

CONSUMERISM VERSUS THE CULTURE OF EXISTENTIAL INTELLIGENCE

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Abstract

The present study aims to investigate the possible difficulties that human beings (especially young people) face in finding the existential meaning in consumer society. It tries to outline answers to the following questions: Does consumerism feed the crisis of meaning in contemporary society? Do consumerist ideologies and lifestyles meet the fundamental needs of the human being or do they rather induce false needs? Doesn't it propose false clues in search of meaning, in search of happiness? Maintaining the illusion that by purchasing goods, services, experiences (as many and as expensive as possible) we gain self-esteem and respect for others, consumerism can induce a dangerous sense of self-sufficiency, self-satisfaction. After the job, or even before it, the feverish, compulsive rush for shopping has become the main concern of hyperconsumerists. Under these conditions, do they still have time and energy to search for self, otherness, the purpose of life? Isn't consumerism a real obstacle in cultivating existential (spiritual) intelligence? If consumerism through (pseudo) values, the behaviors it cultivates, supports and maintains the existential crisis, then what is to be done, how can we get out of the impasse? Could the increase of the preoccupation of the society, of the socialization factors, of each individual for the development of his own existential / spiritual intelligence be a solution?

Keywords: consumerism, existential meaning, crisis of meaning, existential intelligence.

1. Introduction: What is consumerism?

The Larousse dictionary defines consumerism as lifestyle focused on consumption and characterized by a tendency to systematically buy new goods¹.

Consumerism is the dominant ideology and ethos of a consumer society, or market society, in which the whole of social life is penetrated, even structured by the economy. A culture of consumption is a culture in which the consumption of goods (tangible or intangible) is constitutive of social relations and social meanings². In other words, consumerism is a certain way of thinking and lifestyle based on excessive consumption of goods, services, real or digital life experiences. It has infiltrated everywhere, leaving its mark on our everyday life.

It is a fact reported, more than a decade ago by Jonathon Porritt, in an article published in *The Guardian* ("Stop shopping or Planet go pop"): "Fascism. Communism. Democracy. Religion. But only one has achieved total supremacy. Its compulsive attractions rob its followers of reason and good sense (...). More powerful than any cause or even religion it has reached into every corner of the globe. It is consumerism."³ In this article, Jonathon Porritt draws our attention to the traps that both the individual and the society might fall into due to consumerism, as well as to the consequences it causes on the environment.

2. The Traps of Consumerism

In this type of (consumerist) society, according to Galbraith (1986, p. 169), production creates the needs it wants to satisfy, and then fills the void it has created. Under these circumstances, the individual begins to believe and feel that his fundamental and primary need is consumption. Lipovetski finds that the influence of consumerism on the individual and on society is remarkable: 'There are very few social phenomena that have managed to change so profoundly the lifestyles and tastes, aspirations and behaviors of adults in such a short period of time, as consumerism has.'⁴ He notices that today's consumption has acquired a truly existential dimension, coming to be used even in the pursuit of individual happiness. Lipovetski concludes that in 'the hyperconsumption society, consumption is radically divided, being ordered around two antagonistic axes: on the one hand, the practical purchase of products, the necessary services; on the other hand, the hedonic buying (for pleasure).'

Goods have completely invaded our lives, becoming the accessories of a merry show, this is what Debord (1996) outlines in his paper *La société du spectacle*: 'I would rather call this *show* grotesque. Consumption becomes the new reason to live, a way of life focused on material values, excess, comfort, the satisfaction of pleasure. A (pseudo) nonethical culture of the unnatural is born, promoter of ultramercantilism

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¹ <https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/consum%C3%A9risme/18532>

² François Gauthier, *Les ressorts symboliques du consumérisme. Au-delà de la marchandise, le symbole et le don*, in *Revue du MAUSS* 2014/2 (n° 44), pp. 137-157.

³ theguardian.com/politics/2007/apr.8.

⁴ Interview with Gilles Lipovetsky, 2013, <https://www.millenaire3.com/interview/2013/la-dimension-existentielle-de-la-consommation>.

(everything is for sale!), of the quantitative (much, more and more!), of ignoring otherness; a reductionist lifestyle that excludes or ignores everything that does not enter the narrow sphere of one's own interests and pleasures. I would say that this principle of hyperconsumption tends to be extrapolated to the level of experiencing human relationships. We notice an increase – rather among young people – in the preference for as many friends, relationships, life experiences as possible. The preference for this kind of superficial, undigested, thoughtless relationships (they don't have time to reflect on them) does not bring them anything good, on the contrary. In their haste, they do not realize that, in fact, it does not matter how many relationships (experiences) you have, how many conquests you have ticked, it matters what you learned from them, after you reflected on them. Going along the same lines, Lipovetsky (2007, p. 13) suggests that 'we are only at the beginning of the hyper-consumer society, nothing is currently able to stop or even slow down the progress of transforming experience and ways of life into a commodity.'

To be effective, consumerism needs a strong ally: advertising. It could not exist without advertising. Advertising is a faithful and unbeatable instrument of consumerism. It models the needs and aspirations of people, it stimulates greed (more) and grandiosity (more expensive), it forms conditioned reflexes, it acts on the subconscious through subliminal perceptions, it induces false needs etc., its 'disinterested' goal being the perpetual increase of the sales volume. Its purpose is achieved: we buy more and more and not only because we need it but also for pleasure, to feel good, to have fun. We buy more and more expensive goods in the hope that our self-esteem will increase and we will enjoy more respect from the others. We buy because buying gives us the illusion of happiness! (Shopping therapy!) In conclusion, we can say that advertising does not only sell products, but it sells the illusion of living, of having a purpose, of being happy. The private sector, consumerism, advertising 'want to create the individual who seeks compensation for his needs and disappointments not in the quality of his life and his profession, but in consumer goods (...).'⁵

Children and teenagers can become the easiest victims of the commercials and advertising programs to which they are exposed. Under the influence of publicity, before acquiring the necessary discernment for their choices, they move towards values with material connotations, towards displaying a socio-economic status as high as possible; they channel their interests in the direction of purchasing company clothes, the most hi-tech and expensive devices; they select their friends according to the material values to

which they have adhered. Those who cannot buy such goods become frustrated, risk developing symptoms of anxiety, depression; they can even become aggressive. If we take into account the effects of excessive use of the smartphone, the Internet (social media in general), a phenomenon very common in this age group, we complete the picture of the possible risks teenagers face. Numerous psychosociological studies have shown that excessive digital consumption generates addiction, depression, isolation, loneliness; live contact with others is diminished, and the creation of an ideal and false image of oneself is encouraged. We cannot ignore Jules Henry's remarks about advertising as an expression of an irrational economy centered on a high standard of living.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that this kind of hyperconsumption pseudoculture, apparently paradoxical, has found a favorable ground in the troubled anomie societies, characterised by multiple transition (economic, political, social) settling quickly and even more successfully than in developed societies. This is also the case of Romania. I would also like to point out that, beyond the negative influences on the individual, society, the environment, consumerism also contains positive elements that are not negligible. We must not fall into the trap of *radical demonization of consumerism*: 'Let's recognize that, among the positive elements of consumerism, the most important is the autonomy of the individual. Consumption is able to bring real satisfaction. Harmful excess consumption is not enough to reduce the phenomenon as a whole. The search for pleasure, comfort, entertainment, escape, is consubstantial with human desire.'⁶ Probably intending to show the bright face of consumption, the role it played in reducing poverty and hunger, Noah Harari noted that: '... today, hunger affects fewer people than obesity. In 2017, 124 million people died of starvation, but many more (over a billion) were suffering from obesity.'⁷ I wonder if these figures are the expression of the benefits of the consumer society. From my point of view, they are false indicators, irrelevant for measuring prosperity, development and quality of life. They rather reflect the greed, irrationality and injustice that exist in the world.

3. The crisis of meaning in the society of 'hyperconsumption'

Existential crises, also known as existential dreads, are moments when individuals question whether their lives have meaning, purpose, or value, and are negatively impacted by contemplation⁸. It may be commonly, but not necessarily, tied to depression or inevitably negative speculations on purpose in life (e.g.,

⁵ Robins, 1999, p. 112, apud. Ar. Gör. Baris KARA, Les valeurs de la société de consommation : une analyse sémiologique des publicités de presse, <http://iletisimdergisi.gsu.edu.tr/tr/download/article-file/82747>.

⁶ *La dimension existentielle de la consommation*, interview with Gilles Lipovetsky; <https://www.millenaire3.com/interview/2013/la-dimension-existentielle-de-la-consommation>.

⁷ Noah Harari, *21 de lectii ale secolului 21*, Polirom, 2019, p. 29.

⁸ Richard K. James, *Crisis intervention strategies*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existential_crisis.

'if one day I am to be forgotten, what is the point of all of my work?'). Lipovetski (1983) was one of the first philosophers to draw attention to the deepening of the crisis of meaning in consumer society. He felt this wind of 'emptiness', the risk of the materialism inherent in today's world that makes existence lose substance and verticality. The existential void takes strange contours for many of the individuals in society. There is 'a diffuse and ubiquitous discomfort, a feeling of inner emptiness and the absurdity of life, an inability to feel things and beings.'⁹ Around the same time (1992) and in the same register, Emil Cioran pointed out that: 'today's man is the expression of a deep crisis, of great (soul, moral and spiritual) complexity. Today's man is alone and empty; he lacks landmarks; he is the *object of manipulation* and that of *anti-models* that deepen the crisis of values; he no longer recognizes himself; he is deceived by the illusion of false values; the world no longer offers him authentic values, nor does man have anything to ask of this world; what to build or project ideals for.'¹⁰ Moreover, Adorno pointed out that: 'In modern societies dominated by consumer ideology, excess consumer goods have become harmful and destructive. As the population is surrounded, if not suffocated by goods, the chance of the individual to find his way, his purpose in life, his meaning, becomes more and more difficult and even impossible' (Adorno, 1998, pp. 122-123). In Bauman's opinion (1999, p. 43), the individuals who make up the consumer society are in a constant situation of lack of content, dissatisfaction. Consumers are oriented towards meeting new needs, with constant exaltation and enthusiasm. Trapped, they can (apparently) get rid of their dissatisfaction only through consumption.

Today's society lacks landmarks, it is a society of 'the present moment, of urgency, of the visual, of the individual lost in the crowd', a society in which individuals are 'saturated with information', but for whom the loss of earlier constituted social *fabric* has become apparent' (...), it is a consumer society 'in which consumerism and narcissism intertwine with frustration and a sense of insecurity', 'in which individuals are fascinated by advertising and seduced by the populism of their leaders', a society that 'prepares and orients individuals so that they can function in the realm of the imaginary and the virtual'.¹¹

Consumerism seeks to create an individual focused on wealth and comfort, not on the search for 'the reason to live' and on increasing the quality of life. Thus consumerism projects an individual who neither intends nor has time to pose the problem of an intelligent existence, of a meaningful existence. Time is one of the greatest problems of the individuals of this society. Increasing consumption often involves increasing time spent working. We consume more, we

work harder. We exhaust ourselves by working and consuming. Fatigue, overwork, stress affect our physical and/or mental health. We no longer have enough time for family, friends, and community, to discover and build the meaning of our own lives. Not only does the lack of time prevent us from discovering our purpose in the world, the reason for living, but the main obstacle is the axiological system itself that underlies consumerism. It is difficult to find the meaning of life in a society whose main stakes are: the excess, the comfort, the pleasure, the tangible, the concrete.

Excessive consumption, whether for pleasure or ostentation, nourishes pride, shakes desires, creates other needs. It does not urge us to existential interrogations, to reflect on inwardness, and otherness. The individual of this world is more concerned with showing that he is above his fellow men than with being in joy and harmony with others. Hyperconsumption expresses the narcissistic pleasure of feeling a distance from the common, enjoying a positive image of oneself (Lipovetski, 2013).

Consciously or not, people are looking for themselves; they are looking for their identity. For many of them, the things, the services purchased represent an 'amplifier of their identity', of their superiority in relation to the others. The psychological effect is even more pronounced in the case of branded goods. Being expensive, they are 'exclusive'. Eckhart Tolle points out that trying to find oneself through things does not work: the satisfaction of the ego is only short-lived, followed by the appearance of other frustrations and dissatisfactions that need to be resolved. Man does not find himself, nor does he see the meaning of his existence. 'Identifying the ego with things gives rise to attachment and obsession with things, which, in turn, ensure the continuity of the consumer society.'¹²

The crisis of meaning finds its explanation in a complex of factors (be them economic, social-political, psychological, etc.) not only in the axiological system promoted by the consumer society. I am thinking, for example, of the effects of accelerating robotization, including the disappearance of a large number of industries and professions; many of the current socio-professional categories will become 'irrelevant' to the economy and not just to it. As already announced – due to robotics – the 21st century could be the 'end of work' in its traditional sense. Under these conditions, the question of man's relationship with his existence will become even more pressing. What will this 'useless, irrelevant mass' (Harari, 2019) do with its life? Given that the key statuses, the fundamental social statuses (profession, family) will be questioned, what will man do with his life? What will give meaning to his life?

⁹ Gilles Lipovetski, 1983, p. 108, apud. Jean-Luc Bernard, *Introduction à la psychologie existentielle*, Dunod, 2019, pp. 15-16.

¹⁰ Emil Cioran, *Tratat de descompunere*. București: Editura Humanitas, 1992, p. 224.

¹¹ Barus-Michel, J. *Criza ca obiect al psihologiei sociale clinice*, in Barus-Michel, J. & Neculau, A. (coord.). *Psihosociologia crizei*. Editura Trei, București, 2011, pp. 90-91.

¹² Eckhart Tolle, *Un pământ nou*, Curtea Veche, București, 2019, pp. 49, 50.

How will people come to terms with the idea that they are 'useless' and 'irrelevant'? The feeling of uselessness is devastating for the human being: it depresses him, it inhibits his desire to fight and even his desire to exist.

4. The way out of the stalemate: the orientation towards an intelligent existence

Motto:

'Man does not live only on material security, but on the meaning he gives to what he achieves.'

(V. Frankl)

An intelligent existence means, above all, a meaningful existence. Know what you live for! The Japanese believe that every human being has a reason to exist, a reason to live, has an 'ikigai'. 'It is hidden inside us and requires a careful search to reach the depths of our being and find it. (...) Ikigai is the reason we wake up in the morning.'¹³ Some have discovered it, they are aware of it, others are still looking for it.

The one who has something to live for can bear almost anything (Frankl, 2009). In Allport's view, for man, the discovery and construction of the meaning of existence, the discovery of a suitable guiding truth represent the foundation for developing resilience, for finding the strength to overcome all obstacles, misfortunes, dramas of life. By discovering the meaning and following it, man can transcend critical situations, can rise even above fate (destiny). 'The search for meaning is the first motivation of man in life' (Frankl, p. 111). 'Meaning differs from person to person, from day to day and from hour to hour. (...) Every man has his own vocation, his own mission in life to carry out a certain task that is required to be fulfilled. The more man forgets himself by giving himself to a cause that he serves or a person he loves, the more human he is and the more he updates himself.'¹⁴ 'When I look for the meaning of life, I want to explain what reality is and what my specific role is in the cosmic drama. This role makes me take part in something above myself and gives meaning to all my experiences and choices (...). To understand the meaning of life means to understand one's unique function, and to lead a good life means to fulfill that function.'¹⁵

Throughout history, billions of people have believed that for their lives to make sense, it is enough to 'leave something behind' (Harari, 2019, p. 277). It can be a child, a book, a house, etc. The orientation of man towards an intelligent existence presupposes the intensification of his preoccupation for discovering the meaning of his own existence, for rethinking the

relationship with the self, with the fellows, with the environment. It also involves reviewing its relationship with goods, with consumption, his orientation towards a 'sober', intelligent consumption. Only in this way will he more easily distinguish between real and false (induced) needs, between values and pseudo-values. He will better withstand the temptation of the superficial, the excess, the useless and the success as life's goals. All these will be perceived as anti-values.

According to psychosociologist Danielle Rapoport, we can only be happy if we choose sobriety, intelligent consumption; only if we become subjects in our consumption, if we lean more towards 'utility, quality, proximity'.¹⁶ Existential intelligence, however, involves more than awareness and fulfillment of meaning and orientation towards intelligent consumption. It represents a new paradigm that we meet in specialized literature, under the name of spiritual intelligence, both names, designating, broadly speaking, one and the same thing. Existential intelligence, as Gardner characterizes it, involves having a heightened capacity to appreciate and attend to the cosmological enigmas that define the human condition, an exceptional awareness of the metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological mysteries that have been a perennial concern for people of all cultures.¹⁷ McMullen noted that 'if cognitive intelligence is about thinking and emotional intelligence is about feeling, then spiritual intelligence is about being' (McMullen, 2003, pp. 43-46).

In the view of Zohar and Marshall, spiritual intelligence (SQ) is the intelligence with which 'we address and solve problems of meaning and value, the intelligence with which we can place our actions and our lives in a wider, richer, meaning-giving context, the intelligence with which we can assess that one course of action or one life-path is more meaningful than another. SQ is the necessary foundation for the effective functioning of both IQ and EQ. It is our ultimate intelligence.'¹⁸

Spiritual intelligence means 'to be able to discern the real meaning of events and circumstances, and be able to make work meaningful; identify and align personal values with a clear sense of purpose; live those values without compromise and thereby demonstrate integrity by example; and understand where and how each of the above is sabotaged by the ego, which means being able to understand and influence *true cause*' (Mike, 2006, pp. 3-5). Cindy Wigglesworth identified the spiritual intelligence as the ability to behave with wisdom and compassion, while maintaining inner and outer peace (equanimity), regardless of the circumstances.

¹³ Hector Garcia, Francesc Miralles, *Ikigai*, Humanitas, 2017, p. 15.

¹⁴ Viktor E. Frankl, *Omul în căutarea sensului vieții*, Meteor Press, 2017, pp. 121-123.

¹⁵ Noah Harari, *21 de lecții pentru secolul XXI*, Polirom, 2019, p. 269.

¹⁶ <https://www.la-croix.com/Famille/Parents-Enfants/Dossiers/Couple-et-Famille/Famille-et-societe>.

¹⁷ Kenneth W. Tupper, in *Entheogens and Existential Intelligence: The Use of Plant Teachers as Cognitive Tools*, Canadian Journal of Education, Vol 27, nr.4/2002, pp. 503-508; <https://journals.sfu.ca/cje/index.php/cje-rce/article/view/2843/2140>.

¹⁸ Zohar D., Marshall I. *SQ: Connecting With Our Spiritual Intelligence*. Bloomsbury Publishing, New-York, 2000, pp. 3-4.

In *Spiritual Intelligence: A New Paradigm for Collaborative Action*, Danah Zohar considered that Spiritual intelligence can be fostered by applying 12 principles:

1. **Spiritual self-awareness.** It means to recognize what I care about, what I live for, and what I would die for. It's to live true to myself while respecting others.

2. **Spontaneity.** To be spontaneous means letting go of all your baggage (your childhood problems, prejudices, assumptions, values, and projections) and be responsive to the moment.

3. **Being Vision and Value-Led.** Vision is the capacity to see something that inspires us and means something broader than a company vision or a vision for educational development.

4. **Holism** encourages cooperation, because as you realize you're all part of the same system, you take responsibility for your part in it. A lack of holism encourages competition, which encourages separateness.

5. **Compassion.** I don't just recognize or accept your feelings, I feel them.

6. **Celebration of Diversity.** Compassion is strongly linked to the principle of diversity. We celebrate our differences because they teach us what matters. Celebrating diversity means that I appreciate that you rattle my cage, because by doing so, you make me think and grow.

7. **Field Independence.** It's a willingness to go it alone, but only after I've carefully considered what others have to say.

8. **Humility.** Humility is the necessary other side of field independence, whereby I realize that I am one actor in a larger play and that I might be wrong. Humility makes us great, not small. It makes us proud to be a voice in a choir.

9. **Tendency to Ask Fundamental 'Why?' Questions.** 'Why?' is subversive, and people are often frightened by questions without easy answers. Answers are a finite game; they're played within boundaries, rules, and expectations. Questions are an infinite game; they play with the boundaries, they define them.

10. **Ability to Reframe.** Reframing refers to the ability to stand back from a situation and look for the

bigger picture. It brings a variety of approaches to problem-solving tasks and is prepared to let go of previously held ideas when these clearly are not working. It seeks to broaden experience by taking on tasks outside of comfort zone

11. **Positive Use of Adversity.** This principle is about owning, recognizing, accepting, and acknowledging mistakes. Positive use of adversity is also the ability to recognize that suffering is inevitable in life. There are painful things for human beings to deal with, yet they make us stronger, wiser, and braver.

12. **Sense of Vocation.** This principle sums up spiritual intelligence and spiritual capital. It's my ideal that business will become a vocation that appeals to people with a larger purpose and a desire to make wealth that benefits not only those who create it but also the community and the world.

The development of existential intelligence presupposes first the knowledge, the awareness of its inherent benefits. It would take an effort of will both individually and socially. The involvement of socialization factors in the education of children and young people in this spirit would be required. At the macrosocial level, the creation of the necessary context for an intelligent existence requires profound changes at political, economic and socio-cultural levels.

5. Conclusions

This paper is a plea for a rational, decent, sober, without excess consumption. The benefits that people enjoy in today's consumer society (the progress of comfort, the multiplication of experiences, 'the satisfaction of having') cannot be denied. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that hyperconsumption does not make it possible to fill the feelings of existential emptiness related to the relationship with others, communication, love, recognition, self-esteem, professional achievement. Moreover, a consumer-centered existence risks favoring the deepening of the crisis of meaning, does not leave time for existential interrogations, overturns the hierarchy of values, in conclusion, is the opposite of an intelligent existence.

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