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THOUGHTS ON THE CHAMELEON CONSUMER AND THE CHAOTIC MARKETING

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Marketing theory and practice pass through systematic reassessment and rethinking. Challenges to marketing theory and practice are given by two types of forces: on the one hand information and communication technology development and on the other hand cultural changes and change in consumer behavior patterns. Globalization has caused the connection between social and cultural values that are peculiar to consumers in different markets, an unusual mixture of behavior patterns and marketing practices. Phrases such as opportunistic consumer, the consumer who" manages" his own options, enclavement, tribalism, superficiality, flexibility, flow, the mixture between reality and simulation, between concreteness and image are to be found more and more in marketing publications.

In this article I intended to analyze social and cultural mutations that changed purchase and consumption behavior, and also the continuous rethinking and conceptualization of marketing practices.

Introduction

Contemporary society has undergone profound changes due to the action of two forces: an unprecedented technological development and cultural changes. Modern technologies have led to changes in communication methods and transaction management. At the same time, they emphasized and expanded cultural transformations. These are associated with the transition from modernism to postmodernism. Concepts particular to postmodernism have stimulated debate both within the social sciences and within the exact sciences. Postmodernism has also created controversies in management, marketing, consumer research, provoking and demanding changes in the traditional perspective on them. Modern marketing has created its own identity in the second half of the twentieth century, when pioneers of marketing theories laid down, pointed out and enriched the concept of marketing. The concept of marketing concluded the role of marketing in the modern order of humanity history, by referring to the relations that organizations create, maintain and develop with their stakeholders (customers, its own personnel, shareholders, the local community, the media, suppliers, distributors etc.). Such relations, based on two essential elements of the marketing concept - customer orientation and the focus on a specific market - have been refined and extended to an increasing number of organizations in various branches of human activity. Marketing has provided the interface between organizations and their environment, regardless of the human activity it refers to - production and distribution of goods and services, culture, politics, non-profit activities.

The success of modern marketing cannot be disputed, although its practices have given rise to much criticism. Its central position in contemporary culture, in the business culture, is given by the compatibility with a basic principle of the economy market - that of customer sovereignty. The idea of the sovereign customer, whose needs and desires the organizations seek to meet, overlaps perfectly with the main principles of marketing.

Recent literature identifies mutations in the evolution of major cultural, social, technological and economic development of society questioning the principles of modern marketing. These transformations refer to:

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1. consumer behavior development;

2. technological development;

3. economic, political and ideological globalization.

Detecting consumer behavior trends and their implications on marketing is provided mainly by three approaches:

- Firstly, we notice a sizable body of research, articles and opinions on social and cultural transformations that determine the passage from modernism to postmodernism;

- Secondly, the concerns for theoretical and empirical developments on individual and social values of consumers should be emphasized;

- Last but not least, the socio-cultural "barometers" orchestrated by various organizations working in the field of marketing research and socio-psychological studies should be highlighted.

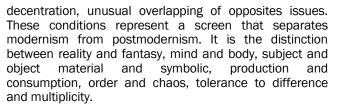## 1. The Chameleon Consumer and Postmodernism

The first body of researches intends to conceptualize postmodernism and to identify its implications on consumption, production and business management. Referring to this type of scientific concerns, it may question the idea of horizontal and vertical representation of their test results. In other words, are the performed analyses and their conclusions generally valid regardless of the geographic area and the consumer social status? By linking these analyses with those regarding globalization effects one comes to the conclusion that spreading features and trends identified in purchasing and consumption behavior will be made faster and faster both horizontally and vertically. Migration is also a specific phenomenon of the modern society (Barico, 2009). The transformation that Barico is talking about refers, among other things, to the spread of phenomena and trends in purchasing and consumption. Marketing is considered one of the vectors that determine the transition from modernism to postmodernism (Firat & Dholakia, 2006).

The transition from modernism to postmodernism questions two fundamental principles of the modern marketing. The first claims consumer sovereignty and the second is based on the assumption that consumers manage their consumption needs and are not ruled by them. Debating these two principles on which modern marketing is based, influences the principles of market economy and business culture.

"Modern society resembles an incredible and complex maze of discourses that interrelate" (Dawes & Brown, Simmons, 2008, p.299).

Referring to the new language of marketing, Simmons (2008) points out that it is based on four pillars: change, complexity, chaos and contradiction.

Firat, Dholakia (2006, p. 128) associates the transition from modernism to postmodernism with new rules that will change society: hyper-reality, fragmentation, subject

decentration, unusual overlapping of opposites issues. These conditions represent a screen that separates modernism from postmodernism. It is the distinction between reality and fantasy, mind and body, subject and object material and symbolic, production and consumption, order and chaos, tolerance to difference and multiplicity.

Consumers use experiences that simulate reality, they prefer fantasy and hyperrealism is the cultural trend that defines this lifestyle. Disneyland and other theme parks or theme restaurants in the world are designed to imitate reality and thus mislead consumers.

Consumers create the desired meanings through consumption and are obsessed with appearances, life styles, using them as substitutes for their identity.

"Consumers are no longer committed to a single lifestyle or to the same set of beliefs, and thus a consumption similar to DIY markets results that mirrors a collage of multiple representations of images and their preferences, even if they refer to the same product" (Firat & Schultz, in Simmons, 2008, p. 300).

In this context, the image becomes more important than the functional features of the product. Rafaello establishes the image of elegance, Pepsi-Cola that of youth, Nike that of performance, Rompetrol that of citizen responsibility, and so on.

"The significance of the objects is not fixed for a long period of time and is not related to their functions, each consumer assigning the desired significance to the objects" (Elliott, in Simmons, 2008 p. 301).

We are witnessing a fragmentation of markets into increasingly smaller segments, which leads to accelerated proliferation of the number of products and brands. These developments result in the fact that disorder and chaos becomes accepted standards.

The market fragmentation is accompanied by behavior patterns, different from the previous ones, and specialty literature refers to the following:

- DIY is metaphorically the pragmatic and convenient assembling process of ideas, facts and products;

- Complexity refers to the mixture of different and unexpected roles and lifestyles, the consumers being opportunistic;

- The increased speed of movement and action refers both to change in the consumer behavior and to the production speed of mental imagery. A first consequence of this model is the superficiality of the acts of consumption, but also of production; everything is produced and consumed *"here and now."* Barico (2009) emphasized the idea that horizontal migration, allowed by information and communication technology favors superficiality at the expense of sustainability and long-term plans;

- Navigation is the process by which consumers switch from one role to another, from one micro-

culture to another, from one site to another, acquiring expertise during this horizontal movement. Patterson introduces the concept of "prestalgia" which refers to the need of the consumers to live "future moments" rather than re-live moments of the past. The phrase that describes best this situation is "isolated in the future";

- Enclavement is the process by which consumers create real and virtual spaces to intensify experiences and sensations. Consumers also dissociate the stressful place of professional duties from the personal one, by seeking online refuge or spending their holidays in remote areas.

Modernism is based on the principle that humanity has control over its own destiny and over the nearby objects. On the contrary, postmodernism stresses the idea that objects and structures resulting from human activity have control over consumers. In other words, we are witnessing a role switch, the superiority of the subject-consumer to the brand – the object of his desire, can no longer be sustained by strong arguments.

In another article, Firat (1995) demonstrates that postmodernism highlights the idea of the objectification of the subject-consumer. The consumer becomes the "object" of consumption by the image he creates by means of the consumed products. Thus, the consumer becomes the consumer of his personalized experiences.

Changing the relationship between consumption subject and object determined new consumption terms. First, consumers accept disorder or the idea that things are not in their normal state. How high range stores practice merchandising is a consequence of these developments in the consumer behavior. The objectification of consumption subject is highlighted by the presence of certain packages on the market – e.g. perfumes, clothing – in the shape of men or women bodies. An obsession of the postmodern consumer is the differentiation from its peers, thus choosing means that are distinguished by their exoticism.

The acceptance of disorder, of chaos as a living standard led to the paradoxical overlapping of behaviors and practices, an inexplicable and contradictory combination. A reflection of this new lifestyle is provided by consumers belonging to higher social classes that are buying both from luxury shops as well as from discount shops or discount markets. Consumers no longer determine long-term projects, they only have short term purposes, and their decisional inconsequence is obvious in many of their purchasing and consumption acts. This feature derives from what Alvin Toffler said in his book *The Third Wave*: "I got to the point of super-option". Toffler believes that since modern ages man has so many options that his freedom of choice is changed into a difficulty or constraint of choice.

As a result of cultural changes, consumers refer differently to social differences and particular social class behaviors.

Consumers show tolerance for other consumer's beliefs, values or practices. Moreover, in purchasing and consumption, every consumer plays a variety of roles. In my opinion, tolerance is different, depending on the area defined by geographical, cultural and economic traits. Thus, a lower tolerance towards other consumer acts can be perceived, according to the economic development and the cultural values of each market. I refer to the cultural values as those defined by Hofstede - individualism/collectivism, high power distance/low power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity.

In postmodern culture, reality and truth continuously build themselves through cultural and psychological processes of simulation, through mental imagery, while modern culture gives credentials to the idea that reality is independent from human beings. Reality is considered to be contingent on postmodernism, and in modern culture the structures are built and changed according to cultural conventions. (Firat & Dholakia, 2006)

Based on the above, other essential ideas in the plan of culture and theory marketing are derived. First, there is the idea that in postmodernism human needs are created and marketing is part of the process generating consumption needs. The idea that marketing is a producer of meanings and that the consumer uses experiences and symbols is also present in the modern culture. But considering marketing as a production factor for consumer needs contradicts the essential principles of the marketing concept and determines the reassessment of modern marketing theories and models. In my opinion, remain the question of whether marketing cause needs or just help to raise awareness of a number unlimited of needs that exist in human beings.

The idea of ambiguity of the knowledge subject – the consumer – will also change the founding principles of marketing. The consumption subject – the consumer – and the consumption object – the product brand – are not different, the consumer and the social environment overlap and are inseparable. Marketing is not only the supplier of products designed to meet the needs of a known subject, but also the consumer's partner in generating more and more complex desires and experiences.

Consumption contributes to creating identities, images, values and experiences, while consumption in modern culture is perceived only as an economic necessity. In modern culture, consumption is considered the end of a process while in postmodernism consumption determines another action. Marketing is a process of building net-works that allow consumers to create, navigate and plunge among the most diverse experiences. It is not just a set of occult practices, reserved to a small group, but it is a democratic process, making its knowledge and practices accessible to those unfamiliar with it. Marketing democratization is similar to what happened with the advent of Gutenberg's printing press, when the knowledge meant for an elite group became accessible to a large group of

people. The Internet has made a mass customization of consumer offers and experiences possible.

"In the futuristic movie "Minority Report" whose action takes place in 2054, the hero goes through a one to one marketing experience. The main character goes through a billboard showing the American Express card, and the billboard becomes a hologram visible only to the alleged character, that presents his image and personal data, urging him to buy the card. The character then enters a Gap store where customers are greeted, called by their names, and then asked how their last shopping was, and then their favorite choices based on the latest shopping are suggested. Indeed, as shown in this movie, the year 2054 may be paradise for marketers. But in some respects, the marketing futuristic scenes are close to what is happening nowadays. Shop visitors receive personalized coupons based on past purchases, many newspapers allow online readers to create personalized editions in which even advertising is customized. Consumers can also buy customized versions of many brands of products. For example, on Nike's business site, buyers can choose among several models of shoes sold in different price ranges. They can customize their shoes using several colors and features. For some models the choice of color and shoe laces is allowed, together with personal ID inscriptions, product payment and doorstep delivery. (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004, p. 3-4).

Nike, Levi's, Timberland, Diamond Lab21 are organizations that have transformed offer customization and consumption experiences into mass businesses (Gay et al, 2009).

In fact, the situation described before resembles to what happened in small communities where sellers were also shop owners. They knew, at any time, the detailed preferences of their customers: their client's and other family member's birthday, preferences for each product range, and they adapted their message according to their customers. Now, the Internet has made the world a global village and the way products are consumed and distributed resembles to what happened in small communities in the past. It unites consumer organizations, located in the farthest corners of the world.

Elliot (1997) suggests the following scale to analyze consumption dialectics:
- Material consumption versus symbolic consumption;
- Social significance (social function) versus individual significance (psychological function) of consumption;
- Desire versus consumption satisfaction;
- Rational versus irrational consumption;
- Creativity versus constraint in consumption.

2. Consumer Chameleon and Its Values

In the early '80s of the twentieth century great attention in the research field of marketing was given to the evolution of consumers' social values. The interest in this subject

has still been preserved in the '90s of the last century and in the first decade of this millennium.

I consider it useful to indicate that some social values identified during the '80s and '90s of the last century coexist with specific values of the first decade of the twenty-first century, while others were replaced by values of the new millennium.

Monitor Services study program (Yankelovich et al, in Assael, 1992) identifies four groups of social and cultural trends in the '80s.

The first trend concern an increased focus on the own person and image in contrast to the focus on groups such as family, the community, and the country. This trend is reflected in guiding purchase and consumption acts toward purposes such as self encouragement, self accomplishment and self achievement. This trend is mirrored by behaviors and concerns regarding the personalization of purchase and consumption acts, hedonism, introspection, cultivating ostentatious consumption, socio-cultural expression by consumption, concern for privacy, concern of women for professional careers, care for body shape etc.

A second trend group refers to the tendency of individuals to improve the life environment and personal life. This trend is reflected in behaviors oriented towards sensuality, mysticism, adopting a new kind of romance, attraction to novelty and change, return to nature etc.

Focusing on a much simpler life environment, with fewer threats is highlighted by the concern for simplifying purchase and consumption acts, by purchasing simpler goods, by the emergence of new forms of cynicism, of anti-ambiguity etc.

The fourth trend group, set out by Monitor Services deals with the fact that lifestyles become far less structured, which leads to behaviors rejecting authority, anti-materialism, tolerance for chaos and disorder, sexual interference, concern for the present in opposition with care for tomorrow etc.

Cathelat has shaped since the early 2000s several trends and consumer purchasing behavior of consumers.

Autonomy corresponds to social disinterest and distrust in leaders, in managers or in stars that appear in the media. This value leads, according to the author's opinion, to purchase and consumption behavior that cannot be ignored by managers:
- Tendency to individualism;
- Consumption is opportunistic and bulimic, explained by collective neurosis;
- Decreasing importance of social status, purchasing acts including less and less the social component.

Searching *equilibrium* implies that consumer purchasing decisions reflect motivations such as health, tranquility and simplicity. Consumers consider it more important to

have more free time than to make large profits and have little free time.

New relationship with nature is generated by the growing fear of pollution and by the impossibility of exercising control over the results of scientific discoveries. Relationship with nature is reflected in motivations such as paid health care, competitiveness, physical form.

The trend towards authenticity is the value that shows the inclination of consumers to purchase authentic products / brands. It appeared as a result of marketing excesses which favored creating anonymous brands, uniform markets and consumer behavior. Research showed that markets can be economically but not culturally global markets. Standard communication strategies, global brands, the international distribution of their own sale forms and methods are discussed.

The trend towards *integration in small communities* called micro-connection by Cathelat. In a disrupted society, consumers learn to adapt constantly and prefer to share their adaptation concerns to small groups, creating a sort of "tribalism."

The inclination towards social cohabitation. According to the published articles of Cathelat there is a greater compassion for the marginalized, a greater need for order and harmony. These reasons are also the result of a crisis of traditional male values that require rethinking the relationship between individual and the social group.

The inclination towards opportunism. The description of the values above shows a large number of contradictory behavior patterns. B. Cathelat believes that they are the result of separating the consumer's life into two distinct areas:

- The space of material, family and social obligations. In this case, a consumer is a conformist and is connected to small social groups. The results of these inclinations are adopting purchase and consumption behavior characterized by functional realism in which that price / quality ratio is dominant;

- The space of personal freedom has the role to compensate the pressure of the previous space, the consumer creating a private space that chases him away from rules and regulations. In this space, the consumer is being dominated by emotion.

3. Consumer Chameleon and Digital Revolution

The digital revolution and the unexpected development, as soon as the Internet was launched, caused several changes in the business environment (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004, p. 4-5):

- Consumers have more power than they had before the "digital revolution". The internet, the mobile telephony, the economic and political globalization ensure greater transparency of offers and sales prices. Consumers can compare prices on-line; they can do their weekly shopping in a mall and the next week in an "outlet" in another city or even in ano-

ther country. They register into virtual communities to share opinions about brands, stores, prices, purchasing and consumption experiences;

- Marketers can offer many more products and services than before the digitization of the economy. They have the opportunity to customize offers and advertising, to create new types and models that tend to respond to consumer needs in the upper layers of Maslow's pyramid.

- The exchange between organizations and consumers became interactive and instantaneous. Marketers can measure the effects of their actions and can quickly find their customer's satisfaction degree. These records will increase the reaction rate of organizations, but also reduce the life cycle of product models.

- The consumers will have control over private TV channels, over the moment of viewing and the option of contact with advertising messages. These changes represent unprecedented challenges for the advertising industry, where large amounts of money are invested. Television will become a "snack bar" (....).

The development of the internet as a means of information, advertising and sale medium has led to new reading and learning patterns. The traditional model of the advertising processing flow Z is replaced by more disordered models, like the jigsaw type. The internet turns consumers into DIY amateurs, who themselves imagine and build products. They are faced with many sources of information provided by search engines and, therefore, base their choices on "vox populi", on the recommendation of the highest number of visitors. They do not have time to check the credibility of the information sources. Internet integration in the business world has also raised other issues and topics for discussion: mistrust, privacy violation, the association with individualism, but also the idea of social virtual networking, the elusion of grammar rules, and the closeness and the distance of individuals at the same time. The debate on the opposition between individualism - collectivism is close to the idea emphasized by Cathelat concerning the connection of small groups, called tribalism by the author. The internet stimulates the building-up of virtual networks, debate groups and development of viral marketing.

Internet and globalization will reduce costs, increase the speed of new products diffusion, reduce entry barriers in various markets, increase price transparency, and re-define distance barriers. Internet and globalization bring consumers and sellers with different values and needs together to know each other, and to change behavior models.

Conclusions

Developments in consumer behavior determine changes in organizational marketing. The main tendencies in organizing and carrying out activities are: the adoption of

more flexible organizational structures, an increased responsiveness to environmental change, the interoperable cooperation and promotion of team project working, a greater attention to individual creativity, the establishment of alliances and partnerships between organizations.

In the following papers I intend to establish empirical studies regarding the extent to which behavioral changes identified in worldwide marketing literature can be assigned to Romanian consumers and regarding the relationship between behavioral change and marketing practices of organizations.

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