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CONSUMPTION PATTERNS AND MACROMARKETING  
A Radical Perspective

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ABSTRACT (within 250 words).

... In studying the choices for consumption, marketing scholars have been almost totally equipped with a very narrow spectrum of choice, viz. brand choice. This paper discusses the nature of consumption patterns and how social choices leading to particular types of consumption patterns are made. It is argued that the dominant consumption pattern in capitalist societies consists of private consumption, at an individual level, and in a passive way. It is further argued that such a consumption pattern is an inevitable outcome of the skewed distribution of power and control of resources and that it continues <sup>under the predicament of power and poor consumers</sup>

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CONSUMPTION PATTERNS AND MACROMARKETING  
A Radical Perspective

By  
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Introduction

Patterns of consumption in a society are shaped by choices made at the levels of production (what to produce<sup>1</sup>), distribution (how to allocate the products within society), information dissemination (how is the existence of products going to be communicated), and pricing (at what cost will the exchange take place). In studying these choices, that is, choices for consumption, marketing scholars have been almost totally occupied with a very narrow spectrum of choice, viz., brand choice. For example, in the 1964-74 period, research involving consumer choice published in the Journal of Marketing Research has been almost totally on brand choice, with a small number of articles dealing with product choices, and none with choice among consumption patterns. The same is true regarding the applications of new concepts and formulations to marketing phenomena. Almost all new concepts (such as, attitude theory, multi-dimensional scaling, etc.) have been applied to brand choice. Why this is so can probably be best explained by the historical development of the marketing discipline.<sup>2</sup>

For the most part, the term "consumption pattern" has been used colloquially and informally. However, in the economic literature, a formal interpretation has been given to the term. In this literature, consumption patterns refer to the allocation of an economic consumption unit's (a person's, household's, geographical region's) budget among different need categories such as food, housing, etc. (Brown and Deaton, 1972; Eklund and Cunningham, 1972; Greytak, 1975). Although the interpretation of the term in the economic literature captures some aspects of the concept of a consumption pattern, it leaves much undefined for the purpose of analysing the dynamics of consumption in a society. Also, the term "pattern" requires a definition which indicates a meaningful configuration of certain phenomena (such as, ideas, objects, acts, etc.)<sup>3</sup>. Is it the same pattern of consumption that we confront for example, when two persons allocate their budgets similarly among need categories (in terms of percentages), but one uses a car for

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A question may arise as to whether products of different technological processes represent different patterns of consumption. They may, in the case a technology causes a change along one of the above dimensions in comparison with other technologies. However, this is not necessarily the case with all new technologies. For example, a technology which has attracted considerable interest as a result of the energy crisis, viz., the advancement of the electric car as an alternative to the internal combustion engine, does not bring a change in the pattern of consumption as it creates no movement along the dimensions outlined earlier.

An understanding of consumption patterns, their formation, transformation, and diffusion will contribute in several ways to the understanding of consumption behaviour and certain social processes in general. First of all, consumption pattern, as defined above, is a broad concept which indicates not only buying behaviour or choices among brands and products, but also the life processes as they are affected by these choices through defining the kinds of relationships man becomes involved in during the act of consumption. Adherence (or conformity) to a certain consumption pattern then indicates the future choices, because commodities representing a pattern in different need categories have structural relationships among them. An interesting phenomenon which can be studied in case consumption patterns are made the focus of research is that individual consumers who have different cultural backgrounds, are from different socioeconomic strata, have different demographic characteristics, and who exhibit different buying behaviours and attitudes toward marketing practices and institutions can and do conform to the same patterns of consumption. There appear to be certain processes and mechanisms in society which promote uniformity in consumption patterns of consumers.<sup>5</sup>

Still another contribution of studying consumption patterns is what it will bring the understanding regarding consumption choices to a completely different level than what is studied in brand choice. As was mentioned earlier in the paper, when one moves from brand choice (micro) to choices among consumption patterns (macro), the type of choice involved moves from individual choice to social choice. Let us elaborate this point in a simple way. For an individual consumer, the choice between buying one versus another brand of car is quite free and independent, subject to some degree of reference group and promotional influence. Especially when the brands have similar prices, much is left to the individual's own liking. This may be one reason why the stochastic models of brand choice work just as well as any other brand choice model (Bass, 1974; Hurniter, 1973). Now let us consider the same individual making a choice between buying and not buying a car (a product which is a major representative of the dominant consumption pattern in the U.S.). Here we see a much more restricted choice. Any individual who wants to participate in the U.S. society will have to have a car. This is because of the way transportation, shopping, recreation, housing, etc. systems are structured. That is, a choice has been made at the societal level in the construction of these systems which require private cars as an imperative in order to have the mobility necessary for total participation and integration. Why, for example, have highways developed at a great pace, while railroads and public transportation have lagged behind? How are such decisions made within a society? Once the economy

percentage of car ownership for those who live much below the poverty level.<sup>6</sup> This illustration indicates that the freedom of brand choice does not imply the freedom to choose between consumption patterns. In fact the problem of the choice (or formation) of consumption patterns necessitates analysis at the sociopolitical level rather than the microeconomic level.

### The Emerging Consumption Pattern

A close look at consumption in the U.S. and other advanced Western economies shows that the dominant consumption pattern is characterized by the private, individual and passive extremities of the dimensions outlined earlier and that there still is a growing tendency in this direction. A diffusion of the same pattern to the affluent sectors of the underdeveloped countries is also observable. Such growth and uniformity in its acceptance is another evidence, along with the growth of structures and institutions which accommodate and promote the dominant consumption pattern, for the social character of the choices made among consumption patterns.

Traditionally, the problem of social choice has been in the domain of a branch of mathematical economics called social choice theory. The best known and a classic work of social choice theory is Kenneth Arrow's monograph Social Choice and Individual Values (1963). The problem that social choice theorists focus on is the problem of aggregating n given individual preference patterns into a social preference pattern. While this type of research has a mathematical elegance and some limited applicability in developing conceptually efficient voting rules, it is unable to explain the real structures and processes which underlie a social preference pattern.

There are indications from different social and behavioural sciences that in the choice made within an organised whole (whether a group, an organisation, a distribution channel, or a society) certain structures and processes play an important role, and that decisions are not mere aggregations of individual want. Economics has provided us with the concept of buying power, and thereby, different Pareto optima, sociology with the concept of social classes or strata, and political science with the concept of power structure. We have also become cognizant of the determination power of certain social institutions and economic relationships, above and beyond the individuals who constitute them. Along these lines, Galbraith has quite successfully argued against the classical and neo-classical economists' contention that what is produced in a society is the result of an aggregation of individual consumers' demand. Both in his "Management of Specific Demand" (1971), and "Theory of Social Balance" (1969), he pointed out the fact that the relationship may well be the reverse. That is, the decision as to what is produced in the society may substantially determine the demand for these products. In another article (1973) Galbraith has argued that economists who adhere to the classical assumption of homo-economicus by eliding the problem of power, and thereby making economics a nonpolitical subject, lose their contact with the real world. In case the marketing scholar adheres to the same assumptions of classical economics, he is also in danger of detaching himself from reality.

In the case of formation of consumption patterns the issue of power appears in at least two contexts. One is the buying power differentials among members of society. Those who are in high income classes can more effectively express their preferences and needs in the market place than those who are in low income classes. Also, innovations are controlled by the potential demands of high income consumers as they are the ones who can spare a segment of their disposable incomes for new commodities representative of new consumption patterns. Those in other income classes are usually just catching up with and maintaining the contemporary dominant pattern of consumption. It is an observed fact that commodities representing emerging patterns are first adopted by the high income classes (Tucker, 1964). Tucker explains this fact by stating that until recently only high income classes had the money to spend on these commodities, but this explanation is easily repudiated by the fact that today a substantial percentage of households with incomes below poverty standards conform to the consumption pattern first adopted by high income classes.

The second and may be the more important power structure issue in the emergence of consumption patterns is the differential control members of society have over the allocation of resources. Those who control this allocation to a large degree through their ownership and management relations with the big corporations that control the resources (Baran and Sweezy, 1966) are highly concentrated in the high income classes (Sweezy, 1973; Bartlett, 1973; Miliband, 1973; Zeitlin, 1974). Therefore, these consumers not only indirectly determine resource allocation through their buying power in the market, but also directly through their control of the resources. And their relations to the productive forces influence their preferences for alternatives that can satisfy needs developed through their contact with the social system - including institutions, structures, etc., in the society - and their position in it. In capitalist economies, as capital accumulation becomes the purpose, and profit the means (Jorgenson, 1967; Lowellen, 1971), preferences of the powerful consumers are biased towards patterns of consumption that have a potential of maximizing profits. By their position in the social structure, they are also biased towards patterns that create and amplify individual differences (Veblen, 1899). Such seems to be the emergence of today's individual, capital intensive dominant consumption pattern which removes, as much as technology permits, all productive consumption activities from the home and family environments into the capitalist production system, because this increases capital accumulation (Braverman, 1974).

The diffusion of the consumption patterns of the powerful to the powerless consumers can be explained by the processes of socialisation and emulation. In each process the presence of a definite power relationship, where the powerful influence the cognitive processes of the powerless, and thereby, their perceptions of objective reality, is indispensable (Garnier, 1973; Rafky, 1973; Freire, 1970). In socialization, the socializing agent can be an institution of the society as well as a person. An example of how the structure of the economy can influence the need perceptions of a consumption unit was given earlier for the automobile. In an economically and socially well integrated society, characterized by socioeconomic structures that make certain patterns advantageous



### Conclusion

Indeed, the issue of patterns of consumption is an important one, considering its impact on an individual's life. But, although consumption patterns are a major component of a consumer's life process as a whole, their formation and transformation have not come to be an area of study in marketing. Brand choice, although an important process from the point of view of the producers and distributors of brands, does not constitute as significant an impact on the lives of the consumers as choice among patterns of consumption.

Propositions developed in this paper along the lines of power structure, socialization, and emulation concepts are contrary to propositions drawn on the basis of classical economics assumptions. Individuality, and independent, free, rational choice assumptions based upon classical economics framework are mostly translated and transferred into the marketing discipline. But when patterns of consumption are considered, the ideals of the capitalist system, that is, individualism and free choice, seem to be myths; at least for the majority of the people. Attempts are made to substitute and compensate for what is lost of these ideals in the area of choice among consumption patterns by what seems to be an abundance of choice among brands and products that represent the same consumption pattern. But it is questionable whether what is lost at a grand level can be compensated by abundance at a petty level.

The propositions developed are within a macromarketing framework. Rather than an investigation of what happens at the level of an individual unit within the system, they are directed at understanding a societal phenomenon, namely, the formation and diffusion of consumption patterns in society, and the influence of these processes on the consumption units. Macromarketing can be defined as the study of economic, political and social structures and processes which tend to equate demand and supply in a society. In this endeavour, concepts can be borrowed from other social sciences and used in the explanations of these macro phenomena. The marketing discipline, as it stands today, has a technological-managerial orientation which promotes interest in the creation of different brands and images to promote the demand for the dominant consumption pattern (Kotler, 1973), rather than understanding needs. This is not without an historical cause. The dependencies between the mode of capitalist production and the patterns of consumption are such that, limitations of choice among consumption patterns, and at the same time, an enrichment of choice among brands and among other differentiations in products within the same pattern of consumption increases the profitability of the capitalist mass production technology. And as long as marketing continues in its technological-managerial orientation, not studying the processes of wider participation in the social choices made for consumption, it will be the promoter of an ideology which tends to perpetuate the present power structure, and which deepens the predicament of the powerless, disadvantaged and poor consumers.

Footnotes

1. Here, product is understood as any commodity (material and nonmaterial) for which there is exchange.
2. This historical development leading to the almost exclusive interest in brand choice behaviour is important in understanding the discipline of marketing, and will be given an analytical treatment in another paper.
3. See the definition of a pattern in the Dictionary of Social Science by Zaidrozy (1959).
4. The consumption item, like the product, defines any commodity for which there is exchange.
5. As an evidence of conforming consumption patterns, consider the following statistics relating to the U.S.: Percent of households owning cars: 80%; television sets: 95.3%; washing machine: 71.3%; refrigerators: 83.3%. Source: Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports. Consumer Buying Indicators Series P-65, no.44 (February 1973).
6. The percentage of car ownership for households which earned \$3000 or less a year was 40.6% in July 1971. Source: same as in footnote 5.

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