

# NOSTALGIC CONSUMPTION

## VIEW FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF NATURAL / GENUINE / AUTHENTIQUE CONSUMPTION

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Lack of products and brands left deep scars in the collective memory of Romanians, especially when we take into consideration their access to objects, products and even brands, before the revolution of 1989. After this moment in Romanian economical history, the scarcity or the lack of access to goods had to be reinvented in a different world, an abundant one. All of these because the market was perceived as a place filled with copiousness in terms of products, goods, brands, services and other opportunities. But, even if the load of scarcity was important, back in 1989, Romanians spoiled themselves with certain products (brands) before revolution, not necessarily better than those which are present on the shelves today, but rarer than those they were used to. With all these things in mind, the present study aims to explore how nostalgia actually is influenced by the complete moment experience of those who are old enough to experience both 1989 consumption and nowadays consumption. Focus group discussions were conducted in Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca and Timisoara, because these are the main cities where the revolution took part back in 1989. So, in order to contact those who were directly involved in changing the political regime, I have chosen to call them around the table of discussions. The information obtained through the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews is exploratory and even if the data are rich and valuable, these do not entail any form of statistical analysis in the sense of a quantitative research study. These results suggest that the complete moment experience, received by interacting with specific objects or brands both before and after 1989 and until now, intensely affects nostalgia felt by consumers / users of those items.

*Keywords — happiness, nostalgia, consumption, scarcity, abundance, consumer behavior, sitting in line, authenticity, genuine consumption.*

### I. Introduction

I began writing about consumption, and especially *authentique* consumption, when I realized that there is no definition for the acquisition process we see today in markets, super-markets and hyper-markets. I do not want to disappoint any of my colleagues who wrote about consumption nowadays, that is why I want to clarify the sentence above. Of course there is a big dynamic around consumption today, but there are very few writings regarding the generation of too high ideals who, somehow survived 1989 and now had to reinvent their entire system of values, including their decision process in buying goods (products or even brands).

But lets look closed on this difference: Romanians back in 1989 and Romanians today. For the first ones, the wild capitalism was at the beginning of its triumphal march: dynamics of things reinvented day by day and the indifference towards the human condition was growing more visible.

In a world in which we live very varied moments, in which we have started to pay big prices for different kind of stimuli which later become perceptions, after that, memories, and finally "once in a life time experiences", probably most of us decided to stand out, to get out of patterns and crowds and therefore, to act freely in any activities. *Differentiate yourself or die* is an idea which comes often in my mind, especially as it is not long ago mapped and it seems to become more and more valid and present too. But what means to differentiate? The first thing that comes in my mind is that to accept that there is an attitude / lifestyle / a common approach, a pattern or a mold for living, which then has to be denied for the difference to take part. Practically, differentiation means understanding the cone of shadow that you wish to leave behind.

In addition to this and finally for the introduction of this paper, the present science Communication intends to underline the existence of a profile, a consumer profile, which, under the same umbrella of the need for differentiation, represents that segment of population who is able to take a step forward, but not necessary guided by their need to lead or stand in front of everybody else, but rather from the need to experience the concept of loneliness. Yet, here, we are not talking about a typology of persons who withdrew from further lead a social life, but those who developed a more happier life by buying things and consume products and goods which seem to be specially created for them. Let's name them *authentique* consumers / *consumatori de firesc* (Romanian translation).

In order to put a little light in my research, let me enumerate the main objectives of this paperwork:

- I want to identify if there is any influence of nostalgia in calibrating generation X attitude towards consumption;

- I want to analyze the triggers of consumption from the perspective of stereotypes as part of the rationale behind acquisition mechanism;

- By having in mind the dynamics of consumer behavior in Romania, I would like to shed light on every changes that can occur in the consumer-goods interaction, once with the transition from hyper-consumption to consumption by means of searching for *authentique* experiences. Also, on this aspect, I am curious to find out if there are any differences for the X generation, who actually experienced consumption before 89 and Y generation who are nostalgic for the consumption they experienced by storytelling (exhibited stories by X generation);

- I also want to observe all the defining elements of those who are tributary to stereotypes in actually building their decision of buying / acquisition. But also, I would like to better understand the criteria of not acting like that by simple fact they stand in the mirror of prior mention reactions;

- As a bet with me, I would like in the future to create an easily identification solution of these types of consumers, a perfect marketing research tool which, if used, to give the chance to better recruit and understand nowadays consumers, who are triggered, in their acquisition processes, by their need to experience genuine situations (consumption situations).

By starting this paper I propose myself to underline new perspectives on consumption and create the foundations of the concept of „genuine (authentique / firesc) consumption” and also definition for its satellite concepts: consumption biased by nostalgia, biased by happiness and prejudice and also influenced by the need for standing out.

On these premises, I propose to adventure into the world of consumer behaviors, having in mind the possibility of the existence of a purchasing behavior, triggered not by the fact that a person belongs to a group, but by means of experiencing real situations with the goods he actual buys and then use.

## II. Conceptual specifications and theoretical framework

The exact definition of genuine (firesc / authentique) consumer is at its beginning, but it aims to fill a space left free in the process of explaining purchasing behaviors. To better understand this concept, let's take a look at the consumer society (Goffman, 2007), in its transition to hyper-consumption (Lipovetsky, 2007). When defined by Goffman, not much an economist, but a very good sociologist, it provides an opportunity to shape a new consumer segment. This profile was characterized by a non-conformist attitude and the need to differentiate of its representatives, from the crowds. To put this concept on a timeline, consumer behavior is rather on the border between hyper-consumption and something else, not necessarily between Goffman's consumerism and hyper-consumption of the contemporary era, but another way of making purchase and finally to consume.

One of the first definitions of consumption “food, clothing, housing, health, transport and leisure occupations define each domain of consumption” (Larousse, 1996, p.66), cared to enumerate a list of objects for consumption. By this perspective, consumption looked more like a process which enabled us to believe that, for understanding of consumption, the context became very important. In ours specific case, the abundance of products and stimuli represents the context to which consumers are exposed to every day. That is the reason, not coincidentally, `the abundance` has become one of the most important features and somehow the main context of consumption, especially hyper-consumption. And, because of the central positioning of those features in the definition of consumption, it become easily to see that any form which use to be taken in its evolution, our focus must be upon the quantity and availability of products. Having in mind what Baudrillard said, that one of the most important pillars of the consumer society is the abundance, described as the “multiplication of objects, services, material goods, which represents a fundamental shift in the ecology of the human species” (Baudrillard, 2005, p 29), we will consider, throughout this paper, the context of the markets *shelf abundance*.

Abundance or *belșugul*, as Romanians refer to it, says Baudrillard (2008), becomes a key factor in the rationale behind the purchasing decision, even if we are not necessarily talking about a trigger, but influencing context (Pattanaik, 2009), in which people are continuously adapting to finding the best schemes and solutions for their needs. We can call this pursuit, the pursuit of relevance by means of consumption. “But if we understand abundance as another step of consumption growth, then we will surely remember a previous stage of history - the deficit / scarcity (Craib, 1976). It has left deep traces in Romanians' memory when it comes to their access to objects, products and brands just before 1989. Then, after this threshold, the deficit or lack of wealth had to be reinvented in the context of hyper-markets and their shelves. Even so, in the context of 70-80's, Romanians managed to pamper themselves with some products (even brands) harder to obtained than other products that were sufficiently common in order to represent subject of collaboration consumption - Collaborative Consumption (Felson, 1978) – meaning the daily usage, those products that were found everywhere.” (Amuza, 2015).

On these premises, the current study aims to explore how consumers are influenced, in their purchasing process, by the intangible aura of certain products / goods (even brands), when they meet them again in today's economic environment, while they had the experience of using them, earlier in time.

Thus I propose to focus on how nostalgia of consumption before 89 actually influences the consumers today, when they are exposed to abundance, or, more specific, to a multitude of products, specific to a single category (including those objects / products that were found in the past). There is plenty of authors who talk about semi-professional consumers (Fugate, 2014), but we are actually looking for that type of consumption described not by the desire of being the best in performing your hobbies, but simply good at using relevant goods and creating better experiences this way.

Now, having in mind the evolutionary path of consumption, we can rightly ask: what triggers the purchase and how does the consumption looks today? Amuza (2015) asked himself which is the defense mechanism of hyper-consumers (Lipovetski, 2007) which are overexposed to the abundance of products? By assuming that consumption means exclusively consumer's behavior, then we know that it is nothing but people's conduct within the meaning of purchase or consumption of goods, while their customer is the end user (Cătoi, 1996).

In presenting next ideas, I have used all the information already identified by Lancaster (1966), who wrote few studies on this problem, as he argued that the objects / products are consumed due to their characteristics, features and new objects / products are nothing but recombination of the characteristics that defined old ones. This is the main differentiation that Lancaster makes between what's new and what's old. Therefore, whit this things in mind, I propose the following exercise: let's think at the definition of nostalgia, as the opposite concept of progress, “against which it is viewed negatively as reactionary, sentimental or melancholy” (Keightley and Pickering 2006), we can have as prerequisite work idea that the everything that can come in the category of new products will automatically awaken

nostalgia for past consumption. "Even if in this way, the old features of objects are appreciated and will be in discussion for consumer preferences, recombination will prove to be purchased every time (Lancaster, 1966) – dynamic products on the shelves and even the appearance branding are the main proves for this idea." (Amuza 2015).

Very interesting to note for this paper is the way in which the aura of Wund's Curve (Lancaster, 1966) looks very actual: especially in the context of genuine consumers. "This concept focuses on people's reaction to the news and indicates neither their greater propensity to choose nor the newest the products / goods, but nor the oldest. We could say that this conclusion represents the virtual hedonistic victory's reaction to innovation and it sustains our definition of genuine consumer, that stands before a decision and constantly bombarded by an abundance of products decides to choose those goods that serve he's hedonistic need to experience (regardless how consumption nostalgia acts on the one hand and innovation on the other hand)." (Amuza 2015). If we embrace this idea and bring it into question the definition of consumption (Larousse, 1996) mentioned earlier in this paperwork, we can now tell that it is quite limited on a very specific context, which would actually remove the idea of consumption in a context of lack of goods / products, a context of Scarcity, as Craib written in his studies (1976). But for better understand the nuances between these concepts: Plenty / Abundance (Baudrillard, 2005) and Deficit Scarcity (Craib, 1976) we have to look from more than the perspective of a single variable. Therefore, I think the distinction between the two concepts aims rather the context of consumption, not its definition in itself. More so, Larousse's definition is incomplete, therefore I propose to discuss other perspectives on consumption; one of them belongs to Falk (1994) "I consume, therefore I am" – by this sentence, we are pushed to think to a rather complex task, than a complete one. Basically, if we do a disciplinary parallel between socio-economics and philosophy, the *Desein* (Heidegger, 1927) becomes conditioned solely by the consumption. Another perspective on this is Paul Du Gay's (1996), who outsources some perspective on consumption and places the concept in the industry by talking about consumption as a creative and imaginative activity – totally opposite to production. Now, what I think is relevant for both, your interest as readers and me as a sociologist, is a common note which born of these perspectives: The concept's complexity.

By taking into account everything we have taken a look so far, while having in mind the idea that consumer's intentions represent "the most important approach in decomposing or unpacking a concern about a specific, a hierarchical set of actions - organized by their importance for a better solving the need that represents the subject of concern." (Ratneshwar, 2003), the consumption itself can be defined as the usage of certain objects or products (even brands) to meet various needs, all dictated most often by cultural contexts (Amuza 2015). Therefore, we can speak of consumers which are strongly influenced by nostalgia (in their purchasing process), biased consumers, those with blazon, genuine consumers, those who are not necessarily looking for a good utility of the products they use, but for a balance between product's utility and the moment when the whole process of consumption started. For better understanding of this concept, I am going to use an example on which I discussed a few hours with colleagues of mine

from different countries – a person who is about to buy a bottle of mineral water or Soda. My idea was that he is going to choose a glass bottle, because he is not a nostalgic consumer, but neither will he jump in the arms of innovation (guided rather by the product's utility than the brand behind the object). "Thus the most likely will be for him to choose the middle option. In order not to stick with just an example and to maintain focused on study's purpose, it is important to define the object of consumption, with reference to any tool with which one interacts. Consumption can therefore be understood as a complete experience obtained after interacting with certain goods (both products and brands)." (Amuza 2015). Even if the timeline looks like it is upside down on the following sentence, this idea is endorsed by two economists who put it under the umbrella of usage: A. Wolfespenger and H. Lapage (1995) believes that in the process of purchase, the consumer receives an active role as he becomes capable of evaluation. In addition, consumer's budget is not perceived from the amount's perspective any more, but from its potential (Wolfespenger, 1995).

But what is this example all about? The essence of the theory places the consumer in a position where he is able to be for himself, no strings attached, his own creator of satisfaction, while goods have the chance to become nothing but a bunch of instruments in the process. "In this process of defining the nostalgic consumer, we should know first of all know the concept of nostalgia, which implies at its origin the state of longing *dor* – a painful condition arising in relation to the returning home, or in a comfort zone / area." (Amuza, 2015). This idea was earlier supported in the seventeenth century by Johannes Hoffer, who talked about nostalgia as about a specific emotion – a familiar condition and not necessarily as a frequent homesickness (Davis, 1979). Therefore, for me it looks like nostalgia has its origins into the whole context and it is not necessarily attached to the concepts of "lost, but desired objects - e.g. "you don't become nostalgic about a certain house, but after the representation of it in your whole, so after your experiences developed in that certain house" (2015).

The situation is similar on the outcomes of the FGDs and IDIs that primary conduct this study, back in 2014, as consumers talk about "how was before and how cigarettes were before... Where else can you find those times nowadays?" (R.B. 51y.o). This statement proves that even they respondents perceive the products which performed well back in 89, as a high standard of quality, they instinctively assess the usage and they will consume those products from the complete experience's perspective.

On these premises, nostalgia gets the proportions of a historical emotion (Boym, 2007, p8). Fred Davis (1979) anticipated our context where nostalgia proves to influence the whole or the complete experience of usage by highlighting in his study the strong connection between nostalgia and past moments in general - politics—for example "The nostalgic feeling interfere deeply with any nationalistic and patriotic emotions." (1979, p.72). Indeed, the overall conclusion of each group was that politics regimes had a big contribution in shaping consumption contexts. In this way, nostalgia started to be some kind of a "safety valve for disappointments and frustrations suffered due to the loss of values once cherished." (ibid. p.99). In order to assess the nostalgia of our respondents, I've used a scale, designed by Sarah Penney in her RIBM doctoral conference, which

involves understanding all the changes that may occur in thoughts or attitudes in response to different stimuli (in this case, I refer to products or sometimes, to brands). These were specially selected from those that have a halo of historical awareness (meaning products that were heavily used before the 1989 Revolution in Romania).

As an endorsing proof, nostalgic consumers proved to choose every time the objects (products or brands) that helped them anchor themselves in past experiences, “but they remained skeptical enough and they also choose to leave an open the door in a real-life situation to choose products or brands that perform well on the utility scale (exactly as authentic consumers do).” (Amuza, 2015)

Thinking once again at scarcity (Craib, 1976), with all these ideas in mind, the concept succeed to create two sides: one that refers exclusively to narrowing down to the consumption options and another one (important for current study) which speaks about scarcity in terms of a Society’s base unit – “Scarcity represents the only condition for our history to exist.” (idem, p. 129). As we can see in Craib’s work, the history proves to be always an inferior version of the present situation of any society. This perspective endorses nostalgia’s bias in terms of appreciation specific goods that prove to perform better than current ones, as respondents told us that “Current products are far from the standard of quality of those on the market back in 1989...” (Adrian, FGD 2, Bucharest, over 50y.o.). In helping building this theory - nostalgia experienced by consumers - Simone Denise (2011) raises our attention regarding consumers, particularly smokers who, even if they find easily every negative effects smoking implies, when it comes to nostalgia, they can’t detach from the benefic, fine, cool context of smoking experience. Some of them even tend to appreciate the qualities of cigarettes from those times while shaping them an aura of having real benefits “They were healthier, they used not to have a large amount of additives and this discussion can be escalated in other contexts too.” (Mihai, FGD2 Bucharest, over 50 years). This situation is similar in our study - perception repeats in the case of a bicycle, or an old brand of a chocolate. Bike’s technical characteristics are perceived as more refined before the Revolution. In conclusion, in order to endorse the parallelism between Simone’s results and mine’s, we’ll have to put on the complete experience more weight due to its implications which objects have in relation to the body.

As Amuza said in his primary study, “we can conclude that nostalgia has potential to influence the perception upon the complete consumption’s moment experience as an event that happened once can change the context of consumption from that point forward, without altering goods’ proprieties. All the details behind the comparing that consumers make continuously between past experiences and current ones succeed to offer an important touch in understanding consumption’s influence upon nostalgia: that the situation is exactly the opposite: nostalgia is influencing consumption and the elements that create the context become crucial in understanding inhibited behaviors.” (2015).

### iii. Methodology

This study tries to set itself on an exploratory path by differentiating from other paper-works which offer „How

to...” advices by implementing enough theoretical content, perfectly balanced with study cases. The second part of the project – the social survey- is designed to evaluate, from a qualitative perspective, using focus group techniques, shades, which people are inclined to attach to brands that were on the market both before and after 1989. Respondents were gathered both from Bucharest and Timisoara. In this way we tried to put around the focus group tables persons that were connected directly to the black market and had access to goods which weren’t sold legally, but continued to exist even after the revolution.

The group agenda gathered respondents from a panel between 40 and 50 years of age and even persons with ages over 50 years, in order to meet the required age for speaking wittingly of the experience of smoking (two groups in which the brand Kent was discussed from a consumerist perspective) and to ensure a generous period in which respondents could be key decision makers regarding the products they choose to consume before and after 1989. We did not follow a differentiation on the basis of gender, because we chose for the debate products which addressed both male and female consumers.

The number of respondents participating in the focus groups is not nationally representative- the approach is specially designed for a qualitative study / step in the big picture of understanding current segmentation of population and consumers.

## iv. Conclusion

This research remains at a design stage level, especially as it represents only the first step, the qualitative approach, in the process of understanding consumption today. The number of respondents is not sufficient to support an exhaustive conclusion, but we believe that pre-testing has provided compelling grounds for making future efforts in completing a study that explores the correlation between people’s propensity for prejudgment and behavior consumption. This paper aims to become the framework of a more elaborate project with the purpose of verifying the existence of neo-consumers and nostalgically consumers.

### Acknowledgment

This paper has been financially supported within the project entitled „SOCERT. Knowledge society, dynamism through research”, contract number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/132406. This project is co-financed by European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013. Investing in people!”

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**PhD Student Antonio Amuza** [Definition of genuine (fișc / authentique) consumer aims to fill a space left free when the purchase behaviors were defined.]



**PhD Student Radu Florea** [Understanding behaviors of those who were able to experience consumption before and after 1989 gives an accurate radiography of what Antonio really understands by authentique consumption.]