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# Thinking through Consumption and Technology

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**Abstract:** Consumer society engenders a peculiar set of existential conditions, but it is often neglected in analyses of technology. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate a way to examine technology through the set of existential conditions in consumer society, and, at the same time, argue for its importance in normative analyses of technology. Particularly, this chapter argues against a specific pattern of argument against technology to be inadequate in isolation of an analysis of consumer society. In this respect, philosophers and other researchers interested in normative issues on technology in consumer society can benefit enormously from social theory of consumption.

**Keywords**: *Social Theory of Consumption*, *Zygmunt Bauman,* *Consumerism, Consumer Society*, *Good Life, Information Technology*.

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# Thinking through Consumption and Technology

A few years ago, Zygmunt Bauman published a book polemically titled *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* (Bauman 2008) At first glance, Bauman’s question is not too different from that of others who have studied the ethics of consumption and related consumerist attitudes, behaviours and practices (e.g. Borgmann 2000, Cafaro 2001). There is, however, one subtlety in his formulation of the question that separates it from similar pursuits. Instead of analysing consumption and the related consumerist lifestyle with a specific ethical theory, Bauman invites us first to uncover the existential conditions engendered by consumer society, and then to examine the possibilityof ethics under those existential conditions. Bauman’s approach, I think, offers us a different and significant alternative to normative analysis. It is different, as I have pointed out, in that it begins with a unique set of existential conditions of consumer society but not with a normative standard fixed by a particular ethical theory. And, it is significant because if the set of existential conditions engendered by consumer society repudiates the normative standard of a given ethical theory, then arguing against consumption and the related consumerist lifestyle *with* the theory *under* those existential conditions is unlikely to be successful unless the argument is simultaneously directed at consumer society itself.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Because many technologies are designed and manufactured for people in a consumer society and their functions and uses are an integral part of the consumerist experience, the same line of thought is equally applicable to the normative analysis of technology. Certainly, philosophers have already offered insightful analyses of the impacts of technology on people’s well-being with special reference to consumerist lifestyles (e.g. Borgmann 1984, 1992 & 2000, Chapter (Tiberius) and Chapter (Spence) in this volume). However, they often start with a theory of the good life and follow with an application of their theory to evaluate the technology in question. What is missing in their analyses, therefore, is the set of existential conditions of consumer society. It is important because those existential conditions necessarily (dis)favour some accounts of the good life, which can go against a preferred view of the good life. In short, uncovering the set of existential conditions in consumer society is as important to normative analysis of technology as to normative analysis of consumption and consumer lifestyle. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate one way to examine technology through the set of existential conditions in consumer society, and, at the same time, to argue for its importance in *normative* analyses of technology.

## Zygmunt Bauman and the Consumerist Syndrome

Consumption, consumerism and consumer society are topics being studied by researchers of different disciplines and from multiple perspectives (for an overview of the research, see Arnould & Thompson 2005). In this chapter, I shall look at *social theory of consumption* (also known as *sociology of consumption*) as it is most relevant for the current purpose. Social theory of consumption aims to examine the processes and meanings of consumption and the constitutive characteristics of consumer society. It is unique in that its focus is not only on consumption and consumerist lifestyle *per se*. Instead, consumption and consumerist lifestyle are examined from a macroscopic perspective and through various changes in sociocultural, epistemological and institutional dimensions of a society (e.g. Baudrillard 1998, Campbell 1987, Slater 1997, Featherstone 2007, Bauman 2005, 2007 & 2008). Accordingly, consumer society is to be understood as a specific way to organise a society (thus, *consumer* society) and consumerism is to be understood as a specific way of life in *that type of society*.

Bauman, one of the most prominent theorists of consumer society, has conceptualised consumerism as a unique way of *being-in-the-world* that constitutes its own “cognitive frames and tacit assumptions.” (Blackshaw 2008, 117) He has argued that consumerism is constitutive of people’s “assumptions of the ways of the world and the ways of walking them, visions of happiness and ways to pursue them […].” (Bauman, in Rojek 2004, 293) So understood, consumerism favours some ways of life over the others and informs its people *what a good life is* and *how to live it*. In this respect, Bauman’s analysis is particularly useful for illustrating the outlook of the good life in consumer society and its influences on people.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the following, I shall look at his analysis of consumerism and consumerist values (or, as Bauman has labelled them, the *consumerist syndrome*).

Bauman’s analysis is based on a comparison between consumerism with the way of life in the ‘society of producers’, i.e. the type of society in an earlier stage of modernity that is exemplified by mass production of goods for mass consumption.[[3]](#footnote-3) In the ‘society of producers’, where mundane life is guided by a strong work ethic, work is valued as an end in itself. Work ethic’s emphasis on work as an end in itself has not only affirmed the importance of work-related virtues, e.g. diligence, self-discipline, etc., it has also devalued qualities that are presumed to distract people’s fulfilment of their work duty such as pleasure and (instant) gratification. (Weber 2001 [1930]) For its significant to people, the type of work a person has also become the designator of how good a person’s life is in the ‘society of producers’. Since people’s life is structured by their work, and work is characteristically *immobile* in the ‘society of producers’, a good life can only afford to be a gradual and long-term project in that type of society. Any gradual and long-term projects, however, require *stability*. It is the drive for stability, Bauman suggested, that fosters the desire for a “reliable, trustworthy, orderly, regular, transparent, and […] durable, time-resistant and secure setting.” (Bauman 2007, 29)

As a society moves towards becoming a consumer society, the work ethic and the outlook of the good life it supports are replaced by another ethic and a different outlook of the good life. It is so because consumer society, unlike its predecessor, “engages its member [primarily] in their capacity as consumers.” (Bauman 2005, 24) Or, put differently, consumer society is organised around the “social logic” of consumption. (Baudrillard 1998) The move towards consumer society is helped and intensified by various sociocultural, epistemological and institutional changes, e.g. a new time-space structure, heightened self-reflexivity, the decline of nation-states, globalisation, etc. (See, e.g. Harvey 1989, Giddens 1990, Beck 1992, Bauman 2000). Bauman has called these processes and changes a liquefaction of modernity. ‘Liquefaction’ or ‘liquidity’ is his choice of metaphor to capture the status of the current stage of modernity, which is characterised by an emphasis on *mobility* and *inconstancy.*[[4]](#footnote-4) (Bauman 2000)

The processes of liquefaction, especially the heightening sense of (self-)reflexivity and the increasing interconnectedness with globalisation, have undermined pre-existing sources of authority (e.g. scientific rationality) and generated unprecedented uncertainty, and the uncertain world of liquid modernity is inherently hostile to any gradual and long-term projects as their outcome cannot be affirmed with confidence in the face of uncertainty without any solid forms of authority. Bauman has pointed out that gradual and long-term projects can hardly maintain their sensibility in an uncertain environment, and, thus, are often substituted by something immediate and short-term. (Bauman 2007, 31) In this respect, consumerism – for its emphasis on *instant* gratification – has supplied a ready-made answer to the uncertainty of liquid modernity. Moreover, as Campbell (1987) has argued, the act of consumption associated with consumerism is characterised by its *pleasure*-seeking nature, where pleasure is not to be understood as sensory pleasure but something *in* and *of* emotional experiences achieved through a person’s power of creative imagination. (Campbell 1987, 65-76) So construed, consumerism can also be seen as an inner protective mechanism against the uncertainty of liquid modernity.

The significance of instant gratification is also reinforced by the new meaning of time in liquid modernity. Bauman has noted that time is *pointillist* in liquid modernity, that is – time becomes a collection of self-contained units, or what he called ‘eternal instants’. (Bauman 2007, 32) Because of the disconnectedness of each ‘eternal instant’, an activity is only relevant for *now*. Consumption, or any activities for that matter, has to be done in and for the present if it is to be relevant at all.

However, immediacy is not the only value prioritised by consumer society of liquid modernity, social theorists of consumption have pointed out that *novelty* (or *newness*) is another cornerstone of consumer society. For instance, Bauman has argued that the necessity of novelty is built in the very existence and continuity of consumer society itself, as its survival is rested upon a state of perennial incomplete satisfaction or non-satisfaction of its members. (Bauman 2007, 46-47) Novelty is essential to maintain such a state, for it embodies the promise of unexplored experiences, which keeps people in “a state of constantly seething, never wilting excitation […] and in a state of suspicion and disaffection [that give rise to the desires, needs or wants to find] a way out of disaffection.” (Bauman 2005, 26)

In short, consumer society is propelled to prioritise *immediacy* and *novelty* due to various sociocultural, epistemological and institutional changes, and work ethic and its outlook of the good life in the ‘society of producers’ are made obsolete in consumer society. As Bauman has fittingly described,

“the consumerist syndrome has degraded duration and elevated transience. It lifts the value of novelty above that of lastingness. […] It has sharply shortened the timespan separating not just the want from its fulfilment […], but also the birth moment of the want from the moment of its demise, as well as the realization of the usefulness and desirability of possessions from the perception of them as useless and in need of rejection. Among the objects of human desire, it has put the act of appropriation, to be quickly followed by waste disposal, in the place once accorded to the acquisition of possessions meant to be durable and to their lasting enjoyment.” (Bauman 2007, 85-86)

Yet, it is important to point out that people’s freedom of choice is necessary if immediacy and novelty are values to be realised. For people to take advantage of immediacy, they must be *free* to make choices at any moments they will. Similarly, for people to experience novelty (or newness), they must have the options to choose from and, more importantly, they must be able to choose from them *freely*. In this respect, the freedom of choices a person enjoys has also determined how far the person can benefit from immediacy and novelty. Freedom of choices, therefore, becomes the most important parameter for shaping the outlook of the good life in consumer society. This is perhaps why Bauman has claimed that “[f]reedom to choose sets the stratification ladder of consumer society and so also the frame in which its members, the consumers, inscribe their life aspirations – a frame that defines the direction of efforts towards self-improvement and encloses the image of a ‘good life’.” [[5]](#footnote-5) (Bauman 2005, 31)

## Technology *in* Consumer Society, Technology *of* Consumer Society

I have, through Bauman’s analysis, outlined the existential conditions of consumer society and attempted to show that immediacy and novelty are prioritised in response to those existential conditions and become the core values in consumer society. Such an account not only allows us to better understand the peculiarities of consumer society, it also allows us to better understand technology in the context of consumer society. As I have pointed out in the beginning, insofar as technologies are something designed and manufactured for consumption, they too can be seen as an expression of the peculiarities of consumer society. In other words, technologies *in* consumer societycan also be conceptualised as technologies *of* consumer society in that they reflect and reinforce the values inherent to consumer society, i.e. immediacy and novelty.

A paradigm example here is information technology. Consider, for instance, social media technology such as social networking sites (e.g. MySpace, Facebook, Google+, etc.), instant messengers (Windows Live Messenger, Google Talk, etc.) and (micro)blogging services (WordPress, Blogger, Twitter, Tumblr, etc.). Their design and functions have embodied the essence of immediacy and novelty. The uniqueness of social media technology is that they allow and encourage real-time inputs and responses from their users. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Google+ ask their users “What is on your mind?” and “Share what’s new” at their front page and call those ‘updates’, instant messengers are promoted as ‘instant’ messengers, and Twitter has advertised to let its users to get “[i]nstant updates from your friends, industry experts favourite celebrities, and what’s happening around the world”. Their emphasis on real-time inputs and responses has propelled their users to react as soon as they start using them. Similarly, the main purpose of these platforms is to enable their users to share and receive *new* information (i.e. updates), either personal or non-personal, with and from other users. As a matter of fact, the proper functioning of social media technology is contingent on the *new* information provided by the users without which social media technology essentially become obsolete. In other words, one of the main driving force behind social media technology is the continuous novel experiences they can offer to their users. In this respect, social media technology is a prime example of technology of consumer society.

The significance of immediacy and novelty is also epitomised in the current debate of the virtues and vices of the Internet. Recent critics of the Internet have argued that the Internet has flattened our mind and society. For example, Nicholas Carr (2008, 2010) **has** argued that the Internet has made deep reading and deep thinking difficult if not impossible, and the shallowness engendered by the Internet (and information technology in general) is a result of overabundance of information available on the Internet and their accessibility made possible by information technology. Carr’s argument, in effect, is an argument against the immediacy enables by information technology that renders contemplation impossible; and, it is also an argument against the endless search for novel information via hyperlinks that itself becomes a distraction to people’s mind. In light of this, it is interesting to see that the proponents of the Internet and information technology **have** also appealed to immediacy and novelty in arguing for the virtues of the Internet. For instance, Charles Leadbeater (2008), Clay Shiry (2010) and Steven Johnson (2010) have all argued that information technology, by shortening the distance in time and space, has empowered new forms of collaboration through the Internet. In short, it is the immediacy in this new way of communication enabled by information technology that speeds up generation of new ideas crucial to the progress of the society.

Either way, it should be clear that immediacy and novelty are central to both technology and the discussion of the benefits and harms of technology, at least in the case of information technology as I have attempted to demonstrate. In this sense, technology in consumer society is not only something consumed by the people, but it is also constitutive of the consumerist experience itself.

## From the Critique of Technology to the Critique of Consumer Society

So far, my analysis has been primarily interpretive. I have offered another way to understand technology with respect to the existential conditions of consumer society. I want to turn now to an implication of this approach on *normative* analysis of technology. Particularly, I want to argue against the sufficiency and effectiveness of a specific pattern of argument *against* technology, which can be found in both popular and academic discourses. The pattern of argument I shall criticise has the following form:

(1) A technology *T* promotes *immediacy* and/or *novelty* (or other values purportedly reducible to either of them).

(2) Novelty and immediacy is bad/undesirable (either morally or prudentially).

(C) *T* is bad/undesirable (either morally or prudentially).

Here, it is not my intention to argue that technology *does not* promote the consumerist syndrome of immediacy and novelty, nor it is my aim to argue *in favor* of them. My criticism of this pattern of argument is that even if (1) and (2) are true and (C) follows from them, this pattern of argument is ultimately insufficient and ineffective because it fails to acknowledge the fact that technology is situated in a consumer society and it is a reflection and reinforcement of the consumer syndrome as I have attempted to demonstrated.

An example of this type of argument is proposed most clearly by Borgmann (1984) in his critique of modern technology through his ‘device paradigm’. He argued that modern technology has concealed the meaningfulness of our lifeworld by rendering things “instantaneous, ubiquitous, safe and easy”. (Borgmann 1984, 41) There are, of course, numerous ways to interpret Borgmann’s argument. However, it should not be too difficult to see the role of immediacy figures in it, as the concealment of meaningfulness is a result of the diminished (temporal) distance between human being and nature made possible by modern technology. In this sense, Borgmann’s argument against modern technology is similar to Carr’s argument against the Internet in that both of them have highlighted the vices of *immediate* accessibility.

Yet, as I have attempted to show that the preference for immediacy and novelty arises from the existential conditions of consumer society, it is inescapable so long as people are a member of a consumer society. And, the embodiment of immediacy and novelty in technology is also a reflection and reinforcement of the existential conditions itself. Hence, a sufficient and effective argument against immediacy and novelty cannot be an argument against technology *per se* but can only succeed as an argument against consumer society *in general*. In short, any arguments formulated in isolation from the fact that technology is situated in a consumer society are at best incomplete. More importantly, however, is that it is often unclear from which perspective the argument against immediacy and novelty is coming from. Particularly, if the argument is made from within the viewpoint of consumer society, it is then bounded to be limited by the set of existential conditions of consumer society itself. In other words, the argument merely presents a predicament, namely immediacy and novelty are undesirable, but there is no escape because they are inherent to consumer society.

In other words, any sufficient and effective arguments against immediacy and novelty, whether they are seen as qualities embodied in technology or as core values in consumer society, require us to go beyond consumer society and transcend its peculiar set of existential conditions. Hence, they require us to rethink the notion of consumer society itself.

## Renewing ‘Consumer’ Society, Renewing the ‘Consumerist’ Good Life

To be fair to Borgmann’s critique of modern technology, he does attempt to ‘go beyond’ consumer society and ‘transcend’ its peculiar set of existential conditions via his notion of ‘focal things and practices’ such as running and family dinners for (re-)engaging ourselves with the meaningfulness of our lifeworld. (Borgmann 1984, 196-226) However, Borgmann’s focal things and practices are deeply *anti-*consumerist and they are difficult to be acknowledged in full by people who are *already* a member of consumer society. Indeed, to fully acknowledge his focal things and practices appears to require members of consumer society to revert their present lifestyle and retreat from (or reform) their society in entirety. While this option is possible in theory, it is only practically plausible for a few heroic individuals who are prepared to live *outside* their society that is currently organised around a social logic of consumption. The problem of Borgmann’s and other similar *anti-*consumerist proposals such as Voluntary Simplicity (e.g. Elgin 1993; for a study of the notion of ‘voluntary simplicity’, see Doherty & Etzioni 2003), Slow Food movement (see, e.g. <http://slowfood.com/>), etc. is that they have rejected consumer society in its entirety and failed to recognise the positive aspects of consumer society. In closing this chapter, I want to suggest other options that truly *go beyond* consumer society and *transcend* its peculiar set of existential conditions but without rejecting consumer society as a whole.

Recently, a new way has been presented to conceptualise the notion of ‘consumer,’ through *political consumerism* (see, e.g. Micheletti 2003, Micheletti *et al.* 2004) . According to political consumerism, consumers are not *passive* *recipients* of goods and services but they are *active participants* of the society through the act of consumption. In other words, consumption is an active way to shape the society around us. In this respect, political consumerism introduces a new form of (sociocultural, political and moral)responsibility to the notion of ‘consumer’. At the same time, by reconceptualising consumers as active sociocultural, political and moral actors (and, consumption as a sociocultural, political and moral act in itself), it requires us to rethink the idea of consumer society itself. More significantly, however, is that by infusing normative considerations into the act of consumption, political consumerism provides resources *within* consumer society to question the preference of immediacy and novelty. In this sense, people do not need to escape from consumer society, instead they need to transform it from within.

Political consumerism, of course, is not the only game in town. Other researchers (e.g. Blättel-Mink & Hellmann 2009, Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010) have explored the notions of ‘prosumer’ and ‘prosumption’ in the place of ‘consumer’ and ‘consumption’. And, they have attempted to argue against social theorists’ biased focus on consumption in the present research and to re-emphasise the intimate links between production and consumption, especially in the context of information technology. In doing so, they have provided new meaning to the act of consumption (or, prosumption), which at the same time introduced new role to consumers (or, prosumers) and new way to organise a society, i.e. prosumer society. From this perspective, the notions of ‘prosumer’ and ‘prosumption’ have also offered another way to rethink consumer society from within.

What is in common to both political consumerism and the notions of ‘prosumer’ and ‘prosumption’ is that they both offer a new way to conceptualise the notion of ‘consumer’. Particularly, they have both reconceptualised consumers as *active actors*, either in sociocultural, political, moral spheres or in economic sphere. This is significant not only for *how we consume technology in consumer society*, e.g. political consumers need to consider various sociocultural, political and moral consequences of their purchase and uses of technology; it is also significant to *how technology are being designed and manufactured*. After all, technology is also a reflection and reinforcement of the values prioritised by the society.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have illustrated one way in which social theory of consumption can be relevant to normative analysis of technology. Particularly, I have argued that a specific pattern of argument against technology commonly found in both popular and academic discourses is inadequate, and it has to be supplemented by an analysis of consumer society. In other words, any critiques of technology (and of consumer society) need to take into considerations the broader perspective in which the objects of critique are situated. In this respect, philosophers and other researchers who are interested in normative issues on technology in consumer society can benefit enormously from social theory of consumption.

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1. Of course, the scope of Bauman’s approach is not only limited to moral rightness and wrongness of consumption and related consumerists attitudes, behaviours and practices as a narrow understanding of the term ‘ethics’ will imply. It will also cover their prudential goodness and badness, particularly their potential impacts on people’s good life. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Since Bauman has written prolifically on the topic, it is beyond my scope to provide a comprehensive study of his works here. Rather, I shall only outline the key points in Bauman’s analysis of consumer society. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This type society corresponds to the stage of modernity Bauman labelled as ’solid’ modernity, which is exemplified by a Fordist model of production. Solid modernity is so-labelled because the Fordist model requires “combination of huge factory buildings, heavy machinery and massive labour force”, and thus is characterised by “bulk and size, and, for that reason, also with [spatial] boundaries.” (Bauman 2000, 57-58) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bauman’s ‘liquid’ modernity and his discussions of various issues associated with it, e.g. globalisation, individualisation, the new meaning of space and time, the decline of community, etc. is broadly consistence with Anthony Giddens’s (1990) notion of ‘late modernity’ and Ulrich Beck’s (1992) notion of ‘second modernity’. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is useful to be reminded that Bauman’s analysis – and this section, which is based on his analysis – is unquestionably over-generalised and an over-homogenised. In short, there is not a radical discontinuation from the society of producers to the society of consumers. Nor, is there a radical distinction between people-as-producers and people-as-consumers. Despite these flaws, these society-types and ways-of-being-in-the-world remain useful, I think, insofar as they render complexities more comprehensible and, thus, illuminate what is otherwise hidden by the complexities. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)