THE SOCIOCULTURAL DETERMINANTS OF CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION IN RUSSIAN SOCIETY IN THE CONTEXT OF SPIRITUAL CRISIS

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ABSTRACT
The focus of the paper is conspicuous consumption in modern Russian society. There is much evidence that the social phenomenon is one of the main trends in Russian sociocultural dynamics which stems from consumption (consumerism). Acting as the essential foundation of Western culture, the ideology of consumption has actively spread in the sociocultural environment of the post-Soviet society. Consequently, the consumer culture has become a part of the socialization mechanism, i.e., the basis for the formation and reproduction of the consumer society. The dynamics of conspicuous consumption are fast. It plays a pivotal role and it is of much importance for modern social scientists. There is enough evidence that conspicuous consumption is a form of a modern cult, which became the social measure and the basis of life strategies. Interestingly, consumption began to determine the vector and prospects of the sociocultural transformation of Russian society. All these factors determine a high theoretical and practical demand for the social and philosophical conceptualization of conspicuous consumption in Russia. Obviously, it is important to describe the sociocultural aspects of this phenomenon. The results of the study indicate that the trajectory of Russian sociocultural dynamics correlates with conspicuous consumption and consumer ideology at large. The authors believe that this trajectory is a warning sign of spiritual devolution distorting the spiritual code of Russian people.

Keywords: consumption, conspicuous consumption, consumer culture, consumption ideology, sociocultural dynamics, Russian reality, Russian society, spiritual crisis.

INTRODUCTION
A key aspect of the paper is conspicuous consumption and its influence on people in modern Russia. Consumption as an ideology of a mass society has deeply penetrated the fabric of social relations. Modern society involved in the processes of globalization is practically unable to resist it. Consumerism has completely changed the type of socialization, i.e., nowadays individual norms and values come in line with the system of values of consumption. They change the system of social life contributing to the dehumanization of society and the formation of a “one-dimensional” person striving for unrestrained consumption (Ilin, 2016: 45). The cult of consumption has become the source of depreciation cult and the formation of a society in which less and less space belongs to the things and values of a durable character, as this contradicts the logic of a consumer society which is based on production processes. The deeper the cult of consumption penetrates the fabric of social relations – determining the identification strategies of individuals, social groups and their perception of social reality – the more it is getting hold of social practices.
There is a growing body of literature showing that conspicuous consumption is one of the indicators of one-dimensionality, spiritual lumpenization and degradation of modern society since the main purpose of such consumption is to demonstrate high social status, belonging to a higher social stratum with the help of consumed goods.

The purpose of this paper is a deep scientific analysis of the sociocultural conditioning and determinism of conspicuous consumption in modern Russian society. There is much evidence that Russian society still comes with a strong civilizational identity preserving its mental matrix (Lubsky et al., 2016). Nevertheless, there are powerful indicators that Russians have actively joined the dominant trend of the modern world under the name “consumption” which became a symbol of the modern era and the factor of sociocultural dynamics.

The fundamentals of consumption study as a social phenomenon emerged in the 19th - early 20th centuries in the works by T. Veblen, M. Weber, G. Simmel (Veblen, 1984; Simmel, 1996). However, until the middle of the 20th century, social scientists had been primarily studying consumer behavior. Only in the 2nd half of the 20th century did the readers get acquainted with the scientific works connected with the study of consumption as such. Around the same time, the famous theory of the “consumer society” proposed in the 2nd half of the 20th century appeared in the works by J. Baudrillard (1998). The very theory of consumption became the subject of an in-depth study of several foreign scientists (Cross, 1993; Lee, 1993; Slate, 1997). They focused on the phenomenon of consumer culture and the mechanisms of its penetration into the sociocultural fabric of society. Following the development of the consumption theory, social scientific investigations began to describe the spiritual challenges confronting modern consumer society, empathizing the hazards to collective moral health, interpreting a religious context, the context of self-actualized social practices and choice expansion (Giordan, 2007; Lucchetti et al., 2015; Moreira-Almeida et al., 2014; Puchalski, 2012). The interpretive approach to consumerism has been fundamental to the development of “New Age spirituality” which emerged in the brilliant research projects of foreign social scholars. This concept stems from a perfect idea of “spiritual shift” in the history of mankind, when the spiritual ceased to be identical with a sacralized religious sphere and got its own right to an independent status, to its own logic of development and evolution (Heelas, 2002).

The problem of conspicuous (prestigious, demonstrative, iconic) consumption initially appeared at the end of the 19th century in the pivotal research “The Theory of the Leisure Class” by T. Veblen. In this insightful work T. Veblen interpreted things as an indicator of consumer status, and this idea remains important today. In Russian social thought, the problem of conspicuous consumption also received much attention. In the meaningful works by V.I. Ilin conspicuous consumption is the phenomenon most clearly manifested in the periods of the initial accumulation of wealth, when new rich people emerge (Ilin, 2005). A.V. Logunov outlines conspicuous consumption as one of the significant external signs of personal identification associated with the assimilation of behavioral code; the symbolism of prestigious goods; the development of linguistic competence; the acquisition of spaces distinguished by the presentations of a selected reference group (Logunov, 2003).

Social scientists often describe modern Russian reality from the perspective of consumer culture initiated by the internalization of Western culture ideology (Tumaikin, 2012). Scholars intensively speak of an increase in despiritualization, spiritual crisis and spiritual lumpenization (Filyushkina, 2014; Filyushkina & Volkov, 2014; Volkov et al., 2015). The phenomenon occurs widely among young Russians (Vereshchagina et al., 2015). Central to the entire discipline are the roles of science and education performed in the spiritual improvement of society, in the construction of its safe future (Volkov et al., 2016; Bandurin et al., 2015).

Therefore, despite the existence of a whole range of works that can be regarded as scientific grounds for analyzing conspicuous consumption, very little is known about Russian reality from the point of view of conspicuous consumption’s sociocultural determinants in social practices. No previous study has investigated the problem in depth in social and philosophical literature. The knowledge gap in the field of study determines the subject area of the paper and its innovative character.
The mind to addiction for many recreational consumption. Fashionable things; demonstrating the following types of conspicuous consumption.

The current study shows that the motivation to consume plays an important role in conspicuous consumption. In her groundbreaking research O.S. Posypanova identifies several “motivational trends” of conspicuous consumption. They are as follows:

- The “social motivation” trend which relates the acquisition of the necessary position and status.

As far as the structure of conspicuous consumption is concerned, first of all, it is critical to outline the following types of conspicuous consumption: a) the acquisition of luxury goods with the purpose of demonstrating the financial ability to afford this big luxury; b) the consumption of unique and fashionable things; the acquisition of “brand” products; shopping items; glamorous objects; c) recreational consumption. There is much evidence that simultaneously consumerism becomes an addiction for many people. The goods lose their own importance and become a symbol of admission to a certain social group. The idea of achieving social superiority through consumption generates in the mind of a customer the belief that the act of buying itself can deliver more pleasure than the
purchased object. In this way, consumption becomes the goal and meaning of life, it determines a life’s trajectory and the trajectory of conspicuous consumption. Consequently, the trajectories of conspicuous consumption represent a set of significant individual practices and competing strategies (psychological aspirations) that go beyond the limits of vital consumption and target social status growth. They maintain the prestige of a person, visualizing the culture of desires (“pleasures”), positioning one’s own status in the space of social distinction based on the instinct of rivalry and the desire to stand out from the general mass. Accordingly, being realized within the culture of desires, the status-demonstrative consumption acts simultaneously as a challenge to public opinion.

Obviously, mass production is not able to significantly increase and make available to most people such benefits as land in expensive areas, training in prestigious educational institutions, high quality services, career vacancies, important job positions, objects of high rarity, membership in closed clubs, etc. It is in this field, and not in the sector of clothes, wristwatches or cars, where today emerges a “watershed” between the elitist layers of society and “all the rest”, including the middle class. It is these goods that are becoming markers of status consumption, which differentiate, for example, in Russian society a small class of wealthy oligarchs from the rest of the population (Malakhov, 2011).

It is interesting to note that the sociocultural context of the structure and status-demonstrative consumption trajectories make it possible to clarify the factor-objective and subjective sections of the analysis.

What objective factors determine the rules of conspicuous consumerism behavior? These are as follows:

a) Human nature, which relates to the desire for wealth and power.

b) Falsely understood self-actualization and self-affirmation (to show one’s own false importance, to cut a dash instead of doing things for the benefit of society and an individual). All these factors relate to lumpen psychology and the culture of a “one-dimensional man”.

c) The state of society (excessive social inequality) and bad virtues at a certain stage of sociocultural transformation.

This study has been able to indicate that the structure and trajectories of status-demonstrative consumption are superimposed on consumption patterns that reflect not only personal tastes, but also relate to the demands of the social environment of a subculture. Consequently, the style of consumption in its sociocultural dimension emerges from the idea that commodities can serve as means of establishing social similarity and difference. The society of mass consumption and the increased symbolism of culture contribute to the identification of an individual through consumption. New means of consumption include several symbols that form the basis of the symbolic order used for symbolic social control. Postmodern culture relates to new means of consumption. The lifestyle is a criterion of social differences, and consumption is interpreted in the context of symbols (Ivanova, 2005).

We have detected a lot of evidence that the style of consumption is a sociocultural phenomenon, objectified through a public style structure. In the conditions of an increasing divide in the Russian society between the poor and the rich in the competition for an access to social and cultural resources and opportunities, it is the domain of the various forms and manifestations of culture where the interaction of style fields occurs.

Of much importance is the fact that sociological studies conducted among young people show that in Russian society there are different styles and types of consumer behavior of young people. In the context of an increase in the value of material benefits, conspicuous consumption manifests itself in such forms as the acquisition of clothing and accessories of well-known trade brands. Equally
important is the consumption of certain forms of leisure (visits to rock concerts, discos and nightclubs),
depending on the prevailing fashion for such consumption objects (Tsimerman, 2007). Continuing this
story, E. Omelchenko proceeds from the assumption that the purchase of luxury accessories that are
redundant in relation to real needs is initially irrational, and based on fantasy, exaggeration and
suggestibility (Omelchenko, 2008).

Consequently, the sociocultural context of demonstrative consumption turns out to be closely
connected with mass culture and the accompanying social alienation, spiritual devolution, manifested
in a relevant attitude to moral values. Therefore, referring to modern Russian reality, this is typical of
Russian young generations to openly believe that the modern world is completely different, many
moral norms are outdated, and to achieve success in this world, one can sacrifice moral principles and
norms (Petukhov, 2015).

In observational studies, mass culture is a regular stage in the development of civilization. It is
conditioned by the introduction of a market economy, industrialization, supported by scientific and
technological progress, urban lifestyles, the development of the media and information technologies,
and the strengthening of globalization processes and trends (Robertson & Knodker, 1999). The
spread of mass culture, based on the ideology of consumerism, correlates with a change in the value
orientations of Russian society. Material values gradually drive out spiritual values from the highest
positions, and this is obvious from Russian youth community research. Opinion polls’ results serve a
prime example. According to the All-Russian Center for Public Opinion Research, young people
themselves believe that orientation to material values is paramount for young people (76%), and this
fact is not approved by either young people themselves or by the older generations of Russians
(Rossiiskaia molodezh ...).

There is no doubt that the domineering of material values emerges from the establishment of consumer
culture in the Russian society. Its growth stems from the unfavorable spiritual climate in the country
associated with the crisis of social institutions responsible for the reproduction and broadcasting of
cultural and spiritual values to the youth community (Vereshchagina et al., 2015). The very system of
socialization contributes to the expansion of consumer culture among young people. The key agents of
consumer socialization, according to foreign experts, are the family and the media (Kamaruddin and
Mokhils, 2003).

A dangerous feature of mass culture is the fact that it affirms the equality of material and spiritual
values serving as products of mass consumption. However, in similar conditions, as J. Baudrillard
noted, mythology itself is mythologized and consumption is alienated from its initial meaning
(Baudrillard, 1998).

In sociosophical concepts, alienation manifests itself in the following basic interpretations: as
paradoxical processes and situations of being in which a person becomes alien to his own activity, its
conditions, means, results and himself; as the relationship between a social object and some of its
social functions, developing as a break in their unity, simplifying the social nature of the subject and
changing the nature of the alienated function; as the transformation of human activity and its results
into an independent and hostile force.

Evidence suggests that alienation as a social problem has an expression in the inner world of a man.
The rate of alienation of a modern man from his social reality in the context of the rising degradation
of Russian society is the presence in the worldview of such components as the feeling of impotence
against objective circumstances; the notion of the meaninglessness of life; the perception of social
reality as a world with deformed norms of a social being.

Consequently, the sociocultural changes result in the expansion of status-demonstrative consumption,
the phenomenon of the loss of vital meaning. According to S.V. Khoruzhaia, such society experiences
a semantic “vacuum”, caused by the noncoincidence of semantic “focuses” in interpersonal
communication. In a semantic vacuum archaic archetypes of culture regenerate, on top of that, archaic enclaves spread their influence on the society (Khoruzhaia, 2007).

V.G. Nemirovskii proceeds from the assumption that “the most important characteristic of any society is the attitude of people towards two “eternal” problems, i.e., the meaning of life and the meaning of death”. But in modern Russia, as in any crisis society, most people try not to think about these questions, limiting their thinking to everyday concerns (Volkov et al., 2015). In other words, we are talking about the lost meaning of existence and the lack of a life perspective experienced by many people in Russia. Therefore, we can conclude that the sociocultural context of status-demonstrative consumption in Russia emerges from the processes associated with consumer consciousness in the process of socialization, taking place in the conditions of economic instability, social injustice and inequality, the destroyed system of the translation of spiritual and moral values that make up the spiritual code and the mental matrix of the society (Lubsky et al., 2016). These processes are accompanied by the establishment of a new system of sociocultural connections, in which social identification is built not so much on the distribution system of labor and production, but rather on the system of consumer signs and symbols.

CONCLUSION

The study has set out several important conclusions. In the conditions of a relative commodity abundance and symbolic diversity in the post-Soviet Russian society, which replaced the Soviet society with its deficits and shortages of goods, everyday consumer behavior transforms over the time. This trend develops facing contradictions and semantic uncertainty, value relativism and socioeconomic instability of Russian society. It creates distortions in consumption and the erosion of taste standards. As a result, the consumer domain becomes the space of challenges and risks of social spiritual development.

Another important conclusion is that in the conditions of the social loss of orientation in the world of meanings and life-affirming principles, the ontology of conspicuous consumption finds its expression in “consumerism”, when the consumed goods and services serve as the symbols of progress on the steps of the social ladder. They contribute to the transformation of the “prestigious” way of life to the ultimate existence goal. As a result, the ontology of conspicuous consumption relates closely to the so-called “one-dimensional thinking and behavior” that inscribe all the sociocultural diversity into a monotonous commodity-money life. In conditions of sociocultural transformation, the desire for prestige turns into an indicator of the desire to enjoy real goods, to gain the opportunity to achieve a subjectively desired situation, which is embodied in the practices of conspicuous consumption.

One of the most important findings is the idea that recognizing the objectivity of the spread of mass culture and consumer ideology as its main attribute in the era of globalization, it is important to see the consequences of this process. The main outcomes are the destruction of values, spiritual and cultural space of Russian society that shapes both the microcosm of human everyday life and the macrocosm of sociocultural dynamics. We must state that modern Russian society, acquiring the format of a consumer society with a pronounced demonstrative component, demonstrates a dangerous logic and trajectory of its own sociocultural development. It is different from the Russian historically developed forms with the priority of spiritual virtues and spirituality as the existential value of the society.

When a society ceases to need eternal values, ceases to be spiritual and ceases to cultivate spirituality, when it proclaims total consumption as the dominant practice and lifestyle, it is historically doomed to a spiritual devolution. Can a society develop without spiritual foundations? What kind of society is this? What kind of world will it pass to future generations and will this passage happen at all? These questions need to be answered, and especially in Russia, due to the lack of a centuries-long consumption culture of the Western type. We strongly believe that Russian conspicuous consumption is a big risk factor for the sociocultural dynamics and requires a deep analysis.
REFERENCES


