

## The ethical dimension of consumption in a relationship

Grzegorz Grzybek<sup>1</sup> & Mira Malczyńska-Biały<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

In the present thesis the characteristics of current consumer society are presented in the context of female-male relationships and any inter-human relationships. It has been shown that the ideology of consumption may have an impact on the changeability of female-male relationships, as well as on the stereotypical division of roles in a relationship. The importance of consumer ethics has here been emphasised. For this purpose, the model of erotic ethos, based on sexual aesthetics, has been discussed in this article. This model is connected with the contemporary consumption model, in which one can compare material product consumption with relationship consumption. It seems that consumer ethics concerning relationships not only should consider current changes, but also, in the context of a relationship, bear in mind life ethos and sexual aesthetics.

**Keywords:** consumer ethics, consumer society, ethical consumption, life ethos

### Introduction

The basic assumption of this article is the conviction that current female-male relationships have begun to adopt the form of a consumer exchange. In the first part of the article the idea and concept of current consumer society is characterised. Next, the influence of consumer trends on the sphere of private life is shown. In this context a synthesis of the complexity of relationships in the context of the sexual sphere is made. In the following part the ethos of relationships in the context of consumer ethics is analysed; in particular, a comparison is made between the consumption of material products and the consumption of the female-male relationship.

In investigating the above-mentioned issues the female-male relationship is understood as a sexual relationship between partners who share a common household. It can be a traditional married couple or couples without a civil law contract. Because of the attempt to detect particular relationship principles, homosexual relationships have not been taken into consideration. One can make the assumption in the form of a hypothesis, according to which consumption in itself is not pejorative. The formation of global consumer society and the adoption of consumer behaviour in human relationships does equate to the degradation of ethical principles; these principles should derive from moral values. However, it changes the ways of referring to other market subjects. Because of contemporary female-male relationships focusing on consumption as it is broadly understood, one should investigate the appropriate principles influencing levels of satisfaction, or at least consent to exist in this kind of consumer relationship. It seems that these principles have to take into consideration ethics of consumption and the life ethos of both partners.

### Characteristics of contemporary consumer society

One can characterise modern society as a consumer society. It is a civilisation which values consumption more than other virtues, such as: morality, the common good, customs, and social norms. This consumption entails the intensive purchasing of various products and goods and deriving the maximum satisfaction from such activity. The world of consumption

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<sup>1</sup> University of Rzeszów, Faculty of Pedagogy, Rzeszów (Poland); email: ggwil@o2.pl

<sup>2</sup> University of Rzeszów, Institute of Political Science, Rzeszów (Poland); email: mira19@interia.pl

as well as consumer society is based primarily on utilitarian values (Hostyński, 2006, pp. 17–19, pp. 313–314; Moore, 1980).

Over the centuries, consumption has changed its pejorative meaning from “destroy”, “use up”, “waste”, “exhaust” to become a synonym for “living life” (Gabriel & Lang, 1995, p. 7). The term consumption, from Latin “consumptio”, is a synonym for eating, using, and the meaning was “making use of materialistic goods in order to fulfil the real needs of human being, which is equivalent to contributing or creating conditions for harmonious personal development” (Majka, 1980, p. 228).

Consumer society had already started developing in the second half of the eighteenth century in countries where consumption played a dominant role among other sectors of social life (Alvi, Hafeez & Munawar, 2009, p. 104). Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, parts of Germany and Italy may be included in this group of countries. Evidence of consumer society can be found in British colonies and North America. Economisation of lifestyle and a wide range of mass production constitute the characteristic features of consumer society (Spierngs & Houtum, 2008, p. 900). Moreover, the culture of consumption developed on the back of the Industrial Revolution. This is when goods of a non-essential nature, typically decorative and ornamental products, started to be sold. The great opening of department stores in the mid-nineteenth century was a continuation of the process. Department stores were supposed to elevate shopping to something more than a necessity. They were to transform it into a pleasant social activity (Gabriel & Lang, 1995, p. 7).

In Europe, an intensive development of consumption and consumer society took place after the Second World War. A progressive process of religious, social, ethnic, national, economic and ideological cultural expansion contributed to this development and it was visible in the consumption of goods. As a consequence of the creation of European Economic Community (25<sup>th</sup> March 1957), the process started of societies in Europe opening up to the influence of other cultures. Goods were intermingled and as a consequence the new consumer culture was created and crystallised, which specifically affected the emotional attitudes of consumers (Galbraith, 1973, pp. 77–84).

The changes of economic conditioning, which is an increase in all sectors of economy, the income of people, change in social values, and cultural conditioning of consumption, all had an impact on the development of consumption in Western Europe after the Second World War. The development of industrialisation and urbanisation had an impact on the creation of new social classes, with ready access to a wide variety of goods and consumer services (Thompson, 2012, p. 914).

Contemporary consumer society is a civilisation for which consumption, connected with the intensive purchase of products and deriving from it great satisfaction, is more important than morality, customs, social norms and common good. This kind of society acquires goods that are not essential for day-to-day living. Possession of these goods is not a goal in itself. The process of acquiring the product is essential here or “the desire to act to acquire more, which partly constructs one’s life goals (Stearns, 2001, p. 15).

A characteristic feature of modern consumer society is the satisfaction of not only the basic needs which are necessary for life, but above all, the acquisition of products for the satisfaction of pleasure. It can be observed the development of complex communication systems that affect the equipment of products in their symbolic meaning. Electronic and digital information transmission technologies equip products with symbolic meaning, thanks to which consumers do not perceive the products how they really are, but they perceive their images to experience them. They are shaping the areas of the subject of consumption as areas of fashion and lifestyle. The emphasis is not on production and distribution but on its social meaning and use. Items of consumption are means by which it is possible to individualize lifestyle and its demonstration.

The formation of a culture of consumption is observed as the last stage of capitalist society. They are changes in the systems of social values for the creation of post-material values (Bylok, 2013, pp. 109–110).

Consumer society is degrading durability and equates “old” with “obsolete“, which can no longer be used, and is only fit for being trashed (Bauman, 2009, p. 27). Consumer society is a collective of individual consumers. Their freedom of decision is expressed in the choice between what is on offer. In consumer society, everything that is needed for life appears in the form of goods for purchase. For the consumer, the value of the object of consumption is based precisely on the possibilities of its consumption. The possibility of being used up is what makes the object a consumable article and an object of consumer desire. Manufacturers of consumer items, which by the market’s nature depend on the maximum turnover are interested in reducing the time of consumption to a minimum (Bauman, 2004, p. 98).

In consumer society, individuals perform, albeit in their own way, acts of consumption in which satisfaction must be immediate and should pass away when the act of purchase has been completed. The time consumed by the act of consumption becomes the bane of consumer society. It is in the general interest as soon as possible to meet one’s needs and the emergence of others. The senses play a special role, thanks to which the units respond to objects spontaneously. This leads to the suppression of reflection on the purposefulness of such intense, often irrational consumption (Wątroba, 2009, p. 140).

The idea of consumerism as an ideology based on excessive consumption and focusing on the acquisition of material goods, in developing countries, has begun to influence other spheres of life, including work, family, emotional relationships, hobbies and free time. Possession of certain goods and their usage has begun to determine the social position of an individual, and affect in a particular way one’s professional career as well as the success of one’s private life (Bylok, 2013, p. 9). Because of the media and widespread marketing, people have started to adopt consumer attitudes, which in the past did not exist; people were unfamiliar with such behaviour. A contemporary consumer acquires goods not only to fulfil the basic needs, but also he or she wants to belong to the economic, social, technological, even geographic and spiritual structures in which they are living (Dalglish, 2012, pp. 36–37).

Consumption in a contemporary consumer society has begun to penetrate deeper into human relationships, because thanks to consumption people’s dreams have come true; men and women have fulfilled their desires. Because of consumption people have communicated with one another, have demonstrated their place in a social hierarchy, have even used consumption to contrast themselves with others and categorise themselves and their surroundings. Consumption also plays a psychological role in the lives of human beings. It calms people and makes them feel more secure (Lewicka-Strzalecka, 2002, p. 165; Aldridge, 2006, pp. 69–134). Possession of a particular product can make a potential partner more attractive and it can show to what particular group of people he or she belongs (Quinteros, 2014, p. 265).

Taking into consideration the above, it seems to be essential that being in a relationship is dependent on fulfilling mutual needs connected with acquiring (purchasing), using and deriving subjective and objective benefits.

### **Changeability of female-male relationships**

Currently, in the era of developed consumption, properly formed female-male relations determine whether a relationship is attractive or not. One can assume that a distinctive contemporary feature of female-male relations is great changeability over time. Zygmunt Bauman draws attention to the fact that a relationship is a coalition based on a convergence of interests. He claims that while people start a relationship, then, they easily finish it. Opportunities “knock at one’s door” and disappear shortly afterwards because fortune is fickle, a coalition may be changeable, flexible and fragile. Although human relationships are fragile

and changeable they are constantly an object of desire. Starting a relationship, though a tormented one, which might be postponed in time because a relationship can finish abruptly, still appears as a source of satisfaction and fulfilment (Bauman, 2003, pp. 43–44).

Female-male relationships can be categorised into two groups, one group is legally formalised relationships (married couples) and the other group is relationships not legally formalised. Relationships are very fragile nowadays which has led to an increase in the proportion of single people. Today, however, being single (“alone”) is not a subject of revilement and very often being “single” does not mean being absolutely alone because it is interrupted by short-term relationships, sometimes being in a relationship means living together. Currently, there is also a number of people living together in a consensual union, where this informal relationship has elements which lend the arrangement an air of permanence. The permanence of consensual union relationships is based on an economic relationship which is consumptively attractive for both sides. It is also based on living together, applying the roles in a relationship, sexual satisfaction, connected with the control of conception, intellectual and communicative relationship, or normalised relationships with other family members and friends, who accept this female-male relationship. Creating a common life ethos also has an influence on the permanence of a relationship, where the sexual sphere is not only connected with reproduction but it also has a dimension which bonds partners together (Slany, 2008, p. 137).

A marriage means a relationship between two people, a woman and a man (biological aspect), which is supposed to destroy the feeling of loneliness and a radical gender distinctiveness (psychological and biological aspects) and gives it a sexual character. It has a social character and it becomes one of the most basic dimensions of social relations. It is approbated by a society. Cultural patterns give norms and regulations of role models in a marriage: as a wife and husband. These cultural changes influence the transformation of role models and the crisis of their identities. Considering the distinctiveness of ethos of a woman and a man, the longevity of marriage without a strong approbate (morality pressure) is limited (Grzybek, 2014, p. 32).

One needs to notice that in a stable relationship the belief that one possesses their partner exclusively may lead to the disappearance or neglect of what the original basis of a relationship was. A marriage contract puts both partners in an exclusive situation of possessing the body, feelings and care of the other person. He or she does not need to be conquered any longer because the love of a partner has become a possession. Both spouses stop making an effort to be loved, to create love, at the same time they become boring, their beauty fades (Fromm, 2012, p. 71). Possession of things by two people may create a union of owners, where “the modus of possessing” overcomes “the modus of being” (Grzybek, 2014, pp. 80–81).

Erich Fromm emphasises the fact that concentration on consumption in a relationship may lead to a fight with boredom by introducing such forms of a relationships as: group marriages, free partner exchange (swingers) and group sex. He claims this is nothing more or less than avoiding problems connected with the love that people have in a relationship. The basic difficulty derives not from the institution of marriage but from the existential structure of “possessing” (Fromm, 2012, pp. 72–73).

Reducing the requirements of a relationship, where essential skills are based on consumer abilities, might be a solution. Zygmunt Bauman names these kinds of relationships as “pin relationships.” The idea is to end (unpin) the relation once partners lose control over it. The first assumption of this relationship is to start a relationship with full awareness, without too much emotion. Secondly, a relationship cannot run its natural course, free from rational control. The third assumption is that one always needs to be ready to “unpin” the relationship, in other words to end it (Bauman, 2003, pp. 38–39).

It is worth mentioning that the idea of an “attractive” and long-lasting relationship results from the ability of a female and male to communicate with each other and with a system of normative social roles that a woman and a man has to play. In this respect one should focus on the term cultural *gender*. It is going to be mentioned according to the assumptions of development ethics (Grzybek, 2013, p. 100).<sup>3</sup> It signifies a certain kind of normative gender organisation: cultural gender — it is the assigning of biological sex (male and female) and certain postulated attributes, which in a socialisation and education process through pressure morality should be generated in a particular person. Generated features become the source of a culturally settled area and range of mutual communication and action (Grzybek, 2014, pp. 55–56). This characterisation of cultural gender is going to be essential in attempting to emphasise ethos in a relationship in the context of consumer ethics.

At this point one should refer to Michel Foucault’s ideas concerning sexual organisation. Sexuality and its organisation results in a normative dimension of relationship organisation and because of that it is connected with an endless spreading of control forms and areas (Foucault, 1995, pp. 92–102). Confronting the above idea with feministic views, which require the areas of development space, especially that by which the life ethos of female and male is not identical. It should be emphasised that the sexual role, which is a social product, constricts the right identification and consumption of their own personal desires and sexual needs. Social and moral pressure persuades women to meet the requirements of a man. Male domination is supposed to be responsible for traditional, sexual behavioural norms which are oppressive towards women (Bellioti, 2009, p. 369). The conviction concerning oppressive sexual organisation towards women is also present in the works of Simone de Beauvoir. According to her, a person is not born as a woman – she becomes one. Biological, psychological and economic aims do not determine the form taken by a female in a society. This product called *woman*, which is something implicit between a male and a castrate, is a creation of the whole civilisation. Only because of others does a person become somebody (De Beauvoir, 2014, p. 317).

According to Erich Fromm, referring to sexual intercourse appropriately presents the specificity of gender differentiation, which is so important in the context of consumerism. The role of a male in playing the sexual role is proving his sexual ability and erection which provides a woman with pleasure and fulfilment. It means that a man has to display his masculinity. In order to satisfy a man, a female does not display anything. It is essential to show her will. However, the sexual ability of a man does not equal his will, the lack of availability of a man cannot be hidden, whilst a woman can do it. In a situation when a woman agrees to intercourse and a man desires her, he can be sure of getting sexual fulfilment. Alternatively, when a woman wants closeness with a man and he is not ready to give her pleasure and satisfy her, nothing can be done (Fromm, 2011, p. 106).

It seems that in the contemporary world the existence of poor or absent sexual abilities is much more often the reason for the end of a relationship than it used to be in earlier, pre-consumer generations (Staszewski, 2017, pp. 40–44). The contemporary consumptive approach is connected with a basic characteristic, that is: not to delay any fulfilment of a desire, also in the sexual sphere (Fromm, 2012, p. 95).

Trying to put in order all the main theses concerning the changeability of a female – male relationship or a married couple in the era of current consumer society one can indicate the decrease in stability of married couples’ relationships and increase in the number of consensual union couples. Single people have not become reviled, loneliness is not absolute because it is disrupted by interim relationships with another person. A consumptive attitude towards a relationship is characterised by its control — “pin relationships.” The consumerism of a

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<sup>3</sup> Development ethics it is a theory showing a normative dimension of a human development, in which theses about moral human existence and ethical personality are the basic assumptions. The aim of development ethics is providing a theoretical tool which allows the visualization of an educational and caring reality (or social one).

relationship is also revealed by showing female sexual desires, which was never a norm in the society of “manufacturers”.

### **Ethos of relationships versus consumer ethics**

Enumerating areas characterising the contemporary specificity of female-male relationships as well as outlining the essence of consumer society has made it possible to show the ethos of a relationship corresponding with current consumer ethics. It should be emphasised that the ethos of a relationship is going to be formed on the life ethos of the individual; including the specificity of female and male ethos. The relationship ethos will have to manage to oppose the morality pressure of society. However, in the era of pluralism of social forms and developing consumer ethics, morality pressure, including religion, has been weakened (Bergson, 2007, pp. 15–106; Plašienková, 2008, pp. 529–535).<sup>4</sup>

It is worth pointing out here the ethics that makes it possible to show the ethos of relationships and consumer ethics. The point of reference will be the assumptions of the ethics of development. The ethics of development is "a theory showing the normative dimension of human development, in which the basic assumptions are issues of the moral existence of man and [his] ethical personality" (Grzybek, 2010, p. 20). Three basic aspects of defining the term of ethics have been elaborated in this theory: “Ethics is: 1) a philosophical science over morality, norms, values guiding human life; 2) knowledge in the field of the art of living; 3) a separate system of valuing and directing oneself in life – the ethos of life” (Grzybek, 2016, p. 18). From the point of view of this reflection, most interesting are the terms referring to the art of living and the ethos of life. On the basis of these notions, an attempt will be made to specify the ethos of relationships and ethics of consumption.

Together with the development of consumer society, specific ethical norms connected with the purchasing process have been formed. A particular consumer ideology has developed, according to which the world is a specific warehouse for potential consumer objects. The life of an individual person constitutes an endless consumer transaction. It comes down to deriving the maximum satisfaction and life success of an individual, which is measured by gaining the proper market value, like accumulated capital or financial status within society (Bauman, 2008, p. 21).

Consumer ethics understood as all the rules and norms of actions connected with broadly understood purchase-consume process, accepted in a particular time and environment, has gained a new dimension. It has come down, specifically, to generally accepted principles of behaviour and customs as well as to moral rules which determine the consumer actions of groups of people or individuals during the purchasing process, consuming and managing of goods (Muncy & Vitell, 1992, p. 298). In this context one can state that ethos becomes a determinant which categorises the purchasing process, as well as attitudes and consumer decisions, as proper or improper (Chun-Chen et al., 2012, p. 317).

In the subject literature we may notice a lack of uniform definition of consumer ethics. It is connected with the idea of economic ethics and consumption ethics. Consumer ethics in the context of economic ethics may be defined as the moral obligation of a person whose actions aim to fulfill material and spiritual desires through the acquisition of goods and services; this kind of activity is analyzed in the means of the influence it has on the person who participates in the economic process, his education, dignity and personal development (Majka, 1997, p. 180). Consumption ethics is connected with a conscious and thoughtful purchase decision, so certain consumer choices are based not only on moral values but on beliefs. Ethical consumption is responsible consumption that may be described by taking a moral approach to

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<sup>4</sup> Morality pressure as a less perfect morality form has been characterized in the specificity of Henry Bergson’s ideas.

the market and the consumption of goods and services. The moral factor is associated with the idea of following your values and moral goals (Kalajtzidis, 2016, p. 40).

Life ethos according to “development ethics” can be understood as models of behaviour and evaluation, which means a specific way of being which is affected by morality and ethics. At the same time, it can be confronted with social morality putting pressure on particular behaviours. Nevertheless, it is about the protection of one’s way of being, ethical personality development, which expresses itself in the mode of existence directed more into “being” not “possessing” (Grzybek, 2014, pp. 72, 84).<sup>5</sup>

That is why consent for the rejection and replacement of a consumption object, which no longer provides full satisfaction, affects female-male relationships and places both partners in the role of consumption objects. A female-male relationship conforms to the rules applied in (doing) shopping and that is why partners do not require anything other than average consumer skills. As in the case of a consumer product, a relationship is supposed to be consumed or used. If it is faulty or not attractive, one should dispose of it. A product can be exchanged for a new one, which might be more rewarding, even if a transaction does not take into consideration warranty, service or refund. People trash entirely roadworthy cars, good computers, once an “updated version appears on the market.” Relationships are no exception here (Bauman, 2003, p. 27). On this point one could refer to utilitarian ethics, pointing to the right of actions which give priority to experiencing pleasure and achieving goals over the negative effects of actions, even if they resulted from traditional, shallow morality (Moore, 1980, pp. 3–50; Gluchman, 2008a, pp. 11–32; Gluchman, 2008b, pp. 628–655).

The consumption of a relationship can also be examined from the point of sexual satisfaction. In this context, one should reject the dichotomous divisions of sexual ethics into: group on — anti permissive, objective and absolute Christian ethics, as well as relative and permissive liberal ethics (Ślipko, 2005, p. 284). However, one might contradict such oppositional groupings with Michel Foucault’s thoughts about sexual aesthetics. It should be understood as a lifestyle, in which moral value is neither dependent on the compatibility of behaviour codes nor on purification rituals, but it depends on certain forms, or even particular formal regulations that allow one to benefit from pleasures, in their real distribution, in perceived limits, and retrospective hierarchy (Foucault, 1995, p. 229).

The aesthetics of sexuality could become an element in an integrated life ethos. Igor Primoratz analysed four basic conceptualisations of sex: sex aimed at procreation, sex connected with love, sex as a tool of inter human communication or “sex as sex in itself”, in other words directed towards gaining pleasure— would not need to have a contradictory character, but a proper connection would be dependent on accepting one’s own sexuality aesthetics (Primoratz, 2012, pp. 21–74).

The question arises, whether sexuality aesthetics is an individual consumer choice or the mutual choice of a couple. One can assume that accepting the same aesthetics of sexuality will depend on the convergence of views which a couple had before making their decision to start their relationship. The relational sphere in the ethical estimation dimension is conditioned ideologically with accepting particular anthropological assumptions. One of them is to show human love as a virtue: “Love in its full meaning is a virtue, not only a feeling; what is more, it is not just arousal of [the] senses. This virtue is originated in one’s will and has at its own disposal resources of its spiritual potentiality, which means that it is an authentic engagement of one’s freedom of a person-subject deriving from the truth about the person-subject. Love, as a virtue is alive in one’s will and recognises the decency and value of a person, it is the source of this person affirmation. It affects all relations, experience and actions” (Wojtyła, 2010, p.

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<sup>5</sup> The adoption of the concept of life ethos, being based on the assumptions of the ethics of development, introduces a unique specificity of understanding, which may be different from the assumptions discussed in studies on consumption by other authors (Aldridge, 2006; Baudrillard, 2006; Mysona Byrska, 2015, pp. 59–66; Ritzer, 2001).

110). The above characterisation indicates more the postulated dimension of love in a relationship than the justification of being mutually attracted to each other. It seems that sexual attractiveness can penetrate and melt any other strong emotion or be aroused by it, whilst love constitutes only one of these emotions. Because the majority of people associate sexual attractiveness with love, they easily confuse love with sexual attractiveness. Love can awake the desire for sexual closeness and then sexual intercourse, it is free from greediness, the yearning to conquer somebody or desire to be conquered oneself; however, it is full of affection (Wojtyła, 2010, p. 62).

In development ethics, love, as a virtue, has been determined as the desire to possess an object (right for consumption), which in a particular way is realised in the inner person relationship of two beloved people. Experiencing a mutually loving relationship is a joy in itself; this relationship becomes a very strong motivation to act in itself (Grzybek, 2010, p. 41).

Love, as understood in this way, should not be combined with the morality of pressure, exerted on the members of a society and making them follow a specific behavior towards a sexual partner, but with an attractive value through the desire of realization (Bergson, 2007, pp. 69–106; Grzybek, 2014, pp. 71–84, pp. 90–101). Love free from the normative dimension approaches closer to the ethics of a consumer, who behaves similarly with the objects of his/her desire. Such a comparison seems to allow for making appropriate conclusions.

### **Conclusion**

Attempting to analyse the phenomenon of ethical consumption in relationships, especially taking advantage of consumer trends in the sphere of private life, one needs to focus on certain conclusions. Contemporary consumerism is a transformation of human beings into consumers — “homo consumer” and relegating all other dimensions of humanity, such as background, to secondary and subordinate factors. Purchasing processes are used to satisfy not only those needs connected to the physiological processes of every person, but also to satisfy, in the best way, all other needs as well as the ultimate aim of one’s actions (Bauman, 2011, p. 109).

“Homo consumer”, in one’s own realisation of happiness needs to impose certain principles of this realisation. Being a couple requires the application of a similar life philosophy, life ethos which on the one hand allows one to oppose moral pressure, and on the other hand allows the cementing of a relationship and makes it possible to gain mutual satisfaction. In this context, consumer ethics means applying similar rules, also in the sexual sphere, which can be called: “sexuality aesthetics”. Whether a partner is a subject of consumption and this relationship is objectified — this requires thorough reflection, however, it’s possible to assume that these considerations are going to be diversified, depending on the philosophical and ethical school of thought. However, in this aspect one can show the opposition of sexual morality in the context of ethical systems, which are identical to religious assumptions and ethical eroticism, which is based on an integrated life ethos. In the other characterisation, the consumption of a relationship, especially the satisfactory realisation of this relationship, also understood in a spiritual sense, does not have to objectify a person or a relationship of people.

To conclude, it is necessary to emphasise the fact that consumption in itself is not pejorative. To support this concept, one should refer to utilitarian ethics, in which the rule to experience pleasure determines “the good” of the object of realisation. In order for homo consumer to remain a rationally acting person it is important to accept the order of consumption according to one’s own life ethos, oppose pressure morality, whilst in the context of gender relations – according to sexuality aesthetics, stand in opposition to morality of sexuality.

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