

# Taxonomy for “Homo Consumens” in a 3.0 Era

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## INTRODUCTION

Consumption is a basic human activity that implies a wide range of consequences: economic, psychological, environmental and social ones. Although it is true that consumption is one of the principal and most necessary engines for modern economies, there are important ecological and social costs in its practice. As human beings we are co-responsible for our consumption habits. We can no longer think that to consume is a free act that only implies ourselves and what can we afford. Through our lifestyles and consumption patterns we transform the world. Consumption can be seen in many different ways: from a liberal perspective nobody has the right to influence and be critical about your consumption but yourself: you have the freedom and the right to buy what you can/want/desire; from a reformist point of view, as a society, a consumer society is the best, the ideal society we can have, but it has some drawbacks that we can reform or correct; The sustainable side states that it is possible to move towards a cleaner (and a fairer) world with certain behaviours; Last but not least there is even a political viewpoint where consumption can be seen as a way to change the world. There could be also a radical position (also seen as destructive), or also an ascetic one, that pleads for a new relationship between the Planet and Humankind in a back-to-the-roots path.

It was Erich Fromm, in 1965, who was the first to call the human species *Homo consumens*, a term that evolved from *Homo sapiens* to denote how we devote all our efforts, beyond working from 9:00 to 5:00, to consume compulsively as a means to

sublimate our frustrations. In addition, Saad (2007) and Lipovetsky (2006) have used the term *Homo consumericus* to refer to the Darwinian principles of evolution and consumer behavior. Lipovetsky has noted that modern times have brought about the rise of a third type of *Homo consumericus*, who is unpredictable and insatiable.

*Homo Consumens is the man whose main goal is not primarily to own things, but to consume more and more, and thus to compensate for his inner vacuity, passivity, loneliness and anxiety...Homo Consumens is under the illusion of happiness, while unconsciously suffers from his boredom and passivity. The more power you have over machines, the more powerless it becomes as a human being; the more you consume, the more you become a slave to the ever increasing needs. (Fromm, 1965, p. 214)*

Since then, most of the literature on symbolic consumption and consumerism has recreated this concept to deepen, if not openly criticize, a society that alienates the person, relegating it to a mere facet, often irresponsible and compulsive, and unconsciously, a buyer of increasingly sophisticated products and services. For example, Robert Bocoock (1995) states that consumption is a social, psychological, and cultural process that affects the way in which individuals establish and maintain an awareness of what they are or would be; Luis Enrique Alonso (2005) includes consuming as a form of material appropriation of the social surplus, understood as the production, circulation, and use of signs, circumscribing all practices of each

social position; Naomi Klein (2002), aligned with her “No Logo,” dared to raise a frontal attack on a logoized world; and Zygmunt Bauman (2007) points to how today’s world, with its globalization and the Web, cannot be understood without simultaneously considering, to a greater or lesser extent, consumers being consumers and consumer’s objects themselves: “individuals become simultaneously the promoters of commodities and the commodities that they promote” (p. 6). Even Adela Cortina (2002) raised the need to work toward a more conscious and critical consumption, without necessarily revolutionizing or destroying the system but reforming from within those aspects that do not work properly. Requena (2009) raised the possible existence of “consumers of nows,” the so-called transumers who would collect and accumulate “nows” in intense and prolonged fashion. Effectively, September 11, 2001, and its subsequent consequences, among which is a strong feeling of vulnerability (the collapse of the twin towers, representing the heart of capitalism, violated the consumer society, which could happen anywhere) caused us to believe that no future could be imagined, resulting in a feeling of *carpe diem*: Consume “nows,” because we do not know if there will be “afters.”

Thus, “we are all consumers,” as Kennedy said in his famous 1962 speech: “We are the largest market economic group, affecting and affected by almost every public and private economic decision.” In this developed society, it is true that we do not understand/cannot imagine our identity(ies) without that idea of being a buyers’ being. We are consumers, recognize ourselves as such, and cannot understand our society (relationships, institutions, symbols, and myths) without this essence. The concept of “mass man” (a term coined by Ortega in 1929) refers to the human being as characterized by a large increase in the consumption of goods and services of all kinds.

However, we know that there are not “consumers,” targeted as such and predictable in behavior throughout their existence, but consumption

habits, moments, and behaviors. The financial crisis, globalization, and social networks have changed the way people indulge in the satisfaction of their needs. Traditionally, consumers were labeled according to their behaviors and habits and classified in a particular segment according to sex, age, habitat, and life moment. Today, these classifications are geared more toward consumption moments in which each person behaves according to the circumstances: sometimes rational, sometimes emotional, sometimes price based, sometimes hedonistic. For example, you can be a manager by day, a parent on weekends, and a player at night. Thus, segmenting consumers is increasingly difficult, especially when they are now better informed, have become more demanding, and are sovereign in their decisions. It seems that Belk and Pollay (1985;889) were premonitory when they said, “We are building our identity in a way that had never before tasted”.

## BACKGROUND

### Homo Sapiens and Homo Consumens Ludens

Perhaps the first subclassification in this new taxonomy is to differentiate between rational and emotional consumers. The SmartShopper is logical and rational and tries to maximize a personal return on investment when buying food, household items, and even clothes, while the consumer is looking for emotions and experiences and seeking to enjoy every purchase. It is, however, that old distinction between “go shopping” and “do the shopping.”

It seems logical and even obvious to think that when a buyer chooses to purchase a good or service that he or she should always opt for that object that will provide greater value. The satisfaction of a need understood as that which fills the gap between a state that is presented as an ideal and a current state that keeps us unhappy is not only

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