

”I Consume, Therefore I Am?” A Qualitative research on New Generation’s Perception on Romanian Consumer Society

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Abstract

An evolved form of the capitalist system, consumer capitalism proposes a new way of life, centered on material values, in which consumption tends to become an end, but also a value in itself, which is a culmination of hedonism. In this context, we can speak of a new form of culture, the culture of consumption, in which consumption becomes the center of gravity of human existence. In other words, the new capitalist system produces consumers and a culture of consumption. The central objective of the present research, which is qualitative in nature, was to capture the main features of consumer society in Romania, with a focus on understanding the extent to which the new generation of Romanian consumers is influenced by consumerism. We set out to answer the question of whether consumption is a central value for young consumers in Romania and, in context, how they relate to the basic elements of consumer culture. The target group of the research were students from two Master's programs at the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest, from which a sample of 27 people was drawn. The method used for the investigation was the structured online interview. From the analysis and interpretation of the data it emerged that, in the case of young Romanian consumers, compared to other age groups, there is a different structure and dynamics in terms of consumption, with the predominance of satisfying complex needs of an emotional nature, such as the search for and expression of one's own identity or the differentiation of social status, to the detriment of satisfying primary consumption needs. The younger generation of consumers also tends to seek out the 'new' as they move from American-style globalization to multicultural globalization.

Keywords: consumer society, consumer culture, new consumer, consumer behavior, trend, globalization

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Introduction

In consumer culture theory, consumption is approached as a center of gravity of human existence, reflecting what, in practice, we call consumer culture. One thing has become very clear today: consumer culture, or in other words life built around mass-produced goods, media and shopping malls, is a phenomenon that is spreading all over the world.

Based on the particularly important role that consumption has acquired in contemporary society, Ritzer (2010) refers to consumer culture as a new form of culture, the main argument of his approach being the central value status that consumption has acquired.

While many scholars, such as Trentmann (2012), Lipovetsky (2007), have defined consumption as a phenomenon integral to human existence, Campbell (1998) points out that, especially in developed societies, consumption is no longer just about acquiring the bare necessities of existence, but is seen as

valuable in its own right. This is revealed by the multitude of individuals who are everywhere involved in the acquisition of goods and are surrounded by their peers who, in any context, flaunt (sometimes even ostentatiously) their purchased goods (Stanciu, et al., 2019).

Analyzing contemporary consumers from the perspective of active involvement in consumer culture, young people have a disproportionate influence compared to older people. The importance of young people as a category is justified primarily by the fact that they represent a profitable current market, but also a future market. As young people are important players in the consumer capitalism market, we believe that their perception requires special attention.

This study, situated in an academic community, as the participants are students of a master program of The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, investigates students' view about specific aspects of Romanian consumer society. The study draws on the insights emerged from online interview data and represents an attempt to understand to what extent the behavior of the new generation of consumers from Romania is influenced by consumerist ideology.

Taking as a starting point the importance of the younger generation in contemporary consumer culture, our study raises the following questions: Is consumption a central value for the new generation of consumers in Romania? How does the new generation of consumers in Romania relate to the basic elements of consumer culture (consumer goods, brands, consumer spaces)?

The paper is divided into five sections. After the Introduction comes the section of Literature Review, which is followed by Research Methodology and Results and Discussion. The paper ends with the section dedicated to Conclusions.

Literature Review

As it was shown by Sassatelli (2007), in consumer culture, material goods have become the main tools by which consumer builds and expresses his individuality and, beyond their material existence, they represent, in fact, messages of the owner's self. The fact that contemporary individuals build their identity around the imperative of excessive consumption of commodities, that could bring them an immediate satisfaction is a recurrent theme both in scientific literature and in public discourse, especially in developed societies (Abrudan, et al., 2015; Vasiliu, et al., 2016). Lipovetsky (2007) points out that the contemporary individual's appetite for consumption and the tendency to construct identity around consumer goods is one of the consequences of the 'fashion plot', embodied in the 'morally driven obsolescence' of products, which began to affect the industrial world after the Second World War, culminating in recent decades in a veritable inflation of the new, generated by the accelerating pace of model renewal. But this whole 'fashion plot' could not have achieved its purpose if it had not been doubled by an 'advertising plot' and, by implication, the media, which have shaped people's vision of the contemporary world (Kellner, 1983). Alongside fashion, advertising has also plotted in its own way, the main aim being to sell a concept, a vision, a lifestyle associated with the brand along with the product. This explains why consumers turn coded symbols into brands to express their identity and lifestyle.

The global adoption of the consumer mentality as a *modus vivendi* has come about because the capitalist system of recent decades, unable to rely solely on the production of goods and services, has had to focus on the production of consumers and consumer culture. The impact of capitalism has been enhanced by Americanization, which has resulted in the spread of typical American goods (Coca-Cola, blue jeans, etc.), typical American consumer settings (the fast-food restaurant, the chain store, the themed supermarket, the shopping mall, the casino, the amusement park, etc.), and American patterns of consumption all over the world (Ritzer, 2010; Cantaragiu and Ghinea, 2020). Against this backdrop, a number of shifts in consumer behavior have occurred globally, with the chronic desire for material goods, the shopping virus and the passion for the new becoming legitimate. Therefore, living better, enjoying life's pleasures, not depriving oneself of anything or disposing of unnecessary things have become goals in themselves for consumers. All this has inevitably led to a way of life centered on materialistic values.

But although the era of abundance of recent decades seems to have created a favorable climate for the heyday of hedonism, the persistence of social inequalities, especially those caused by poverty, has inevitably led to an exacerbation of inter-human conflict. In this context, Lipovetsky (2007) speaks of a paradox of happiness in consumer society, pointing out that although the satisfactions individuals can access are more numerous than ever before, happiness is still as inaccessible as in the past, with increasing disappointment and frustration increasingly evident.

Research Methodology

Attempting to provide a deep understanding of new generation's perception on consumer society in Romania, present qualitative research draws on online interview data provided by master students of The Bucharest University of Economic Studies. The interview as method of data collection is considered by scholars a useful tool for capturing many of the subjects' views on a specific phenomenon (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Qu and Dumay, 2011).

While the main objective is to highlight participants' view about specific aspects of Romanian consumer society, the research questions were formulated as follows: *Is consumption a core value for the new generation of consumers in Romania? How does the new generation of consumers relate to the basics of consumer culture?*

The sample consisted of 27 respondents, 8 men and 19 women, aged from 21 to 45 years. All the respondents were students at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, following the courses of two master programs: "Quality Management, Expertise and Consumer's Protection" and "Commercial Business Administration". Respondents were born in different regions of Romania, both in urban or rural areas. Appendix 1 shows the characteristics of the sample.

Considering the restrictions imposed on the background of Covid-19 pandemic, the research team conducted online interview. The format of the interview was asynchronous, which means that the participants and the members of the research team were not online at the same time. While synchronous interviewing online is conducted in real time and tends to follow a pattern that is familiar to in-person interviews, asynchronous interviews are more like open-ended surveys (Kozinets, 2020).

Even though the asynchronous interview has a major limitation to not allowing participants and researchers to converse in real time and to take benefits from all the visual elements specific to face-to-face interviews, the reason why the research team chose this tactic was not only to allow participants to answer questions at their convenience, but also to encourage the reflective process among them (Lindlof and Taylor, 2017). As Bryman (2012, p. 669) point out, even though greater motivation is required for completing an online interview, however, replies could be sometimes more detailed than in a face-to-face interview. Moreover, as it is highlighted by Kozinets (2020), interviewees' answers in asynchronous online interview tend to be more deliberate and calculated because they have more time to reflect on answers. There is an obvious advantage of a 'clean' transcript when conducting an asynchronous interview, but, if the interviewer hopes for spontaneous moments of revelation, this format is less effective than the real-time one.

As the interview was conducted entirely in a textual context, a structured interview form, consisting of a list of questions, was used to collect the answers from participants (Appendix 2). In designing the interview guide, which is often called a 'discussion guide', the research team followed Kozinets's (2020, p. 235) advice who claims that the more structured the approach to the interview, the more important it is to use a carefully constructed, pretested, and revised interview/discussion guide.

Being aware that another major issue for asynchronous interview is that respondents may read all the questions and then reply only to those that they feel interested in, the research team sent via email the list of questions to a large number of students and took into account to include in the sample only those interviewees who provided detailed answers to all questions, eliminating the others. The process of data collection started in October 2020 and ended up in January 2021, with interviewee no. 27, when the research team considered that data saturation had been achieved, meaning that no significantly new information was produced (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). In this respect, data analysis was approached by the research team as an ongoing process, data collection and analysis were being occurred alongside

each other. The collected data were coded with the support of Microsoft Word and Excel (by counting relevant keywords) and categories were built-up. The relationships between categories were further analyzed. During the process of data analysis, the pursuit for internal consistency through alignment across research question, collected data and analytical process was the focus of the research team (Bryman, 2012).

Keeping in mind that a compelling story, resulting through data and theory narrative, is the very essence of qualitative research (Bansal, et al., 2018; Bansal and Corley, 2012) the research team tried to do a comprehensive treatment of collected data and to extract findings in the attempt to discern insights of young consumers' perception on Romanian consumer society.

Results and discussion

Themes resulted from data analysis

Reflecting on consumption

Analyzing the data sources resulting from the research, we identified in the responses of the study participants a suite of valences of consumption, as follows: means of identity expression, source of satisfaction, source of status differentiation and necessity (Table 1).

Table no. 1. Reflecting on consumption

Valences of Consumption	Respondents	Quotes
Consumption as a means of expressing identity	R13	<i>"Romanian society is deeply affected by the culture of consumption, and the identity and meaning of individuals' lives are defined through consumption, through the purchase and use of consumer goods".</i>
	R19	<i>"I believe that we should not identify ourselves with the things we possess or the services we benefit from, because this kind of behavior distances us from our self, making only possession important to us."</i>
	R21	<i>"People identify with the goods or services they consume".</i>
Consumption as a source of satisfaction	R14	<i>"The feeling of satisfaction when we buy something is very strong, but most of the time when we get home, we realize that we don't actually need the good we just bought."</i>
	R27	<i>"Consumption has acquired in my life a value of ritual and routine... I believe that consumer goods can satisfy certain emotional needs".</i>
	R4	<i>"We feel free people when we consume and consider consumption as a reward in the struggle for success. We are very happy when we purchase something, but often come to realize that we don't need it."</i>
Consumption as a source of differentiation	R1	<i>"To consume is to exist in the eyes of others, whom we imagine to be envious and admiring of our possessions."</i>
	R21	<i>"The desire to own more than the bare necessities derives from people's need to feel superior, to provoke envy in others...The flaunting of possessions is an increasingly common practice that is also easily spread through social media."</i>
Consumption as necessity	R9	<i>"Consumption is at the basis of our existence, we can't live without acquiring certain things."</i>
	R8	<i>"Consumption is the main reason a person exists. People are born to consume."</i>
	R25	<i>"Since ancient times man has been a consumer, starting from basic resources for certain basic needs to the more complex needs of today."</i>

The opinions expressed by most of the respondents converge towards the idea that consumer goods are used by Romanian consumers as tools for expressing identity and lifestyle. This result is in line with Arnould and Thompson (2005) claim that goods are the main instruments through which consumers assert their individuality and, beyond their concrete, material existence, they are in fact messages, expressions of the possessor's self. In general, theorists who have turned their attention to the relationship between the consumer's approach to identity creation and the structural influence of the market argue that the market produces certain consumption patterns that consumers can choose to occupy. While individuals pursue personal goals by occupying these consumption

patterns, they also adopt and personalize cultural scripts that align their identity with the imperatives of the global consumer economy.

Consumption as a source of personal satisfaction as well as differentiation of the state is another idea that emerges clearly from respondents' responses. This finding is in line with Featherstone (2007) and Baudrillard (1970) who pointed out that satisfaction derived from consumption of goods is linked to their social significance. People use consumer goods and consumption experiences to create either social bonds or distinctions.

Always searching for something new

The analysis of the data collected from the interviews shows that the continuous aspiration towards "something new", one of the defining features of contemporary consumer behavior as Lipovetsky (2007) points out, is also found among the new generation of consumers in Romania, mainly as a result of the symbiosis between the inflation of novelty and advertising (Table 2).

Table no. 2. *Always searching for something new*

Respondents	Quotes
R1	<i>"Advertising and media pressure stimulate the desire to get hold of something, but once the act of buying is done, the desire for a new purchase arises."</i>
R16	<i>"Many times, consumers don't make the best decisions, they act irrationally and their decision is influenced by some misleading information."</i>
R4	<i>"In my opinion, consumption is driven, both by the society we live in and by each of us. Discussions with friends are mostly about sharing impressions of products purchased and buying tips."</i>
R11	<i>"I fail to be immune to the consumerist assault in the air I breathe. Sometimes it seems like everything around is a buzz that says 'Consume! Consume!!!'."</i>
R7	<i>"We buy products because the market presents them to us as useful, not because we really need them. Consumption is due to marketing strategies by which we are lured into consuming willingly or unwillingly."</i>
R17	<i>"The cult of brands is particularly noticeable among the new generation of consumers and especially in certain categories of goods: clothing, electronics (mobile phones), cars."</i>
R13	<i>"Young people put emphasis on the brand/brand and not on the quality of the product because they are influenced by their entourage and do not want to be inferior"</i>
R7	<i>"We humans are always looking for something new".</i>
R16	<i>"There is a risk of losing our rationality and the more we consume, the more we will want to consume more and more."</i>
R2	<i>"People today want more and more and not necessarily because they need it...thus increasing unnecessary consumption."</i>

Respondents state that the abundance of goods marketed in different consumer settings and the transformation of shopping into a leisure mode are the main factors likely to stimulate the perpetual desire for the "new", as it was highlighted by Underhill (2007).

Another factor indicated by respondents as having a decisive contribution to stimulate the desire for something new is also advertising, through which, as Schroeder (2017) emphasized, brands address individuals in the position of consumers by promising to fulfil their unsatisfied desires and needs. A large part of the respondents agree that aggressive advertising (both in the media and in social media) has led to a real cult of brands, including luxury brands, among the new generation of consumers in Romania. An explanation of this behavior can be found in Lipovetsky (2007), who pointed out that advertising, whose rhetoric now emphasizes emotion, on meanings that go beyond the objective reality of products, no longer sells only products, but also concepts, visions, lifestyles associated with brands. Moreover, as it was shown by Strizhakova et al. (2008), brands with global notoriety, being generally associated with an idea of high quality, have the ability to set a standard and convey that myth of cosmopolitanism, to which many consumers around the world aspire.

In conclusion, based on the opinions expressed by the respondents, the equations reflecting the causes and implications of the unrestrained desire for something new in Romanian consumer society can be stated as follows:

Inflation of the new + advertising = passion for the new

Abundance of goods + cult of brands = excessive consumption and waste

However, the views expressed by a number of respondents criticize the continuous desire for 'something new', showing that this type of consumer becomes trapped in a vicious circle of excessive and unnecessary consumption, which, unchecked, can lead to shopping addiction (Miltenberger et al., 2003).

In addition, respondents are also aware that purchasing power is essential to maintain the quality of active consumer, noting that poverty is one of the stigmatizing inequalities in Romanian consumer society. Not having money can become a profound social handicap in a consumer society because money facilitates participation in consumption and the ability to engage in the central practice of consumer culture (Goodman and Cohen, 2004).

Tasting the American lifestyle

Analysis of data sources shows that the American model of consumption (consumer goods, media products, consumer decor) has been enthusiastically adopted by Romanian consumers (Table 3).

Table no. 3. Tasting the American lifestyle

Respondents	Quotes
R21	<i>"The Romanian society is affected by the Americanization phenomenon because people like anything new, trendy, that can make life easier. Of course, this phenomenon also has negative aspects (for example, shopping malls and casinos are places designed to waste time and money)."</i>
R14	<i>"Our country is directly involved in the phenomenon of Americanization through customs and traditions and holidays taken over, but also fast food."</i>
R18	<i>"What is sad is that by borrowing American traditions (which we find more interesting) we often forget our own traditions and cultures, which makes us vulnerable as consumers because we can no longer distinguish quality - our own traditions from what is imported and imposed through various marketing strategies."</i>
R17	<i>"Romanian culture is strongly influenced by Americanization by taking over many American customs. Thus, in our country we can observe the popularization of American holidays (Halloween, Valentine's Day, etc.), which have no cultural importance for us, but are mainly a means of consumption. At the same time, we are facing the expansion of shopping malls that have turned shopping into a way of spending leisure time."</i>
R4	<i>"Shopping is seen as a therapy that can help us to detach, for a while, from the social problems we face and that influence our lives."</i>
R24	<i>"Fast food has become very popular in Romanian culture due to the speed of preparation and appealing sensory characteristics. However, eating these foods can lead to digestive system disorders, which in time can lead to overweight and even obesity."</i>

The opinions expressed by respondents on the impact of Americanization on Romanian consumer society show both a positive perception and an awareness of the negative social implications. The main advantage of Americanization as perceived by the respondents concerns the possibility of mass access of the younger generation to typical American consumer goods and media products (films, series, music, etc.), which were inaccessible to previous generations (their parents). This finding reinforces Ritzer's (2010) claim according to which the global spread of the American model of consumption is recognized as one of the most important indicators of Americanization, reflected in the attribution of labels to certain phenomena manifested in the sphere of consumption, such as "McDonaldization", "CocaColonization" or "Starbuckization".

Among the negative effects of Americanization, respondents most often list the tendency of Romanians to celebrate holidays imported from the Americans (Halloween, Valentine's Day), which, beyond the consumption of specific products, are devoid of any cultural significance. And as a result of the aggressive promotion in the media and social media of these holidays, Romanian consumers tend to neglect the local traditions.

An ambivalent attitude is noted among respondents regarding typical American consumer settings, metaphorically called by Ritzer (2010) as "cathedrals of consumption" (malls, chain stores, themed superstores, fast food restaurants, casinos, amusement parks). The consumer settings most often associated by respondents with the idea of Americanization are the mall and the fast food restaurant. Although respondents appreciate the shopping mall for its diversified offer that meets all needs, they also see it as a place for wasting time and money, and also responsible for compulsive shopping. In the case of the fast-food restaurant, although they indicated the speed of preparation and service as the main advantage, respondents are aware of the negative effects of frequent consumption of specific products.

The explanation for the appeal of many American forms exported to the world (media products, consumer goods, consumer decorations) lies in the fact that they have succeeded in conveying to the public the idea of malleability and adaptability to local cultures. However, the American affiliation is clear.

Research trustworthiness

Regarding the validity and reliability of our research, we followed the approach of Lincoln and Guba (1985) who introduced the alternative concept of *trustworthiness* as more appropriate to qualitative research. Apart from a long engagement of the research team with data sources, in order to reduce the biases, data validation was done through challenging the findings by three of the research participants (R20, R24, R16). As they confirmed that the interviews' findings are comprehensive and linked to reality, we considered that respondents' validation had been obtained, this fact contributing to the strengthening of the research findings credibility.

Conclusions

Contemporary society seems to have generated an unquenchable appetite for consumption, so that any saturation of one need is immediately followed by the emergence of another, which then materializes into a new demand. As a result of increased social mobility and the possibility for everyone to take part in the world of consumption, access to consumer goods is no longer so strictly marked by the dominant-dominated antagonism, but rather the market oscillates between 'always more' and 'always newer'.

The main valence of consumption, in the case of the new generation of Romanian consumers, as the research shows, is the marked transition from satisfying primary consumption needs to satisfying complex needs, many of an emotional nature, aimed at expressing identity, the self, personal lifestyle, through the choice and consumption of "fashionable" material goods, a choice ultimately directed by the contemporary market, which creates different patterns of consumption and consumers. In other words, young Romanian consumers choose what they are and are what they choose, they pursue, in an often predetermined context, the differentiation of social status and the increase of self-esteem, within the social ties they develop.

The new generation of consumers in Romania, following the dominant contemporary lifestyle, is in constant search of the "new", under the influence of aggressive advertising which, today, no longer sells only products but, above all, concepts, visions, lifestyles, including through the exacerbated promotion of the cult of brands/brands, which stimulates the desire to be "in trend". As a result, there is a tendency towards irrational consumption, strongly marked by hedonism, towards waste, consumption becoming a value in itself, in other words, a center of gravity of human existence.

The constant search for the new, as a distinctive feature of the consumer behavior of the younger generation, is partly due to the globalization of the American lifestyle. From the analysis of the data, an ambivalent attitude of the new type of Romanian consumer clearly emerges, in terms of relating to this model of consumption that has become dominant. Thus, he/she looks positively at the easy access to consumer goods and media products, while adopting imported holidays, but also observes that, by accepting this lifestyle, he/she buys products without cultural significance, to the detriment of local products and traditions. They also quite readily accept consumer settings, i.e. the shopping mall and the fast-food restaurant, which are frequently associated with 'Americanization', due to the benefits expressed in the form of a diversified offer (in the case of the shopping mall) and the ease of preparing

and serving food (in the case of the fast-food restaurant), respectively, even though they sometimes find that these are in fact forms of time-wasting and irrational spending of money or sources of promoting unhealthy eating.

In this context, the original meaning of Descartes' statement – “I Think, therefore I am” - is perceived by the new generation of consumers to some extent as “I Consume, therefore I am”. Obviously, we must consume in order to exist, but nevertheless consumption should not be valorized and elevated to the privileged status of a value in itself.

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Appendix 1

Respondents' profile

Crt. no.	Respondent's Initials	Respondent's code	Gender	Master programme	Age	Marital status
1.	AC	R1	F	M1	23	unmarried
2.	BA	R2	M	M2	21	married
3.	CO	R3	M	M2	23	unmarried
4.	CC	R4	F	M2	24	unmarried
5.	DR	R5	F	M2	21	unmarried
6.	GI	R6	M	M2	22	unmarried
7.	HB	R7	M	M1	23	unmarried
8.	ID	R8	F	M1	23	unmarried
9.	IF	R9	F	M1	24	unmarried
10.	IT	R10	F	M2	22	unmarried
11.	LR	R11	M	M1	45	married
12.	MR	R12	F	M1	24	unmarried
13.	MV	R13	F	M1	24	unmarried
14.	MI	R14	F	M1	24	unmarried
15.	MD	R15	M	M1	23	unmarried
16.	MR	R16	F	M1	36	married
17.	OM	R17	F	M2	21	unmarried
18.	PT	R18	F	M1	24	married
19.	RO	R19	F	M1	24	unmarried
20.	RN	R20	M	M2	22	unmarried
21.	SA	R21	F	M1	21	unmarried
22.	SD	R22	F	M1	23	married
23.	SC	R23	F	M1	22	unmarried
24.	SA	R24	F	M2	21	unmarried
25.	SM	R25	F	M1	22	unmarried
26.	TS	R26	M	M2	22	unmarried
27.	VA	R27	F	M1	23	unmarried

Appendix 2

Discussion guide

Crt. No.	Questions
1.	What do you think are the reasons why consumption has become important in the everyday life of consumers around the world?
2.	Comment on the following statement “Consumption is a value in itself for me. I consume, therefore I am”. Explain in which extent this reflects your consumption behavior.
3.	How do you explain the never-ending desire for “something new” of Romanian consumers? What do you think is fueling the appetite for consumption of Romanian consumers? What are the consequences of this behavior?
4.	What do you think are the reasons behind the culting of brands in Romanian consumer society?
5.	What does Americanization mean to you? What do you consider to be the positive side of Americanization in the Romanian consumer society? But the negative one?
6.	Comment on the inequalities determined by gender, social class, age and poverty within the Romanian consumer society. Which of these sources of inequality do you consider to have the greatest power of stigmatization within today's Romanian consumer society? Explain why.