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INCONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION: A DEPARTURE FROM MATERIALISM OR ITS NEW MANIFESTATION?

In the paper the authors describe the phenomenon of inconspicuous consumption, including the consumer behaviors characteristic of it and the socioeconomic processes underlying it. The authors analyzed the manifestations of inconspicuous consumption from the perspective of three conceptions of materialism: Belk's, Richins and Dawson's, and Kasser and Ryan's. They identified the elements linking inconspicuous consumption with specific aspects of materialism as well as the points of difference between these two phenomena.

Keywords: inconspicuous consumption; materialism; culture of consumption; aspirational class.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, there have been many analyses concerning the consumer society and its impact on various domains of human life. The construct that directly reflects the values promoted in the consumer culture characteristic of this kind of society is materialism (Górnik-Durose & Janiec, 2010). Understood as an individual trait, it manifests itself in the values cherished (Richins & Dawson,

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1992), in the significance the consumer attaches to possession (Belk, 1985), or in the pursuit of extrinsic life goals, such as money, fame, and image (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). However, there appear publications suggesting the occurrence of new sociocultural phenomena which it is impossible to describe by referring only to the existing perspectives and theories. These analyses, addressing the issues of the role of material goods and their consumption as means communicating social and class status, suggest that significant changes have taken place over the last ten to twenty years. Sociologists and consumer behavior researchers highlight transformations in the identification and role of traditionally understood luxury goods; they also signal the emergence of new consumption patterns (Bylok, 2016; Scott & Weaver, 2018). One of the terms used to refer to these phenomena is inconspicuous consumption (Berger & Ward, 2010; Currid-Halkett, 2017; Eckhardt, Belk, & Wilson, 2015). As opposed to conspicuous consumption, defined by Thorstein Veblen (1899) as spending money on luxury goods and services in a conspicuous way in order to present one's high socioeconomic status – this type of consumption takes more diverse forms and proceeds much more noticeably. Its usually named characteristic features include giving up products with a distinct brand indication in favor of more subtle signals, spending more money on health, education, personal growth, and leisure rather than on conventional status goods (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Eckhardt et al., 2015).

Consumer behaviors associated with inconspicuous consumption are regarded as characteristic of a new social category, referred to as the aspirational class. According to Currid-Halkett (2017), however, this class is defined not only by consumer choices but, above all, by cultural capital. According to that author, behaviors in the domain of consumption are aimed at the manifestation of one's social and ecological awareness and do not always involve purchasing expensive luxury goods. The representatives of this social class – educated, well off, proecological, attaching great importance to knowledge acquisition, and aware of the ways in which the goods they buy are produced – exhibit consumer habits that may at first glance appear to be contrary to materialism. Yet, there are arguments that inconspicuousness is a new form of conspicuous manifestation of one's status and class identity – “Inconspicuousness is the new conspicuousness” (Eckhardt et al., 2015, p. 812), which in turn brings the construct discussed closer to the materialism variable (Eastman, Fredenberger, Campbell, & Calvert, 1997). It therefore seems there are good reasons to analyze the inconspicuous consumption phenomena in relation to selected conceptions of materialism, to identify the elements linking the two constructs, and to specify the differentiating points.

It should also be mentioned that although the inconspicuous consumption phenomenon has been described based on observations concerning the spendings of inhabitants of big cities in the United States (Currid-Halkett, 2017), its manifestations can be seen also in Polish society (Bylok, 2016; Jasiulewicz, 2015; Szul, 2012).

WHAT IS INCONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION?

Inconspicuous consumption is sometimes defined as purchasing and using subtly branded products that are ignored by the majority of observers but facilitate interaction with those who have the required cultural capital to decode these signals (Berger & Ward, 2010; Eckhardt et al., 2015). In principle, it takes two forms: the first one is *cost-of-information consumption*: purchasing and using goods that do not require considerable financial outlays (e.g., nail polish of a particular color, a T-shirt made of ecological cotton) or gaining specific knowledge in the field of broadly defined culture; the second one is *cost-prohibitive inconspicuous consumption*: extremely high expenditures on health care, education, or child care (Currid-Halkett, 2017). What these two forms have in common is the fact that they are not noticeable at first glance to an external observer and that they contribute to the development and enhancement of identity in members of the new social elite.

The emergence of inconspicuous consumption is associated with a number of socioeconomic factors. The first one of them is the fact that many material goods have become widely available. Luxury goods, formerly reserved for individuals with very high financial status, began to be available to the masses. More and more people can afford relatively inexpensive articles, such as Dior glasses or Louis Vuitton wallets; you can drive a luxury car by renting it (Eckhardt et al., 2015). This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as the democratization of luxury or as luxury for the masses (Danziger, 2005; Thomas, 2007). Conspicuous, visible consumption of luxury goods has ceased to be a marker of class identity (Hemetsberger, von Wallpach, & Bauer, 2012). The next factor stems from changes in the global economy, associated with the increasing importance of knowledge, skills, and intellectual work (*meritocracy*) and with the almost unlimited upward mobility opportunities. Thanks to the acquired knowledge and hard work, individuals have the possibility of social advance, which constitutes the dominant ethos of the aspirational class. Those who earn much work hard in order to maintain their financial status, which makes free time the most valuable

resource for them. Therefore, paradoxically, they devote the money they earn to gain as much of that time and to use it optimally, paying for child care, house-keeping services, or luxury holidays (Currid-Halkett, 2017).

Inconspicuous consumption is also linked with a different phenomenon: the subtle signals sent out when using goods that, at first glance, seem not to have anything to do with luxury can be received and correctly interpreted only by other representatives of the new elite. Status communication thus takes place within the social stratum identified as one's own and is not targeted at people of clearly lower status, particularly when advantage over lower-status groups is considerably large and taken for granted (Daloz, 2013). A manifestation of this kind of inconspicuous consumption can be the choice of inconspicuous brands – using subtle design-based signals. Well-off consumers who do not want to manifest their status by means of visible luxury products are willing to pay more for those that are inconspicuous, invisible to other, uninitiated members of society (Han, Nunes, & Dreze, 2010).

Inconspicuous consumption manifests itself also in matters of diet – “indeed, exotic or authentic food has become a legitimated signal of cultural capital for the aspirational class – and one that is shared across the economic gradients” (Currid-Halkett, 2017, p. 54). Although choosing healthy food from ecological farming, prepared with utmost care, produced in small craft workshops, does not require extraordinary financial outlays, it does give a sense of well-invested money and performs its function as a status marker: “Kale salad may not seem as overtly snobby as the opera, but it's still a means of preserving class lines, albeit more subtly” (Currid-Halkett, 2017, p. 55).

Being a group engaging in behaviors identified as inconspicuous consumption, members of the aspirational class attach great importance to education, self-improvement, or updating their knowledge. What is important, however, is pointing to the right kind of sources of the above, appropriate to the social status. This kind of approach to the development of one's cultural capital sometimes takes a superficial form:

Krugman's actual insights are less important than recognizing that reading Krugman is important. Reading the *New York Times* is a part of the aspirational class shared language, and citing Krugman (and knowing he's a Nobel Prize winner) at a dinner party is a significant part of fitting in with this group. The awareness of Krugman and the *New York Times*, not Krugman's thoughts in and of themselves (with all due respect), demonstrates cultural capital (Currid-Halkett, 2017, p. 52).

The above selected examples make it possible to conclude that inconspicuous consumption, which revolves around the display of cultural capital, plays an

important role in building and manifesting identity. It allows a person to consider himself or herself a better informed citizen and a healthier environment-friendly consumer. These goals seem to promote the pursuit of a new set of values, which still serve the purpose of reasserting the person's class status, though in a more subtle and less noticeable way. Thus, inconspicuous consumption appears to consist in sending out signals that will be received by other representatives of the sender's social class (rather than by everyone, as in the case of conspicuous consumption); it consists in conspicuously not consuming certain goods – “not owning these ubiquitous brands as a kind of mutated conspicuousness: standing out by not owning a brand” (Eckhardt et al., 2015, p. 814). It seems, however, that representatives of this group of consumers are still largely “status seekers – people who are continually straining to surround themselves with visible evidence of the superior rank they are claiming” (Packard, 1959, p. 5).

INCONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION AND SELECTED CONCEPTIONS OF MATERIALISM

The findings concerning inconspicuous consumption suggest that it is a form of distancing oneself from traditional material goods, since they have ceased to be an effective social status marker and an effective channel of cultural capital communication (Currid-Halkett, 2017). However, the extent to which consumption in the aspirational class reflects practices characteristic of materialism depends, among other things, on which conception of materialism we adopt – materialism is not a homogeneous construct, and perspectives differ in terms of what components of materialism they include (Górnik-Durose, 2002).

The first significant perspective on materialism is Belk's conception, in which materialism is treated as the importance that an individual attaches to the things he or she possesses. Being an individual's personality characteristic, materialism – according to Belk – manifests itself in the form of three reactions occurring in the self – material goods – other people interaction: possessiveness, nongenerosity, and envy (Belk, 1984, 1985). Possessiveness is “the inclination and tendency to retain control or ownership of one's possessions. Possessions are seen as reasonably tangible, but may include certain experiences (e.g., last year's vacation – I've been there/done that), tangible assets (including money, contracts, monetary obligations and interests, and land), owned symbols (e.g., a name, coat of arms, or title), and even other persons (where some identification

with and mastery or control over these persons exists – e.g., ‘my employee/friend/child/legislator’” (Belk, 1985, p. 267)

Nongenerosity manifests itself as a person’s unwillingness to give one’s own possessions or to share them with others, whereas envy is a desire for other people’s goods – not only objects but also experiences or persons (Belk, 1985). Inconspicuous consumption does not seem to be directly related to this construct. However, two of the dimensions proposed by Belk can be reflected in behaviors characteristic of inconspicuous consumption. Possessiveness with regard to certain experiences, particularly those that build class identity – the acquired knowledge, good manners, or ecological awareness – may constitute an aspect of inconspicuous consumption, especially if its typical signals, hard to detect, are a deliberate strategy of restricting imitation by lower social classes (Eckhardt et al., 2015). Inconspicuous consumption may also be associated with envy, understood in a broad sense, when people’s purchases (e.g., of inconspicuous luxury brands) or nonmaterial investments stem from the desire for what others possess. – particularly those who are a step closer to being “their version of better humans in all aspects of their lives” (Currid-Halkett, 2017, p. 20).

The next popular perspective on materialism is the one by Richins and Dawson. These authors define materialism as “a value that guides people’s choices and conduct in a variety of situations, including, but not limited to, consumption arenas” (Richins & Dawson, 1992, p. 307). It manifests itself in the form of three phenomena. The first one is *acquisition centrality*, which means placing both the possession of goods and the process of their acquisition at the center of life. The second one manifests itself in recognizing *the role of acquisition in happiness*, which means that for materialists the possession and accumulation of goods is the key issue in life to such an extent that they consider them indispensable to the achievement of satisfaction and well-being. The last manifestation of materialism consists in perceiving *the role of possessions in defining success*, which means materialists evaluate success in life (both their own and other people’s) based on the quantity and quality of goods acquired (Richins & Dawson, 1992). It seems the phenomenon that comes closest to the construct of inconspicuous consumption is the third of these. Although possessing particular objects is neither the only nor the most important manifestation of inconspicuous consumption, consuming certain goods is regarded as a marker of social status tantamount to the achievement of success in life. In the case of *the role of possessions in defining success*, material possessions no longer serve only as status-conferring elements. Their value more and more often depends on the ability to project a positive self-image and to identify oneself as participant in the imagined ideal life (Campbell,

1987, cited in Richins & Dawson, 1992). These functions of possession in turn seem to be the same as those performed by inconspicuous consumption.

An interesting perspective on the issues of materialism is offered by Kasser and Ryan. They founded their conception on the assumptions of the self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan (Kasser, 2002; Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Sheldon, Ryan, Deci, & Kasser, 2004). In this perspective, materialism manifests itself in the form of focus on extrinsic values and goals, namely: *financial success (money)* – the achievement of wealth and the acquisition of material goods; *social recognition (fame)* – being famous, recognizable, and admired; and *attractive appearance (image)* – fashionable clothes, a beautiful face, and a shapely body (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Although what the authors regard as the core of the message promoted by the capitalist and consumerist culture is striving to possess money and goods, they consider it necessary to add the other two values. All three revolve around seeking one's own worth beyond oneself, in external rewards and praises from others. As opposed to what is referred to as the materialistic triad – money, image, and fame, goals such as personal growth, self-acceptance, affiliation, community feeling, and health are referred to as intrinsic (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 2001, cited in Zawadzka, Duda, Rymkiewicz, & Kondratowicz-Nowak, 2015).

Relating these goals and values to behaviors characteristic of inconspicuous consumption, one can conclude that it is a manifestation of the pursuit of both: goals classified as intrinsic as well as selected extrinsic aspirations. Intrinsic goals, such as personal growth, sense of competence, community feeling (understood as a desire to act for the common good) or health, seem to reflect the values pursued by inconspicuous consumers. To a great extent, the way they spend money as well as their habits reveal a strong preoccupation with knowledge acquisition (e.g., reading the *New York Times*, watching TED Talk), environmental care (looking for information about food or clothing production methods), and their own health (healthy organic food, health care) (Currid-Halkett, 2017).

Some consumer behaviors described as characteristic of inconspicuous consumption can be identified as examples of the pursuit of extrinsic goals. If the consumption of particular goods (regardless of whether or not they are expensive) becomes a way of defining oneself, distinguish oneself from others, and make oneself similar to the class one aspires to, it can be regarded as revealing the individual's attachment to his or her own image. What is characteristic of extrinsic values is the striving to be rewarded and praised. If drinking almond milk instead of usual milk, practicing yoga, using the "appropriate" nail polish, or enrolling your child on hockey rather than football classes (cf. Currid-Halkett,

2017) are meant to evoke admiration and respect from other consumers (equally conscious ones), it may be a manifestation of the pursuit of extrinsic goals.

In the light of the above examples, inconspicuous consumption seems to have relatively little in common with traditionally understood materialism. Although selected behaviors characteristic of it may be a manifestation of the pursuit of materialistic inclinations, many of them are associated with self-expression values (Inglehart, 2000) and with the motive of expressing one's personality (Holt, 1995). Inconspicuous consumption appears to be "built around the self and aimed at stressing one's own individuality and uniqueness," which suggests its status-marking role (Poraj-Weder & Maison, 2015, p. 29).

A DIFFERENCE OF MEANS OR A DIFFERENCE OF GOALS?

"Materialism, being a manifestation of the culture of consumption, is associated with an increase in the importance of self-enhancement values and with a decrease in the importance of self-transgression values," which means "pursuing one's own interest when making choices, focusing on taking care of oneself, and pursuing one's own success" (Zawadzka, 2014, pp. 19-20). Materialism-oriented individuals pursue the values and goals of the culture of consumption by engaging in behaviors such as accumulating goods and money or pursuing power and pleasure (Zawadzka, 2014).

The culture of consumption, however, manifests itself not only in attitude to the acquisition of money and objects (materialism in the narrow sense), but also in attitude towards oneself. Just like particular goods have to meet certain criteria to be assessed as valuable, also individuals should present themselves and their personality in such a way as to become an object worth interest; it is even necessary for them to "make a transaction" involving their own personality in order to become competitive. One "must be able to 'put across' one's personality in competition with many others . . . [O]ne has to be in fashion on the personality market, and in order to be in fashion one has to know what kind of personality is most in demand" (Fromm, 1949, pp. 70-71). Z. Bauman calls this phenomenon self-consumption and describes it using the example of attitude towards the body and identity. Care for one's body – both for its fitness and for its beauty – takes place by means of products and services available on the market, which are meant to ensure the desired effect and contribute to an increase in the individual's market attractiveness. In the world of liquid modernity, identity – just like

the body – is subject to the laws that govern the market of consumer products. It is not conferred upon a person once and for all; “identities are projects: tasks to be undertaken, diligently performed and seen through to infinitely remote completion” (Bauman, 2007, p. 110). Many times in the course of life, identity undergoes composition and disintegration; it is fragmented and temporary, and the possibility of getting rid of the one that, at a given moment, fails to meet the expectations is perceived as a manifestation of human freedom (Bauman, 2000, 2007). The market of consumer goods meets and responds to “consumers’ obsession of tampering with identities,” offering products and services by means of which it is possible to replace the outdated aspect of identity (Bauman, 2007, p. 122), and buying goods becomes tantamount to buying symbols necessary for those transformations (Bauman, 2000, 2007). Importantly, the individual’s efficiency in the role of a consumer determines his or her place in the social hierarchy, at the same time constituting an inclusion or exclusion criterion (Bauman, 2007).

On the one hand, inconspicuous consumption, revealing the separation of the construct of luxury from conspicuousness and status (Eckhardt et al., 2015), manifests a departure from the typically materialistic tendencies typical of the consumer society; on the other hand, it performs functions similar to those performed by conspicuous consumption. Brand attachment, taking forms such as brand engagement in self-concept (Razmus & Łaguna, 2017), can thus more and more often manifest itself with regard to niche brands sending subtle signals. Nevertheless, acquiring and using products still constitutes an important aspect of inconspicuous consumption. Its second aspect is associated with experiential consumption (cf. van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), transition to nonmaterial consumption, and a preference for access rather than ownership (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). It therefore seems that the relatively new pattern of consumption, referred to as inconspicuous, is a product of two tendencies: one of them directly related to the functioning of the culture of consumption, to focus on status and its manifestation by means of material goods, and the other one manifesting itself as engagement in the pursuit of values such as development, health, or the common good. To determine to what extent inconspicuous consumption is a form of self-expression and a manifestation of the pursuit of intrinsic values and to what extent it expresses the pursuit of status and extrinsic reward, further research will undoubtedly be necessary.

The aim of the paper was to analyze the phenomenon of inconspicuous consumption in terms of underlying factors and in terms of associations with specific dimensions of materialism. We have found that some manifestations and motives

of inconspicuous consumption show resemblance to behaviors characteristic of materialism-oriented individuals, while others suggest a departure from the values and goals promoted by the culture of consumption. Due to the fact that the findings concerning inconspicuous consumption are based on an analysis of the consumption habits of big city residents in the United States (Currid-Halkett, 2017), we should be aware of certain limitations regarding the legitimacy of generalizing these findings to other populations. Undoubtedly, however, also in Polish society it is possible to find symptoms of many trends characteristic of inconspicuous consumption, referred to as deconsumption (Bylok, 2015; Szul, 2012), sustainable consumption, ecoconsumption, or ethical consumption (Bylok, 2015; Sobczyk, 2018).

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