



## Functions, power and future of consumerism

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### Abstract

The subject of research is consumerism, as a total social phenomenon, which affects both the material and spiritual level of people's existence in society. The research problems are the functions, power and future of consumerism, that is, the questions: What are the functions and power of consumerism? Why did consumerism triumph during the historical development of society? What are the challenges of modern consumerism? The main hypothesis is that there is a complementarity of the functions of consumerism, as well as the impact of consumerism on societies in the post-socialist (post-scarcity) transformation and on sustainable development through universal basic income. The scientific goals of the work are: 1) *to describe* consumerism and the process of its creation; 2) *to classify* the functions of consumerism and *to functionally explain* the difference between them, with an emphasis on the integrative point of view of complementarity between them; 3) *to anticipate* the future of consumerism, i.e. the potential challenges as well as the experiential connection (scientific law) between post-scarcity societies, in the process of post-socialist transformation, and uncontrolled shopping (compulsive buying syndrome), and the experiential connection between consumerism and universal basic income in order to reduce economic inequality, poverty, illiteracy, labor demotivation, mental imbalances, addiction and crime, with the aim of moving towards sustainable development. The methods of (descriptive and comparative) analysis, deduction, synthesis, induction, case studies, content analysis of concepts about consumerism and its functions will be used based on a simple classification (material dimension, level of society, system - symbolic dimension, level of individual, actor) (Kukic & Markic, 2006: 217) and desk research. The results of qualitative-quantitative research relate to knowledge about consumerism, its etymological, total and particular conceptual definition, its functions and their corresponding power, and about the future of consumerism from the perspective of the reasons for its past triumph, as well as real and potential challenges. These findings were obtained through secondary, mostly qualitative (in the form of words) data (Kothari, 2004; Dale, Wathan & Higgins, 2008), with a few quantitative, statistical data collected during 'library research' (Kuba & Koking, 2004: 90) that is, during studious work on bibliographic units from an abstracted sample.

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**Keywords:** consumerism; functions (material and symbolic); post-socialist transformation; Sustainable Development

### Introduction

The work on the topic 'Functions, power and future of consumerism' is structured through *an introductory and concluding part*, the *theoretical and methodological framework* of the research, *the results* and *a discussion* of the results, along with a *literature segment*, at the end of the paper. It represents a modified version of the chapter of the master's thesis, entitled 'Consumerism as a total social phenomenon', defended at the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Banja Luka, in December 2019.

The topic of this work is current, considering the contemporary manifestations of the subject of research, that is, its effects in the past, which have an impact on the society of the present. Hence, this research emphasized the external dimensions of the phenomenon of consumerism, such as its structure and functions, just like the relationship of consumerism with other

phenomena, through the social structure. This indicates the static aspect of consumerism and the *laws of coexistence*, which are manifested in the experiential connections of consumerism with the macro level of the social system and the micro level of the individual, the actor, where these connections are represented by the pluralism of the functions of consumerism. Thus, has not been neglected the dynamic potential of consumerism expressed through the *laws of suction*, i.e. the transformation of individuals and society under the influence of social challenges, before which consumerism achieved victory, or will achieve it in the future, over other civil ideologies, during the past and future historical development of society towards a more sustainable variants.

### Methodological framework of the research

**The subject of research** is consumerism, as a total social phenomenon, which affects both the material and spiritual level of people's existence in society. **The research problems** are the functions, power and future of consumerism, that is, the questions: What are the functions and power of consumerism? Why did consumerism triumph during the historical development of society? What are the challenges of modern consumerism? **The main hypothesis** is that there is a complementarity of the functions of consumerism, as well as the impact of consumerism on societies in the post-socialist (post-scarcity) transformation and on sustainable development through universal basic income.

**The scientific goals** of the work are: 1) *to describe* consumerism and the process of its creation; 2) *to classify* the functions of consumerism and *to functionally explain* the difference between them, with an emphasis on the integrative point of view of complementarity between them; 3) *to anticipate* the future of consumerism, i.e. the potential challenges as well as the experiential connection (scientific law) between post-scarcity societies, in the process of post-socialist transformation, and uncontrolled shopping (compulsive buying syndrome), and the experiential connection between consumerism and universal basic income in order to reduce economic inequality, poverty, illiteracy, labor demotivation, mental imbalances, addiction and crime, with the aim of moving towards sustainable development.

**The methods** of (descriptive and comparative) analysis, deduction, synthesis, induction, case studies, content analysis of concepts about consumerism and its functions will be used based on a simple classification (material dimension, level of society, system - symbolic dimension, level of individual, actor) (Kukic & Markic, 2006: 217) <sup>[33]</sup> and desk research.

**The results** of qualitative-quantitative research relate to knowledge about consumerism, its etymological, total and particular conceptual definition, its functions and their corresponding power, and about the future of consumerism from the perspective of the reasons for its past triumph, as well as real and potential challenges. These findings were obtained through secondary, mostly qualitative (in the form of words) data (Kothari, 2004; Dale, Wathan & Higgins, 2008) <sup>[31, 15]</sup>, with a few quantitative, statistical data collected during 'library research' (Kuba & Koking, 2004: 90) <sup>[32]</sup> that is, during studious work on bibliographic units from an abstracted sample.

### Theoretical research framework

The term *consumerism* comes from the English language -

from the verb *to consume*. At the base of this verb is the Latin verb *consumere*, which means to consume, that is, 'to eat, devour, waste, destroy' (Graeber, 2011: 492) <sup>[27]</sup>. 'To consume also means to destroy. In the course of consumption, the things consumed cease to exist, literally or spiritually. Or they are physically 'used'; to the point of complete destruction, for example when things are eaten or worn out, or are stripped of their appeal, so that they no longer arouse or attract desire and lose their ability to satisfy one's needs and desires - for example, an overused toy or an overheard record - and so on become unfit for consumption' (May, 2005: 23). The term *consumption* appears in the English language in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In early uses in English and French, the word had a negative connotation. To consume something meant to destroy, burn or lose it (Graeber, 2011: 492) <sup>[27]</sup>.

The word consumerism (n.), as a noun (consumer + -ism), has been used since 1922 in the sense of '*protection of consumer interests*', and in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was also used as *a synonym for capitalism* to describe the Western, consumer-oriented, economic system as opposed to the centrally-planned economy of Soviet communism. Until 1960, it was overshadowed by another meaning - '*consumption as an economic policy*'; (www.etymonline.com/word/consumerism). Although consumerism is associated with the West, it is actually *a global phenomenon*. It is believed to date back to the time of *ancient civilizations* (e.g. ancient Egypt, ancient Rome) (Tewari Nandi, 2016) <sup>[50]</sup>, when there was the acquisition and consumption of goods beyond basic needs.

It is considered that consumerism, as *a culture of consumption (consumer culture)*, intensified during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to the growing *middle class*, which accepted new ideas about luxury consumption and the importance of *fashion*, as a motivator of purchases. Consumerism is considered as a modern phenomenon, which originated in Western Europe, and which until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through '*westernization*', broadly taken as *globalization*, infiltrated societies around the world, through European and American companies, i.e. the contact of the culture of Europeans and Americans with other cultures (Tomic-Koludrovic & Leburic, 2002: 30, Stearns, 2001: 8. according to: Perackovic, 171 in: Colic, 2013) <sup>[48]</sup>.

The big turn towards consumerism happened just before *the industrial revolution*. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the industrial revolution and capitalist development were primarily focused on the capital goods sector and industrial infrastructure. With the industrial revolution began the era of mass consumption, since the sudden increase in production achieved the mass production of goods, which due to the low price were available to everyone for consumption. The practice of consumption developed for various motives, in addition to satisfying rational needs, and mostly from the desire to prove a higher social position.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, under the influence of advertisements, chain stores, mass entertainment and more advanced means of consumption (department stores), consumerism was transformed into *a consumer ideology*, that is, *a shopping lifestyle*. Some authors even believe that through consumerism the West exercised its influence in the world until the year 2000 (Stearns, 2001: 9 according to: Perackovic in: Colic, 2013) <sup>[48]</sup>. *Marshall McLuhan's* predictions about the tendencies of consumerism in the age of the third millennium are such that the trend from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when consumerism as an '-ism' won, will continue (according

to Perackovic, 173 in: Colic, 2013).

The term consumerism is of relatively recent origin. It is considered that the first documented use of the term was recorded in the magazine *New Republic* in 1944 (Tewari Nandi, 2016: 5) <sup>[50]</sup>. Over time, the use of the term spread, which caused a proliferation of definitions, which were characterized by variations in precision and specificity.

An initial notion of consumerism can be acquired by looking at or experiencing other sensory experiences of everyday consumption practices at points of sale, which, through scenes of mass buying and consumption and *the waste dumps* caused by them, creates the possibility of an informal definition of consumerism as '**excessive buying and consumption**'. However, a unique *nominal the definition* of the term has not yet been agreed upon, therefore consumerism is only one of a series of essentially contested terms. The state of scientific knowledge about this phenomenon is such that the existing literature includes a spectrum at one end of which are early forms of social thought about consumption (Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, Veblen, Zombart, Gurwich), and at the other - contemporary studies that also provide a critical review and comprehensive insight into the transformation of industrial society into a consumer one, and the mechanisms that drive it, which indirectly touch on the issue of consumerism (e.g. Baudrillard, 1970; Bourdieu, 1979; Ritzer, 1993, 1995, 1998, 1999/2005, 2001; Corrigan, 1997; Chaney, 2003; Paterson, 2006; Featherstone, 2007; Goodwin, 2008; Dunn, 2008; Lipovetsky, 2008; Bauman, 2007, 2009, 2010; Smart, 2010; Singh, 2011; Campbell, 1987; Dunne, 2013;). Only a few publications are explicitly devoted to consumerism (eg Campbell, 1987; Stearns, 2001; Lodziak, 2002; Trentman, 2004; Migone, 2004; Caims, 2006; Docwra, 2009) <sup>[48, 22]</sup>.

On the other hand, there is a plurality of descriptive definitions to describe the common usage of the term. According to the usual meaning, consumerism is the '*ideology*' of the consumer society, the '*theory*' that the consumption of goods and services in large quantities ensures the economic progress of countries, '*politics*' that promotes greed, thereby trying to present the manifestations and development of consumerism.

In addition to determining consumerism exclusively as *a consumer movement*, that is, collective actions of consumers to protect basic consumer rights and improve the position of consumers in society (Swagler, 1979; Brobeck, 1990; Garman, 1991) <sup>[49, 8, 25]</sup>, there are also understandings of consumerism as *a worldview*, which is either criticized or justified. Thus, among other things, it is stated that 'consumerism is – *an orientation towards material consumption* as the greatest goal in life - and a serious threat to freedom, because it weakens this virtue, necessary for people to rule themselves' (Abela, 2007: 7) <sup>[2]</sup>.

Thus, the term consumerism is most often used for categorization and sociological criticism of the prevailing social arrangement of mass production and mass consumption with an ideological discourse on the freedom of individual consumer choice. In addition, it is also used to conceptualize *alternative forms of consumption* (ethical, sustainable, etc.), which try to use consumer processes to transform production and consumption practices.

### Total and particular definition of consumerism

The usual use of the term consumerism is in accordance with the encyclopedic definitions of this term

(www.encyclopedia.com).

Namely, according to *the Saint James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* (2000), consumerism refers to the process of purchasing goods such as food, clothing, water, shelter, electricity, gas, etc. in order to use it. Consumerism is more than that, considering that from the original meaning of the consumer movement, founded due to the increased prevalence of advertising, it has reached the meaning of *a cultural ethos*, which is characterized by dependence on trade and constant shopping, due to the influence of commercial values (Jacobs, 2000).

According to *the Encyclopedia of European Social History* (2001), consumerism usually refers to: the unlimited and general desire for purchased goods and services that define the self and social position in advanced market societies; a movement to protect the personal and economic needs of customers from unfair and manipulative manufacturing, retail and financial interests (Gross, 2001).

According to *the New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (2005), consumerism describes the change in American culture from a 19<sup>th</sup>-century production-oriented society to a consumer society and contributes to liberal beliefs in the Progressive Era, starting a long-lasting trend of consumer advocacy and consumer protection laws. According to *the Encyclopedia of Science, Technology and Ethics* (2005), consumerism refers to a way of life, conditioned by a high level of material wealth, i.e. the purchase and possession of goods and services with a particularly symbolic and emotional meaning, in which the USA is leading, even though it is a global phenomenon.

According to *the International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* (2008), consumerism can be defined as a belief system that promotes high and increasing levels of personal consumption of material goods and services, while attributing to consumption a major role in promoting individual happiness; the opinion that the main goal of the economy is the most efficient fulfillment of people's freely chosen consumer decisions (Dunn, 2008) <sup>[22]</sup>. Finally, consumerism can be understood as: the belief that it is good for people to spend a lot of money on goods or services (Merriam-Webster) or as an activity of people who spend a lot of money on goods and services (*Ibidem*), and as an ideology of excessive consumption material goods and services (study.com). In accordance with the above, it is evident that consumerism is most often defined in two diametrical ways - in a broader and a narrower sense.

In *a broader sense*, several foreign and domestic authors (Abercrombie *et al.*, 2008, 276; Tomic-Koludrovic and Leburic, 2002, 27; Stearns, 2001, vii) <sup>[48]</sup> according to Stazic in: Colic, 2013: 170) use the term consumerism to denote *an ideology* that seeks to connect the purchase and consumption of luxury goods and services and the achievement of greater satisfaction, happiness and social status, so that purchase/consumption becomes the main social activity, which contributes to the development and spread of consumer culture to all areas of social life from the global to the local level, thus building a new type of identity, based on consumer habits. In other words, it is an 'ideology that goes beyond the economic sphere and penetrates into all areas of social reality, especially culture, thus becoming the very foundation of the entire life of contemporary societies' (according to Stazic in Colic, 2013: 170). On the other hand, consumerism in *a narrower sense* means: collective *forms of action* for the protection of consumer rights, originally



created in more affluent economies; *the theory* of continuous growth of consumption as a factor of economic progress; *the position* that the decisive element in shaping the economic structure of society is the free choice of the consumer; general increase in consumption among the more affluent layers of the population (*Ibidem*).

Garman (Garman, 1991) <sup>[25]</sup> provided an operational definition of consumerism in the context of the evolution of the consumer movement in the 1960s, noting that consumerism was a label placed on the efforts of a growing number of consumer advocates who questioned the inadequacy of the market system and the lack of interest of businesses and governments to deal with the important needs and demands of consumers. Consumers were looking for a greater balance between them and sellers in the market.

Brobeck (1990) <sup>[9]</sup> made a **distinction between consumerism and the consumer movement**. The consumer movement includes all those who worked in the interest of consumers. He limited his definition of the consumer movement to non-profit advocacy groups and individual advocates who want to advance the interests of consumers by reforming government and/or corporate policies and practices.

However, an agreement has not yet been reached regarding the narrower meaning of the term consumerism, in the scientific sense, since its nominal definition has not yet been introduced into the world's sociological encyclopedias. As in the narrower sense, a kind of politicization of consumption is carried out as a social activity and process, a more adequate conceptual starting point for further analysis of the phenomenon would be the definition of consumerism as an ideology, which is evident already on the basis of the derivative consumerism itself, i.e. the suffix '-ism', which is added to the root of the word (consumer in English).

From an etymological point of view, the suffix '-ism' signifies excess, strengthens the meaning of the term, indicating the extremity in connection with consumption (the basic term) from which the term, through the word consumer, is derived. Thus, this term differs in meaning from pure terms without the suffix '-ism' - consumption and consumer. The suffix also presupposes a specific type of theory, practice or doctrine, as well as a certain value that is tried to be imposed globally, at the same time associating it with an ideological direction, current, movement, etc. (<https://velikirechnik.com/2016/03/07/izam/>).

If the previously presented definitions of consumerism (broader and narrower) are compared with Mannheim's classification of ideologies, it becomes clear that the broader definition of consumerism corresponds to Mannheim's notion of **total (general) ideology**, which seeks to provide answers to questions related to societies and social problems, while the narrower the definition refers to Mannheim's notion of **a particular ideology**, which tends to solve the problems of one sphere of society and politics or only one state. In this second case, the most active representatives of consumerism, as a particular ideology, are certain parties and other organizations, as well as social movements.

## Research Results and Discussions

### Functions of consumerism

For the sake of a better explanation, it is necessary to determine consumerism from the aspect of its functions

(**functionalist explanation**) in relation to the wider system to which it belongs, in order to determine whether consumerism, as a phenomenon, contributes to the strengthening or weakening of the system, i.e. the individual, or is it neutral in relative to the same.

**The assumption** of this research is that *consumerism has two main functions*, viewed from two levels of analysis (society or system level and individual or actor level):

1. **the function of reproduction of instrumental-rational action** (material dimension) and
2. **the function of communicative - rational action** (symbolic dimension).

On the basis of a *comparative approach*, it becomes evident that this classification of functions, formulated by the starting assumptions of the research, is supported by Bourdieu's classification of the functions of ideology (*cognitive, communicative and dominating functions*), on the basis of which it is possible to state that: 1) the function of reproduction of instrumental-rational action (material dimension) corresponds to *the dominance function*, while 2) the function of communicative - rational action (symbolic dimension) refers to *the cognitive and communicative function*.

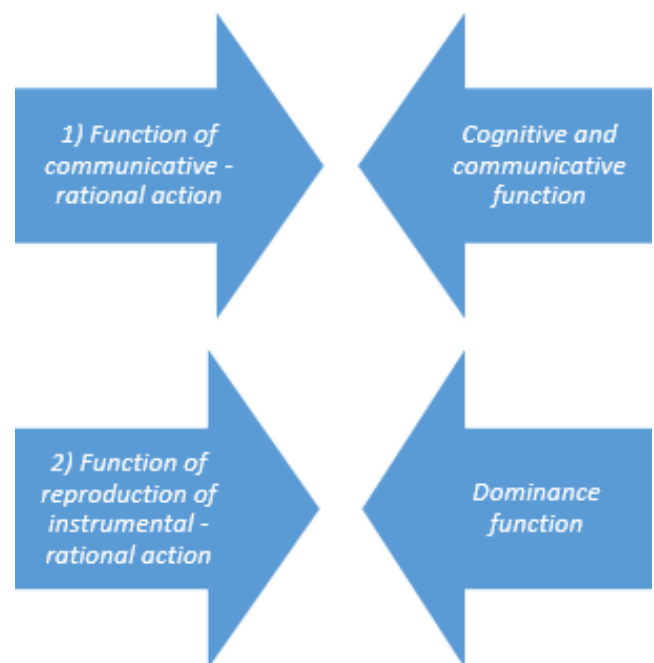


Fig 1

In the domain of these two functions, there is a wide range of needs (individual and social), which consumerism tries to satisfy. Some of those functions, which consumerism (should) perform in personal and social life, are the following: the function of control; the legitimation function; the function of initiation; the function of homogenization; the function of integration; the function of adaptation; the function of identification; the function of orientation; the function of communication; the function of learning and education; the function of compensation; an emotional function and the prophetic function.

**Table 1:** Sub-functions of reproduction of instrumental-rational action

<b>1) Material dimension</b>	
<b>1.1. 1.1. The function of control</b> - consumerism serves to spread the logic of the neoliberal model of globalization, through ensuring compliance with the imperatives of the consumer society, by means of rewarding or punishing (regulation). Consumerism, as a specific system of values, norms and rules of conduct, tries to regulate the behavior of buyers, consumers, with the aim of accepting consumerism as a norm.	<b>1.2. 1.2. The legitimation function</b> - consumerism is used to justify the social order and consumer behavior models forced by that order.
<b>1.3. 1.3. The function of initiation</b> - consumerism is at the service of progress, by overcoming existing conditions and the traditional way of life, which aims to achieve social (and individual) development, so consumerism is a mechanism of consumer, consumerist capitalism.	<b>1.4. 1.4. The function of homogenization</b> - standardizing patterns of social action and generating consumer identity, based on the dominant social activity - consumption.
<b>1.5. 1.5. The function of integration</b> - consumerism connects atomized individuals into new forms of association (movements for consumer protection, etc.), and such social groups into a consumer society. The connection is reflected both on a symbolic level and in real life, especially in crisis situations where consumer rights are threatened, etc.	<b>1.6. 1.6. The function of adaptation</b> - of the social system to changes caused by industrial revolutions, through the social role of the consumer.

Source: (Slijepcevic, 2019)

From the attached it is evident that consumerism is in the service of a wide range of functions, which are realized in society, from which its *power* derives, considering the

connection with capitalism, whose sources of power rest in *property, money, goods*, etc.

**Table 2:** Subfunctions of communicative - rational action

<b>2) Symbolic dimension</b>	
<b>1.7. 2.1. The function of identification</b> - consumerism appears as a form of collective consciousness among people, according to which individuals, as consumers, identify with a group of consumers, thus acquiring a kind of identity.	<b>2.2. The function of orientation</b> contributes to the fact that, by following the consumerist way of life and the taste shaped by it, consumers are more easily oriented towards the expectations and roles that follow them in society, as well as that societies themselves are oriented as the prevailing consumer trends.
<b>1.8. 2.3. The function of communication</b> - consumerism enables consumers to communicate with each other in order to maintain contacts and exchange useful information, but also to present themselves in the desired way, in order to maintain themselves in a predominantly consumerist social environment.	<b>2.4. The function of learning and education</b> - consumerism as a cognitive doctrine satisfies the human need for knowledge about one's own needs and desires, the emergence of the consumer universe and, in accordance with them, the creation and explanation of a specific perception of reality (nature and society), etc.
<b>1.9. 2.5. The function of compensation</b> - consumerism occurs as a means of compensating for shortcomings, thus providing a sense of comfort. Consumerism appears as an ideal substitute for religion, whose influence is increasingly decreasing with the development of modern societies. Thus, instead of religious explanations of reality, there is an apology and apotheosis of profane ceremonies and rituals, humanistic (but also political) values of utilitarianism and hedonism, equality in mediocrity (same tastes, purchasing power, consumer status, consumer freedoms, cooperation among members of consumer movements, etc. ). Which only says that scientific thought, however, has not yet succeeded in completely suppressing such forms of collective consciousness.	<b>2.6. The emotional function</b> - consumerism satisfies the needs for enjoyment, satisfaction, happiness, acceptance, etc.
<b>2.7. The prophetic function</b> - provides ethical ideals about the position of the human consumer in the future development of the consumer society and causes criticism of the same, etc.	

Source: (Slijepcevic, 2019)

Namely, the power of consumerism could also be seen in the context of the potential of the 'new economy', which is developing within the information society. It is about *the digital economy* (Degryse, 2016).

### The power of consumerism

'Consumerism succeeded where other ideologies failed, because it concretely expressed the cardinal political ideas of the century - *freedom and democracy* [...] Consumer goods allowed Americans to break free from their old, relatively safe, but closed communities and open up to the individualism of a dynamic mass society" (Vincenzo, 2018: 14).

Although freedom is one of the permanent and universal human values, this cannot be said for democracy with certainty, and hence the very power of consumerism is partially conditioned by the future of democracy, which has long been discussed in terms of post-democracy (Colin Crouch) or even *netocracy* (Bard & Soderqvist, 2003).

What kind of future awaits consumerism, and hence the consumers, could be judged on the basis of the role and importance of consumer goods in maintaining continuity and initiating change, which suggests that it will be like this for a long time, just as in the case of the symbolic struggles that are fought for that goods.

The development of society so far has shown the importance

of consumption in terms of providing people with opportunities *to expand control over their personal lives*. Consumers are the ideal agents of the consumer world, 'perfect beings of capitalism', while consumer movements represent a kind of *check and balance to capitalism*, as an implicitly anarchic system.

Considering all that, one can only guess the further dynamics of trade in cultural goods and information in the undoubtedly new phase of capitalism - the digital economy (Degryse, 2016) and during the intensification of that phase, due to *the fourth industrial revolution*. That revolution represents the continuation of computerization, as *a digital revolution*, rapidly creating major social changes in both directions. On the one hand, in terms of *improving people's quality of life*, by increasing the level of earnings, connecting the world with new technologies, greater efficiency of smart technologies in work and organization, especially in *the prevention of natural disasters*, but also in terms of the worsening of people's social insecurity, due to inequality in access and knowledge the use of technologies, the obsolescence of jobs and the generally unstoppable pace of all new industrial effects.

And indeed, the effects of every industrial revolution can be traced through a change in power or organizational structures in a relatively short period of time. Thus, the third, digital industrial revolution, at the end of the 1960s meant the development of technology in the direction from analog and mechanical to digital, which is in use today. The fourth industrial revolution, at the end of the XXI century, will bring changes in the form of artificial intelligence, robotics, IoT (Internet of things), auto industry (driverless vehicles), automation, 3D printing, quantum computers and nanotechnology. An interesting and morally-ethically challenging topic from the field of 'human genetics' is related to the fact that 3D printing technology will bring the possibility of creating copies of the human heart and other human muscles, i.e. the organs of the new 'super-man'.

In the spirit of these changes, consumerism could quite expectedly be used as *a means of ensuring the accumulation of power of the controllers of the information society*, and that through encouraging the consumption of new 'goods and services', i.e. resources, on which the digital economy depends (knowledge, electronic devices, etc.).

In the context of what has been said so far, it is possible to modify the quote about the former power of consumerism, which rested on the belief of democratization, i.e. the inclusion of broad social strata in a democratic society through the consumption of mass goods, while now it rests on the belief of *informatization*, i.e. the inclusion of broad social strata in the information society. through the consumption of electronic consumer goods: 'Consumerism will succeed where other ideologies fail, because it will express the cardinal ideas of the age - freedom, networking and knowledge (information). Electronic consumer goods will allow people to break free from their old, relatively safe, but closed life and outlook on the world and open up to the informationalism of a dynamic cyber society.'

Under the influence of the effects of the third industrial revolution, i.e. the computerization process, consumerism can contribute to *the digital literacy* of the population for participation in the cyber society, as it once contributed to the inclusion of broad social layers in the society of mass consumption, under the influence of the democratization process. Regarding the effects of consumerism, in the context

of the changes caused by the third and fourth industrial revolution, does it not seem justified to add the epithet *biopolitical*, that is, *transhumanist* or *cognitive, emancipatory* to consumerism?

### The future of consumerism

The question of the future of consumerism is also a question of *the sustainability of civilization* and lifestyle, which concerns an unscrupulous attitude towards nature and which leads to: increasingly pronounced climate changes; the problematic capitalist way of production for the sake of creating profit, by exploiting natural resources and polluting the natural environment; the necessity of choosing between a consumer society that calls into question survival on planet Earth for the sake of satisfying needs, artificially manufactured by the advertising industry, and a more promising, sustainable society, in which the goal of corporations, as Noam Chomsky points out, will not be the maximum increase of their profits and market shares, by converting the population into mindless consumers of goods they do not want, but which are imposed on them through the philosophy of futility, in order to direct their attention to the consumption of unimportant things.

However, before making any *predictions about consumerism*, it will be necessary to look at *the reasons for the victory of consumerism* in past centuries, despite everything.

### Why consumerism triumphed?

Consumer consensus emerged after 1945. It is built on mass production and *balanced with high wages*, but is supported by *government demand management* and business manipulation of needs, through advertising. The urgent need for reconstruction and meeting material needs was delayed for a long time by the Depression and the war, which prevented any choice, but expanded production and consumption.

A political consensus quickly emerged around the expectation of 'full employment' and unlimited consumption. The American model of mass consumption was *an alternative to the social rigidity of European culture*, which still showed sharp differences between working-class and middle-class lifestyles. Pro-American politicians favored 'growth' rather than 'protest' over shares of the economic pie.

*The identification of freedom with consumer choice and democracy with mass access to goods* has become an ideal, if not a reality.

Despite criticism of consumerism as a threat to social stability and cultural values, consumption became the main *means of defining self and social relations* for many Europeans in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although thinkers and even politicians have fought against consumerism, no one has produced effective alternatives. The twentieth century showed that the pleasures of the crowd were not as self-destructive as had been assumed. Critics of consumer desires failed to recognize how goods faced new, psychological and social, needs. Goods and purchased experiences provided *ways to pass the time* throughout the year. This became a major role in developments (such as the commercialization of Christmas and holidays) that became an important part of European consumer culture after World War II. Consumer products helped identify stages in private life and communicate status, aspirations, and complaints to others, so consumption became much more *about reading and being*



*read* through the goods one drives, wears, and eats than the mere release of desires. Instead of creating a frustrated, aggressive crowd, mass consumption has produced *a relatively passive population*, quite content with the latest fashion, 'new and improved' gadgets.

Anthropologists *Douglas & Isherwood* (2002) showed how mass consumption allowed the fulfillment of even contradictory longings, the wearing of many roles and *endless experimentation*. Far from predicting the development of obsessions and addictions or a slide into confusion, modern Europeans, for the most part, reacted euphorically to the latest type of culture. Consumer society has become *a substitute for civil society*. The disappointing results of non-profit religious, political or simply voluntary leisure organizations are one illustration of this claim.

Before consumerism, in the first years of industrialization, *nationalism* functioned as a surrogate for traditional religion, and consumerism was initially on the same level as nationalism, as a modern '*civil religion*' (Vincenzo, 2018: 13). Consumerism satisfied the real *needs of personal identity and individual differentiation from the group*, in a society where primary groups have all but disappeared. The utopian idea of a culture of leisure outside the market could not satisfy these needs nearly as effectively as consumer culture. Because non-commercial holiday clubs (which emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century) dominated their members, they often excluded others, became factionalized, and were slow to adapt to change.

The collapse of European communism in 1989 is a good example of *the success of consumerism*. Despite its claims to produce full employment and meet all the basic needs of health, education, food and the like, the Marxist system of the 1970s and 1980s was unable to either increase productivity or satisfy a wider range of wants. The *lack of consumer incentives for hard work* created a society in slow motion, which therefore could never meet the demand for consumer goods. In the West, the simultaneous discipline and freedom embedded in the consumer economy were able to do both.

Despite all the aforementioned successes, consumerism, however, *has not succeeded in eliminating frustrations*. Through imitative spending, the poor and marginal population could become like the rich, until the elite embarked on new 'inventions' (fashion, etc.), creating a new social distance from the masses. When members of the lower classes achieved cars, the rich needed other houses. Frustrations were inevitable even when the majority enjoyed material security and participated in a consumer culture run by the wealthy.

### Challenges of contemporary consumerism

The historical, social and economic diversity of the development of European countries produced a slightly different level of consumerism in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Compared to the more mobile and market-oriented USA, *European ties to community and family* contrasted with consumerist tendencies. Cultural and historical differences have directed consumer desires in Western Europe in slightly different directions than in the USA.

In countries like Spain, relatively slower rates of economic development limited discretionary spending at least until the 1990s. *Political traditions, which restrict markets (such as banning weekly shopping)*, hinder the expansion of leisure consumption. Attempts in the 1990s to extend working hours in Germany and England, for example, were rejected by

social conservatives and unions.

Since the 1960s, European opponents of consumerism have rallied around *movements for environmental protection, non-commercial vacations*, due to shorter working hours, and consumer education. According to *Ronald Inglehart, a 'post-material' cohort* began to emerge in Europe in the 1960s. The gradual disappearance of those age groups that had been shaped by the economic insecurity of the Depression signaled a 'cultural shift' toward post-scarcity values. In the 1960s and 1970s, *the New Left* advocated post-materialist values, anticipating a political shift from issues of distribution, growth and security to issues of quality of life and issues of consumer rights. In particular, *the environmental movement* opposed the impact of uncontrolled consumption on land use (for example, for roads) and pollution of the ecosphere.

In the 1970s, New Leftists, associated with the labor movement, argued that the link between economic growth and jobs was no longer valid, because technological and business changes would no longer create enough jobs for full employment (as had been the case with previous economic upheavals). The computer eliminated both white- and blue-collar jobs, even as it increased productivity, and older technological advances, shifting jobs from the industrial sector to the service sector, are no longer applicable. A growing consumer economy will not produce enough jobs. For this group, the solution was to shorten working hours rather than increasing production and demand for goods. Still, others supported *the non-commercial use of leisure time, promoting alternatives to consumerism*. Surveys revealed that up to 39% of Britons took part in *sport* in 1977, and in 1980 there were around 36,000 football clubs and 50,000 other sports clubs. The number of sports clubs grew 3.6 times in France in the 1960s and 1970s. In the same period, *cultural clubs* increased dramatically from 600 to 4,116. In the mid-1980s, middle-class people enthusiastically joined various groups in order to emphasize their differences from others, but also their solidarity in these organizations, often doing so with militant opposition to commercialization, *protest against the profit motives of sellers and the passivity of buyers*.

However, despite these protests against consumerism, there seemed to be no systematic alternative to its value of unlimited material innovation, social and self-definition in and through commodities. While many Europeans question the long-term sustainability of a consumerist ethic for the environment and the seemingly corrosive effect of consumerism on social relations and political commitments, few seriously question the benefits of growth or have found ways to effectively articulate forms of postmaterialism. Few competent observers are currently considering consumer trends that are compatible with environmental sustainability, but those concerned about unrestrained consumerism face a difficult task in addressing the issue.

It is easy to make products and production processes a little greener, for example by creating biodegradable carpets, but *limiting the total volume of production and consumption* is much more difficult, as it requires people to give up their habitual desires. Such a change in consumer mentality would probably require a slowdown in the number of messages encouraging consumption, and perhaps even *a ban on advertising*, as well as *strict limits on consumer credits*. Such changes depend on passionate environmentalists and other advocates of slow growth winning multiple elections, which

cannot happen without a different attitude among citizens. In other words, in the eyes of critics, consumerism is built as a vicious circle. Changed opinion among scientists, engineers and other technically trained individuals may also be necessary to intervene in the consumer journey. Breaking out of the consumer cycle would involve billions of people over generations developing an interesting, less consumer lifestyle. This is probably the main challenge for civilization. However, the first step will probably require more people to start thinking about consumerism as an ethical, technological, economic and political issue to be addressed.

In the context of **predictions about consumerism**, it is impossible not to refer back to the masterful visions of *Aldous Huxley* (Aldous Huxley; 1896 - 1963) from the dystopian novel, in which he once predicted the consumerist future that we live in today, which turned out to be absolutely right. Namely, his dystopian novel, *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1998), was assessed as an attack on American mass culture and its pro-passivistic parties. What he brilliantly noticed in his visionary way is that in that 'brave new world', that is, a new social order, control over people is established by **imposing pleasure**, which is why there is a fear that the source of the potential destruction of humanity will be precisely that pleasure.

So, different acts that people indulged in for different reasons, but primarily for pleasure. And, precisely, this surrender to pleasures, the voluntary deprivation of one's own autonomy, collective memory and historical memory, leads to people **voluntarily renouncing their rights**, which belong to them as citizens, thus choosing the **identity of a consumer**, which is infantile compared to the **identity of a citizen**. This will gradually produce a state in which people will become creatures of a trivial television culture, by which the truth becomes invisible due to the hyperproduction of unimportant information, which will be accepted rather because of its enormous exposure and ability to distract, than what is significant. This will **block the analytical potential and ability to reason**, as well as the selection of information, and produce a general **state of passivity and egotism**.

In such a state of daily non-use of one's own potentials and abilities and the absence of a desire to expand one's horizons and strengthen cognitive reading skills, people will prefer to rely on different devices, in general (smart) technologies, which will perform different actions and even think for them. 'The brave new world is not so cruel and promotes hedonism, and instrumentalizes social control through dominant culture, consumerism and manipulation of the masses, whose function is the integration of the individual into society and the production of what Marcuse calls a one-dimensional society and a one-dimensional man' (Dujmović, 2011: 550). Given these forecasts, which have reliably proven to have come true over time, **is it and how is it possible to bring consumerism into a logical connection with the current strategies of the organization of society in the near future, what is the strategy of sustainable development? What are the perspectives of contemporary consumerism in general, and especially in the countries of post-socialist transformation?** Research has shown the following:

- a) although people, even nations, all over the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century desire more material possessions, the USA is leading the way because, despite the fact that it has only 4% of the world's population, it consumes approximately 25% of the world's resources;
- b) a huge number of people want to imitate the materialistic

way of life of Americans;

- c) considering that the global ecological excess in the XXI century is at least 20%, the current rate of resource consumption is unsustainable;
- d) as per capita resources decrease, the likelihood of resource wars increases;
- e) the difference in income between the very rich and the very poor has increased so dramatically that there is a likelihood of social unrest and even anarchy; and
- f) in the search for material goods, humanity reduces both the space and resources needed for the 30+ million life forms that make up the biosphere life system of the planet (Cairns, 2006: 25).

Therefore, judging by the current individualized and fragmented consumer practice and the enormous *obsession with consumption*, for which the socio-pathological term '**compulsive buying disorder**' has become established over time, because it is even more pronounced than was the case with unbridled and reckless shopping 1980s, then it can be assumed that the influence of consumerism will continue in the future, in accordance with McLuhan's forecasts, although under the necessary control of strategic decision-making in the direction of balanced consumption.

As for the countries of the post-socialist transformation, such as *Bosnia and Herzegovina*, they are currently and for the past few decades shaken by the consumerist **trend of uncontrolled and thoughtless purchases**, given the lack of experience of the same from the past, Yugoslav, period, that is, given the sudden transition from a shortage to a *phase abundance*. Namely, as Hromadžić (2008) points out, socialist countries were subordinated for decades to *the first period of consumer culture* (the period of satisfying basic needs and deficiencies), that is, to the regime of a centralized planned economy and ignoring consumer wishes. Although some elements of consumption culture were represented, especially in *the sphere of leisure (tourism, as an indicator of socialist welfare)*, there was predominantly a negative meaning of consumerism, which was attributed to it in view of its association with capitalism. Given the state of these countries, it is reasonable to expect an increase in theoretical reflections and research on consumption and consumerism, both from the perspective of macro factor analysis, i.e. issues of global social, economic and political processes and phenomena as well as from a microsociological perspective.

E. Fromm, in his famous book *The Revolution of Hope* (Fromm, 2010), published in 1968 in the United States of America, which was once at a crossroads, expressed the desire for a more **humane society** and the belief that a revolution in this direction is possible gradually, in order to overcome the social organization based on the total coordination and constant increase of work and control, which reduces man to a total consumer, with the main goal of *having more*, instead of *being and creating*.

Maximum production requires maximum consumption, hence the manipulation of human needs, not respecting the real human needs and authenticity of each individual. As a way out of such a situation, Fromm proposed, as the 3<sup>rd</sup> alternative, a change in consumer habits in the direction of **a universal basic income**, i.e. guaranteeing an annual income to each individual, with the aim of enabling normal consumption and eliminating the fear of unemployment and starvation, and improving the general quality and safety of life, by introducing more freedom in the self-determination



of each individual, i.e. consumer.

### Concluding Considerations

The subject of the research is consumerism, as a total social phenomenon, which affects both the material and spiritual level of people's existence in society. Although consumerism is a comprehensive term, it was most often negatively connoted in the direction of similar processes of destruction (of something and/or someone), in order to acquire a wide range of meanings over time, such as: consumer protection, capitalism, economic policy, culture of consumption, lifestyle (ideology) of shopping, obsessive and uncontrolled shopping, consumer movement, materialistic worldview, theory of economic progress of states and the like. The precise conceptual-categorical apparatus of sociology, however, distinguishes between a broader (total) and a narrower (particular) meaning, as an activity that transcends the economic sphere and covers other spheres of society, especially culture and activities that are most often politicized through various movements, parties and their practices.

The research problem refers to functions, power and future of consumerism, that is, the questions: What are the functions and power of consumerism? The main functions of consumerism are: the function of reproduction of instrumental-rational action (material dimension) and the function of communicative-rational action (symbolic dimension). Within the materialistic dimension, the following sub-functions are distinguished: the function of control, legitimation, initiation (mobilization), homogenization, integration and adaptation. Within the symbolic function there are the following sub-functions: function of identification, orientation, communication, learning and education, compensation, and emotional and prophetic function. All these functions and sub-functions contribute to the multiple power of consumerism and its coherence.

Why did consumerism triumph during the historical development of society? Consumerism won because it: expressed key ideas of freedom and democracy; enabled the expansion of control over personal life; enabled the balance of capitalism; improved people's quality of life, prevented natural disasters; enabled the accumulation of power of the controllers of the industrial and post-industrial (information) society; enabled the inclusion of broad social layers in the information society through the purchase of digital and generally electronic devices and because it enabled digital literacy.

What are the challenges of contemporary consumerism? These would be: European attachment to family and community in general; political restriction of market expansion (ban on Sunday shopping) on people's free time (leisure time); ecological movement for environmental protection; poverty; post-materialist values (religion); non-commercial use of free time (sports recreation, cultural clubs, etc.); protests against the profit motives of sellers and the passivity of buyers; limiting the volume of production and consumption; limiting advertising and consumer credit; compulsive buying disorder; voluntary renunciation of (civil) rights; choice of consumer identity; blockage of analytical potentials and the possibility of reasoning; a state of passivity and egotism; universal basic income.

The main hypothesis of the work, which was confirmed, was that there is a complementarity of the functions of consumerism, as well as the impact of consumerism on post-

socialist (post-scarcity) transformation societies and on sustainable development through universal basic income.

The scientific goals of the work have been realized, i.e. a description of consumerism and the process of its creation was made, and the functions of consumerism were classified (typology), with a functionalist explanation of the difference between them, with an emphasis on the integrative point of view of their complementarity. Anticipation of the future of consumerism, i.e. potential challenges, as well as experiential connections (scientific laws) between post-scarcity societies, in the process of post-socialist transformation, and uncontrolled shopping (compulsive buying syndrome, disorder), and between consumerism and universal basic income in order to reduce economic inequality, poverty, illiteracy, mental imbalances, addiction and crime, with the aim of moving towards sustainable development. The methods used are (descriptive and comparative) analysis, deduction, synthesis, induction, case studies, content analysis of concepts about consumerism and its functions based on a simple classification (material dimension, level of society, system – symbolic dimension, level of an individual, an actor) (Kuki & Markic, 2006: 217) and desk research.

The results of qualitative-quantitative research relate to knowledge about consumerism, its etymological, total and particular conceptual definition, its functions and their corresponding power, and about the future of consumerism from the perspective of the reasons for its past triumph, as well as real and potential challenges. These findings were obtained through secondary, mostly qualitative (in the form of words) data (Kothari, 2004; Dale, Wathan & Higgins, 2008) <sup>[31, 15]</sup>, with a few quantitative, statistical data collected during 'library research' (Kuba & Koking, 2004: 90) <sup>[32]</sup> that is, during studious work on bibliographic units from an abstracted sample.

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