consume objects because of concrete needs - they consume signs that are part of an abstract system connected to values and classifications. In conclusion, Baudrillard’s point is that as mediated experience increasingly replaces all other interactions, reality is structured through social codes related to, e.g., function or aesthetics, with the logic of signs and sign-value dominating the constitution of reality. Things have become hyperreal, meaning that there is no original left and that people are met by endless copies of objects, making it impossible to distinguish the real from the simulation of reality. Under these circumstances, meaning arises from relations between consumer-objects, with concepts like need, usefulness and function all being ideological to Baudrillard, who argues that we do not need a theory of needs but a theory of the ideology of needs. On a critical note: apart from accepting Baudrillard’s somewhat extreme argument that we do not consume products but signs, a relatively smaller problem with his theory is that it explains little of how objects are used practically in everyday life. Similarly, his focus on the internal structures of the taste- or consumer system explains little about how people do (or should) go about consuming. Still, Baudrillard’s analysis opens up for the dematerialisation of categories like need and identity alongside the role played by mediated experiences, themes that are still with us to this day.

**Bourdieu – Consumption as Distinction**

Contrary to Baudrillard, Bourdieu’s (2010 [1979]) theory on distinction is less concerned with the internal structure of ‘taste systems’, instead relating to the economic, social and cultural forces that shapes the classificatory systems that surround society, including practices, institutions and power relations. Opposite to Baudrillard, Bourdieu proposes that human action can be perceived as something concrete and material, different from representation and the exchange of signs. Importantly, Bourdieu rejects the idea that consumer preference, or taste, is the result of innate individual choices, instead arguing that taste is a social phenomenon. Moreover, much like Veblen, Bourdieu reasons how taste and choice reflects a symbolic hierarchy that the ‘dominant-classes’ enforce and use to defend their position. Consumer preference becomes a distinction that separates people in matters ranging from music and literature to food or newspapers.

Hence, to Bourdieu consumers operate according to a logic of distinction, which is embodied in their own taste. Here objects serve simultaneously as material support for interaction

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9 For a full consideration readers may refer to Baudrillard (1981).
and symbolic indicators, which makes the world intelligible; goods are simply material elements used by social actors to reproduce cultural meanings and structure social space. And while taste is seen as arbitrary and not a matter of intrinsic value from a cultural standpoint, Bourdieu is adamant that it is not socially arbitrary. In fact, Bourdieu argues that there is a close correlation between taste and social divisions, as in his almost canonical quote:

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed (ibid.: xxix).

Instead of understanding human experience through cognitive or linguistic models, Bourdieu proposes the notion of *habitus* to describe the classificatory mechanism that is the primary force in stabilising social position. Habitus may be thought of as preceding consciousness, not as biological determinism, but as something swayed by the class of our upbringing and our education, a system of acquired dispositions. To Bourdieu, the individual habitus functions to reproduce economic and cultural capital - the latter referring to the knowledge and cultivated manners, often connected to education, which awards status in society - with taste establishing itself as a symbolic power that is used to legitimise social differences. Thus, as the subjective taste of the dominant class comes to coincide with good taste in general, the distinction and classifications of society is ‘naturalised’, connecting consumption to the above logic of distinction as taste reproduce the social positions of actors.

Bourdieu showed how social stratification and consumption are intimately connected, and how consumption plays a role in the consolidation and stratifying of social practices like sports, food or fashion. Roughly, my consumer preference, my taste, tells on my social position. Connected to this, while it is often said that there is no accounting for taste, Bourdieu actually affords us an account of taste as an elective affinity, writing how

*Taste is what brings together things and people that go together […] Taste is a match maker; it marries couples and also people, who make ‘well-matched couples’, initially in regards to taste […] this spontaneous decoding of one habitus by another is the basis of the immediate affinities which orient social encounters, discouraging socially discordant relationships, encouraging well-matched relationships, without these operations ever having to be formulated other than in the socially innocent language of likes and dislikes (Bourdieu 2010: 239).*

Bourdieu proposes a theory on distinction that shows us the function of taste, which says a great deal about consumptions’ role in social stratification. At the same time, though, Bourdieu may be criticised for offering a determinist of too hierarchical picture of social stratification, which makes it hard for people to escape their ‘fate’, just as the distinctions he proposes as central are the same ones which are disappearing in the theoretical considerations by Bauman, Beck and Giddens. Also,
somewhat like Veblen it may be argued that Bourdieu’s theory proposes a trickle-down effect, based on emulative consumption, suggesting that consumption is driven top-down, which seems a poor explanations of the structures of fashion.

**Douglas and Isherwood – Goods for Thinking**

Lastly, Douglas and Isherwood (1996 [1979]) were primarily interested in the uses of goods. In opposition to Baudrillard, though, this interest is primarily connected to how consumption functions on an individual level, instead of a structural or societal level. Theirs is a highly anthropological analysis, which takes it as a given that material possessions carry social meanings. It is these meanings that are at the centre of their analysis, as they argue that our habits of consumption are heavily influenced by these, for example in the way that there are certain things we do not wear or eat, simply because of what it ‘means’.

To Douglas and Isherwood, goods can be understood either through function or meaning. As communicators, goods primary function is as markers of social relationship and classifications, meaning that “[g]oods are neutral, their uses are social; they can be used as fences or bridges (ibid.: xv).” With goods marking out social categories, one of their uses is to discriminate – or categorise – ranks, values, identities and membership. Similar to Bourdieu’s analysis, goods function as sorting devices (fences or bridges) that regulate both access and belonging, though here perhaps in a less hierarchical way. To this analysis, goods may be considered as symbolic means of classifying the world that awards a certain coherence or regularity to the social milieu that the consumer navigates in. In this way, goods function by providing a material basis that stabilises cultural and social categories – a primary function of consumption being to stabilise cognitive order in society.

The position taken in their analysis is one relating goods to information, but instead of understanding goods as mere messages, Douglas and Isherwood contend that goods constitute the very system of information itself (ibid.: 49). Somewhat opposite to how we might normally consider goods, we are here asked not to consider their use-value or their concrete physical function, but reflect on their social function:

> We shall assume that the essential function of consumption is its capacity to make sense. Forget the idea of consumer irrationality. Forget that commodities are good for eating, clothing, and shelter; forget their usefulness and try instead the idea that commodities are good for thinking; treat them as a nonverbal medium for the human creative faculty (ibid.: 40).

Slightly simplistic: that goods are good for thinking refers to the way that goods make the social visible – how not all types of clothes, for example, has the same value, even when its functional characteristics, e.g. to keep you warm or dry, are the same. If a major problem of social life is to pin
down meanings, then the point to Douglas and Isherwood is that the use and acquisition of goods is a way to make particular judgments visible, in the process making consumption the “arena in which culture is fought over” and essential both to the sort of society we want to live in and what we want to be (ibid.: 37).

To Douglas and Isherwood, it is through consumption that every actor attempts to occupy a not only acceptable but dominant position in the creation of meanings. They argue that consumption is not determined by the market or fashion, and that the consumer is neither irrational nor passive, but communicating his or her identity through choices that makes consumption fundamental as a frame for controlling meanings and social roles. Their analysis then provides a semantic account of consumption, which, unlike Baudrillard’s, considers commodities as a language that sets people apart and continuously lets them communicate non-verbally, while at the same time securing a cognitive and cultural stability. This said, a point of critique might be that their analysis omits the practical dimension of consumption and confines consumers to a cognitive dimension where they are left to “maximising the expression of their socio-cultural position (Sassatelli 2007: 100),” something which runs the risk of leaving the door open for a sort of instrumental rational, where consumers are left to act in accordance with a specific end.

Partial conclusion

Similar to all of the above theories is the idea that commodities communicate social positions and that this function of goods is at least as important as that of any needs-fulfilment. Moreover, in various ways they argue in opposition to economic models connected to utility theory (cf. Douglas and Isherwood 1996: xxv), wherein the consumer is an individual who exercises sovereign choice based solely on wants that arise as the individuals’ private observation of his or her needs. Contrary to this, consumption, social interaction and (consumer) society are tightly connected and consumption is indebted to, admittedly various, social structures. A common objection to these theories, then, is that they cannot reflect the grounded experience of consumers that relate to real consumer objects, places and situations. Nevertheless, whether one agrees with Veblen, Baudrillard, Bourdieu or Douglas and Isherwood, their differing analysis of consumption and the function goods play in contemporary society has been widely influential.

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10 As such, a part of their analysis is a critique of the consumer as an individual susceptible to the whims of passion and the understanding the consumer as a person barely responsible for own actions, acting in accordance with prices and sudden fashions.
Consumption as Concept part I

Bearing the above in mind, the following will analyse the conceptualization surrounding the rise of consumer society, including a critical discussion of the use of the consumer-concepts and their meaning, a discussion and meaning analysis of key terms and an evaluation of what it may mean to be a consumer or live in a - so-called - consumer culture, an increasingly commodified culture more defined by consumption than, for example, by belonging (Dholakia and Firat 1998: 108-09) - even though consumption, in itself, may potentially offer a sense of belonging to those people that it is unavailable to (Miles 2012: 219).

Readers should note that a frequent position within the literature on consumers and consumption is that they are essentially contested concepts; that they defy understanding (cf. Dholakia and Firat 1998: 13; Gabriel and Lang 2008; Wilk 2004; Miller 2010). As will become apparent, this is a position that is not entirely dismissed in the following - but the thesis stills calls for a thorough discussion of how consumption is conceptualised in the literature, including an explication of the various forms, values and definitions it has been ascribed.

Bauman’s Diagnosis

As a way to frame the concept explication, I will begin by expounding Bauman’s position on consumption, which can then serve as a point of reference throughout the remainder of the discussion and analysis of the consumer-concepts. Bauman will be the only theorist occupying this elevated position, as the rest of the concept explication will develop through themes and more general positions. Arguably, this privileging of Bauman diverts from Chaffee’s original intend, where single sources are not advantaged, but is done here for a number of reasons. For one, his analysis of the society of consumers does, to my knowledge, not occupy much space within consumer studies, despite its relative breadth and depth, with Blackshaw (2011: 125) commenting that “a fog of misunderstanding has hitherto enveloped consumerism studies accounts of Bauman’s work.” Second, Bauman’s diagnosis of contemporary society is, in general, one of the most poignant, seeing a mass of critical, analytical and biographical reflections written on his oeuvre (cf. Kilminster and Varcoe 1996; Bauman and Tester 2001; Jacobsen and Poder 2008; Davis 2008). Third, Bauman is a staunch occupant of one particular position on the consumer, which, in somewhat simplistic terms, centres consumption on identity-construction and makes virtually all fragments of society, social-life and culture be about consumption. Moreover, Bauman’s sociology is explicitly a sociology of critique, and he is renowned for refusing the possibility of a (morally) neutral sociology (Bauman 2000: 216). Hence, to start by focusing on Bauman is to offer the field a
consideration of an underdeveloped but significant theoretical voice thereby framing a number of the themes and issues, which will be essential for the remainder of this thesis.

**I consume, therefore I am … a subject**

Bauman’s reflection on consumption began with his consideration of modernity and a growing sense of rupture in the 80’s following the realisation of production limits in the capitalist economy. It was not finite resources but symbols that were at stake, with state power no longer being dependant on the rebuttal of ideology, following what Fukuyama (2006 [1992]) famously described as ‘the end of history’. According to Bauman, society had lost its emancipatory ideal, and the consumption of goods and an incessant craving for never, better or more luxurious items of consumption had taken the place as the glue that bound society together. The ‘modernity-of-order’ lost out to the ‘modernity-of-possibility’, the ‘society of producers’ was replaced by the ‘society of consumers’ and suddenly power no longer hung on the repression of the masses but was left to the seduction of the consumer majority, with repression being a last option only used to those flawed consumers that were unwilling - but most often unable - to act out their role as consumers (Bauman 2001a; 2003; 2004; 2007a). Consumer society and second modernity thus developed alongside each other, with the state and capitalism principally engaging people not as producers, whose work-ethic should be controlled, but as consumers, whose needs should be fed by ever new symbolic resources and consumer-aspirations (cf. Kilminster and Varcoe 1996: 231, 236; Bauman in Rojek 2004: 292-93). That is, as linked to the relationship between production and consumption, for Bauman there has been a fundamental shift in emphasis with ‘modern’ society being characterised by primarily engaging its members as producers, and ‘liquid-modern’ society (Bauman’s terminology) primarily engaging its members as consumers (Bauman 2004: 24). This, in turn, signifies a change in society’s stratifying principles, with work, class and lineage losing out as axes of identity and struggle, instead overtaken by the freedom to consume and the consumer SYMBOLS that can readily be appropriated to proffer a given self-identity for most consumers (See also Atkinson 2008; Østergaard 2009). In this line, Bauman wrote

Under postmodern conditions, when the exhilarating experience of ever-new needs rather than the satisfaction of the extant ones become the main measure of a happy life (and thus the production of new enticements turns to be the major vehicle of social integration and peaceful coexistence), the patronage state, adjusted to the task of defining and circumscribing the needs of its subjects, cannot stand competition with systems operated by the consumer market (1991: 237).

To Bauman, the state simply left the game of determining the needs of its subjects alongside its ‘responsibility for their satisfaction’. In this analysis society no longer provides continuity, a task that is nowadays put on the individual consumer (Bauman 1999a: 9). In fact, Bauman’s entire
analysis of contemporary society rests on the idea that political institutions (1999b: 5) alongside solid structures like family, class or nation, which once served as the foundation for human societies, are increasingly absent - with his analysis of ‘liquid modernity’ describing how society is characterised by rapid changes, connected to everything from our hopes and fears to fashion (Bauman 2000).

This diagnosis, related to the state’s newfound condition, becomes the starting point for Bauman’s considerations of contemporary consumption. In his view, we have gone from being obligated to the state to being obligated to freedom of choice, with freedom and choosing becoming near synonymous in consumer society (Bauman 2001a: 74). To be sure, Bauman points out that all human beings have always been consumers and that what is of particular interest to him is “the individual consumption being conducted in the setting of a society of consumers (Bauman 2005: 82).”

This new reality has a number of implications relating to the ambivalence meeting the consumer but also to the defining character of the consumer-concepts. Principally, the consumer has been set free to consume and exploit ever new needs living in what might be referred to as a constant state of choice. But as with every other freedom, individual choice is hung up with both responsibility and a likeliness of mistakes that then becomes a source of personal anxiety and ambiguity (Bauman 1988; Warde and Shove 1998: 5). In Bauman’s diagnosis, this anxiety, which is the trademark of this day and age, is the very foundation that enables consumer society:

Uncertainty-generated anxiety is the very substance that makes the individualized society fertile for consumerist purposes: it needs therefore to be carefully and lovingly cared for and on no account allowed to dry up or evaporate. More often than not, production of consumers means the production of ‘new and improved’ fears (2001: 27).

With the introduction of the consumer society, we are met by a paradox. On the one hand we are free, as consumers, to choose an identity, but on the other hand, we are responsible for our choice of identity, even when we have no way of knowing which to choose (Bauman 2001; Atkinson 2008). Importantly, the analysis is not so much that we are able to pick any identity at any time, as it is that we are in a permanent form of identity crisis. This problem of identity stages some real problems for the consumer, but it also tells us a lot about who the consumer is, just as the character of consumer society is revealed herein. In fact, to Bauman a principal mark of consumer society is not consumption per se, but rather consumption’s emancipation from functionality, meaning that consumption does no longer need to justify itself through anything but ‘pleasurability’ that “[i]n the consumer society, consumption is its own purpose and so is self-propelling (Bauman 2001a: 13).”

One more issue facing the consumer in Bauman’s view is that of globalisation, which, as society, is characterised by a heightened value of immaterial things and an increased liquidity that
slowly but surely are destabilising the few remaining social structures that “limit individual choices, institutions that guard repetitions of routines, patterns of acceptable behaviour […] (Bauman 2007: 1).” In consumer society people are cast in a world without long-term strategies having to rely on a sole reference for human action: choice related to consumer-action and eventually identity-building. Everything is up to the individual and what s/he is capable of doing, with the world changing into an unlimited collection of possibilities. As Bauman quips:

The world full of possibilities is like a buffet table set with mouth-watering dishes, too numerous for the keenest of eaters to hope to taste them all. The diners are consumers, and the most taxing and irritating of the challenges consumers confront is the need to establish priorities: the necessity to forsake some unexplored options and to leave them unexplored. The consumers’ misery derives from the surfeit, not the dearth of choices. ‘Have I used my means to the best advantage?’ is the consumer’s most haunting, insomnia-causing question (2000: 63).

In this way, the freedom experienced by the consumer comes with the condemnation that whatever choice they make, it is theirs to bear.

Bauman (2000: 74) argues that “the code in which our ‘life policy’ is scripted is derived from the pragmatics of shopping.” In a world where long-term planning seems unrealistic and where we are continuously promised new beginning, ways of personal improvement and where the making and remaking of self-identity is an on-going project, the shopping experience is what we are left to act upon. Here, the seductive power of consumer society lies in the fact that it promises the ‘liberation from the power of things,’ meaning that as today’s easily accessible commodities are not meant, nor produced, to be kept, they are easily discarded; we do not need to award things any allegiance. In fact, things are no longer important because they are owned, but primarily because they are consumable (Bauman in Rojek 2004: 294-95).

This ‘shopping life policy’ entails that the cognitive schema (cf. Branigan 1992: 13-20) that influence how we go about our daily life is modelled around the activity of shopping, soon to be followed by the knowledge that the happy life is connected to our competence in making choices, while we, at the same time, are acutely aware that we probably are less competent than we could be. In Bauman’s terminology, our shopping list is endless, including shopping for the skills we need to earn a living, to convince employers we have them and for ways to make others believe we are what we wear. As a consequence, the aftereffects of this ‘pragmatics of shopping’ is that all animate and inanimate fragments are cast, judged, compared or evaluated in relation to and against each other as objects of consumption, with objects of consumption defined as “objects that lose their usefulness (and so their lustre, attraction, seductive power and worth) in the course of being used (Bauman 2005: 9).” The inevitable result of this is that all members of society on a daily basis move between the role as consumer and being the object of consumption. Here we meet a significant point.
only are we as consumers constantly evaluated and addressed by ourselves and others or by our willingness to play or fill the role as consumer - to speak of ourselves as consumers and train and learn to become consumers, we are also frequently evaluated as if we were on the other side of the division between consumers and consumed. As such, to Bauman the division between chosen and choosers is not as solid as it used to be, with the laws of the market applying to everything and an increasing commodification taking place, which signals that everything and everyone is, could or should be dealt with as if a commodity (Bauman 2001a: 12, 62; Bauman in Rojek 2004: 306). It is only by proving your use-value that you can be accepted as a valuable member of society and elevated to a place among the other consumers and “[t]o consume therefore means to invest in one’s own social membership, which in a society of consumer translates as ‘saleability’ (Bauman 2001a: 56).” 

Thus, while the consumer, as seen through the previous discussion of sociology, is the identity-seeker, the consumer is also the consumed. As Bauman phrases it:

In the society of consumers no one can become a subject without first turning into a commodity, and no one can keep his or her subjectness secure without perpetually resuscitating, resurrecting and replenishing the capacities expected and required of a sellable commodity (Bauman 2007b: 12)

To reflect on the above, an interesting theme is how the consumer is the consumed in a dual sense: on the one hand it can be argued that we, people-cum-consumers, are treated as if commodities on a daily basis by e.g. employers, peers, romantic partners, university professors or strangers, who assess our qualities and use, discard and relate to us on that basis, something which also reflects on our behaviour. On the other hand, it is an inherently modern phenomenon, perhaps even a defining trait of people as consumers, that we are consumed by a desire to consume more and more, as this has been equated with the general improvement of life and ultimately the actualisation of our potential (cf. Dholakia and Firat 1998: 76-77). This opens an interesting dichotomy between the consumer who consumes and consumers who are consumed, related to the plural meanings of consumption, which may then both designate something the consumer does and something that is done to the consumer.

In Bauman’s rewriting of Descartes’ Cogito, the pragmatics of shopping allows for the sentence: “I shop, therefore I am … a subject (Bauman 2001a: 17).” At the same instance, the ‘consumer society’ becomes the society engaging, evaluating and judging its members primarily through their consumption-related capacities. Thus, to Bauman

To say a ‘society of consumer’ is to say more, much more than merely to verbalize the trivial observation that having found consumption pleasing its members spend much of their time and effort trying to amplify its pleasures. It is to say in addition that the perception and treatment of virtually all the parts of the social setting and of the actions they evoke and frame tend to be guided by a ‘consumerist syndrome’ of cognitive and evaluating predispositions(Bauman 2005: 83).
What Bauman is saying here is, that the consumer society is not simply about enjoying yourself or a new purchase. Instead, what he refers to as a ‘consumerist syndrome’, has to do with the radically altered cognitive dispositions, strategies, attitudes and preferences taking shape, which for one has “degraded duration and elevated transience” shortening the lifespan of just about any object in confronting the biggest worry in consumer society: that demand might dry out. In this sense, Bauman is in line with Slater (1999: 85-86), in the argument that as contemporary society has become non-foundational, both cognitively through methodological doubt and socio-culturally as its values are fundamentally challenged, the project of self has become “technicized” by treating all problems as mendable through the use of commodities; a process that both exploits and intensifies identity crisis, with goods being introduced as answers to problems of identity and simultaneously intensifying these problems by introducing more ways of being.

To this end, time becomes a focal point for Bauman, who addresses this issue from two different angles. First, he argues that ideally, for merchandisers, marketing people and the like, satisfaction ought to be instant, in the double sense that consumers should not be kept waiting and that satisfaction related to a given object should be reduced to a bare minimum, so as to keep people consuming (Bauman 2004: 25). In this sense, consumer society comes with a contradiction. On the one hand it promises instant gratification in regards to just about anything, while at same time declaring the impossibility of gratification, forever installing new and improved objects of consumption (Bauman 2001a: 13). Second, the amount of time that could be spent consuming is central to Bauman’s analysis, as the amount of time available for consumption plays a major role. Thus, commenting on the efforts of marketers to pack as much consumption into every moment he writes that “[…] as stretching the size of the day or the week was out of the question, the obvious way to deal with that worry was to try to pack more consumption into each time unit – by training people to consume more than one commodity at a time (2012: 19).”

In conclusion, for Bauman consumer society has alongside ‘liquid modernity’ made it a point to focus on speed, excess and waste, values that are in stark opposition to the ‘productivist era’, where duration, moderation and long-term planning was well-esteemed and frequently awarded. Unlike this ‘productivist era’, where work, kin and class were the axis around which individual constitution took place, consumption has now, to a large degree, displaced them in all matters related. Moreover, consumption is no longer primarily instrumental or functional in its character, rather it is “autotelic, a value in its own right (Bauman in Rojek 2004: 294).” According to Bauman consumer society, then, comes with a threat and a promise to individuals. It limits their possibility of forming a coherent narrative related to character and life, but awards the opportunity
to un- or redo their identity. Essentially, things are no longer important in their own right, as the use-value has given into the importance of sign-value and, as Bauman could argue, contemporary consumption is primarily about using objects up, so as to bolster, create or recreate self-identity. Thus, to say consumer society is to say that all areas of life are permeated by consumption. That is, in the words of Bauman

The ‘society of consumers’ […] stands for the kind of society that promotes, encourages or enforces the choice of a consumerist lifestyle and life strategy and dislikes all alternative cultural options; a society in which adapting to the precepts of consumer culture and following them strictly is, to all practical intents and purposes, the sole unquestionably approved choice; a feasible, and so also a plausible choice – and a condition of membership (2007b: 53).

In the end, the consumer society is characterised through the life of choices, choices connected to lifestyle and identity. To Bauman, these choices are not so much a privilege, as something we are doomed to, leaving individuals, as Bauman says quoting Ulrich Beck, to seek ‘biographical solutions of systemic contradictions’ (Bauman 2001a: 23).

The Validity of Bauman’s Reading

Reflecting on Bauman’s thesis, might be a good way to understand and reflect on a number of the inferences drawn on the subject, as Bauman is arguably one of the more ardent critics of consumer society. This awards us a critical reflection, before we turn to the next chapter’s more general examination of the field and its positions.

Especially Alan Warde has been an adept critic of Bauman, arguing that the pursuit of self-identity through consumption is a “one-sided appreciation of the rationale of consumer behaviour (Warde 1994: 59).” Furthermore, he questions the entire idea that sign and identity-value has somehow succeeded use and exchange-value as the tools of consumer decision-making, for the simple reason that if they were as anxiety-provoking as it might appear from Bauman’s account, individual crisis would have reached a far higher level than is the case in western societies (ibid.: 65). In short, Warde does not agree with the emphasis on “[…] individually distinctive visual appearance and its autonomy from material hierarchies (ibid.: 71),” but more than this, he does not accept Bauman’s understanding of the consumer as such. Instead of ‘Bauman’s consumer’, Warde argues that the consumer is an entirely different and much simpler creature. For Warde, then, ‘the consumer’ is first and foremost an abstraction of economics, an abstraction without feelings and not the anxiety-stricken individual who haunts the social sciences. In place of this, Warde (ibid.: 72-73) defines the consumer through minimum-requirements. Here, the consumer is, (i) someone who chooses to buy something, (ii) wants to buy that something at a good price, (iii) can only want what is for sale, meaning that access is a constraint, and that (iv) have enough money to purchase this
item. To Warde, these are the conditions that warrant talk of the (abstract) individual consumer, arguing how “talking of the consumer is merely to dignify the term ‘shopper’ (ibid.: 66).”

Warde suggests that both Giddens, Beck and Bauman’s propositions on consumption offers far to individualistic accounts of consumers, whose anxieties he suggests is remedied by a number of compensatory ‘mechanisms’, including social contacts, delegation of choices, convention and complacency. Simultaneously, part of Warde’s critique seems to be aligned with what he takes to be the overtly cognitive, individualistic and decisionist models of self that are involved in the ‘consumption as identity’ thesis11.

The gist of the above critique, then, is that theories on consumption, Bauman’s in specific, have a tendency towards the excessive or extravagant, something that should be kept in mind when theorising consumption. In short, there might exist a tendency towards assigning key functions to consumptions meaning or practice, but as will be apparent, we are hard pressed to define consumption via reference to one or two primary purposes. Personally, I find Bauman’s theory sympathetic, but Warde’s critique should, nonetheless, remind us always to consider alternative and opposite reflections on the meaning(s) of consumption.

**Consumption as Concept part II**

Heretofore, I have given a quite lengthy consideration of Bauman’s arguments and voiced a short critique of his consumer diagnosis. In the following, I will progress in a more thematic way, giving voice to the various perspectives on consumption, the consumer and consumer society within the literature - in relation to what has been written on concept explication that “the usefulness of a conceptual definition, therefore, is a function of how effectively the definition suggests attributes or properties that distinguish the concept from other objects (Broom, Casey, and Ritchey 1997: 86).” Through Bauman and Warde, we have already seen some of these possible attributes that are linked to the consumer-concepts, which will now be further developed here, just as the discussion of ‘consumertisation’ will raise the issue of its ‘distinctiveness’ from parallel processes. As a way of processing the literature, this chapter will be devoted to provide a picture of the variety and definitions related to the selected texts. It will introduce many of the different themes and questions that drive the literature and evoking Chaffee’s general idea (1991: 21), a major part of this can be

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11 Somewhat similar critiques of the thesis on ‘consumption as communication’ exist. Campbell (1997), for example, points to the fact that while consumption can be viewed as a form of communication, there are several reasons not to view it exclusively as such, partly because goods have instrumental as well as symbolic meanings and because there is a problem in establishing that people are aware of the meanings they share, how these meanings are agreed upon and the degree of intentionality involved.
thought of as a critical analysis of an accumulated body of research, performing the meaning analysis as it moves along. Furthermore, as a frame of analysis I suggest that there are four primary ways of engaging with the consumption analytically: one, analysing consumption or the consumer in the light of historical developments and changes from one era to another; two, looking at the consumer as a social agent with specific attributes; three, describing the characteristics of contemporary consumer society; and four, analysing the features and influence of consumption. While some of these themes overlap, they are to a large degree different entry points to the on-going analysis of consumers, consumption and the consumer society, which the following analysis will then gradually evolve through.

**Consumption, History**

As we have already seen through Bauman, one side to the story of consumptions’ importance lies in the apparent shift in focus from production to consumption in society (Bauman 2007a). In this way, consumer culture can be understood as a particularly modern phenomenon, which has evolved from being the end-project of production, to taking on a life of its own (Arnould and Thompson 2005: 869). At the same time, though, the world is not without production and it is perhaps more precise to say that production and consumption are parallel processes - that production involves consumption, e.g. of labour, materials or knowledge, and that consumption involves production, e.g. creating labour or knowledge – but that consumption has been privileged. This is partly due to processes of disembedding (Giddens 1991b: 21-29): removing or limiting the direct interactions characterising the productivist era, enabling people to work away from their workplace, buying commodities without physically shopping and characterised by symbolic means and the internet, which has meant that private ‘at-home’ activities has been connected to consumption (cf. Dholakia and Firat 1998: 15) and that our frame of reference has been radically altered, instantiating a growing awareness of how events happening around the world might affect us.

At the same time, a principal feature of contemporary consumption is that it is driven almost exclusively by market relations, where consumers primarily choose between ranges of nearly identical products, which are produced for the sole purpose of economic gain. That is, produced by companies uninterested in needs or cultural value. As a consequence, most brands no longer refer to products, but to the use and context of consumption, with the aim of becoming an immanent component in the consumer milieu (Arvidsson 2005). While differentiating products and aggregating consumers to fit mass consumption used to be the way to go, it may be argued that contemporary consumption is marked by widely similar products and the disaggregating and organising of consumers into segments and target groups, in order to mark and produce lifestyles,
by way of advertising and the media that themselves have also gone from mass to more narrowcast (Slater 1999: 190-91).

Here we sense an image of the commodification of society or, simply, the process where everything is increasingly commodified, but we also grasp how consumption and production are concomitant processes; how every instance of consumption is inscribed with production and vice versa - reflecting how we might say that “any definition of what consumption and production are, their distinction, depends purely upon the meaning of value (Dholakia and Firat 1998: 13).” While the understanding of consumption used to be based on it being the end-product of production, these boundaries are increasingly blurred.

Moreover, historically consumption was not so much about identity as about object. But another change that appears to have happened is a shift from object-orientation to identity-formation, wherein the way people relate to objects of consumption (*sic*) is less concerned with the objects’ physical dispositions (if they have any) than the ephemeral value it has in the moment of consumption. In this way, the discussion of use-value against sign-value is still on-going, with Bauman, as we have seen, following in the wake of Baudrillard, arguing that our choices are governed by sign-value rather than use-value and that this has caused us to enter into a symbolic social competition, in a way that makes advertising become a crotch for the besieged shopper and heightens the experience of ambivalence that we discussed in regards to the modernity-analysis by Beck, Giddens and Bauman.

The Consumer

This study started from the suspicion of the consumer as an ever-present social category, a haunting identity that could not be evaded even if trying. And so it appears, most of the scholars dealing with consumer studies and the sociology of consumption are, perhaps for obvious reasons, indebted to the idea that ‘the consumer’ is a dominant social category. For outsiders to the field this might not be so - and ‘the consumer’ reverts back into being, e.g., a person, a potential consumer or a human being (cf. McCaughan 2012; Groes 2013) - but for the majority of scholars, focus is on the particular traits that describe the modern consumer, or what the consumer does in consuming.

Accordingly, a range of attributes have been ascribed to the consumer. In a schematic accounting of these, Sassatelli (2007: 42), for example, summarises the many different identities coupled to the consumer into eight categories, mentioning the sovereign, entrepreneur, snob, imitator, slave, collector, flâneur and rebel, while Gabriel and Lang (2006) introduce the consumer through nine personas, as chooser, communicator, explorer, identity-seeker, hedonist or artist, victim, rebel, activist and citizen. This way of establishing the attributes of the consumer is born
with the inherent possibility that some of these categories are mutually exclusive, meaning that the consumer may, for example, either be a sovereign or a slave. But while it is for another study to decide which, how or whether these identities are mutually exclusive, there is an interesting associated theme of establishing how these identities are awarded that can be understood in two different yet connected ways. First, these consumer personas are theoretical constructs, used to describe archetypes, explain consumer behaviour and relate this to, e.g., motivations, intentions and values. Second, they might be seen as personas that consumers can use or exploit, which plays into the idea that individuals have, or may employ, a number of different social identities, as described by Hogg and Michell (1996: 632):

When individuals have a number of different social identities or "me's" or social roles, some of which are partly constituted by their acts as consumers of goods and services, there is no necessity for congruency between the roles and positions, and thus it cannot necessarily be expected that there will be congruency across all their consumption choices. However, consumption choices and anti-choices which can be linked to the enactment of particular roles would be expected to display functional or symbolic complementarity. The implication of this is clear for marketing — particularly in considering marketing and communications strategies — because earlier consumption choices would be expected to form the context for, and influence the outcome of, later consumer decisions.

In relation to the many possible identities of the consumer, one interesting dimension is the weight people put on their tastes (understood in a Bourdieuan way) in places like personal ads, their social media profiles or when introducing themselves. This is not to suggest that people are defined by their tastes, but that taste has become an immediate way of framing who we are (Campbell 2004: 30-31), which also indicates, alongside the above identities, that the consumer at one level is an ‘unnatural’ or cultural category. While we have always consumed, consuming has changed, making needs, uses and ultimately the identity of our consumption-practices culturally defined (Slater 1999: 147). The extreme argument here leads to people being defined by what they purchase, while a less extreme version is argued for by Campbell (2004: 32), saying that we do not buy identity, but that we discover it by exposing ourselves to objects of consumption. Ultimately, the point about the consumer is that s/he is caught somewhere between the ultimately rational agent of the homo economicus and the slave or irrational fool, who again oft-most is an idealised figure without any reference to the most common demographics. The consumer then, according to Fine (2005: 293), is far from a passive recipient of the meaning of objects of consumption and is active in creating that meaning. But the consumer is not liable to be able to command a monopoly in doing so, not least because the meaning is both internalized from without (what does consumption mean to the consumer?) and interpreted by others (experts and retailers and not least in consumption for display).

Reminiscent of Stuart Hall, there is then also an element of encoding/decoding, with consumption as a form of labour and potentially as a form of resistance, where people can play with the meaning
of things, use them in personal or subversive ways, flaunt contradictory meanings and make sight a site of struggle.

A defining trait assigned to the consumer seem to be that it is, to a large degree, up to the consumers themselves to produce a context for consumption, which makes the activity of consumption meaningful, creating the legitimacy assigned to use-value (cf. Arvidsson 2005: 242). We then find that there is a duality to consumption, which is both the train driving the previously discussed ‘crisis of identity’ - or ambivalence - and the very activity individuals use to mend or resolve this issue. One particular salient issue with the consumer, then, is that analysis of the consumer tends to be caught in a matrix between multiple identities and the question of what actually qualifies as consumption.

Heretofore, to search for a single definition of the consumer seems to be an unviable position (cf. Wilk 2004; Gabriel and Lang 2006; Miller 2010). Instead, to limit the uncertainty provoked by the unsound image of the consumer, we might go back to the discussion of consumer-attributes, settling by reference to Gabriel and Lang (2006; 2008) and Gabriel (2011), who points to some of the ‘conflicting images’ or oppositions that characterise the discussion. Here, one theme is that of the consumer as a chooser. As the story goes, we are at the one hand met by a plethora of choices, expecting to be able to pick and choose valuable alternatives in just about any realm of life; meaning that consumer choice and consumer attitudes to many are as present in regards to universities as they are at the supermarket (Sassatelli 2007: 41; Askegaard 2009). On the other hand, the absence of habit, which is arguably an effect of the profusion of consumer choice and people’s expectations of choice-availability, can be costly, with the cognitive burden of choosing between comparable products, on the basis of scarce information, with the knowledge of alternative options and the knowing expectation that one should be able to legitimise one’s choices lurking. It all then comes down to the consumer as someone who wants to be able to be a chooser, but frequently opts for the habitual-choice, alleviating the agony of choice but reassured by its possibility.

Another key contradiction to the understanding of the consumer is that of rational/emotional, with the rational consumer most frequently connected to economics - a calculating male figure, who weigh up the facts before a decision is made – existing in opposition to the emotional consumer - a female figure prone to involving gut-feeling and caprice in regards to
consumer choice ((Dholakia and Firat 1998: 17; Slater 1999: 54)\textsuperscript{12}. And yet, in reality we will find that neither of these consumer-prototypes are in fashion. To the contrary, the consumer appears to be someone who honour value-for-money \textit{and} are affected by the emotional value of certain consumer objects, a duality played upon and captured in much advertising.

The above opposition speaks to other similar ones, e.g. sovereign versus dependent or \textquoteleft the dupe\textquoteright{} versus \textquoteleft the rational hero\textquoteright{}, oppositions that, again, are mostly abstractions. While the consumer in one sense – due to his or her primary function related to choice – is the ultimate sovereign figure, s/he is also persistently indebted to support and protection, as the logic – and the ingredients, origins, the benefits and dangers – behind the consumer goods of today tend to escape even the most vigilant consumers.

Still referring to Gabriel and Lang, other conflicting images are, for example, the individualist versus tribalist, the conformist versus the rebel and the meaning-seeker versus the devourer, all of which are images connected to the discussion surrounding the relationship between identity-construction and consumption. Hence, in a time where ordinary has a sad ring to it, the rebel, or what might in the language of marketing be referred to as innovator or change-agent, has become an ideal, just as it has become an absolute ideal to be unique - an individual fashioning distinct tastes that becomes the signifiers of identity. Yet, as is also oft-mentioned in Bauman, this particular kind of individualism, with its sometimes subtle sometimes distinct badges of fashion or interests signalling group membership, is reminiscent of Maffesoli’s (1996) neo-tribes, which Bauman defines as a principal form of resistance to consumer anxiety, simultaneously providing support for the inimitable individual and stabilising identity by providing some kind of group membership.

All in all, a prominent feature of consumption is that of communicating. As such, it is commonplace to make inferences about people based on their consumption, a tendency apparent in everything from popular TV-shows like ‘kender du typen’, to the identification of segments and target-groups in advertising and the development of slogans like the Danish furniture-retailer Bolia’s ‘The Spaces We Create Are Who We Are’. This function of consumption is, of course, also something we as consumers may play upon, and just as objects of consumption are used to proffer our identity or eventual uniqueness, they are used as displays for external messaging. This feeds

\textsuperscript{12} Showingly, this relationship between men and women has, as Dholakia and Firat (1998: 19) mention, been the axis of another issue, with women to this day being devalued for being consumers, while their consumption at the same time has been quintessential to economic growth - a GNP-paradox.
into questions of ambiguity and ambivalence, the meaning of consumption and the individual consequences, important to the later analysis of consumption’s place and influence.

Importantly, what is obvious from the above is that consumer identity is examined in a diverse, at times contradictory, number of ways. What is significant to take from this, then, is that the understanding of the consumer, how s/he is framed, bespoken or the means s/he is supposedly in possession of are tremendously important for the understanding of said consumer. This is not least so, as it entails differences ranging between using consumption as a way of presenting oneself or trying to find your *self* through consumption; being a supreme rational being, aware of pros and cons or being manipulated, dominated or outwitted by, e.g., the advertising industry and in need of protection and guidance; or using consumption as a chariot of gratification.

**Consumer Society**

At present, the above leads to a consideration of the consumer society and one of the initial questions that the work on this thesis sprung from, namely that if we are trying to observe consumer society, what are we then trying to observe? This question has strong ties to Chaffee’s framework, with one of concept explication’s primary features being to enable us to know “whether an event we encounter is an instance of that concept or not (Chaffee 1991: 30).” While I do not believe in framing (Goffman 1974; Gitlin 2003 [1980]) the consumer-concepts in a way that definitively lets us know ‘what to look for’, as I have argued by reference to Blumer, there is a lot to be said about the character of the ‘consumer society’ and the way it is described through the literature.

In the below, I will consider the above question, by enquiring into the characteristics that merit talk of a consumer society. Primarily, this involves discussing an apparent deepened and widening engagement with consumption, but it also entails examining the reasons for engaging in consumption as such. All in all, the reason for even talking of a ‘consumer society’ is the argument that our society is a particular variant, which is characterised by consumption, even if the meaning of this may be somewhat opaque. Thus, the idea that ours is a society characterised by the primacy of consumption requires qualification and nuance, which the below sets out to provide. The consumer society awards us a subject, but to what degree this subject is free to do as pleased, how it might go about consuming and what this consuming might entail is simply not self-evident.

**Consumer Society, Consequences and Success**

There are numerous variants of the ‘successes’ of consumer society. One is undoubtedly its ability to adopt or usurp any subversion aimed at delegitimising or subverting it, turning, for example, subcultures like punk into fashion or making the contemporary pursuit of ‘authenticity’ into a
search driven by individuals, who must follow the latest (consumer) trends in their appetite for, e.g.,
urban gardening, new Nordic cuisine or crossfit (cf. Potter 2010). Another consequence is that of
the marketization of politics, with politics and public institutions being met by the scrutiny of the
consumer, whose expectations are informed by their engagement with consumables. The
preeminent feature of the consumer society, though, seems to be alterations in the relationship
between consumption, social practice and what it means to be human. Not only may we infer from
the idea of a consumer society or culture that identity, ideals and hopes are directed more towards
consumption than waning categories like citizenship, work, religion or official status, we may also
suggest that the practice of consumption and our ambitions as consumers are the only remedy to
give us a sense of direction (Slater 1999: 24).

As a way to verbalise consumer society, Slater (1999: 24-32) iterates seven markers
that may help us recognise consumer culture. First, these include that it is a culture of consumption,
suggesting, as written above, that it is permeated by consumption, which ultimately borders on
becoming a value in its own right. That is, consumer culture is the culture of consumer society.
Second, it is dominated by market society, wherein goods are produced almost solely for a market
purpose. This is a determining feature of society in which, reminiscent of Bourdieu, material and
cultural values become primary structuring forces, with consumers becoming a product of the
economic regulation that the market has come to be the primary means of achieving. Third, these
market relations are in principle anonymous and impersonal, meaning that products are generally
not personalised but created to a consumer (subject), who as a rule becomes objectified, profiled
and targeted as a persona in a market segmentation analysis, leaving it to advertising to make the
impersonal pertinent. Furthermore, it is universal in the double sense that while we formally are
virtually unrestricted in our consumer choice, there are also no restrictions on what might become a
consumable. Just about anything, from objects to social relationships, may be exchanged as articles
of consumption. As Slater (1999: 27) puts it: “the right and ability to be a consumer is the
ideological birthright of the modern subject” before adding the addendum “while consumer culture
appears universal because it is depicted as a land of freedom in which everyone can be a consumer:
this particular freedom is compulsory. It is by and large through commodities that everyday life,
and the social relations and identities that we live within it, are sustained and reproduced.” As such,
similar to Bauman’s analysis, Slater points to the changed role of consumption as a central
secularization connected to the modern world, with everything holding the potential of becoming a
commodity. Fourth, one way to understand what being a consumer in consumer society means
could be to translate this with ‘s/he who chooses’, that is, a primary feature of consumer society is
the importance put on consumer choice being a private act, creating consumer sovereignty as the image of freedom. In this way, a characteristic feature of consumer society is the way freedom has been equated with private choice. Consequently, this settles ‘the consumer framework’ within certain Enlightenment ideals of private, individual freedom. But at the same time it completely removes talk of the public good, societal consequences, solidarity or authority, by restricting choice to affect only the individual. Framed as a question by Slater (1999: 28): “if individuals define their own interests, how can society hold together?”

Fifth, needs in consumer society are characterised by being ever unfulfilled – something which may principally question their lexical meaning (can a need be a need if it is impossible to fulfil?). There are always new commodities to be consumed or desired and while this insatiability might have been referred to as decadence, corruption or sin in another society, this is not the case in the consumer society, with economic order being built upon incessant needs. To this end, a paradox of consumer society might be drawn to the fore, namely that while the ideal for society and liberal economics is rationality, discipline and work ethic, society is structurally dependent upon irrational desires, instant gratification and insatiable needs. Sixth, as have been pointed to elsewhere, consumer culture has become a medium for the construction and negotiation of identity in a society where social position is no longer handed to the individual automatically. While appearance may have lost some of its meaning in relation to differentiations of class, consumption practices have become a centre for communication. As stated by Sassatelli (2007: 195): “Consumer culture is constituted as a culture both for consumers and of consumers: both a set of commodities for people to consume and a set of representations of people as consumers.”

Seventh, with the destabilisation of status and meaning (Baudrillard), which have become malleable and exceedingly negotiable, clothing and appearance in general has, for example, become a major source for strategic action related to future possibilities and the values we want to show off. To this analysis: clothes, at least to some degree, make people. In this way, consumption becomes central to the creation of, e.g., autonomy and subjectivity, but it also establishes the creation of identity through consumption as a primary site for strategic action from institutional actors. This, of course, summons the constant debate over the consumers’ status and whether we are

13 Or to quote Williams: “The consumer asks for an adequate supply of personal ‘consumer goods’ at a tolerable price: over the last ten years, this has been the primary aim of British government. But users ask for more than this, necessarily. They ask for the satisfaction of human needs which consumption, as such can never really supply. Since many of these needs are social – roads, hospitals, schools, quiet – they are not only not covered by the consumer ideal: they are even denied by it, because consumption tends always to materialize as an individual activity (1980: 186).”
manipulated or free, sovereigns or dupes. As such, Slater identifies consumption as a primary feature of contemporary society and culture.

For Slater, as for Bauman, it is clear that a primary feature of consumer society is that a consequence of being a consumer is that you are at risk of becoming a consumable at the same time. In this line of thought, it is equally noteworthy how it is possible to argue that culture itself has become a consumable (Dholakia and Firat 1998: 110), meaning that as everything has become marketed, artefacts come to represent a culture even to the original members of said culture. In its ultimate consequence, we do not recreate culture; instead, culture is created through or by consumption, just as our self-image and the imagined communities that are the nation-states. Or to draw the debate into the realm of the cognition curricula, the narrative schemas that have been described as part of our viewing and appreciating of films (Branigan 1992), but is part our general system of understanding, are heavily influenced by a consumer ideology given that virtually all social settings through our cognitive biases are read into a consumerist agenda, framed in relation to Slater’s above distinctions. In this way, a major position in the literature is that the consequence of consumer society is that it is no longer the citizen but the consumer that society is directed towards and that our social relationships, expectations and general understanding are moulded to fit this model of consumption. As written by Dholakia and Firat (1998: 63):

Modernity established and entrenched the market as the most important and, in its later stages, the sole legitimizing force in society. The market played a central role in the legitimation of the modern capitalist consumption pattern, which developed in ways that enlarged the market and extended it into more and more facets of human life. […] One by one, every activity performed in the home that could be called “productive,” became substituted by a marketable product.

Thus, the market may be understood as the sole legitimising force in society, a pattern developed as a historical by-product. In this view people are consumers by definition, consumers who must make sure to be marketable.

**Need and Want**

A central part to the debate over consumers and consumer society hinges on the status and meaning that is awarded to the motivations behind consumption; whether need or want is consumption’s central premise. As the story goes, consumption tended primarily to be about the satisfaction of needs, for example, the need for food, clothing, shelter or security. Hence, until quite recently, these - mostly physiological - needs were of central importance, with wanting reserved for the powerful or monetarily proficient, reminiscent of Veblen. This meant that there were limits to most peoples’ wanting - we were in possession of a consumptive capacity - but it also meant a certain order to things, which had to be produced and had an expected endurability. Today, on the other hand, it
seems safe to assume that there has been a change for a majority of the affluent populations, who, while still in possession of certain key needs that will not disappear, have relegated basic needs to the ranks of hygiene-factors, expected to being fulfilled on a daily-basis.

The story of the rhetorics and discourses on need and want is a complex one, which characterises much of the debate on the modern consumer (cf. Campbell 1998; Campbell 2004). With society’s increased affluence, many scholars argue that for a majority in modern society we would be hard pressed to find basic needs. So while consumption may originally have been constituted as a somewhat passive activity, primarily directed towards maintaining life, its modern variant holds, as we have seen, variants of determining, controlling or deciding the course of life and its higher purposes. Here, a game changer in the dispute between the importance of needs and want is the sheer amount of products. Even if equipped with a simple need, the contemporary amount of products makes it hard to act intuitively in accordance with this need. Instead, in modern consumer society consumers are forced to decide, which of the products they need, they want. Consequently, the fulfilment of needs almost always entails being confronted by the question of want. Consumer society is, so to say, geared to the gratification of wants:

most, if not all, of the products that we have purchased, and which now fill our homes […] are only really there because at some time we ‘wanted’ them. In that particular sense their presence in our world is the direct outcome or result of our emotional state, specifically of our desire (Campbell 2004: 38).

At the same time, though, the gratification of needs is awarded with a legitimacy or justification, which the gratification of wants cannot expect to meet. So while commodities are essential to our daily lives, we are constantly engaged in process of de-commodification to make our activities meaningful, to enrol products in a structure of need. As Sassatelli argues, defining consumer society along the way (2007: 5):

If the consumer society is that in which daily needs are satisfied in a capitalist way through the acquisition of commodities, it is also that in which each consumer has to constantly engage in re-evaluating these objects beyond their price, in order to stabilize meanings and social relation.

Desiring an object that we do not need, we are, accordingly, left to employ a strategy that legitimises our consumption. As Campbell (1998: 242) writes, this principally leaves the consumer with two coping-strategies: “either they can invent or ‘discover’ a need rationalization to legitimize a want-based purchase […] or they can redefine the situation as one in which want gratification is permissible.” While there is a paradox hidden in the way want gratification is the principal function of consumption, while need gratification is it legitimate form, what Campbell points to is that a defining character of consumer society is how consumers are trained in satisfying wants when gratifying needs - not only are they able to eat the cake, they can have it too.
The strategic relief from needs may then be connected to how we have gotten to expect and depend on instant gratification, a function that has transformed the relationship between wanting and waiting, altering the limits set to our natural - or even acquired - needs with the result that “[t]he traditional relationship between needs and their satisfaction is reversed: the promise and hope of satisfaction precedes the need promised to be satisfied and will be always greater than the extant need - yet not too great to preclude the desire for the goods which carry that promise (Bauman 1999a: 37).”

This reading of the contemporary link between need and want sets the scene for a consumer environment that is primarily concerned with the gratification of wants and secondarily the meeting of needs. This is significant to discussions of individuality or even individualisation. For while needs generally are objectively established, wants are by their very nature identified subjectively, as Campbell (2004: 29) suggests: “when it comes to wanting only the ‘wanter’ can claim to be an ‘expert’.” In the consumer society, then, individuals are the only authority in regards to their own wants, which are primary, as there is no disputing about tastes.

This focus on wants are fully noticeable in ‘personal ads’, where people describe themselves in order to seek out a partner and do so through describing their personalised tastes (Campbell 2004: 31-32). In fact, Campbell suggests that the reason for doing so is that it is our taste, our profile of wants and desires, that we feel defines and differentiates us most visibly or unmistakeably. This is not to argue that we, in any strict sense, are defined by our ‘interests’, but that it is our personalised pattern of want, desire and taste that provides the clearest guide to our individuality. Through this argument, Campbell actually counters some of the theses on consumptions’ relation to identity, as he argues that consumers discover their identity through their preferences instead of deriving it from their purchases. Basically, Campbell argues that taste, instead of, e.g., nationality, family or ethnicity, is the primary feature that lets us connect to who we are, mending the problem of identity. To Campbell, wanting, unlike needs, then propels self-realisation, making the question of consumption be about being instead of buying, with consuming providing the emotional response, which underlies the quest for meaning that is a primary driver for individuals in this day and age.

Campbell’s analysis goes partially against a number of other analyses – Bauman’s for one - which identifies modern consumption and the change in emphasis from need to want as directly involved in the waning importance of the citizen, the public sphere and problems of human agency, much like the analysis by Dholakia and Firat (1998: 138), who argues that
A major reason for the confusion regarding human agency is that in modernity agency was so much linked to the “productive” and “creative” actions of individuals, performed in the public sphere. As consumption increasingly takes center stage and individuals act as consumers and are treated as consumers in most of their relations, including the political and social domains, their ability to act as agents (for themselves) comes into question.

In this sense, human agency is confused because the meaning of consumption has shifted. Hence, essential to the above is that a change from need gratification to want gratification in regards to the motivations behind consumption seems to be yet an important trait to consumer society. This is in sync with the surrounding society and the trend of marketization: while needs are obvious – I rarely doubt if I am hungry or cold – wants are synthetic.

To this end, the distinction between needs (original and biologically determined) and wants (induced needs), has been a forceful component of many a theory – Marxist or Frankfurt school - wanting to show that power plays a central role in the desiring of goods. Here we become slaves of commodities, if we go beyond our needs. For the consumer, though, the distinction between needs and wants are somewhat woollier. Not only could we imagine situations where the want of, for example, an item of clothing could trump the need for the daily intake of nutritious food, perhaps because the clothing-item is needed on another level (cf. Dholakia and Firat 1998: 23). At the same time, the hard distinction between need and want, which aligns want on the side of irrationality, goes against many anthropological studies, which have revealed that “concepts such as functionality, necessity or scarcity are culturally and historically constructed, and that this process of symbolic construction is ingrained in the genesis and the satisfaction of human needs (Sassatelli 2007: 78-79).”

As such, in the consumer society it is hard to say what the consumer truly needs or wants, with the declining importance, or visibility, of needs in the affluent societies. Simultaneously, needs have been taken to market, with, e.g., fitness or the whole ‘back to nature trend’ complete with ‘paleo diet’, roof-top gardening, TV-programs like Bonderøven, Ultimate Survival or River Cottage and a lifestyle practice of ‘simple living’, guiding the consumer to ever new needs promising to deliver a long(er) and better life. Here it is plain to see how the distinction between need and want is under pressure, or simply how want has gained the upper-hand, as fitness like ‘getting back to nature’ is firmly grounded by reference both to consumers wants - aspirational, bodily and self-image wise - but also to their needs, through getting in touch with nature and providing properly for the body-cum-temple through nutrition. In this way, it is argued that the primary driver for consumption is no longer need but want or desire, which may then be legitimised by reference to need, a change that is characteristic of consumer society.
The Influence of Consumption

Today's organizations as well as Western societies are dominated by the cult of the consumer – the consumer is no longer an outsider to the world of organizations, but a palpable presence, whose desires and tastes dominate what goes on in most workplaces. Nor is the consumer absent from the world of public sector organizations, hospitals, universities, schools and even government bureaucracies, as they increasingly address their constituents as customers, seeking to offer them excitement, pleasure and choice. Our society is gradually dominated by what Ritzer calls cathedrals of consumption, settings which "allow, encourage, and even compel us to consume so many of those goods and services." (Ritzer, 1999, p. 2). These settings include theme parks, cruise ships, casinos, tourist resorts, hotels, restaurants and above all shopping malls. The idea of cathedrals of consumption suggests their quasi-religious, enchanted qualities of spiritual renewal, accomplished in spaces where children and adults can allow fantasy to run free, to become reality (Gabriel 2011).

The central theme of the above, and the one legitimising this thesis, is the importance awarded to consumption, its impact on theory, people and society alike, and the discussion of its pervasive or permeating character. As for explication, consumption, at one end of a scale, exists as yet a common-sense concept, one that needs no further explanation, not to say explication. That is, consumption is self-evident, an activity we all participate in, something natural. This to a degree, where it could be argued that the workings of consumption are severely involved in the constitution of social order, suggesting how the use and workings of consumption - its 'rituals and meanings'- are often portrayed or understood as “reflecting a pre-existing social reality (Slater 1999: 152).” But unlike the commonplace view of, for example, economy, which has developed through the dichotomy and analysis of supply and demand, our understanding of consumption would only be partially complete, if we by focusing on the demand of goods were to ignore its symbolic value, how commodities are meaningful, and consumptions influence on society.

One way to look at the ‘naturalness’ of a phenomena is, by reference to Lakoff (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 2003), to look at its metaphorical use, an analysis that Wilk (2004) has conducted in relation to consumption through the use of cognitive linguistics (see also Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 1996). To Wilk consumption is characterised by a number of metaphors, just as society is characterised by consumption. The use of metaphors is explained by a human tendency to ground the abstract by relating it to the physical world, making concepts meaningful by reference to direct experience. Wilk’s analysis helps us to understand the opacity of the consumer-concepts, as he describes how consumption is both a radial and a graded category, both a category with a prototype in the middle, which different forms of consumption refer to without necessarily referring to each other - and a category where some activities seem more like consumption than others. From this understanding, He (ibid. 15-19) illuminates three metaphors that are distinctive for the understanding of consumption: consumption is death, consumption is fire and consumption is eating. First, the consumption is death metaphor is described as an economic metaphor, based on the cycle production-use-discard, which in the economist version turns into production-exchange-
consumption, the main point being that there is nothing beyond the point of consumption, making the process leading up to consumption of primary importance. Second, through the consumption is fire metaphor, a metaphor we have previously encountered, Wilk explains how consumption is born with a dual nature, being both destructive and useful, explaining consumption’s kinship with gluttony, sin, corruption on one hand and the link between consumption, prosperity, keeping the engine going and growth on the other. As Wilk (ibid.: 17) describes this metaphor, it “tells us that people consume what they are given; the rich consumer more than the poor because they have more fuel,” a description that, again, emphasise how high consumption equals a high standard of living. Third, the consumption is eating metaphor gives us a sense of consumption as a radial and graded category. Taking eating as the prototype of consumption, inscribing consumption in a cycle that starts with hunger and ends with defecating, it not only explains why some instances of consumption seem more like consumption than others, it may also explain the difficulty of inscribing immaterial consumption as real consumption because it (usually) neither has an end product nor disappears as waste. Moreover, this metaphor makes sense in regards to the discussion of desire, which Wilk (ibid.: 18) compare to hunger, as both are ‘feelings’ that can only be satisfied by consuming. Post-consumption our needs (wants) are satisfied for a moment, before hunger (desire) sets in again, meaning that the cycle of hunger (desire), finding and preparing (shopping), chewing (buying), digesting (using) and excreting (discarding) can begin again. Importantly, Wilk points to the moral ambiguity that is part of consumption in all its disguises: how it seduces, how lack of consumption equals starvation, how the poor may be accused of misspending (irrationally) buying stuff like televisions and how the prominence of the metaphor means that

Anyone who would voluntarily choose poverty is someone who will allow their children to go hungry when good food is put before them; insane if not criminal. As long as Consuming is Eating, it is hard to imagine any mass movement towards metaphorical anorexia (ibid.: 21). Wilk’s analysis of the metaphor related to eating, flags the question of human agency in consumption. While eating is a biological necessity, a consequence of physiological needs, our taste and eating-habits are also cultivated. Even in regards to food and hunger, the distinction between need and want, nutritive value and taste or aesthetics, is something to ponder, a way to question and understand the divide between need and want, to realise that only wanting requires agency and ultimately to understand consumer society.

Reflecting on Consumption

The above has paved its way through the function, meaning, history, different understandings, assumptions and analysis of the consumer concepts. Before explicitly drawing a conclusion and
relating this to the aim of the thesis, a brief reflection and reiteration of some main points might be in order. A common theme has been that consumption plays an extraordinarily large part at every level of society; that the consumer model is occupying every level of imagination to a degree where we might say “that the underlying metaphysics of consumerism has in the process become a kind of default philosophy for all modern life (Campbell 2004: 42).” On an individual level this means, as if in reference to all the classic texts, that goods are described as building blocks used for social climbing, status display, their basic nature being to differentiate (Slater 1999: 153). As such, they have gone from solely being objects, to functioning through their material properties, serving as makers of identity, objects of communication i.a. But in contemporary consumption lies the danger, which Sennett (2002 [1977]) pointed to a number of decades ago, that the motivations behind consumption has gone from social mimicry and convention, with people consuming goods solely for the reasons mentioned above, to believing that they might locate their ‘real selves’ through consumption, awarding consumer society the ironic position of its inhabitants looking for something real in the synthetic. Moreover, we might speculate that consumer society has tipped the balance between public and private in a manner reminiscent of the modernity-analysis by Beck, Giddens and Bauman. In all eventualities, and contrary to some beliefs, the problem seems to me not to be the withering of private-space but the disappearance of the public, as all problems are gradually becoming individual problems (cf. Bauman 2000: 70; Sennett 2002). This seems to be in line with the standards of the autotelic consumer society, functioning as a way to automatically accelerate its purpose.

On a societal level, focusing on consumption seems to result in dual-processes involving the commodification of private and public spheres alike. In the analysis of consumer society, this commodification is often taken to be tightly connected to the general construction of GNP, and the link between society’s development and consumer-action (Dholakia and Firat 1998; Slater 1999; Bauman 2008; Bauman 2012). To this end, theorists point to how society’s capitalism is a function of society servicing the encounter between commodity and consumer; how it is systematically dependent on the insatiability of needs; how consumers have a moral responsibility to keep the wheels of society going; and how the measurement of happiness is oft-connected to the rise of GNP. In short, the health of the economy has become the purpose of society, as consumption has become primary to a degree where anyone who does not contribute (by consuming) should ‘rightly’ feel on the outside. Consumption - and not scientific technologies or the control over nature – is framed as the key to improving lives. In one way, then, consumer society has replaced society per se, meaning, to quote Slater (1999: 23), that “the use of the term ‘consumer culture’ can
indicate the reduction of the broad social ideal of civil society to the mere pursuit of wealth, the cult of GNP.” Paradoxically, we have seen how consumption has become individualised, while at the same time realising that consumption has become the dominant category in society; established how the greater good is at danger of disappearing, while social cohesion is bound to our hopefully insatiable needs; speculated how consumption is an individual act, when we simultaneously use it to position us in relation to others.

**Partial Conclusion**

In the above, I have discussed and analysed the conceptualisation of consumption. The aim of the analysis and the methodological considerations, based on Chaffee’s concept explication, was not so much to locate a single meaning or objective category to describe or settle the consumer-concepts within. Rather, it was to discuss and reflect on these concepts as sensitising and understand the meaning they are ascribed for a critical evaluation to take shape. To me, this meant loosening Chaffee’s framework, something that might be seen as a consequence of my agreement with Wilk’s argument that “[a]ny enterprise that sets out to find an objective category of consumption as a simple category of objects or activities that is ‘out there’ as a bounded and measurable group, is doomed from the start (Wilk 2004: 24).”

Loosening the aim of concept explication and understanding the above in the light of Blumer’s sensitising concepts, I have attempted to strike a balance between wildly generalising statements and clarity - while understanding the concepts as terms with academic, cultural and historical backgrounds. To follow Chaffee as far as possible, I present the conceptualisation of the consumer-concepts in a schematic form in table I (see appendix), which will serve as important back-ground considerations in relation to the coming argument for consumertisation. Furthermore, by reference to table I, I suggest two things: first, that we can view the ‘meaning’ of consumption as oriented oft-most towards one specific conceptualisation, but that there, simultaneously, is no single conceptualisation that can pretend to cover all of its meanings (see table II)14; and, second, that we can propose how the conceptualisation surrounding contemporary consumption is best understood as a supplement to the meta-processes of globalisation, mediatisation, individualisation and commercialisation, a preliminary argument being offered near the end of the thesis.

14 Readers should note that there are a number of similarities between the conceptualisations I present in table II. Nonetheless, these conceptualisations have been chosen as I believe their central properties to be essentially different.
TABLE II: distilled list of conceptualizations related to the meaning of consumption

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptualization</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consumption as communication</td>
<td>consumption is principally about communication, with consumers employing consumer goods as signs instead of things as a way to communicate meaning to others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption as identity</td>
<td>consumption is essential to identity-formation and reformation and as a way for consumers to show off their personality to others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption as becoming</td>
<td>consumption is connected to being, as it creates the subject and/or offers the consumer a realisation of who s/he is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption as belonging</td>
<td>consumption is fundamentally about status and consumers consume in order to establish group-membership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption as freedom</td>
<td>consumption is in effect about freedom, which is characterised by the subject’s private ability to exercise consumer choice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption as symbolic circulation</td>
<td>consumption is above all characterised by the appearance of goods and not their functional use-value - a matter of responding to and creating semiotic instead of functional needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption as use-value</td>
<td>consumption is basically about the function or instrumental use of objects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption as labour</td>
<td>consumption is a form of labour, as it produces and secures the continuation of itself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption as economic value</td>
<td>consumption is central to the triumph of economic value as the primary value in society, where everything symbolically if not literally is considered saleable.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the above, we may, in an attempt to follow Chaffee, suggest an all-encompassing definition related to ‘the meaning of consumption’, which, if nothing else, speaks both to the immensity of the topic and the futility of its role as a definitive concept. Here, it can then be suggested that nowadays consumption is characterised by versatility, as a tool for communication, identity-formation, becoming or belonging, regarded as symbolic circulation, but not without regard for the instrumentality of objects. Connecting freedom to consumer choice, consumption is, furthermore, essential for the subsistence of consumers and consumer society alike, linking consumption to the primacy of economic value. This is reflected in regards to consumers, who may be perceived through a multitude of identities ranging from identity seeker, to gratifier of needs i.a., but who may essentially be conceptualised as s/he who chooses, meaning that the subject is inherently to be considered a consumer. In addition, consumers may be understood through a fading orientation towards needs that have been substituted by wants or desire, even though choice is still legitimised through needs-based logics. Consumer society, then, delineates how consumption has become a dominant social activity in society, which encourage the consumption of material goods and where culture has become permeated by consumption with the result that the distinction between chosen and choosers, commodity and consumer, has become increasingly blurred. Geared towards the gratification of wants, consumer society addresses its inhabitants through consumer logics that severely affect social relationship, self and institutions alike.
5. Implications

After our endeavour to understand the conceptualisation of consumption, I suggest to take a step back and consider the above in relation to the topics of rationality and advertisement, both of which have been key topics in the contemporary theorising on consumption. Given that the above suggest that consumption has gradually been awarded a more dominant place in society, the two excursus will allow for some perspective before we turn to the final argument on consumertisation.

Excursus I: Choice and Rationality

Among the many themes in the consumer literature it is the argument about the consumer’s status that has functioned as the central debate for the study of consumption: whether the consumer is best understood as liberal hero or a dupe, rational man or irrational fool. At bottom, the debate on rationality is a complex one, which is beyond the scope of this thesis, but the questions it asks in relation to consumers and consumer society are more straightforward, e.g. on the dichotomy between rational and irrational consumption, whether consumers are free or determined, and to what degree rationality, emotions or intentionality are tied to our choices?

We have already met a number of consumer-images, including those of the consumer as identity-seeker, dupe and rational hero. The latter, of course, is an archetype to liberal economy, often known as homo economicus, where he (sic) is an agent in the study of formal rationality related to the consumer as decision-maker. The picture of the consumer who is pursuing self-defined interests through the market, which coordinates but does not compromise the independence of the consumer’s choices, is quite common, at least in politics and economics. However, in regards to our understanding of consumer society, or consumers per se, its explanatory powers are limited. The key here is formal rationality, which Slater (1999: 43) defines in opposition to substantive rationality. Whereas formal rationality is concerned with theorizing how actors pursue their (pre-selected) wants and not what it is they want, consumers must be considered substantively, as people with concrete and actual wants. In this way, in opposition to formal rationality, which has been the mark of economists’ theorisation on the consumer, for a number of the above scholars, thinking of consumer society is established as a form of cultural analysis, which dismisses formal rationality entirely.

15 Another paradox: While the status of individual choice is almost sacrosanct to liberal economics, closing the world off it has nothing to say on how people arrived at wanting a particular product. Or as Slater (1999: 44) criticizes utilitarianism: “To say that someone bought something because it represented a utility to them adds nothing to our knowledge of why they bought it, what their motives or needs were.”
In contrast to the above is often the dupe - conformist, easily manipulated and whimsical - and within this contrast between hero and dupe we find a key distinction for understanding the understanding of consumers: being an active or a passive chooser, a knowing or unknowing subject. To this end, it is possible to argue that it is a modernist tendency to distrust the masses and that when modernity insisted on the primacy of the human subject it was foremost the knowing subject, an analysis drawn by (Dholakia and Firat 1998: 114), who argue that modernist thinkers therefore do not generally trust the majority’s ability to judge and make “rational” choices. As a result, much of modern society is structures to “help” or “guide” the people. […] It is ironic that modern society continually generated ways of making sure that the human being was “controlled” in order not to stray from a “rational” course, given that modernity was founded on the premise of giving the human subject control over her/his destiny.

Similar to the analysis of, for example, Foucault (1991), it may then be argued that an ingredient in (consumer) society is that behaviour (choice) is only free to some degree: an ‘analysis of choice’ to supplement that of Cultural Studies and feminism that favours subcultures and oppositional choices; Beck, Bauman and Giddens, who argue that choice has become compulsion in consumer society; and liberal economics arguing that choice is to be equated with freedom.

From this we may begin to speculate on the status of consumer irrationality. On a very basic level, most consumers at some point or another experience buying something unintended. But does this make it irrational? Or what might an instance of irrational consumption be like, if buying two beers when I only need one isn’t? From their analysis, Dholakia and Firat (1998: 59) speculate on a very specific instance of ‘irrational consumption’, that of the poor aiming to follow dominant consumption behaviour. While affluent households are encouraged to invest in objects that from a needs-based point-of-view are unnecessary or not ‘really’ needed to keep the wheels of society going, developing “according to the needs and success criteria of the business organizations and the affluent social classes”, as Dholakia and Firat put it, the poor are meant to spend their limited income on what is really needed. Again, this irrationality of the poor can be understood in the light of the economist’s rationality, where choices are based on own needs and not on cultural values, the values of society or the choices of others. In opposition to this, Sassatelli (2007: 48) argues how

The first sociological reflections on consumption tried to show that the alternative to such an individualistic, instrumental rationality was not irrationality so much as social rationality. In other words, consumption cannot be simply reduced to one of two extremes of the rational/irrational dichotomy: it cannot be held up as a prototype of cost-benefit calculations which actors make in trying to satisfy their own inner-directed desires, nor can it be liquidated as an example of irrational action, impulsive, other-directed or without purpose.

As Trentman (2005: 8) also points out, rationality and knowledge have been twin categories from early on in the discussion of consumers as dupes or people who make their judgments through knowing their own self-interest. And while the very idea of consumers being able to act rationally
or irrationally may be intuitively appealing, it is confronted by a number of issues like the above. For one, Damasio (2006) showed how rationality is inherently connected to emotions and that our decisions processes does not function (normally) without these, meaning that choice is reflective of emotions shunning the idea of formal rationality. Similarly, Kahneman (2011), with his popularised system I and II, showed how we only rarely use logic in choice-making, instead relying on our intuitions and emotions. If anything, the above tells us that the dichotomy between rationality and irrationality is under pressure; that choice is reflective of something other than rationality; and that, in Giddens apt-phrase, “our consumptive choices are cognitive but also emotional, as they are bound up with anxiety (Giddens and JCC 2003: 397).”

Dholakia and Firat (1998: 37) argued that: “the logical course for the vast majority of us is to buy into the fable of free choice and to consume what is available.” Reminiscent of Kahneman, a truth of consuming is that it is often a rather unreflective process, where we do a lot of our consumption without thinking of ourselves as consumers, a process structured by everything from our condition, physical environment and affluence. At the same time, consuming is also structuring, as our habits and practices of consumption may be understood as performative action, wherein we are created and create ourselves through the eyes of others and by reference to the different roles we have or take upon us. That is, there is intentionality to consumption, but it is one that is heavily tainted by external factors. The consumer is in possession of free choice, but is most often left with preferences when faced by limited available possibilities.

Excursus II: Advertising Space

An oft-described contemporary phenomenon is how a distinctive feature of today’s consumption includes a range of non-material goods, the growth of which is increasing. Among others, these include consultancy, information and entertainment, services aligned with Drucker’s Knowledge Economy or Castell’s Information Society, testifying to the fact that the social has become sellable. At the same time, there has been a surge of aesthetics related to commodities, with packaging, marketing and images gaining a dominant position in the entire journey and consumption of commodities (Slater 1999: 194). In the consumer society, commodities are represented to us. It is commonplace that we come to know of and relate to - even material - products as they are mediated, be it through TV, magazines, the internet or endorsement. Simultaneously, many

16 On a side note: in regards to the mediation of consumption, it may be argued that we are already seeing a progression in consumer society, for example with the rise of second and third screen options, which enables people to be constantly online and consume at multiple levels – instantly and simultaneously.
products have been disembedded from the marketplace, instead appearing in individualised forms, as the technological development gradually has allowed for consumers to consume ‘privately in public’ through smartphones, tablets and the like (Sassatelli 2007: 169).

The dematerialisation of goods is a multifaceted creature that is related to the knowledge industry, which is part and parcel with the post-Fordist society (they are mutually dependent) and brought about together with globalisation. Again, this also entails, and explains, the move from human labour to human resources, as the service industry, as opposite to the age of Fordism, requires person skills; in the analysis of Slater (1999: 195):

As labour you have to sell your personality; this requires work – carried out through consumption – to dress well, look right, be attractive, stay up-to-date on culture, news and fashion. Personality is exemplary of the dematerialized commodity and its culture: what you are, what you sell and what you consume seem to have formed a frightening unity.

In fact, this connection between labour and consumption can be made in various ways. As suggested by Appadurai (1996: 82), consumption can thus be understood as a form of labour, if we concur that a definition of labour is the “disciplined production of the means of consumer subsistence.” Here, the consumer’s work basically consists of learning to desire new products in a particular social environment that plays heavily upon activating fantasy, creating needs and inducing nostalgia.

In line with the above, an interesting problematic is how self, society and the material world are, or have been, envisioned as co-constituting (Miller 2010; Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012: 15). As suggested, it can be argued that a defining trait of (consumer) society, and indeed the reality meeting consumers, is that there are no stable elements available anymore; that the world is liquid (Bauman) or marked by reflexivity (Beck). In this world, a primary function of consumption is to stabilise meaning and fashion projects of identity, which society is no longer able to fulfil. As for the co-constituting relationship, this might make for an interesting discussion, related to technological determinism, for what made this immateriality come about? Ultimately, this is a question for another study, but it opens the discussion of how wants - or desires - are formed? One way is to reiterate how solutions have become tied to consumption in consumer society, to a degree where even the consumer’s fears are convenient, an apt example in the light of the financial crisis:

The concept of risk society is intimately connected to consumption. On the one hand the more risk (perception), the less consumption. On the other hand, anxieties constitute new demands, new markets – even a special kind of market, those which enforce consumption, not free markets, but obligatory markets, in which the producer can dictate high prices. So,
the reflexivity of risk and risk society is getting powerful through the politicization of the consumer and the political consumer is a central figure of subpolitics in risk society (Beck and JCC 2001: 269).

On this topic, the subject of advertising is particularly pertinent in relation to the formation of wants; as a mirror of our times, when it comes to understanding the creation of consumer desire and the consumer society in general. Today a range of commodities that does not ‘make sense’ from a need-perspective, the dematerialisation of consumption and the co-constituting processes of individualisation and globalisation, have created a situation where consumables are expected to fill a gap, to stabilise meaning, while their meaning and use often escape us. It is in this environment that advertising operates, constructing meaning to mend this gap, relating this to the consumer “by placing them within his or her structure of needs, thus inevitably modifying and expanding his or her desires and needs (Sassatelli 2007: 4).” The function of advertising, then, is manifold: to sell products, to comfort the shopper in the moment of decision, to create and recreate meaning and identity, to equate high consumption with high standards of living and to guard consumption against criticism. Or more simply, following Bauman, we might say that the function of advertising is both to create comfort and anxiety.

Already in 1961 Raymond Williams (1980 [1961]) came to the conclusion that advertising had gone from a minor style of communication to a major one, which transformed commodities into glamorous signifiers, as if through a system of magic, creating desires without reference. Commodities became fetishes, donning a symbolic value, presenting an unreal world. Williams argued how advertisement made commodities become embodied, tied simultaneously to body, soul, self-image and aspirations17, while making people forget about production:

If we were sensibly materialist, in that part of our living in which we use things, we should find most advertising to be of an insane irrelevance. Beer would be enough for us, without the additional promise that in drinking it we show ourselves to be manly, young in heart, or neighbourly. A washing-machine would be a useful machine to wash clothes, rather than an indication that we are forward-looking or an object of envy to our neighbours (Williams 1980: 185).

Williams was keen to establish a distinction between the user and the consumer, a distinction between the functional and the symbolic, which he saw advertising obscuring. Moreover, he thought that the metaphor of consumption was a strange way of describing the use of goods and services, but acknowledged the idea of consumption as effective, arguing that “since consumption is within its limits a satisfactory activity, it can be plausibly offered as a commanding social purpose (ibid.: 187).” To Williams it was clear how ‘the right purchases’ could matter for people, who

17 Here, Williams is on par with Barthes (1986), who in his semiotic analysis of modern mythologies, showed how advertising, through a process Barthes referred to a ‘naturalisation’ and structures of connotation, e.g., is able to make femininity a natural property of perfume.
would then be upgraded or held in esteem, but true to his Marxist inheritance, and similar to figures like Marcuse and Adorno, consumerism was considered a form of social control. Nonetheless, Williams’ argument for consumption as magic makes an interesting case to end the discussion of consumption, as it might be argued that the world has turned on Williams and through e.g. Baudrillard, the postmodern turn and the increasing amount of intangible goods, commodities-cum-signifiers are turning out to be the only thing left. The primary function of many commodities, then, may be said to be their signifying power or brand value (cf. Muñiz and O’Guinn 2005).

The study of brand effects have been analysed extensively in cognitive studies, e.g. by showing how priming can activate nonconscious goal pursuit and have motivational effects on consumers, who may then choose prestigious goods (Chartrand et al. 2008) - or how behaviour can be swayed by the display of brands, with people becoming more creative through exposure to the Apple logo as opposite to the IBM logo, more honest through Disney than E! Entertainment logos (Fitzsimons et al. 2008). Besides the obvious conclusion that our choices are less reflective than we might sometimes choose to think, as argued in the previous chapter, the significance of the above is that the meaning of consumables is tremendously important for social cognition, as the commodities we display say something about us both to our surroundings and ourselves.

To take a similar and widely influential example, Belk (1988) wrote an article arguing that we cannot hope to understand consumption behaviour before we understand the meaning consumers attach to their possessions. Simply put, Belk stated that objects are both part of and instrumental in the development of the self. Via a number of empirical studies, Belk argued that consumers regarded their possessions as part of themselves, and set out to understand the function of this extended-self, partly as this could widen our understanding of how consumption influences human existence. Belk’s study raised a number of interesting arguments, his findings, reminiscent of ancient burial rituals and anthropologists’ assumptions that possessions tell the story of their possessor, suggested that besides control over objects, control by objects may also contribute to an item being viewed as part of self. That is, we may impose our identities on possessions and possessions may impose their identities on us. […] Apparently, in claiming that something is ‘mine,’ we also come to believe that the object is ‘me’ (1988: 141).

As a mirror of the discussion related to appearance, Belk also argued how others are an important mirror through which we see ourselves. These others first come to associate possessions and possessor and then, depending upon which is known best, either come to infer the traits of the person from the nature of the possessions or the nature of the possessions from the traits of the person […] (1988: 146).
In short, Belk then argues that possessions in a multitude of ways are essential: as means of storing memories and feelings (148); as means to differentiate or express belonging (153); and to help us manipulate our possibilities (159). To Belk then, the extended-self becomes the individual and vice versa, an analysis that seems to be in accordance with the idea of increased individualisation. The significance of this is aptly phrased by Soron (2010: 179), who wrote how “advertising has come to focus less on the properties of goods, and more on the social and human qualities they embody as part of our ‘extended selves’.”

From the above, it is clear that both in relation to rationality and advertising, and not least in regards to subjects like intentionality, choice and will, it is worth discussing how people are influenced by the role awarded to consumption. How consumption is structuring. Thus, based on the above study I suggest that it is necessary to look at consumption in a new way: as a meta-process on par with globalisation, mediatisation, commercialisation and individualisation.

**Conclusion: A Preliminary Argument for ‘Consumertisation’ as a Meta-Process and Conceptual Frame**

Following the previous analysis and explication, I propose that there is a need for a conceptual frame, which gathers and accounts for the number of explanations and theories on consumption. Thus, in the following I propose ‘consumertisation’\(^\text{18}\) as a 5th meta-process alongside globalisation, individualisation, commercialisation and mediatisation (cf. Krotz 2007: 259). As an echo of Chaffee I, furthermore, suggest that this conceptual frame provides a way to understand the ‘meaning’ of consumption. Due to the limited scope of this thesis and the immensity of the foregoing analysis, I do not pretend to present more than an initial argument, which would require further work to match the density of the theorising done on other parallel meta-processes.

On the topic of mediatisation, Krotz (2007) argues how it, alongside globalisation, individualisation and commercialisation, is best understood as a meta-process; something I argue is equally true for consumertisation. Regarding the distinction between process and meta-process, Krotz (ibid.: 256-57) describes how ‘process’ is customarily descriptive of a temporal and linear sequence related to a certain development comprised of a number of known features. At the same time, he reasons how ‘process’ is not adequate in understanding longer-term developments like the

\(^{18}\) By consumertisation I do not mean ‘consumerisation’, a term describing a trickle-up effect, where information technology emerges in the consumer market before spreading into organizations of business and government (cf. Moschella et al. 2004). Nor do I mean ‘consumerism’, a somewhat opaque but ideological theory, often connected to consumer protection or activism, which is explicitly critical of consumption (cf. Trentmann 2009: 189-190).
above, industrialisation or enlightenment, which are all indicative of developments that are less directional, without fixed start and endpoints and less clear on “what belongs to them and what not.” Instead, Krotz (ibid.: 257) takes it that these are meta-processes: “constructs which describe and explain theoretically specific economic, social and cultural dimensions and levels of actual change.” This leaves us with a *longe durée* view on structural and societal changes that enables us to understand the meta-processes as products of long-term developments, a vision I have also tried to incorporate in this thesis by incorporating theoretical and historical considerations that goes beyond the purpose of explication.

To understand the idea of meta-processes and begin work on ‘consumertisation’ one way is through the definition of other similar processes, for example, individualisation:

The concept of ‘individualization’ will be developed in this sociological sense of institutionalized individualism. Central institutions of modern society – basic civil, political, and social rights, but also paid employment and the training and mobility necessary for it – are geared to the individual and not to the group. Insofar as basic rights are internalized and everyone wants to or must be economically active to earn their livelihood, the spiral of individualization destroys the given foundation of social coexistence. So – to give a simple definition of individualization – ‘individualization’ means disembedding without reembedding (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001: xxii).

Or the concept of mediatisation:

Mediatization generally refers to the process through which core elements of a social or cultural activity (e.g. politics, religion, and education) become influenced by and dependent on the media. As a consequence, the activity is to a greater or lesser degree performed through interaction with various media, and the symbolic content and the structure of social and cultural activities are influenced by the *modus operandi* of the media, i.e., their institutional, aesthetic, and technological affordances. Mediatization implies a change not only in the degree of media influence on cultural and social affairs, but also in the vary way we may conceptualize the media-society relationship. Mediatization involves a double-sided development in which media emerge as semi-autonomous institutions in society at the same time they become integrated into the very fabric of human interaction in various social institutions like politics, business, or family (Hjarvard 2012: 30).

Somewhat simplistic, then, if individualisation designates how people are required to construct their own lives, mediatisation reasons how society must accommodate to media-logics, globalisation describe the intensification of global interaction, and commercialisation has to do with the growing importance of economy, I suggest that consumertisation defines a bipartite development of consumption becoming institutionalised in society and social activity being based on logics of consumption; meaning that the individual is principally addressed as a consumer, but that s/he simultaneously address, e.g., other people, companies and public institutions from a consumer perspective. In the vocabulary of Hjarvard’s (2008: 105) theory on mediatization, consumertisation can be considered a development ‘with a logic of its own that other social institutions must accommodate to’ – and this to a degree where present-day society is infused with consumption, which has seen a gradual and increasing influence on societal structures and individuals alike. Furthermore, it may also describe how (i) self-understanding and identity is principally linked to
consumption, (ii) how the border between consumer and consumed has become less visible, (iii) that ontologically we are not individuals then consumers, but consume to become individuals and, finally, (iv) describe a fundamental transformation afflicting institutions and modes of interaction, which have been altered with the increasing influence of consumption.

This is not to suggest that all aspects of society are shaped by consumertisation alone, but that it, alongside other meta-processes, is a significant development in contemporary society, which affects conditions of life, culture, society and politics. By framing consumertisation as meta-process or historical transformation we are urged to consider its on-going and increasing reworking of society, the influence of consumption in and on society, with consumertisation suggesting consumption to be comprised of - while being something more - than its practices. As consumption has become institutionalised, consumertisation offers a conceptual frame for researching the relations between consumption, society, individuals and cultural change. Moreover, speaking of processes of consumption as a verb is also to take it seriously as a performative - meaning that consumption actually does something, and not only in relation to environment or political stance.

In addition, consumertisation can be understood as a theoretical framework that makes it possible to incorporate a range of different details and analytical studies into one overall account. This does not mean that we may not still consider consumption in a simpler way, for example as independent variables related to behaviour, but that this is not enough to understand the general influence of consumption in and on society. In this way, theorising consumertisation can also be seen as an inherently qualitative project, following in the wake of Carey and Christians (1989: 359), who argued how

It is, then, to this attempt at recovering the fact of human agency – the ways persons live by intentions, purposes, and values – that qualitative studies are dedicated. Thus we do not ask “how do the media affect us” (could we figure that out if we wanted to?), but “what are the interpretations of meaning and value created in the media and what is their relation to the rest of life?

From a narrow university perspective consumertisation connects to commercialisation and the “increasingly market-driven higher education system (Hjarvard 2012: 27)”, which established a kinship between consumertisation and commercialisation. As such, we might suggest that consumertisation is intimately connected to the discussion on the market-thinking and the pressure

19 On a side note, the idea of consumertisation could also be viewed in comparison to Latour’s (2005) call for a Dingpolitik, which, playing on the etymological roots of thing/ding as something that brings people together that can be found, for example, in the Danish “Folketing”, tries to reintroduce the object as a quintessential part of public issues.
of economic language in regards to society, which frequently makes it to the headlines of Danish press (see e.g. Kielos 2013). In this way, consumertisation might be considered a parallel movement to commercialisation, as talk of the growing importance of economy and the increasing marketization of social spheres are equally relevant to both perspectives. In short, as consumers become ‘marketised’, talk of consumertisation and commercialisation are equally valid theories.

Likewise, consumertisation may be understood in relation to individualisation, for example as we have previously seen how individual consumer choice is favoured in consumption and how the consumer is essentially described as a lone figure, who confronts society through private choices connected to identity-formation. Thus, following the above definition of individualisation, we might say that ‘central institutions of modern society are geared to the individual’ as consumer – and this in the double sense that the individual is born a consumer and that consumption is intrinsically individual. Likewise, globalisation and consumertisation may be connected in a multitude of ways, with consumption indebted to global processes and globalisation profiting on consumertisation’s global outlook, for example by an increasing acceleration and distribution of the effects of globalisation or as the widening of global capitalism and technology.

In regards to mediatisation, it is possible to point to a particularly salient common-ground through Jansson (2002: 7), who suggest that it has become impossible to distinguish between consumer culture and media culture, suggesting that they have collapsed into a category he terms image culture. While I believe that collapsing these two categories into one flattens our understanding of both, not least because it says nothing of the complexity of consumption, Jansson is right in suggesting how consumption is indebted to imagery. In the same manner, though, it is also possible to suggest how media, or mediatisation, functions through, or must accommodate, logics of consumption. Thus, when Jansson (ibid.: 6) suggests that “due to the mediatization process […] most kinds of consumer goods have become increasingly image-loaded, taking on meanings in relation to media texts, other commodity-signs, entire lifestyles, and so on” or, essentially, that consumption has become mediatised, I find it equally plausible to suggest that due to the consumertisation of society, most kinds of media must take on meanings and work in relation to logics of consumption - or, to venture back to Bauman, ‘the pragmatics of shopping’. Nevertheless, this discussion is a good measure of how connected the different meta-processes are or could be, a full analysis easily being able to provide material for an entire study. Hjarvard (2012: 30) suggests how mediatisation “provides a new context for understanding media and their social and cultural importance. Media are not outside society exerting an effect on society, but their importance may increasingly be understood by their very presence inside society.” I believe it is possible to suggest
something similar in relation to consumertisation, as consumption is as much ‘inside society’ as it is a practical act related to ‘buying’ or ‘using up’.

In general, referring to the analysis of modernity discussed through Beck, Giddens and Bauman: in a society that compels the individual to construct her or his own identity, the theory of consumertisation offers a platform to discuss both how this has come about and the structures that the continuous (re)creation of identity functions through. Additionally, it creates a path to reconsider how people perceive society, how consumption exerting a logic of its own affects, for example, judgment, thought-processes, values and rationality and how communication is changing with consumertisation permeating society. As such, by reference to Blumer (1954) consumertisation may be understood as a sensitizing concept because it enables us to restate and understand questions of the influence of consumption on culture and society through a new framework. In short, I contend that consumertisation awards us new ways of looking.
Coda

As stated in the introduction, the consideration behind this thesis was the idea that the consumer has become an increasingly influential figure, with consumption exerting a vast, unprecedented and gradually gaining importance for society and individuals alike.

The thesis has developed through the assumption that an adequate theory of consumption is historical in a dual sense, taking account of the theorising and knowledge of what consumption has been and is becoming - accounting for its relative and historical variations, instead of focusing solely on its contemporary form. By this prerogative, it has considered key sociological theories alongside the historical evolution of consumption and the consumer, before turning to reiterate four foundational texts in regards to the analysis of consumption.

Methodologically inspired by reference Chaffee and Blumer, the primary part of the thesis consisted of an analysis reflecting on contemporary writings on consumption, consumers and consumer society, specifically the conceptualisation of these consumer-concepts. Via the conceptualisation of consumption, the thesis has discussed a significant number of arguments on and definitions related to the place of consumption in this day and age. These include the importance ascribed to our consumptive practice and whether consumption is best reflected in the daily repetition of buying and using up, or if these minimal requirements does not account adequately for the present meaning of consumption. In relation to the conceptual explication the thesis has, in a distilled manner, accounted for a number of current definitions related to the consumer-concepts, suggesting that consumption can be understood through nine different conceptualisation, as communication, identity, becoming, belonging, freedom, symbolic circulation, use-value, labour and economic value. In two excursus on ‘choice and rationality’ and ‘advertising’, the thesis has, furthermore, examined and reflected on these topics in the light of the concept explication, so as to offer some perspective and provide questions for further research.

In opposition to common-sensical understandings that takes the act of consumption and its effect on society and individuals to be either ordinary or agreed upon, the thesis concluded by an argument for consumertisation as a conceptual frame that provides an account of how consumption works inside society. Exposing the relationship between consumertisation and other parallel meta-processes, the thesis concluded that consumertisation offers a theoretical framework that enables us to understand - or discuss further - contemporary conceptualisations of consumption, offering new ways to perceive what it means to be a consumer in consumer society.
References


Appendix

TABLE I: sample of definitions related to the consumer-concepts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definitions of consumption</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consumption involves the search for, choice, acquisition, possession and disposal of goods and services (Hogg and Michell 1996: 629).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consumption can be defined as the set of practices through which commodities become a part of the individual (Goodman and Cohen 2004: 2).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand consumption as a process whereby agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion (Warde 2005:137).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption has now become a serious form of work, however, if by work we mean the disciplined (skilled and semiskilled) production of the means of consumer subsistence (Appadurai 1996: 82).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consumption is a historically shaped mode of sociocultural practice that emerges within the structures and ideological imperatives of dynamic marketplaces (Arnould and Thompson 2005: 875).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subcultural ethnographies emphasize consumption as a critical site where identities, boundaries, and shared meaning are forged (Kates 2002: 383).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consumption is a form of value production which realizes the objects as lived culture: it engages with commoditization, works on it and sometimes subverts it (Sassatelli 2007: 197).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The activity of consuming can be considered as the vital and necessary path to self-discovery, while the marketplace itself becomes indispensable to the process of discovering who we are (Campbell 2004: 32).</td>
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<tr>
<td>The unconscious cultural force that conspicuous consumption imposes is illustrated by the propensity to buy expensive items that are not even seen by outsiders, such as underclothing and kitchen utensils. The standards of decency extend to all types of consumption without individuals necessarily consciously trying to impress others in their behavior (Trigg 2001: 108).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption embraces all the ways in which people use material and symbolic objects in their life practices, as well as things that are stabilized in object-like form (e.g. services, leisure activities) (Slater in Schor et al. 2010: 280).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer culture is crucially about the negotiation of status and identity – the practice and communication of social position – under these conditions. Regulation of these issues by tradition is replaced by negotiation and construction, and consumer goods are crucial to the way in which we make up our social appearance, our social networks (lifestyle, status group etc.), our structures of value (Slater 1999: 30).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmodern consumption is when consumers become producers in constructing selves, self-images and meaningful experiences by immersing themselves into simulated processes. Consumption is not an end, but just another moment in the continuous cycle of reproduction (Dholakia and Firat 1998: 99).&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption is in essence a moral matter, since it always and inevitably raises issues of fairness, self vs group interests, and immediate vs delayed gratification (Wilk 2001: 246).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commodity consumption is part of a much broader process of cultural modernisation which reaches far beyond the mere acts of purchase: as an everyday experience of ever new available objects, it stands for an expansion of the horizons of experience and for growing expectations and aspirations resulting from this experience (Schrage 2012: 10).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Definitions of consumers

Commonsensically, being a consumer is about knowing one’s needs and getting them satisfied: choosing, buying, using and enjoying – or failing in these (Slater 1999: 2).

In this work, consumers are conceived of as identity seekers and makers. Consumer identity projects are typically considered to be goal driven, although the aims pursued may often be tacit in nature and marked by points of conflict, internal contradictions, ambivalence, and even pathology (Arnould and Thompson 2005: 871).

Increasingly, we are what we consume. People assure themselves of who they are and how much they have achieved through what they consume. Others judge them and their identities by the same criteria. (Dholakia and Firat 1998: 114).”

We suggest, then, that the consumer may be viewed as one of those ‘essentially contested concepts’ proposed by Gallie that defy domestication. The consumer, we argue, is unmanageable, both as a concept, since no-one can pin it down to one specific conceptualization at the expense of all others, and as an entity, since attempts to control and manage the consumer lead to the consumer mutating from one impersonation to another (Gabriel and Lang 2008: 322).

Definitions of consumer society

Ours is a “consumer society” in the similarly profound and fundamental sense in which the society of our predecessors, modern society in its industrial phase, used to be a “producer society.” That older type of modern society once engaged its members primarily as producers and soldiers; […] modern society has little need for mass industrial labor and conscript armies, but it needs—and engages—its members in their capacity as consumers (Bauman 1999: 36).

Consumer society is a type of society in which the ‘satisfaction of daily needs’ is realized ‘through the capitalist mode’. This is to say, that daily desires are satisfied through the acquisition and use of ‘commodities’, goods which are produced for exchange and are on sale on the market, […] in the consumer society we not only satisfy our most elementary daily needs through commodities; we also conceptualize the purchase and use of goods as acts of ‘consumption’ (Sassatelli 2007: 2).

Forbrugersamfundet er et samfund, hvor en lang række af de kulturelle bånd, der knytter menneskene sammen i meningsfyldte fællesskaber, er udtrykt gennem forbrugsmønstre. Forbrugersamfundet er med andre ord kendteget ved en kultur gennemstyret af forbrug (Askegaard 2009: 239).