Liquid Consumption

Fleura Bardhi, Cass Business School, City University London, UK
Giana Eckhardt, Royal Holloway University, UK

We introduce the construct of liquid consumption, which has four characteristics: (1) no singularization of consumption objects; (2) situational value; (3) use value dominates; and (4), an increased dematerialization. A liquid view of consumption has implications for our understanding of materiality, social distinction, the nature of relationships, and ethical consumption.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this paper we conceptualize a new theoretical perspective of consumption we call liquid consumption. A range of consumption phenomena has emerged during the last decade that require new ways of conceptualizing and thinking about consumer behavior, such as global mobilities (Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould 2012), the sharing economy and access based consumption (Belk 2010; Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Chen 2009; Lambert and Rose 2012), digital consumption (Belk 2013); liquid organizations (Kociatkiewics and Koster 2014), the rise of fast fashion (Samsoe and Bardhi 2014), and liquid art (Bauman 2007c). These phenomena challenge the foundations of our existing conceptualization of consumer behavior, including the centrality of possessions and the dominance of ownership, the nature of relationship to objects (such as notions of attachment, commitment, and loyalty), the raison d’être of consumption communities, and the nature of value derived in consumption. To better conceptualize these changes, we propose using a liquid approach to understanding consumption, which is defined as having the following characteristics:

1. No singularization of consumption objects. Consumers avoid identification with objects and are not necessarily looking to extend the self.
2. Situational value of consumption, which highlights the flexible rather than the solid, rigid or enduring nature of relationships or practices.
3. Use value dominates, in contrast to linking or identity value.
4. Dematerialization: a focus on the immaterial and access over ownership and possession. Value is placed on ‘lightness,’ in contrast to the economic, physical, emotional and social obligations/burden of ownership and materiality.

The liquid perspective of consumption is inspired by and anchored in the notion of liquid modernity, a social ontology of contemporary modernity put forth by the work of the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2000, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2011). Liquid modernity is a social condition where social structures are no longer stable or long-term, and thus cannot serve as ‘frames of reference for human actions and long-term projects’ (Bauman 2007a, 1). It characterizes contemporary society as an age of individualization and uncertainty, dominated by instrumental rationality and fragmentation of life and identity. Liquid modernity is characterized as a chaotic continuation of modernity where a person can shift from one social position to another in a fluid manner. What is valued is flexibility, movement, lightness, access and speed rather than size, weight, fixity, ownership and locational control.

We propose that conceptualizing consumption as liquid has important implications for how we understand materiality, social distinction, the nature of consumption relationships, and consumer ethics. In liquid modernity, consumer identity is liquid and materiality needs to enable fluidity of lifestyle and movements between identity projects. Thus, we derive four implications for consumer attachment to objects: 1) the temporality of the relationship to materiality; 2) emphasis on use-value; 3) dematerialization and the increased value of access; and 4) emergence of liquid materiality. Further, we maintain that consumers are attached/anchored to practices rather than objects, and a liquid perspective is able to account for this shift. Further, a liquid perspective has important implications for understanding social distinction, one of the cornerstones of how we understand the purpose of consumption within daily life. As a social ontology, liquidity opposes the assumption of static social structures, including class. New forms of distinction have emerged. Bauman (2000) proposes that individual freedom rather than class has emerged as the axis of social distinction. Those who are free from commitments will gain stature in society, as compared to those anchored to people, places or things. It is suggested that geographic mobility will also be key in defining the new elites. Network capital rises in importance (Urry 2007), and conspicuous consumption decreases in importance (Eckhardt, Belk and Wilson 2015).

Regarding consumer relationships, the new ontology suggests that liquid relationships are temporary, bonds are loose and guided by instrumentality without commitment. Ephemerality relationships to products and brands as well as among consumers are valued rather than traditional conceptualizations of consumer loyalty and commitment. Finally, with regards to consumer ethics, it is challenging to be an ethical consumer in liquidity. Morality and social structures are dissolving (Bauman 2000), and there is not a solid base of morals to turn to for guidance. In a liquid consumer culture, one’s subjectivity is that of a consumer; one cannot escape being a consumer. Thus, one cannot be ethical as understood outside of consumer culture. To that extent, liquid consumption provides an explanation for the much discussed gap between attitudes and behaviors in the sphere of ethical consumption (Deviney, Auger and Eckhardt 2010).

A liquid view of consumption also has implications for a variety of other consumer research domains, such as consumer welfare, poor and disadvantages consumers, consumer governance, consumer surveillance, and how consumers use space. We unfold these implications and suggest a future research agenda that takes these into account. We also note that, contrary to Bauman, we do not see liquid consumption as an evolutionary imperative, and we recognize that some areas of the world and of consumption need to be solid to support a liquid lifestyle. We conclude by articulating the boundary conditions of liquid consumption and do not argue that all consumption is liquid. In sum, where the value lies in the consumption process is shifting, as is consumer subjectivity, and a liquid ontology is needed to understand and theorize these shifts.

REFERENCES


