Consumerism and the Quality of Life

Summary

High level of consumption, driven by marketing activities, the pleasure and joy of possession and the accumulation of material goods are often associated with prosperity, sense of happiness and fulfilment in life. On a broader scale, economic indicators related to production and consumption are used to define the well-being and quality of life in societies. Unfortunately, the phenomenon of consumerism entails negative social and individual consequences. It is worthwhile to consider whether striving to increase consumption, including artificial creation of demand through marketing activities, is indeed the right and necessary action to be taken in the quest for the adequate life quality level of the contemporary man.

The objective of this article is to try to answer the question whether high consumption level actually leads to an increase in the quality of life. The article is also a voice in an interdisciplinary debate which the today’s world needs to a great extent.

Key words: consumption, consumerism, quality of life, welfare, marketing.

JEL codes: I31, M30

Introduction

In the contemporary world, especially in highly developed countries, consumption of material goods, their acquisition, possession and accumulation are very strongly associated with high quality of life and regarded as the path leading to the fulfilment and happiness of modern men. The phenomenon of consumerism, “excessive consumption of goods and services unjustified by actual human needs and disregarding social, environmental and individual costs”, is being increasingly discussed (Mróz 2009, p. 16). So-understood consumerism does not stem from in the actual human needs, but the apparent needs related to the desire to achieve a higher social status, prestige, or power.

Consumerism – background

Consumption is identified with lifestyle, spending leisure time, a way to overcome boredom and find fulfilment. It should be emphasized that consumption in developed countries has long ago ceased to exclusively satisfy the basic needs of consumers. However, its growth is constantly being stimulated, inter alia, by the marketing activities of profit-oriented enterprises. At present, ever higher levels of consumption, the desire and willingness of consum-
ers to buy new products, have also become prerequisite for economic growth and efficient functioning of the economy (Mróz 2013). It can be thus concluded that one of the sources of consumerism is the creation by businesses of ever new needs and the development and sale of products that meet those needs. Through marketing efforts, consumers often find out what products they need and should possess to make their lives better and more fulfilling. Consequently, we can observe the buyers’ pursuit of increasingly new things intended to make them happier (Mysona-Byrska 2015).

From the consumers’ perspective, growing consumption results from the illusion that it can provide them with a generally understood well-being and happiness. In some sense, it is meant to compensate for the fast pace of life, hard work, and the hardships and stresses of everyday life. Therefore, it appears that consumerism has now become a way of achieving happiness (Mróz 2013, p. 58). Hence, there emerges the question what the quality of life and well-being, so desirable by modern man, are and whether they can be achieved through consumption?

The concept of the quality of life

Many definitions relating to life quality categories can be found in the subject’s literature. The concept is very diverse, it can be approached from broader or narrower, quantitative or qualitative perspective, depending on the researcher’s assumed objective (Sompolska-Rzechuła 2013). It can be argued that “the quality of life is the degree of satisfaction of man (society) with his existence as a whole. It is then a specific sum of individual or collective sensation of living conditions and their evaluation at the same time” (Bywalec 1991 in: Sompolska-Rzechuła 2013). According to some authors, the quality of life, in addition to consumption, also includes other aspects such as health, education (access, quality), the condition of the environment, accessibility to social services, infrastructure, public safety, active citizenship, quality and efficiency of public institutions and offices (Mróz 2013, p. 54). Some researchers, however, emphasize that the quality of life should be determined mainly by means of subjective indicators and is primarily related to the subjective assessment of an individual person (Sompolska-Rzechuła 2013). This seems very reasonable, for instance in the context of the above definition, according to which each person should individually determine the degree of satisfaction with his or her existence. Such approach is further reflected in the indicators described herein below.

Until the second half of the twentieth century, the topic of happiness and well-being was exclusively dealt with by philosophers. It was not until the 1960s that psychologists and sociologists studying human welfare and the quality of life became interested in these concepts. Interdisciplinary research in economics and psychology, concerning mutual relationships between wealth and happiness also led to remarkably interesting findings (Frey, Stutzer 2002; Myers 2000; Czapiński 2012).

Basing on his own research, Campbell - the precursor of studies on the quality of life - drew the conclusion that there is no clear relationship between objective parameters of the
quality of life and the level of satisfaction with it (Campbell 1976). Similar conclusions were also reached by other researchers. Findings of their studies are presented hereinafter.

Negative effects of consumerism

The quest for ever higher levels of production and consumption was, by definition, supposed to bring prosperity and high quality of life for mankind. However, the “paradox of the consumer society” is often mentioned as involving a feeling of failure, despite the increasing amount of material goods, and even spiritual degradation of man caused by dependence on material goods. There also appears a feeling of discomfort and being overwhelmed by the huge amount of products and information, resulting from the pressure to devote more and more time and effort to find the right product meeting the buyer’s requirements (Mróz 2013). The negative effects of consumerism also include the widespread lifestyle-related diseases (obesity, diabetes, heart diseases, cancer, depression, anxiety, etc.), caused by stress and chronic fatigue (Pal 2016). Over-exploitation of natural resources leading to environmental degradation at the level of 60% over the past 50 years, is of grave importance as well (Wasilik 2014).

Due to numerous negative effects of consumerism, the “dark side of the American dream” is being discussed. Among other things, negative effects also include inflation, unemployment and income inequalities (Czapiński 2012). It is also worth noting that excessive consumption in developed countries is more or less at the expense of poorer countries, being at a lower level of economic development, frail in economic and political terms (Mróz 2013, p. 54). Such rising inequalities are the underlying cause of growing discontent in societies around the world.

The topic of consumerism and its effects has been debated by politicians, international organizations and researchers. One of the noteworthy scientific publications is M. Sandel’s book, whose main assumption is that the market “corrupts, destroys, eliminates non-market values which are worth being protected.” Nowadays, market transactions no longer relate exclusively to material goods, but are gradually beginning to rule our entire lives. Sandel rightly points out that it is time to ask ourselves a question whether we want to live that way. According to Sandel, expansion of markets and market values onto the spheres of life where they should not be present at all, gave rise to financial crises. Greed and lack of responsibility are also to blame for the situation (Sandel 2013, p. 18). So to paraphrase Sandel’s conclusions, a question can be asked whether we can and should continue to live that way and where will this path lead us, if we do not turn back?

Measuring welfare and quality of life

In the context of the pursuit of the appropriate life quality level of societies, their welfare and happiness, the question arises how to measure this phenomenon and what indicators are the most adequate ones.
Still, the most commonly used indicator is the Gross Domestic Product. However, the observations of countries which are systematically getting richer have led to the conclusion that the sense of satisfaction and happiness of its citizens do not necessarily increase with the growth of prosperity and the GDP ratio. The popularity and importance of GDP caused that its limitations are often forgotten about. Simon Kuznets, who created GDP indicator in the late 30s, never expected it to be used to measure human well-being. It represents the physical production of goods and services, but as Robert Kennedy said in 1968, GDP *measures everything except that which makes life worthwhile* (what makes life worthwhile) (Czapiński 2012). It was considered that GDP is not an adequate measure of well-being and the quality of life. Consequently, alternatives indicators have been sought to more appropriately reflect the level of well-being. The advocates of this approach, i.e. the need to measure the happiness of citizens of individual countries, apart from measuring the richness of the economy, are economists dealing with the happiness economics, a concept the underlying presumption of which is departure from consumption as the basis of human happiness (Frey 2008; Włodarczyk 2014).

The result of the search for new measures is the creation of a number of other indicators. In 1972, the Kingdom of Bhutan was the first in the world to officially abandon the GDP, only to replace it with the Gross National Happiness indicator measuring well-being rather than consumption.

In 1990, the United Nations agency proposed a social development index - Human Development Index HDI. It was created by the Nobel Prize laureate Amartya Sen and Mahbub ul Haq. It measures the level of health, education and living standards, and is currently one of the key indicators, taken into account by decision-makers.

In 2012, the first ranking of countries in terms of happiness was published. It is based on the World Happiness Index developed by Gallup World Poll and includes factors such as the actual GDP per capita, projected life expectancy in health, access to medical care, employment security, family relationships, and the level of corruption or respect for individual liberties. Since then, five countries in the world - Bhutan, Ecuador, Scotland, United Arab Emirates and Venezuela - established ministries fostering happiness as an important social policy goal.

One of the basic questions, for which the answer is being sought (this article including) is the relationship between high levels of consumption and wealth vs. quality of life and the generally conceived well-being. For the first time this issue was studied in 1974 by Richard Easterlin who, based on his research, discovered that there was no clear link between happiness and material well-being. This lack of dependence between well-being and wealth was called the Easterlin’s paradox (Easterlin 1974). Easterlin found that while wealthier citizens of the country are happier than poorer ones, in the long term wealth growth is not associated

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1 Other alternative indicators proposed to replace the GDP include, *inter alia*: National Happiness Index, Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare – ISEW, or Sustainable Net Benefit Index – SNBI (Włodarczyk 2014); http://worldhappiness.report/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/03/HR-V1_web.pdf [access:17.03.2017].
with increased levels of happiness. The results of Easterlin’s primary research were later repeatedly confirmed both by himself and other researchers².

The research has also shown that an increase in the quality of life of the poor to the level allowing to meet basic needs leads to a similar sense of happiness in the poor and the rich, and further growth in wealth does not boost happiness (Pink 2015). Thus, the studies of the relationship between well-being vs. prosperity and consumption show the absence of close links. In developed countries, where the economic level has exceeded a certain indicated minimum value, allowing for a decent life, the continuous pursuit of GDP growth does not lead to an increase in well-being³. The discovery of absence of close links between wealth and happiness is considered to be one of the most unexpected findings in economics (Sompolska-Rzechula 2013).

Conclusions

The presented research results show that economic growth and high-volume consumption do not directly lead to increased satisfaction and well-being. Therefore, the question of striving for blind pursuit of GDP growth, enhanced consumption, possession and aggregation of material assets is emerging. Furthermore, the postulates of sustainable consumption - frugal, moderate, responsible (Drapińska 2015), the purpose of which should be simply a dignified life, are becoming significant. Regrettably, wealth often does not go hand in hand with dignity, especially if our wealth is created at the expense of other people (e.g. production and resource exploitation in underdeveloped countries). It’s worth noticing that the life quality of modern man should not be limited to the material sphere but should also emphasise spiritual and social needs (Sompolska-Rzechula 2013).

Aristotle considered moderation and self-limitation as the greatest virtue of man (Tatarkiewicz 1988 in: Mróz 2013, p. 65). Studies indicate that the happiest people are those who have minimal material needs and do not have exaggerated demands. The example of the Danes, who occupy the top place in the ranking of the happiest people in the world, and whose secret of well-being lies in their modest demands, confirm this theory.

It seems that today the world is in great need of an anti-consumerist revolution. This is why the book by R. Skidelsky, E. Skidelsky „How much is enough? Money and good life” in which the authors argue the outcome of economic development should be the improved quality of life rather than accumulating material goods, has become a worldwide bestseller. (Skidelsky, Skidelsky 2012). Moreover, Sandel recommends to curb the greed, place greater emphasis on honesty and rethink the moral constraints of the market (Sandel 2013, p. 19). Similarly, Jeffrey Sachs, one of the authors of the UN report, highlights that the situation in which individual countries strive for economic development has a very negative impact on the society and the environment. In his opinion in recent years there has been many exam-

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² Easterlin’s assumption was questioned by many scholars (most strongly by Stevenson and Wolfers, 2008). It seems relevant only in relation to wealthy countries. In developing and poor countries, the happiness of citizens is following the economic growth measured by GDP (Czapiński 2012).

ples of countries which achieved economic growth at the expense of significantly deepening social inequalities, social exclusion and severe environmental damage⁴.

It appears that the route of material progress is in some sense inevitable, however it should definitely differ from the hitherto one. First and foremost, those indicators that complement, or even diverge from, the economic growth should be taken into account (World Bank, 2003 in: Czapiński 2012).

Implementing the idea of sustainable consumption is extremely difficult, but the need to change the patterns of modern consumption seems obvious. Thus, the question remains how to put these right ideas and proposals into practice.

One strategy is to appeal to the consumers’ sense of responsibility for our planet, and to promote new styles of life and consumption (sustainable life style). Helping visualise advantages individual consumers would gain through implementing a change in consumer awareness and attitudes seems to be an effective appeal. It is equally important to educate the public by indicating that quality of life cannot be perceived solely through the prism of consumption, and an increase in consumption of material goods effects the feeling of happiness in superficial terms only (Wasilik 2014). Such education may take the form of projects and events co-organized by governmental institutions, NGOs, local governments, universities or schools (Mróz 2013, p. 178).

Particular attention should be drawn to marketing efforts of enterprises, which should focus not only on economic goals, but also take social and environmental areas into account. A sustainable approach to marketing should be adopted, with pursuit of sustainable consumption recognised as the basis for environmental protection, reducing the exploitation of natural resources and rational use thereof. In line with modern marketing, enterprises should assume responsibility for the undertaken activity, and adequately care for the effects of such activity and its impact on the overall well-being of both individuals and societies (Drapińska 2015).

Conducting the right policy, enactment of legal rules and regulations which protect consumers against unfair marketing practices, nurturing and developing business ethics environment, but also building awareness, involvement in interdisciplinary debates engaging economists and management and marketing professionals alike, seem vital elements in the formation of sustainable consumption societies in a global scale.

**Bibliography**


⁴ http://worldhappiness.report/ [access: 17.03.2017].
Zjawisko konsumpcjonizmu a poziom jakości życia

Streszczenie

Wysoki poziom konsumpcji, napędzany działaniami marketingowymi przedsiębiorstw, czerpanie przyjemności i radości z posiadania oraz gromadzenia dóbr materialnych często kojarzony jest z dobrobytem, poczuciem szczęścia i spełnieniem. Również w szerszej skali wskaźniki ekonomiczne związane z produkcją i konsumpcją służą do określania szeroko rozumianego dobrostanu i jakości społeczeństw. Niestety, zjawisko konsumpcjonizmu niesie ze sobą negatywne skutki społeczne i indywidualne. Warto więc zastanowić się, czy dążenie do wzrostu konsumpcji, w tym sztuczne kreowanie popytu przez działania marketingowe, jest rzeczywiście działaniem słusznym i koniecznym na drodze do spełnienia i osiągnięcia odpowiedniego poziomu jakości życia współczesnego człowieka.

Celem artykułu jest próba odpowiedzi na pytanie, czy wysoki poziom konsumpcji rzeczywiście prowadzi do wzrostu poziomu jakości życia. Artykuł jest
również głosem w interdyscyplinarnej dyskusji, której podejmowanie jest konieczne w dzisiejszym świecie.

Słowa kluczowe: konsumpcja, konsumpcjonizm, jakość życia, dobrobyt, marketing.

Kody JEL: M30, I31

Явление потребительства и уровень качества жизни

Резюме

Высокий уровень потребления, стимулируемый маркетинговыми действиями предприятий, получение приятности и радости от обладания и накопления материальных благ часто ассоциируется с благополучием, чувством счастья и свершения. Также в более широком масштабе экономические показатели, связанные с производством и потреблением, служат определению благосостояния и качества жизни обществ. Увы, явление потребительства несет с собой негативные социальные и индивидуальные последствия. Следовательно, стоит подумать, является ли стремление к росту потребления, в том числе искусственное формирование спроса маркетинговыми действиями, правильным и необходимым действием по пути к свершению и достижению соответствующего уровня качества жизни современного человека.

Цель статьи — попытаться ответить на вопрос, действительно ли высокий уровень потребления ведет к повышению качества жизни. Статья — это тоже голос в интердисциплинарной дискуссии, приступление к которой необходимо в современном мире.

Ключевые слова: потребление, потребительство, качество жизни, благополучие, маркетинг.

Коды JEL: M30, I31