
THE CULT OF THE MOMENT AS A NEW POSTMODERN RELIGION

Ondřej Roubal*

Vysoká škola finanční a správní, Prague 10, Estonská 500, 101 00, Czech Republic

(Received 16 June 2014, revised 18 August 2014)

Abstract

Issues related to the transformation of value orientations and lifestyles of social actors (concerned individuals) are frequently thematized in the social discourse of postmodernity. They point out mainly a transfer from material to postmaterial values, an intensifying individualization process or fading relation to authorities, traditions and religious faith. Many authors also point out, on the theoretical and empirical level, that people tend to increasingly lean towards the values of emotionality and achievement of mental joy in the form of intensive search for new sources of amusement and experiences (adventures). The concepts of the 'experience' society or the 'adventure' society emerge. The hedonistic lifestyle is knowingly supported via commercial marketing communication as an interventional factor of social environment. Marketing topics shape human thinking and actions to worship the 'cult of the moment', and socialize individuals in favour of behavioural strategies based on 'instant gratification'. The prevailing lifestyle is more and more affected by the rhythm of the fast running time. On the one hand, consumers are rewarded with certain pleasure and excitement; however, on the other hand, their obsession with constant change and diversification of experience objects leads to great deal of disappointment and increasing uncertainty on the spiritual level.

Keywords: delay gratification, hedonistic lifestyle, postmodern religion

1. Introduction

Many sociological concepts of the post-modern society reflect striking transformations in the area of value orientations and lifestyle of the current populations of the Western world [1]. Sources, characteristics, symptoms, and implications of such transformations are theoretically and empirically analyzed in various contexts and meanings of the modernization processes of the society. Subjects of the analyses mainly cover a strengthening process of individualization, people's focus to post-material values or their diversion from traditions and traditional religious faith while inclining to newer forms of spirituality and plural world of spiritual forms of life [2]. Similarly, the emphasis lies on diverse aspects of dynamics relating to qualitative changes in the

*E-mail: roubal@centrum.cz

orientation of lifestyles and focus of value patterns in the globally functioning, complex, and less predictable social environment [3]. Under the conditions of growing uncertainty and the less predictable social environment human identity and its respect become an issue at the same time [4]. Some authors also speculate about the crisis of personal and community identity in perspective of contemporary global society, which bring serious challenges for assuming any kind of identity [5]. But sources of these identities are typically instable, uncertain and too much flexible. In the sociological analyses of lifestyle and its transformations in the course of the modernity processes, some authors intensively accentuate the specifics of life within the so-called welfare societies (affluent society/society of material abundance), which are formed in economically prospering Western countries in the course of several postwar decades. In the society of welfare, which increases a feeling of economic safety, there is not only a significant transfer from material to post-material values, but also a decreasing need to be reassured about salvation which was traditionally provided by religious organizations [6]. Instead of religious organizations the era of post-modern consumer society brings hypermarkets and commercial sources of entertainment which represent new targets of human efforts and their sense of life.

Not only sociologists have been giving analytical attention to the situation relating to the transformation from the society of 'deficit' to the 'affluent' society. In this context, they study the phenomenon of lifestyle of the newly forming 'consumer' class or 'global middle class' [7], as appropriate, aspiring after various forms of consumer lifestyle and preferring variously intensive hedonistically-oriented life practices. At the same time, the society of material abundance should create unprecedented conditions for new lifestyles and associated changes in the value orientations of social actors (concerned individuals), who are 'freed' from concerns for material survival to closer focus on a number of alternative goals and values, often of immaterial nature, characterized by the need to saturate various individual longings, authentic wishes, and intimate fantasies. Consequently, a situation occurs, where the original priority of resolving existential concerns and dominance of material values is replaced by new priority, consisting in the search for and the fulfilment of existential needs, usually embedded within the emotional world of subjectively formulated goals and authentic wishes.

This social situation is sufficiently analytically and convincingly presented in the Schulze's 'experience society' concept [8]. According to Schulze, the emphasis of people on experience becomes an important determinant of searching, formulating, and implementing the life project, under which the fulfilment of emotional needs, initiation of exciting feelings, and states of cheerfulness play a key role. In fulfilling these needs, the 'instant gratification' strategies and the preference of hedonistic life practices apply more and more, with systematic support and validation by interventions of global marketing activities. The emotional marketing of experiences evolves, presenting experiences as values through the media - values that bear no delay,

whereas the attractiveness, intensity, and uniqueness of such experiences/values may only be preserved through action, quick activity, and determination not to postpone anything [9]. Consequently, consumers turn into 'collectors of experiences', relentless adventurers travelling the roads of sensuality and aesthetic experiences marked by marketing, in an attempt at hedonistic intensification of present moments by shifting their inherently volatile attention and temporary interest from one experience to another.

However, the entire process is probably characterized as ambivalent. On the one part, consumers are rewarded for their adventures in the form of certain pleasure and excitement, they may experience new impulses and sources of joy, and – with their own consumer hunger after experiences – they ultimately prevent the undesired fossilization of everydayness. They do not allow for the initial attractiveness of joyful feelings to simply transform into trivial and dull comfort. Therefore, they seek new challenges, discover, refuse routine, and start – similarly as players – new rounds all the time, with a view to enjoy the game and its outcome. They enjoy the game, similarly as they take pleasure in partial results achieved in the course of the game.

On the other hand, the journeys of such adventurers, who constantly seek new and more exciting experiences, apparently do not bring more stable and permanent feelings of joy and satisfaction. The problem is that each specific decision and each choice from the wide range of opportunities necessarily results in doubts whether different choices and decisions would not bring more irresistible experiences. The higher the supply of various experiences to select from the more intensive the feeling of uncertainty brought about by each additional decision [10]. In order for the collectors of experiences to (preferably) eliminate the unpleasant feelings of uncertainty that by making specific selection in respect of the offered potential experiences they are missing out on other, more attractive and appealing targets, providing irresistible feelings of joy, they try to alternate many different experiences as quickly as possible. With inherent volatility, they go from one experience to another, in an effort to achieve as much as possible, preferably within the shortest period of time possible, in order to have sufficient time to 'sample' other attractions. Naturally, this leads to the inflation of experience, where the effort of maximum accumulation of experiences within the minimum periods of time also leads to superficiality. In addition to feelings of uncertainty, people also experience disappointment. The obsession with constant change and diversification of experience objects not only fails to eliminate fantasies and perception of other, more appealing and still new attractions that are getting away and that must be sought after until full exhaustion, moreover the principle of constant innovations and current of exciting novelties becomes a mere routine, a circle of everydayness.

The collectors of experiences spin the amusement carousel ever faster, frantically going from one experience to another, only to instantly find out that the more frequent consumption of experiences results in an even more restless appetite for excitement. The longing after experiences remains, only the appetite is more and more promiscuous. The question is how to limit numerous

disappointments and bewilderments in situations, where experiences should rather bring joy and pleasure, how to mitigate anxiety and uncertainty in situations, where the virtually unlimited supply of various experiences to choose from should actually result in the feelings of authenticity and limitless individual freedom.

2. Through welfare to the ‘experience’ society

In the course of the transformation from the society of ‘deficit’ to the society of ‘material abundance’, at least two significant social processes are reflected in the above mentioned context. The first of the social processes is the individualization process, which remarkably increase and intensifies in the situation of onset of affluent societies. According to Inglehart, the values among western publics changed dramatically, going from the preferred material welfare and physical security to often individualized values and subjective experiences associated with immaterial values in connection with the quality of life [11]. Similarly, almost twenty years after the study of Inglehart, Yankelovich uses a sample of American population to empirically confirm the shift of value structures from community to individualistic ones, whereas such transformation has apparently been taking place since the 1950s – in line with the increasing welfare in Western countries [12]. According to Bauman, the affluent society is characterized by the fact that concerns for existence are replaced by concerns for the existential form of life, consisting in the fulfilment of the “*project of life as an artwork*” [13]. In other words, in a society where – in spite of existing income differences - many people dispose of more funds than are necessary for ensuring their existence, where material scarcity is replaced by material abundance, there is more personal space, more independence, and more ways of practicing such independence.

The second social process, closely linked with the radicalization of individualization processes, comprises the partial, yet major (in some respect) transformations of people’s lifestyle, focused on new goals in life and value preferences associated with ‘experiences’. In this context, Schulze emphasizes the dominant orientation of the society on experience, which is subject to the onset of the society of material abundance, where concerns for material survival are replaced with concerns for finding subjective happiness, transforming life into an ‘*experience project*’ [14]. We must add that this ‘experience project’ is a matter of typically individual determination, one’s own search, and subjective fulfilment. The preference of experience as the core value leads to the ‘*esthetization of everydayness*’ and radical recession of rational behaviour in favour of the rationality of experience. At the same time, the underlying principle of the esthetization of everydayness is an ideal of ‘*nice life*’, which consists in constant search for new experiences.

The life philosophy of independence, undeterminedness, and ‘inward orientation’ logically leads to the application of those life strategies that may promote and develop such life attitude. Schulze’s ‘*worshippers*’ of the world of

experiences are typically mobile, flexible and 'socially volatile'. They refuse to accept stability and commitment, i.e. everything that could somehow tie down or limit their life progress focused on transient and mobile world of experiences. They prefer travelling, spontaneity, change, and movement; they do not really plan in life. They seek life 'without bonds', mysterious, volatile, unsettled, action-packed and impulsive life.

The focus on experiences becomes the pivotal motive in life, dominant value and life goal that is not an object of choice, but rather a matter of necessity. A society strongly oriented on values matched with the emotionality of experiences and adventures, initiation the feelings of delight and mental wellbeing will tend to support lifestyle strategies that correspond to the hedonistic mentality preferring *instant utility* and behavioural models that are associated with the term *instant gratification* in economic theory [15]. Experiences thus mainly become the subject of instantaneous consumption, current moment, object of urgent action, and people find it difficult and are unwilling to postpone and defer them for later. Moreover, the lifestyle orientation in the direction of 'instant gratification' is clearly and rather intensively promoted by interventions of marketing events, urgently accentuating the trend of 'immediate and easy accessibility'. Marketing themes usually initiate active and quick action, refer to life 'without limits' and, represent the offer of a life in the world of limitless opportunities and endless adventures. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine commercial marketing communication motivating consumers to abstinence, caution, postponement of decision, modesty, and self-restraint. This results in a society, where 'experiences' are among the most desired values in life, where hedonism is gaining ground as the significant attribute of commercialized lifestyle, all with significant help and support of the marketing industry as an important component of the media. It is based on volatile appetite for various experiences that must be alternated as quickly as possible, without waiting, unnecessary delays and postponing. The choices regarding the type of entertainment are less constant and more impulsive, and they bear no delay, as the objects of experiences change quickly as a result of explosion of virtually unlimited supply of new and new opportunities. Moreover, experiences may hardly be 'consumed' in parts and it is difficult to save some part of an experience for a 'rainy day'. Consumers are 'educated' by marketing to worship to '*cult of instant gratification*', where it is '*now or never*'.

3. Cult of the moment and 'instant gratification'

The culture of the moment may only fully develop in a situation, where the 'fast running time' starts to win over the 'slow running time', where speed becomes a habit forming substances and hastiness is a lifestyle symbol. The slow gives place to the fast, acceleration does not make it possible to slow down in the period of constant changes, mobility and flexibility, because the world of endless possibilities is the world of movement. Eriksen believes that the fast

running time has been becoming the dominant force that determines the pace and direction of the social movement in many regards since the mid-1990s, specifically in connection with a rapid onset of new information and communication technology. In particular, the onset of fast running time significantly affects changes in lifestyles, value orientations, as well as the perception of time and space [16].

3.1. Deferred joy – better later than now?

Under the conditions of the fast running time and petrification of the instant gratification cult, we often seek, to no purpose, more pronounced and frequent symptoms of what is described as ‘perceived utility’ by economists or as ‘deferred/postponed joy’ by sociologists and anthropologists. Generally speaking, the perceived utility results from the feelings of looking forward to possible future experiences. Consequently, it is a situation where immediate consumption of goods makes way to deferred or later consumption. The reason for this is the fact that some goods induce such strong feelings of looking forward that the preference of deferred consumption to immediate consumption seems to be subjectively more beneficial from the psychological perspective. Therefore, subjective feelings of joy, pleasure, and delight may not result solely from hurried and immediate consumption, but also from deferred joy. At the same time, deferred joy falls within the group of human activities that may only be practiced under slow running time. To defer something means to wait, not hurry, and wait for the moment in question, the moment which is to bring the expected utility. Lottery companies probably do not profit from the fact that betters wish to spend considerable amounts on lottery tickets and bets in naïve belief of winning the first prize, with almost zero chance of winning such prize in terms of statistics. It seems that these companies are economically successful because betters actually purchase the chance, no matter how small, they could win. And the visualization of such winnings could bring intensive feelings of joy, whereas the act of looking forward to such winnings results in one and only reward for the vast majority of them. Certain disappointments resulting from the draw may not originate from the fact that we did not purchase a winning ticket, but from the fact that our time of joyful feelings of looking forward to potential winnings has come to an end.

We further studied some respondents’ opinions on issues of ‘deferred consumption’ under the project *Changes in the impact of marketing communication on the area of consumption and lifestyle of people within the context of the current economic crisis (2012)*. The research study originally focused on the identification of potential changes in consumer behaviour of the Czech population in connection with the implications of the prevailing economic crisis as well as on analyzing the changes in the contents and form of marketing communications and the reflection thereof by consumers (addressees) as well as professionals (creators, marketers). Moreover, the project was also expanded by the certainly useful and interesting research of how respondents perceive the

quality of life in the context of their own financial situation, how they define life satisfaction, where they look for feelings of joy, and how they associate behavioural models based on instant gratification and deferred consumption with positive emotions. The project relied on quantitative methods, with the use of a standardized questionnaire. Deliberate selection process mainly targeted the student population of a private university (University of Finance and Administration, Prague), usually coming from middle to upper middle class families.

In this context, we also studied the perceived importance of deferred consumption as potential source of experienced joy and positive emotions. Through deliberate selection process, we targeted young and middle-aged population of up to 45 years of age (75% of respondents in total) and, at the same time, those with high-school or university education (93% of respondents in total) (Table 1). However, the selection process method does not make it possible to generalize the resulting findings for the entire Czech adult population. This is also reflected in the depth of the analytical work, focusing on the description of the basic frequencies and wilful deduction of informative conclusions only.

Table 1. Characteristics of the examined sample.

Respondents – total	713
Gender	men 43.2%, women 56.8%
Age	15-30 years (53.6%); 31-45 (21.2%); 46-60 (20.7%); 61 + (4.5%)
Education	basic (1.4%); vocational training (4.4%); secondary education (51.2%); university education (43%)

As part of the empirical probe using a standardized questionnaire, we asked the following question: “Image you purchased a lottery ticket. On a scale from 1 to 10, how strong is your joy associated with the idea that you may win? Circle the intensity of joy experienced due to visualizations of potential winnings on the above mentioned scale (1: lowest intensity, 10: highest intensity)”. In this case, the empirical data show specific importance of ‘deferred joy’ and the period of ‘looking forward’, in a situation of dramatic expectations and awaiting potential future winnings. The scale interval of (6-10), i.e. above-average intensity of joy arising from visualizations of potential lottery winnings, comprises about 57% of all answers, the modus is located on value 8, with 13.8% share in the total number of answers (Figure 1). The overall average of identified values is 5.96. This means that, overall, opinions that more often express above-average intensity of joy arising from visualizations of potential lottery winnings slightly prevail.

Let us take note that even though the probability of generating future profit in the form of winning is very unlikely, the period between placing a bet and the draw may be viewed as pleasant, positively perceived, a period that

provides certain source of positive emotions in respect of the expected results. However, the draw results – i.e. profits or remunerations – are not crucial in this case; it is the joyful deliberations and delightful daydreaming about the new and attractive things such potential winnings could bring. In this context, the ‘deferred utility’ gains considerable psychological and social importance for human experiences. Unlike some positive emotions associated with profits achieved in the fast running time of volatile moments, without the patient waiting, necessary denial, and unpleasant (and perhaps even risky) postponement, the joy arising from images and illusions of potential profits that are still to come (or may come) is perhaps more concentrated, not subject to the pressure of the moment, and thereby quicker degradation of the level of achieved joy, which is to be re-saturated by quick shift to another mental delight in the instant gratification mode. Apparently, the preference of the deferred utility strategy is a risk behavioural model due to the uncertain achievement/acquisition of such profit in the long run (for example, the given goal is no longer attractive for the given individual, becomes unavailable, the concerned individual is passive and does not act on it, etc), it limits the possibilities of quicker (and certainly more superficial) exploration of the world offering unlimited potential of commercial entertainment and experiences. However, it is perhaps more reliable method of experiencing more authentic, longer, and maybe even more intensive feelings of happiness in some situation.

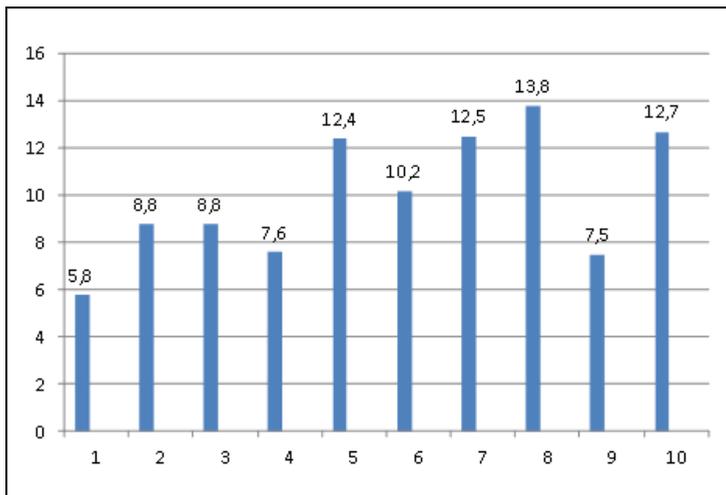


Figure 1. Intensity of joy arising from visualizations of potential lottery winnings (total frequency, %); 695 respondents (1 – lowest intensity of joy, 10 – highest intensity of joy).

The ‘deferred joy’ seems to be a very topical and even sought-after behavioural model from this empirical, although rather illustrative perspective. The question is, whether the ‘fast running time’ society, worshipping the commercial ‘cult of the moment’, actually offers suitable conditions for practicing such behavioural model. For example, by thematizing and promoting

‘deferred joy’, marketing communication would most likely go against the principles of economic interests of manufacturers and companies. On the contrary, marketing experts count on the customers’ uncertainty regarding the future – it leads them to the increasingly more frequent choice of instant gratification of one’s longings and needs. Last but not least, it is also an argument for disputing the ‘immediate gratification cult’ as the one and only way of achieving the feelings of joy happiness and satisfaction.

4. Conclusions

Even though the late modernity is accompanied by the ongoing fading of traditional religion and Christian values in consumer societies, there is a growing interest in the sense and aim of our lives. This sense and aim can be however more and more visible in a hedonic lifestyle which focuses on emotional experience values and on quick moments of commercial entertainment. In this atmosphere, application of the instant gratification strategy dominates a strategy that can be described as delay gratification [17]. Respecting the cult of moment under the conditions of the postmodern society represents a new form of ‘individual religion’, the spirituality of which is based on the values of non-limited and non-deferrable consumerism. On the contrary, the values of protestant ethic in the form of self-denial, self-control or postponing delight are suppressed, even though it is paradoxically these values which contributed in the past to material welfare of capitalist societies [18]. The enforcement of the deferred joy principles is not in the interest of impersonal institutionalized structures that form the consumer spirit and commercialize the everydayness of life; however, it may be in the interest of the social actors (concerned individuals) to slow down the amusement carousel and decrease the pace of volatile changes from one experience to another, expecting that more experiences and more frequent emotional adventures will also bring more joy and pleasure. Metaphorically speaking, we can compare this to fast trains and similarly rapidly shimmering landscapes that offer numerous different images and sensations, attracting more and more passengers. Customers wish to travel faster, do not like to linger on platforms, and unwillingly waste their time by travelling a single route, all this so they could restlessly switch from one train to another, trying as many train lines as possible. The objective of travelling is fun, it is a ride – not a trivial and dull transportation from point A to point B. Travels are increasingly faster, which – as it seems – does not result solely from the wishes of passengers, but is also motivated by pragmatic interest of transportation companies. No one looks for the brake, only the gas pedal. We must add that even though depressing the gas pedal leads to faster ride, it does not necessarily lead to what passengers expected from such speed. It may be that the bad mood, crankiness, disappointment, and unquenchable longing for travelling observed here and there among passengers may only be the side effect of a frantic ride that has lost its purpose and has perhaps become too fast. Who would then want a slow ride with a view of only a few sceneries, when fast

trains manage so much more? Who is willing to limit travelling, when it offers so much? Would it not be better to try purchasing a ticket more frequently, looking forward to going on a ride one day?

Acknowledgement

This article benefited from the financial assistance under the project 'Transformation of the way of life and modernization processes within the micro-region Hlučínsko' no. 13-23870S 41 81 CZ.

References

- [1] A. Kusá, V. Hrabáčková and M. Sabo, Eur. J. Sci. Theol., **10(1)** (2014) 135-144.
- [2] R. Inglehart, *Modernization, Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997, 80.
- [3] Z. Bauman, *Tekuté časy - život ve věku nejistoty (Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty)*, Academia, Prague, 2008, 99.
- [4] M. Solík, Filosofický časopis, **62(2)** (2014) 207.
- [5] A. Lemeni, Eur. J. Sci. Theol., **9(5)** (2013) 65-71.
- [6] M. Vido, Sociální studia, **3-4** (2008) 34.
- [7] T.H. Eriksen, *Syndrom velkého vlka – hledání štěstí ve společnosti nadbytku (Store ulvsyndromet)*, Doplněk, Brno, 2010, 14.
- [8] G. Schulze, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft – Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt/M, 1992.
- [9] G. Lipovetsky, *Paradoxní štěstí (Le Bonheur Paradoxal)*, Prostor, Prague, 2007, 75.
- [10] B. Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why more is Less*, ECCO, New York, 2004.
- [11] R. Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution. Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1977.
- [12] D. Yankelovich, *How Changes in the Economy are Reshaping American Values*. in *Values and Public Policy*, H.J. Aaron & T. Mann (eds.), Brookings Institution, Washington D.C., 1994, 16-51.
- [13] Z. Bauman, *Umění života (The Art of Life)*, Academia, Prague, 2010, 62.
- [14] G. Schulze, *Společnost prožitku*, in *V jaké společnosti vlastně žijeme? (In welcher Gesellschaft leben wir eigentlich?)*, A. Pongs (ed.), ISV, Prague, 2000, 205-233.
- [15] G. Loewenstein, *The fall and rise of psychological explanations in the economics of intertemporal choice*, in *Choice over time*, G. Loewenstein & J. Elster (eds.), Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1999, 3-34.
- [16] T.H. Eriksen, *Tyrannie okamžiku. Rychlý a pomalý čas v informačním věku. (Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age)*, Doplněk, Brno, 2009, 11.
- [17] O. Roubal, Communication Today, **5(1)** (2014) 88.
- [18] M. Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der "Geist" des Kapitalismus*. 3rd edn., Beltz Athenauem, Weinheim, 2000.