

## „NOSTALGIC CONSUMPTION”

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**Abstract:** Scarcity left deep scars in the memories of Romanians, especially when talking about their access to objects, products and even brands, back to 1989. Therefore, after this limit, the scarcity had to be reinvented in an abundant world, as the market was defined by copiousness in terms of products, services and other opportunities. Yet, even before the revolution, Romanian spoiled themselves with certain products (brands), not necessarily better, but rarer than those they were used to. On these premises, the study aims to explore how nostalgia intensity is influenced by the complete moment experience, which consumers by 1989 received when interacting with specific objects or even brands that Romanians continue to interact with even after the moment of 1989, until nowadays. Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were conducted in Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca and Timisoara, as these are the main cities where the revolution started back in 1989, in order to contact those who were directly involved in changing the political regime. The information obtained through the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews is exploratory and even if the data are rich and valuable, these do not entail any form of statistical analysis in the sense of a quantitative research study. Present results suggest that the complete moment experience, received by interacting with specific objects or brands both before and after 1989 and until now, intensely affects nostalgia felt by consumers / users of those items.

**Keywords:** consumption, nostalgia, authentique,

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### 1. Summary

In a world in which we live moments of the most varied, in which we have started to pay heavy prices for all kind of stimuli which later become perceptions, then memories, and finally "once in a life time experiences", most of us want to stand out, to get out of patterns and therefore to act free in any activities. Differentiate yourself or die is an idea which is not long ago mapped, that seems to become more and more real and more present too. To differentiate firstly means to accept that there is an attitude / conduct / lifestyle / a common approach, a pattern or a mould for living, which then has to be denied. Basically differentiation involves understanding the cone of shadow from which you wish to exit.

In addition to this, the present paper intends to prove the existence of a typology which, under the same umbrella of the need for differentiation, talks about those who are able to take a step forward, but not necessary guided by their need to stand in front of everybody else, but rather from the need to experience the concept of loneliness or adventure or to live unique moments.

Therefore, in the research I decided:

- to identify the influence that nostalgia has on today's consumption in the context of Romania's transition from Communism to Capitalism;
- to analyse the relationship between the process of initiation of the consumption behaviour and stereotypes, plus the predisposition to express all kind of prejudices, as a branch of consumers process of taking decisions and being rational;
- having in mind the dynamics of consumer behaviour in Romania, to shed light on changes that occur in the consumer-object interaction, once with the transition from hyper-consumption to a new consumer behaviour (characterized exactly by human predisposition to be influenced, in their process of acquisition, by prejudices and stereotypes. This behaviour is rather specific for those who experience today consumption by referencing to the before '89 economical context);
- to observe all the defining elements of those who are tributary to that consumption behaviour that is characterized by various predispositions of decision-making and to understand the reasons for the consumption of those who stand in the mirror of these reactions;
- in the future I would like to put up an easily identification solution of these types of consumers, in order to settle the right background for developing new techniques of market research, by having as „stars consumers” those people who are at least influenced by prejudice, stereotypes, the need to stage or influenced by the nostalgia in the formation of the purchase decisions.

Starting from this paper I propose to outline new perspectives on consumption and to put the foundations of the concept of „genuine (naturel / authentique / firesc) consumption” and also for its satellite concepts: consumption biased by nostalgia, prejudice and the need for standing out. On these premises, I propose to venture into the world of consumer behaviours, starting for the possibility of the existence of a purchasing behaviour triggered by any other stimulus but the belonging to a group. This idea can be constructed, of course, as a form of a hierarchical structure, such as: I differentiate in order to give me as an example for the group, to become the leader.

Now, let's take an in depth look on the following specific objectives of this work:

- I would like to identify the role that prejudice and stereotyping plays in triggering consumer behaviours at national level, in the context of Romania's transition from the period of scarcity in 1989 to the abundance, which occurred after this period;
  - Identification of the influence that nostalgia has towards those consumers that experienced the acquisition of products/objects present on the market back in Romania of 1989 and that continued to use them until today;
- Identify the role that natural consumers have in outlining a new step on the development scale of consumption;
- Substantiation of possible new market research techniques in Romania for purposes of using the results of the present work (quantitative research included) for brand communication development, according to the local context and therefore with those wishes and other expectations of natural consumers.

## **2. Conceptual specifications and theoretical framework**

Definition of genuine (*firesc / authentique*) consumer aims to fill a space left free when the purchase behaviours were defined. Consumer society (Goffman, 2007), in its transition to hyper-consumption (Lipovetsky, 2007) provides an opportunity to shape a new consumer segment, characterized by a non-conformist attitude. In terms of time, consumer behaviour is rather on the border between hyper-consumption and something else, not necessarily between Goffman's consumerism and hyper-consumption of the contemporary era. Even one of the first definitions of consumption “food, clothing, housing, health, transport and leisure occupations define each domain of consumption” (Larousse, 1996 , p.66 ) , took

care to enumerate a list of objects for consumption , a process which enables us to believe that for understanding of consumption is very important the context of the abundance of products and stimuli to which consumers are exposed to every day. Therefore, not coincidentally, the abundance has become one of the most important features of consumption. And due to the central positioning of the features in the definition of consumption we can easily see that any form which use to be taken in its evolution, our focus must be upon the quantity and availability of products. Based on what Baudrillard said, according to which one of the most important pillars of the consumer society is the abundance of “multiplication of objects, services, material goods, which represents a fundamental shift in the ecology of the human species“ (Baudrillard, 2005, p 29) we will consider, throughout this paper, the context of the shelf abundance. Abundance or riches (belşugul), says Baudrillard (2008) , becomes a key factor in consumer decision-making , even if we are not necessarily talking about a trigger , but rather an entire context ( Pattanaik , 2009) , in which people are continuously adapt for finding solutions for their needs. But if we understand abundance as another step of consumption growth, then we will surely remember a previous stage of history - the deficit / scarcity (Craib, 1976). It has left deep traces in Romanians' memory when it comes to their access to objects, products and brands just before 1989. Then, after this threshold, the deficit or lack of wealth had to be reinvented in the context of hyper-markets and their shelves. Even so, in the context of 70-80's, Romanians managed to pamper themselves with some products (even brands ) harder to obtained than other products that were sufficiently common in order to represent subject of collaboration consumption - Collaborative Consumption ( Felson , 1978) – meaning the daily usage, those products that were found everywhere. On these premises, the current study aims to explore how consumers are influenced by the intangible aura of certain products / objects / (even brands) when they meet them again in today's economic environment. Thus I propose to focus on how nostalgia of consumption before 89 (in the context of Scarcity mentioned by Craib) influences the consumers today, when they are exposed to a multitude of products, specific to a single category (including those objects / products that were found in the past).

Now, having in mind the evolutionary path of consumption, we can rightly ask: what triggers the purchase and especially which is the form that the consumption takes today? Which is the defence mechanism of hyper-consumers ( Lipovetski , 2007) overexposed to the abundance of products? Assuming that consumption represents simply the consumer's behaviour, then we know that it is nothing but people's conduct within the meaning of purchase or consumption of goods, while their customer is the end user (Cătoi, 1996). The need for discovering what does engage all the modern economic system, priori eliminating the subject, the manufacturer and the need to associate with others (all taken in the context of purchase / consumption), made me not to set any limit for myself on this perspective and to focus in-depth consumer's behaviour. Therefore, in composing next ideas I have considered all the information already identified by Lancaster (1966), as he argued that the goods are consumed due to their characteristics, and new goods (such as shown in our context) are nothing but recombination of the characteristics that defined old ones. Furthermore, I propose the following exercise: thinking about the definition of nostalgia, as the opposite concept of progress, against which it is viewed negatively as reactionary, sentimental or melancholy (Keightley and Pickering 2006), we can have as prerequisite work idea that the new products will automatically awaken nostalgia for past consumption. Even if in this way, the old features of objects are appreciated and will be in discussion for consumer preferences, recombination will prove to be purchased every time (Lancaster, 1966) – dynamic products on the shelves and even the appearance branding are the main proves for this idea. Interesting to note for this paper is the actuality aura of Wund's Curve (Lancaster, 1966): in the context of genuine consumers. This concept focuses on people's reaction to the news and indicates neither their greater propensity to choose nor the newest the products / goods, but nor the oldest.

We could say that this conclusion represents the virtual hedonistic victory's reaction to innovation and it sustains our definition of genuine consumer, that stands before a decision and constantly bombarded by an abundance of products decides to choose those goods that serve he's hedonistic need to experience (regardless how consumption nostalgia acts on the one hand and innovation on the other hand). If we stick to this idea and bring it into question the definition of consumption (Larousse, 1996) mentioned earlier, we can now charge it that is quite limited (niche) on a particular context, which would actually remove the idea of consumption in the context of deficit / Scarcity (Craib, 1976). Indeed the difference of Plenty / Abundance (Baudrillard, 2005) and Deficit Scarcity (Craib, 1976) is made from the perspective of a single variable, so the distinction between the two concepts aims rather the context of consumption, not its definition. Even so, Larousse's definition is incomplete, therefore I believe it is important to discuss other perspectives on consumption; one of them belongs to Falk (1994) I consume, therefore I am - this exposure makes us think to a rather complex task, than a complete one. Basically, if we do a disciplinary parallel the Desein (Heidegger, 1927) becomes conditioned solely by the consumption. Paul Du Gay (1996) outsources some perspective on consumption and places the concept in the industry, talking about consumption as a creative activity opposite to production. A common note of these perspectives on consumption is concept's complexity – even if it about those things which represent the subject of consumption, the supply of consumer goods or the consumer itself, every time the full experience is the one that emerges as a benefit of this work. So, taking into account everything we have learned so far, both with having in mind the idea that consumer's intentions represent "the most important approach in decomposing or unpacking a concern about a specific, a hierarchical set of actions - organized by their importance for a better solving the need that represents the subject of concern." (Ratneshwar, 2003), the consumption itself becomes the usage of certain goods to meet various needs of dictated most often by cultural contexts. Thus, we can speak of nostalgic consumers, biased consumers, those with blazon, genuine consumers, those who are not necessarily looking a good utility, but for a balance between product's utility and the moment when the whole process of consumption began. As an example we can take a consumer that is about wants to decide upon choosing a bottle of mineral water. He will choose glass bottle, because he is not a nostalgic consumer, but neither will he jump in the arms of innovation (guided rather by the product's utility than the brand behind the object). Thus the most likely will be for him to choose the middle option. In order not to stick with just an example and to maintain focused on study's purpose, it is important to define the object of consumption, with reference to any tool with which one interacts. Consumption can therefore be understood as a complete experience obtained after interacting with certain goods (both products and brands). This idea was highlighted by economists too and put under the umbrella of usage: A. Wolfespenger and H. Lapage (1995) believes that in the process of purchase, the consumer receives an active role as he becomes capable of evaluation. In addition, consumer's budget is not perceived from the amount's perspective any more, but from its potential (Wolfespenger, 1995). The essence of the theory places the consumer in a position where he is able to be for himself his own creator of satisfaction, while objects become at least a bunch of instruments in the process. When the consumer prefers instead to let be influenced by the nostalgia that binds him to the usage of those objects, then he becomes tributary to past experiences, with the risk of under-assessment of current experience (or even total lack of any experience). In this process of defining the nostalgic consumer, we should know first of all know the concept of nostalgia, which implies at its origin the state of longing dor – a painful condition arising in relation to the returning home, or in a comfort zone / area. This idea was later supported in the seventeenth century by Johannes Hoffer, who talked about nostalgia as about a familiar condition and not necessarily as a frequent homesickness (Davis, 1979). By on these premises, it looks like nostalgia has its origins into the whole

context and not necessarily on the lost, desired object (e.g. you don't become nostalgic about a certain house, but after the representation of it in your whole, so after your experiences developed in that certain house). The situation looks the same on the outcomes of the FGDs and IDIs that conduct this study, as consumers talk about "how was before and how cigarettes were before... Where else can you find those times nowadays?" (R.B. 51y.o). This statement proves that even they perceive the goods that performed well back in 89 as a standard of quality, they instinctively assess the usage of those products from the complete experience's perspective. On these premises, nostalgia gains the proportions of a historical emotion (Boym, 2007, p8). Fred Davis (1979) anticipated our context where nostalgia proves to influence the complete experience of usage by highlighting in his study the strong connection between nostalgia and historical moments in general - politics—for example "The nostalgic feeling interfere deeply with any nationalistic and patriotic emotions." (1979, p.72). Indeed, the overall conclusion of each group was that politics regimes had a big contribution in shaping consumption contexts. In this way, nostalgia became same kind of a "safety valve for disappointments and frustrations suffered due to the loss of values once cherished." (ibid. p.99). In order to test the nostalgia of our respondents, I've used a scale, developed by Sarah Penney in her RIBM doctoral symposium, which involves understanding any changes in thoughts or attitudes in response to different stimuli (in current case, I refer to goods or sometimes, brands). These were specially chosen from those that have a halo of historical awareness. To be more specific, I've tried to choose those products that were present on Romanian market both before and after the 1989 moment. The test model can be found in a copy attached to this paper as an appendix as it performed very well with providing consistent results for the current research. To sustain by argues, nostalgic consumers proved to choose every time the goods that helped them anchor themselves in past experiences, but even so, they remained sceptical enough to leave open the door in a real-life situation to choose products or brands that perform well on the utility scale (exactly as *authentique* consumers do).

When we get back to scarcity (Craib, 1976), with all these ideas in mind, this concept proves to develop two sides: one that refers exclusively to narrowing down the consumption options and another one (important for current study) which speaks about scarcity in terms of a Society's base unit – "Scarcity represents the only condition for our history to exist." (idem, p. 129). As it is described by Craib, the history proves to be always an inferior version of the current situation of any society. This perspective supports nostalgia's bias in terms of appreciation of some specific products or brands that proves to perform better than contemporary ones, as respondents told us that "Current products are far from the standard of quality of those on the market back in 1989..." (Adrian, FGD 2, Bucharest, over 50y.o.). Still in supporting nostalgia experienced by consumers, Simone Denise (2011) raises our attention regarding smokers who even if find easily every negative effects smoking implies, when it comes to nostalgic consumers, they can't detach from the context. They even tend to appreciate the qualities of cigarettes from those times while shaping them an aura of having real benefits "They were healthier, they used not to have a large amount of additives and this discussion can be escalated in other contexts too." (Mihai, FGD2 Bucharest, over 50 years). The same perception repeats in the case of a bicycle, whose technical characteristics are perceived as more refined before the Revolution. In conclusion, in order to support the parallelism between Simone's results and mine's I'll have to give the complete experience more weight due the implications that objects have in relation to the body.

Finally we can conclude that nostalgia has potential to influence the perception upon the complete consumption's moment experience as an event that happened once can change the context of consumption from that point forward, without altering goods' proprieties. All the details behind the comparing that consumers make continuously between past experiences and current ones succeed to offer an important touch in

understanding consumption's influence upon nostalgia: that the situation is exactly the opposite: nostalgia is influencing consumption and the elements that create the context become crucial in understanding inhibited behaviours.

### **3. Methodology**

This research tries to set itself on an exploratory path by differentiating from other papers that offer advices on „How to.....” with theoretical content. The second part of the project – the social survey- is designed to test from a qualitative perspective, using the focus group technique, the degree in which consumption behaviour of people is inclined towards brands that were on the market both before and after 1989. Subjects were gathered both from Bucharest and Timisoara. In this way we tried to gather persons that we're connected to the black market from both cities from which the '89 revolution sprung. By doing so, we sought to recruit persons for the focus groups that were regular consumers both before and after 1989.

The group agenda gathered persons between 40 and 50 years of age and persons with ages over 50 years in order to meet the required age for speaking wittingly of the experience of smoking (two groups in which the brand Kent was discussed from a consumerist perspective) and to ensure a generous period in which respondents could be key decision makers regarding the products they choose to consume before and after 1989. We did not follow a differentiation on the basis of gender, because we chose for the debate products which addressed both male and female consumers.

The number of respondents participating in the focus groups is not nationally representative- the approach is rather aimed at discovering the motivations of today's consumer consumption, which is their conduct in relation to consumption and its subject, to understand how it affects nostalgia consumption in the past day. Therefore, the purpose of the chosen methodology – and the entire study- is a qualitative one, which has rather the purpose of identifying the motivations behind the purchase, than issuing patterns nationally representative.

### **4. Conclusion**

This research remains at a design stage level; the number of respondents is not sufficient to support an exhaustive conclusion, but we believe that pre-testing has provided compelling grounds for making future efforts in completing a study that explores the correlation between people's propensity for prejudice and behavior consumption. This paper aims to become the framework of a more elaborate project with the purpose of verifying the existence of neo-consumers and nostalgically consumers. Shaping a new typology of consumer has - besides the scientific purposes- the intention to broaden the horizons of research in this domain and identify new opportunities in the field of communication and branding. Having a clear image of these potential consumers helps provide an improvement to meeting the needs of this segment in the mass of buyers , while supporting development efforts of those areas of industry that decide to use a specific communications channel .The paper managed to prove that there are other behavior pattern of consumption - different from that of Lipovetsky. The paper also identified the nostalgia that consumers of certain products –both before and after 1989- have experienced following the revitalization of products/brands over time. However, there are more elements to be discussed regarding consumption in the sense that the paper has the potential to develop research tools for identifying consumers of specific brands in order to improve them or create future brands that respond better to customer needs. A new generation of customers seems to be emerging as the abundance of products is increasing and the need for differentiation also being increased along with it. In conclusion, we hope to continue developing this research project, and afterwards to open new opportunities in

the understanding and development of brand communication, raising more questions concerning the dynamics of consumer behaviour, and to certify the existence of this typology of consumers through nationally representative quantitative research. In the interest of specialized writings, this paper aims to further support the achievement of a quantitative study that legitimizes this behavior at macro level. Putting the problem in terms of a sociology of normality, translated by studying the process by which people come to desire interactions with - objects / people - for the sake of unpredictability , living experience or just the interaction itself may play a role in the exploration of interpersonal processes and people's attitudes toward objects which they come in contact with.

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