

**Teresa Slaby**

Warsaw School of Economics

## **CONSUMERISM AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE QUALITY OF LIFE**

### **Abstract**

For the last few years, the quality of life of Polish citizens (Poles) depends to a great extent on the possessed, often entirely unnecessary, goods. The quality of life nowadays results more from the supremacy of pleasant feelings coming from excessive consumption rather than the positive evaluation of life as a whole. The paper presents results of qualitative research in Warsaw and Lublin (2007). The research's main objectives were answers to the questions: does consumerism still strongly characterize the consumers' behaviours; does excessive purchasing of goods create a sense of happiness; do the regional diversities exist and could some symptoms of the restrictions of such behaviours be observed? The findings have not been consoling in this context.

The quality of life is not defined unequivocally in social research. This notion is understood to denote the standard of living, well-being and consumption, the state of personal satisfaction or happiness rooted in consumption, the usage of the natural environment, a good state of health, prosperity in life and social position. It is undoubtedly the case that the quality of life is closely related to a subjective assessment of the degree to which needs are satisfied [11, p. 105]. Under the concept of sustainable development, the quality of life is based on spiritual values without an inclination to have material possessions, which corresponds to the idea of the dignity of life. J. Drewnowski was the precursor of this stream of research. He claimed that civilization entails people being duty-bound to act for the benefit of society [6, p. 343].

In the context of satisfying needs via consumption, the dignity of life is associated with not feeling states of deprivation (exclusion), which could ensue from the failure to satisfy needs (especially for reasons beyond an individual's control) [10, p. 181].

Numerous definitions of the quality of life have become "obsolete and irrelevant" and are undergoing reinvention in connection with changes in the market place where the global consumer has appeared, who has encountered

previously unheard of opportunities for purchasing goods in shopping centres and on-line. It turns out that shopping builds prestige, satisfaction and happiness. The person who belongs to contemporary society is the one who does not resist the temptations of the consumption market and buys and buys... [3]. The states of satisfaction or outright happiness felt in connection with this lifestyle are based on *individual criteria of value judgment*. Thus, they encompass assessments of life overall as well as its various aspects, but also the *capability of adapting to social change* [5].

The desire to have possessions in quantities surpassing the requirements to satisfy needs referred to as *consumerism* evokes certain emotional states considered by some to be positive and by others to be negative (where defining consumerism as deviant behaviour should be deemed to be an exaggeration). This distinction cannot be too acute with respect to the desire of the Polish society to have possessions, as it still holds the vision of empty shelves in its memorable past, nor can one “transfer” these attitudes to the feeling of the quality or dignity of life. For consumption in Polish society is becoming an indicator of social differences. It may act as an enabler to “climb” ever higher on the ladder of class strata. It is an indubitable mark of mass culture. The market has proven to be a powerful tool of cultural change.

In the Polish conditions of transformation (persistent and profound social change) the quality of life (feeling of satisfaction or happiness) consistently hinges upon objective indicators because people feel as if life has done them harm. This applies in particular to the inhabitants of the Polish countryside. Even though in recent years the Polish countryside has ceased to be a homogeneous group with respect to poverty and is now developing at a previously unencountered pace, it cites the desire of having as many possessions as possible much more strongly and more “blindly” than urban inhabitants [13]. Those persons who cannot behave in this manner on account of destitution for instance are called, as Z. Bauman puts it, “defective consumers” [3, p. 9].

The Polish society has submitted to consumerism even though there are strong differences in these behaviours between the city and the countryside. Rural inhabitants, as COBOS research has shown [15, p. 93] are more strongly attached to the city than urban inhabitants are to the countryside, which clearly could have modified the life of the rural population. This research has demonstrated that rural respondents have clearly succumbed to the influence of advertising and believe that only by acquiring goods and services may they “assert their value” [13].

Research concerning the rural population [8], among which one could expect to see more conservative attitudes, deviating from the model of a consumer society has demonstrated that the opposite is true. “Consumer” attitudes are developing at a fast pace, which evidences that the Polish countryside is losing its peasant nature and it may fairly quickly follow the models of behaviour demonstrated by the urban population. All the more so since the inhabitants of rural areas are

increasingly more stratified, primarily with respect to the level of income. This is fostered by the lower status of education and endeavouring to cover the far too great distance separating them from a better life. In her paper cited above, K. Socha writes about the rural population's very troubling submission to uncurtailed consumerism.

And therefore consumption has become the primary contributing factor of a successful life and happiness. Citing psychological research, let us note that self-determination, one of the theories underlying positive psychology, emphasizes that a good life is focused on satisfying internal needs, but specifically with respect to non affluent persons, *the drive for material possessions is the strongest indicator of the overall quality of life* [7]. The source of deriving satisfaction from life leads a human being to ascribe a positive sense to having possessions. Accumulating an increasing quantity of goods and just the very act of shopping contributes to higher prestige in family and professional circles and has undoubtedly become an indicator of the quality of life defined as the subjective state of satisfaction or even happiness.

Psychologists are "grappling" with the unambiguous definition of happiness [14]. In the context of the quality of life, every human being has his or her individual assessment and "defines" his or her own quality of life from the perspective of the many proprietary aspects that shape it.

One may encounter the opinion among "positive" psychologists that it is thought-provoking that people appreciate that the sense of life and happiness transcends having money and possessions but very few of them "make choices in accordance with that knowledge".

Satisfaction with life is enumerated as the best criterion because it combines external living conditions defined by T. Słaby [10, p. 105] as the infrastructural dimension for the standard of living and internal attributes which J. Czapiński calls the attractor restoring the right level for a human being for his or her well-being [4, p. 154].

For nearly two decades the quality of life of the Polish society has to a large extent hinged upon the income one generates and the possessions one has accumulated, which has led to the conclusion that of the two possible approaches to defining the quality of life:

- 1) the cognitive approach (happiness ensues from a positive assessment of the quality of one's current life and perspectives),

- 2) the emotional approach (the state of happiness ensues from a prevalence of pleasant experiences largely resulting from excessive consumption),

the emotional approach, associating the quality of life with a prevalence of pleasant experiences, appears to be at present the right one for investigating the quality of life of the Polish society. This is also the approach that has become the methodological basis for qualitative research entitled "Consumerism and the quality of life" [12].

The selection of this definition has enabled the authors to frame several research problems, namely:

What does consumerism mean at present to the Poles?

How frequently do Poles submit to these behaviours and states of mind?

Does the opinion about excessive consumption as an indicator of the quality of life vary by geographical area?

Are stop signs already starting to emerge in the minds of consumers? Is it possible to select a group of persons from the group of active “excessive” consumers who would not notice a decline in the quality of life if they were to curtail their shopping?

Is the pace of shopping decelerating and is the structure of purchases of inhabitants of larger cities changing, which could evidence the commencement of anti-consumerism?

This research was conducted under engagement from the authors by the firm ABM (Agencja Badań Marketingowych – Marketing Research Agency) in August 2007. The sole respondents were women (they are the ones who make most purchase decisions) residing in Warsaw and Lublin, differentiated by income and marital status (not necessarily of a formal nature) and by having children or not. Lublin served as an example of a “provincial” city not too distant from Warsaw, which could facilitate possible copying the models of consumer behaviours characteristic for the capital city. The final conclusions are therefore applicable solely to the population in large urban cities.

Since the investigated phenomena are of a qualitative nature (even though one may obviously characterize consumerism using several quantitative attributes), the decision was made to use *individual in-depth interviews* (IDI) as the research tool.

By quoting the following statements: *Shopping makes us happy. Maybe just for a moment, but it does. And the awareness that we can afford to shop, that we can buy things is a source of pleasure. Shopping is happiness*, we find the answer to the main question posed in the research assignment. Shopping is happiness; excessive consumption therefore enhances the quality of life defined by using emotional states of mind.

It is obvious that *one may not treat these findings broadly*. They are applicable, as an approximation, to a specific sub-population, but they were stated with such conviction that they may evidence that shopping may give most Polish women the chance to feel improvement in their quality of life.

On the basis of the statements collected in this research, one may assert that:

1. The quality of life understood in the context of consumption is the primary source of pleasure and this pleasure has two phases: the first short one is the very act of shopping or the process of shopping – the ceremony associated with shopping: making appointments with girlfriends, selecting a product. Subsequently, the second phase usually follows: the satisfaction from using a product. The female

respondents did, however, emphasize that some purchases, for instance, apparel and shoes, were not used too frequently later.

2. Excessive consumption was defined by the female respondents in two ways: as the impulsive and unplanned buying of more than you need or as spending on shopping more than the household budget would permit. This frequently occurs under the influence of marketing enticements, primarily price discounts.

3. The answers given by the female respondents paint a picture of consumption understood primarily as a way of accomplishing the following:

- identity building (a person is defined solely by his state of possession or the material capacity to acquire things),
- spending leisure time, solely as a “hobby”,
- dealing with stress/failure in other areas of life.

Having a family (children above all) is the only limitation on consumer aspirations. The partner/husband expands his capacity to acquire (additional money) but this does not have an influence on the scale of consumption though some female respondents do fear sarcastic remarks following excessive shopping.

No symptoms of being discouraged to consumption or shopping were observed. After excessive shopping (according to the female respondents) pangs of conscience and anger appear but they dissipate after one or two days; frequently, self-assuagement takes place: (“the fact that I bought it means that I needed it”). They admit that if they were to have more money they would rather spend even more. The phenomenon of *conscious consumption* (e.g. being guided by environmental concerns) was not recorded in the responses.

During these interviews one could also hear a certain type of justification for consumerism, namely, nearly all the female participants in the research stated that:

1) the primary indicator of social status is money understood as the capacity to consume, *Your bank account balance defines your social status*. You look at other people (and others) via their possessions;

2) others are judged on the basis of their appearance, first impressions count. Attention is paid both to appearance (beauty) and apparel (brand-name). The purchase of furnishings also “counts” among persons decorating their home/apartment.

One may “extract” a certain portion of reflective responses that may in the future mark the advent of opposing values, namely, anti-consumerism, e.g. “Shopping gives pleasure for a few hours. Of course, shopping cannot supersede family happiness, but *it is a form of happiness*”.

The opinions on the impact exerted by excessive consumption on human relations were divided. On the one hand, the opinion was expressed that excessive consumption means that we subordinate our life more to acquiring than experiencing. We devote leisure time (especially weekends) to shopping and not to human contact. But on the other hand, money makes it possible to satisfy needs and achieve the dreams of our loved ones.

Accordingly, one may be tempted to say that the attitudes demonstrated by the female respondents are well aligned to the characterization of the consumer attitude articulated by Z. Bauman ([2], after: [1, pp. 11-13]). According to these respondents, the art of living entails searching for and buying possessions and accumulating the necessary resources to do that. They frequently emphasized that “hunting for a deal”, the purchase of a product on sale, was for them *a source of special satisfaction*.

On the basis of the procured empirical findings one may observe only slight symptoms of change in the consumer consciousness. This is expressed in the statement that although it is true that the most important values are health, family, children, work and friends but... money is needed to live, money contributes to happiness and without money one loses the feeling of security and peace of mind.

Responsible consumption understood *inter alia* as being guided by environmental concerns is for now accepted only verbally; it is not, however, reflected in consumer behaviours.

The Polish consumer will still probably endeavour to find a large dose of happiness and fulfilment in the unexamined satisfaction of consumer needs, and his or her lifestyle will continue to be poised to spending leisure time by sojourning in the “temples of consumption”. In the near future shopping will continue to play a large role in assessing the quality of life in the form of feeling pleasurable emotional states of mind.

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## KONSUMPCJONIZM SUBSTYTUTEM JAKOŚCI ŻYCIA

### Streszczenie

Od kilku lat jakość życia Polaków w dużej mierze zależy od posiadanych, często niepotrzebnych dóbr. Jakość życia obecnie wynika bardziej z przewagi przyjemnych doznań (emocji) płynących z nadmiernej konsumpcji niż z pozytywnej oceny życia jako całości.

Referat prezentuje wyniki badań jakościowych w Warszawie i Lublinie (2007), których głównym celem była odpowiedź na pytania: czy nadal konsumpcjonizm silnie charakteryzuje zachowania konsumentów; czy nadmierne kupowanie dóbr wywołuje poczucie szczęścia, czy występują różnicowania regionalne oraz czy można zauważyć pewne symptomy takich zachowań. Wyniki nie były pocieszające.