



CONSUMPTION: A POLITICAL AND CULTURAL FIELD OF POWER

Tüketim: Politik ve Kültürel Bir Güç Alanı

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to reinterpret consumer behavior beyond the boundaries of classical economic rationality through a philosophical and sociological lens. Consumption is not merely the act of fulfilling needs; it is also regarded as an expression of identity construction, ethical stance, aesthetic preference, and cultural affiliation. In this context, the study analyzes the invisible impulses that guide consumer decisions through the concepts of ethical autonomy, the economy of desire, illusions of freedom, and the daily contradictions of modern life. The research adopts a qualitative theoretical analysis method and draws upon the conceptual legacy of philosophical and classical sociological thinkers. The framework includes Kant's principle of ethical autonomy, Marx's concepts of commodity fetishism and alienation, Fromm's distinction between having and being, and Baudrillard's notions of simulation and consumer society. In addition, classical sociological concepts such as Durkheim's collective consciousness, Weber's lifestyle theory, and Simmel's analysis of individuality and fashion are also employed. The article reveals that consumer preferences carry not only material but also metaphysical meanings. The individual is no longer a mere purchaser but an active subject who constructs meaning through preferences, adopts a stance, and reconfigures their social existence. By grounding consumer behavior in philosophical contexts, this study demonstrates how consumption in today's capitalist world has evolved into a value system and a form of identity architecture.

Keywords: sociology of communication, consumer culture, consumer behavior, ethical autonomy, symbolic consumption.

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Öz

Bu makale, tüketici davranışını klasik ekonomik rasyonalitenin sınırlarının ötesinde felsefi ve sosyolojik bir bakış açısıyla yeniden yorumlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Tüketim yalnızca ihtiyaçları karşılama eylemi değildir; aynı zamanda kimlik inşasının, etik duruşun, estetik tercihin ve kültürel bağlılığın bir ifadesi olarak da kabul edilir. Bu bağlamda, çalışma tüketici kararlarını yönlendiren görünmez dürtüleri etik özerklik, arzu ekonomisi, özgürlük yanılsamaları ve modern yaşamın günlük çelişkileri kavramları aracılığıyla analiz etmektedir. Araştırma nitel bir teorik analiz yöntemini benimsemekte ve felsefi ve klasik sosyolojik düşünürlerin kavramsal mirasından yararlanmaktadır. Çerçeve, Kant'ın etik özerklik ilkesini, Marx'ın meta fetişizmi ve yabancılaşma kavramlarını, Fromm'un "sahip olma" ve "olma" arasındaki ayrımını ve Baudrillard'ın simülasyon ve tüketim toplumu kavramlarını içermektedir. Ayrıca, Durkheim'in kolektif bilinç, Weber'in yaşam tarzı teorisi ve Simmel'in bireysellik ve moda analizi gibi klasik sosyolojik kavramlar da kullanılmaktadır. Makale, tüketici tercihlerinin yalnızca maddi değil, aynı zamanda metafizik anlamlar da taşıdığını ortaya koymaktadır. Birey artık yalnızca bir alıcı değil; tercihleri aracılığıyla anlam inşa eden, bir duruş sergileyen ve toplumsal varoluşunu yeniden kurgulayan aktif bir özne olarak ele alınmaktadır. Bu çalışma, tüketici davranışlarını felsefi bağlamlara dayandırarak, günümüz kapitalist dünyasında tüketimin nasıl bir değer sistemine ve bir kimlik mimarisi biçimine dönüştüğünü göstermektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: iletişim sosyolojisi, tüketim kültürü, tüketici davranışı, etik özerklik, sembolik tüketim.

Introduction

Consumer behavior has long been treated as a field reduced to economic rationality, utility maximization, and the statistical analysis of individual preferences. However, the contemporary society shaped by the post-industrial forms of global capitalism has transformed consumption into more than a material transaction; it has become an act of meaning-making, identity declaration, and ethical positioning (Slater, 1997). This transformation necessitates a reevaluation of consumption beyond economic paradigms, through philosophical and cultural lenses. This study, therefore, positions consumer behavior not merely as a matter of choice, but as an ontological mode of existence, offering a multi-layered inquiry encompassing ethical, aesthetic, and cultural dimensions.

Immanuel Kant's (1785/1993) concept of the "moral subject" asserts that consumer decisions should be assessed not only by their outcomes, but also by the intentions and ethical motivations behind them. Within the framework of Kant's principle of autonomy, the question of how independ-

ent consumer choices are from external manipulations becomes especially pertinent in light of how contemporary advertising instrumentalizes unconscious desires. Jean Baudrillard (1970/1998) redefines modern consumption as a process of generating meaning through sign-values rather than meeting basic needs. According to him, the consumer does not consume objects per se, but rather symbols and social meanings; thus, consumption transforms into a spectacle economy. Similarly, Karl Marx's (1867/1990) notion of commodity fetishism points to a system in which consumption objects obscure social relations and conceal an ideological structure behind the material surface. The consumer, while seemingly making a free choice, is in fact engaging in behavior that reproduces the cycle of capital. This perspective is crucial to understanding how each consumption act, under the illusion of freedom, hides an ideological reproduction beneath it. Erich Fromm (1941/2003), in turn, evaluates consumption behavior on psychoanalytic and sociological grounds, drawing attention to a societal structure in which individuals attempt to construct identity through "having." According to Fromm, modern individuals have been led to believe that they exist not by "being" but by "having." This renders consumption not merely material but also a psychological necessity. Fromm's insights reveal that the contemporary consumer often chooses an object not out of desire, but to compensate for a perceived deficiency; that is, consumption acts function less as sources of satisfaction and more as mechanisms to suppress existential anxiety. This theoretical framework is critical to understanding the multidimensional nature of contemporary consumer culture. Consumption is not merely an individual decision, but also a systemic directive, a cultural encoding, and an expression of ethical stance. Therefore, analyses aiming to understand consumer behavior must be supported not only by behavioral data but also by philosophical depth. The unique value of this article emerges precisely at this point: it offers a philosophical reading that moves consumer behavior beyond the narrow confines of psychology and economics, relating it instead to ethical autonomy, aesthetic preferences, and systems of social value. In doing so, consumption is reframed not simply as an outcome, but as a meaningful process through which individuals position themselves, the world, and others.

1. Max Weber's Concept of Ethical Rationality and the Spiritual Foundations of Capitalism

Max Weber's evaluation of capitalism not only through economic institutions but also alongside moral belief systems marks a significant turning

point in modern social theories. According to Weber, the emergence of modern capitalism is not merely the result of material conditions such as technical advancement or commercial freedom; the main determining factor is the individual's way of understanding the world and approaching it within an ethical order (Weber, 2002). Particularly, Calvinist doctrines led individuals to view worldly success as a sign of divine selection; this, in turn, motivated individuals towards systematic labor, saving, and investing (Bendix, 1977). Weber's notion of "rationality" encompasses not only instrumental reason but also the individual's capacity to ethically structure their own life (Kalberg, 1980). In this context, the spirit of capitalism emerged through the secularization of a specific cultural-moral mindset. Today, this mindset appears to have transformed into individual life strategies, time management habits, and disciplined consumption practices. Especially performance-based lifestyles and planned consumption habits are contemporary reflections of Weber's definition of the rational-ethical individual.

2. Cultural Codes and Ethical Reflections in Consumer Behavior

Sociological analyses of the modern consumer society have shown that consumption is no longer merely a need-based activity but has become an area through which individuals express themselves, construct their identities, and reproduce their social status (Baudrillard, 1998; Featherstone, 1991). However, these theories often overlook how consumption historically took shape within a moral framework. For example, Campbell (1987), in linking romantic individualism with capitalist consumption, argues that consumer behavior involves a process of internal discipline and desire management. This internalization is closely aligned with the moral motivations Weber discusses.

While the dominant utilitarian and hedonic dichotomy in consumer behavior literature is significant in explaining decision-making processes, it leaves a gap that necessitates evaluating individual preferences along with ethical, historical, and cultural norms (Holt, 1995). For instance, even consumption-resistant trends such as "minimalism" glorify an ideal of orderly, planned, and measured living; in this sense, they resemble the Weberian ascetic tradition. This article argues that consumption is not only an economic activity but also a form of cultural and historical regulation by establishing a connection between Weber's concept of ethical rationality and contemporary consumer behavior theories. It will thus demonstrate that the

consumer is not merely market-oriented but also a bearer of an internalized ethical system.

3. Ethical Autonomy and the Logic of Consumer Decisions

Contemporary consumer behaviors are too complex, multilayered, and culturally encoded to be explained solely as need-based or pleasure-seeking actions. One of the most prominent tendencies underlying consumer behaviors is the increasing display of ethical autonomy in individuals' decision-making processes. Ethical autonomy refers to the ability of individuals to make decisions in accordance with their own value systems, independent of external pressures, and this condition is directly tied to the rationalization process of the modern capitalist subject (Weber, 2002). Individuals now act not only under the influence of external authorities but also through the guidance of an internalized ethical system. This internal guidance often manifests as a desire to "do the right thing" in consumer choices.

The preference for organic products, orientation toward sustainable brands, sensitivity to animal testing, or lifestyle practices that reduce carbon footprint indicate that individuals are acting not merely out of utility or pleasure but with a sense of ethical responsibility (Shaw et al., 2005). In this context, consumption is not only the fulfillment of desires but also a domain of conscience, responsibility, and identity construction (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Indeed, this ethical orientation does not drive the individual to rational calculation but to develop a value-centered decision logic. Here, Weber's concept of "moral rationality" comes into play: one chooses a behavior because it aligns with a certain ethical belief; whether this behavior is efficient in a utilitarian sense is secondary (Kalberg, 2013). The rise of ethical autonomy in this way shows that the autonomy of the individual in modern capitalist society is being reconstructed not only politically or economically but also morally. While this strengthens the individual's decision-making processes, it also has led to the restructuring of marketing strategies around ethical codes. Brands competing to offer a "moral identity" shows that they manage not only a commercial but also a cultural and symbolic domain (Thompson & Coşkuner-Balli, 2007). The consumer is now purchasing not just a product but also an ethical position. In conclusion, contemporary consumer behavior does not reverse Weber's relationship between ethics and rationality but updates and recontextualizes it. The "logic" behind individual decisions is now defined less by mathematical rationality and more by ethical conformity. This implies the repro-

duction of the modern capitalist order through ethical representations and accelerates the process in which the moral identity of the consumer subject is transferred to the marketplace.

4. Time, Productivity, and the Return to Asceticism in Consumption

In later stages of capitalist society, consumer behaviors have been directed not only toward satisfying increasing desires but also toward goals overlapping with ethics, such as controlling time and increasing individual productivity. This tendency, particularly shaped in late modernity, can be interpreted as a secular reflection of the ascetic lifestyle Weber identified in Protestant work ethics. According to Weber, abstaining from worldly pleasures and not wasting time were worldly signs of being graced by God (Weber, 2002). Today, this understanding is reflected in individuals' daily consumption decisions through time management, the use of digital productivity tools, and practices of simple living. The modern consumer's approach to time is shaped not only by the axis of utility maximization but also within a framework of moral discipline. For example, digital communities like the "5 AM Club," which promote waking up at 5 a.m., or productivity practices organized around the concept of "deep work," glorify the control over time as a virtue (Newport, 2016). Similarly, minimalist lifestyle movements like "slow living" or "capsule wardrobe" popularize the idea that living with less is a form of mental purification and ethical responsibility. These practices aim not so much to optimize consumption decisions as to frame them within an ethical context.

The role of digital technologies in this transformation cannot be overlooked. Tools such as calendar apps, productivity tracking software, and screen time controllers structure not only work life but also the daily choices of individuals as consumers (Lupton, 2016). Individuals who plan their days in segments, engage in digital detoxes to reduce screen dependency, or use focus apps to increase time efficiency are disciplining not only their time but also their consumption behaviors. In this context, asceticism has become not just a religious or spiritual orientation but also one of the fundamental components of late modern consumer identity. All these trends carry the individual's relationship with time to a normative level, not just an instrumental one. The inability to use time effectively has become a kind of ethical failure, while productivity has become a sign of worldly salvation. Weber's ascetic spirit now survives in new forms through meditation apps, simple living movements, and personal development culture. This shows

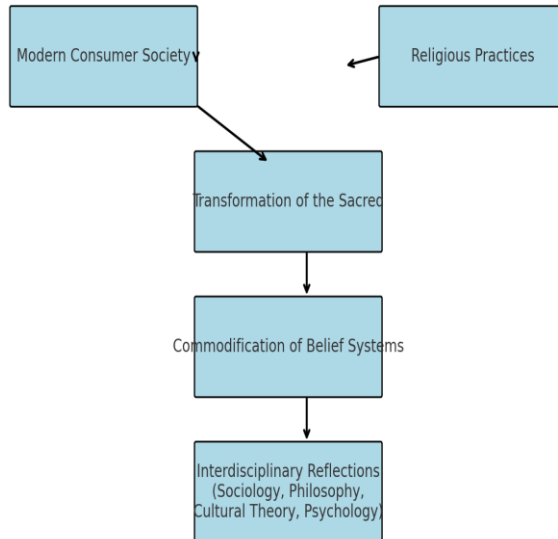
that the contemporary consumer subject has become not only a consumer but also a figure who “ethically manages” time.

5. The Right to Choose or the Belief in Being Chosen?

Modern capitalist society exalts consumer autonomy by presenting the individual with seemingly limitless choices and alternatives. However, this pluralism actually creates an ethical testing ground through the individual’s choices; the preferred product or service serves not only as a utility or aesthetic preference but also as a statement of identity and values. In this context, Weber’s concept of “chosen-ness,” as articulated in his interpretation of Calvinist ethics, is secularly reproduced in today’s consumer culture. The individual is no longer just a subject with the right to choose; through their choices, they become a kind of “worldly chosen” who makes their value, responsibility, and social position visible. Today, the rise of ethical, eco-friendly, or socially responsible brands can be interpreted as the reflection of this desire for chosen-ness in consumption patterns. Fair trade products, vegan lifestyles, shopping from local producers, or the preference for carbon-neutral brands represent the individual’s effort to prove that they are not only consumers but also selective and virtuous. Choice is no longer an expression of need but a declaration of existence; consumption becomes a symbolic act performed through the values the individual has internalized (Bourdieu, 1984; Shaw et al., 2005).

Just as in Weber’s Protestant ethics, in this context, the individual seeks salvation not from an external authority but from their own life practices. However, this search is confronted with the difficulty of drawing an ethical route within the abundance offered by postmodern consumer culture. The right to choose does not represent freedom; instead, it places the burden of responsibility—and sometimes guilt—on the individual’s shoulders. Especially in areas like sustainability, animal rights, or fair production, the “pressure to make the right choice” compels the individual to invest not only in the consumption object but also in the ethical implications of that choice. At this point, the act of choosing is imbued with ethical rationality in the Weberian sense: The individual makes decisions focused not on utility, but on belief. This dynamic shows that the capitalist system redefines the individual not only as a rational calculator but also as an actor who imbues their choices with moral significance. Choosing is no longer just the exercise of a right; it is also taking an ethical stance. Thus, the consumer purchases not only goods and services in the market but also a sense of alignment with their value system. Weber’s concept of “consciousness of being cho-

sen“ provides a secular basis for the modern consumer’s effort to construct their subjectivity and moral competence through their choices.



Schema 1. Transition from the Right to Choose to the Belief in Being Chosen
(Prepared by the authors)

6. Consumption as Symbolic Violence

Consumption is not limited to the acquisition of material objects; it is a multi-layered act woven with meanings, identities, and social relations. Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) conceptualization of “symbolic violence” offers a powerful theoretical tool for analyzing the multi-dimensional nature of consumption practices. Symbolic violence refers to the shaping of individuals’ behaviors and ways of thinking through social acceptances, rather than through physical coercion. In this context, consumption becomes a form of voluntary submission; by choosing certain products or lifestyles, individuals essentially reproduce dominant cultural codes.

For example, the association of luxury brands not only with material quality but also with prestige legitimizes the desire of individuals who consume such brands to belong to the “upper class” (Steenkamp & Baumgarnter, 1998). Here, the product functions not merely as an object but as a symbol of social status. As individuals stretch their material resources to attain this status, their seemingly free choices are, in fact, reproductions of cultural hegemony. At this point, the act of consumption becomes a form of symbolic violence because the individual, unconsciously, participates in a

spectacle that makes their socio-economic conditions invisible (Debord, 1995). One of the most visible areas of this symbolic violence is the consumption choices made by educated middle-class parents for their children. Preferences for “the right toys,” “organic foods,” or “educational digital content” are presented as parental responsibilities, yet in reality, they serve as a means of ensuring the continuity of a particular class position (Pugh, 2009). These consumption patterns shape not only a child’s development but also the families’ own identity construction. Influenced by advertising and media discourses, individuals are constantly directed towards new products to address their deficiencies or realize their potential. This situation finds expression in Zygmunt Bauman’s (2007) concept of “liquid consumption”: the individual never reaches satisfaction because the consumption object functions as a symbolic compensation for what is lacking. This constant sense of deficiency leads the individual to construct their self-worth through consumption; however, this value is based on an external and fragile foundation that must constantly be updated.

As a result, consumption is not merely an economic, but also a cultural and psychological field of power. Symbolic violence operates in this field by limiting the individuals’ capacity to question what and why they consume. Thus, the individual voluntarily conforms to the system’s norms and reproduces them without recognizing the structural inequalities behind their choices.

7. The Cognitive Map of Consumer Decisions: Perception, Pleasure, and Self-Construction

In modern consumer society, the individual acts not as a “homo economicus” but as a pleasure-driven, identity-building being whose cognitive map is shaped by various cultural indicators. At this point, the concepts from disciplines such as cognitive psychology, neuromarketing, and phenomenology allow us to understand how consumer behaviors are shaped. Consumer decisions are largely guided by perception mechanisms. These perceptions are not only sensory but also socially and culturally encoded (Solomon, 2018). For example, a consumer’s assessment of an organic-labeled product as healthier depends not only on content information but also on how this concept is framed by the media and social environment. Kahneman’s (2011) distinction between System 1 and System 2 shows that most decision-making processes are fast and intuitive, operating automatically, and that consumers make emotionally-driven decisions far from rationality. Pleasure is one of the most powerful determinants of consumer

behavior. In this context, Baudrillard's (1998) definition of consumption as an activity that not only satisfies needs but also generates pleasure and symbolic meanings is notable. Pleasure today is particularly associated with aesthetics, experience, and individual satisfaction. The allure of ordering a "venti latte" instead of a simple coffee at Starbucks is not only about fulfilling a caffeine need but also about experiencing the identity and social status related to that consumption act. This process turns consumption into a "ritual"; each purchase expresses the individual's desire to communicate something about themselves and their surroundings (Ritzer, 2009).

Self-construction is at the heart of consumer decisions. According to Giddens (1991), the modern individual does not base their identity on fixed reference points, but constantly updates and performs it. In this process of updating, consumption becomes one of the means through which the individual expresses themselves, differentiates themselves, or feels a sense of belonging. For example, for an environmentally conscious individual, preferring sustainable products is not only an environmental responsibility but also a declaration of identity. Consumption, in this context, becomes a symbolic expression of an ethical stance. The cognitive map of consumer decisions is also an intricate network interwoven with cultural capital, social norms, advertising strategies, and digital interactions. Decision-making processes are influenced by many variables, such as habits, social pressures, emotional needs, and value systems. Therefore, explaining consumer behavior solely through economic models is insufficient; to understand these behaviors, one must deeply examine the individual's inner world, social position, and cultural context.

8. The Aesthetic Regime of Capitalism: Beauty, Desire, and the Theater of Consumption

In the late stage of capitalism, consumption is no longer merely about fulfilling needs, but also about satisfying aesthetic desires, showcasing social status, and performing individual uniqueness. The aesthetic regime here is not limited to the concept of art or beauty; it permeates all aspects of daily life, creating a "spectacle" space that stretches from products to spaces, from bodies to behaviors (Lipovetsky et al., 1994). In this context, consumption turns into a theater: the set design is the product packaging, the costumes are the fashion industry, and the actors are the consumers moving with their desires. In aestheticized capitalism, products gain value not only by their functionality but also by their visual appeal. For instance, the purchasing decision for smartphones is guided not by their hardware

capacity but by the design language they carry elegance, color, texture, and the aesthetic experience offered by the brand (Schroeder, 2020). This creates an aesthetic economy that visualizes consumption, shapes it through ideals of beauty, and transforms it into pleasure. Product aesthetics not only appeal to the eye but also sell the lifestyle, taste level, and social belonging that come with it. In this context, desire is not merely a biological or psychological impulse but a practice culturally produced and directed. Baudrillard (1998) highlights that consumption objects are evaluated more through their symbolic values than their functional values, pointing to the desire of individuals to exist in this symbolic world. For example, an advertisement for a luxury perfume brand presents not content information but desire-laden images such as “attractiveness, success, seduction.” The consumer purchases the product in the hope of possessing these feelings; thus, desire becomes a central concept that motivates and gives meaning to consumption.

Beauty is not only directed at objects but also at the individual. Today, consumers invest not only in beautiful objects but also in the ideal of “being beautiful.” This ideal spans from cosmetic products to healthy lifestyle practices, gym memberships to sharing filtered photos on social media. The aestheticization of the body is presented as part of self-construction (Featherstone, 1991). Here, consumption transforms into not just an economic but also an ethical and aesthetic performance: a beautiful body becomes a sign of willpower, a symbol of discipline, and the key to social acceptance. In conclusion, the aesthetic regime of capitalism turns consumption from merely “buying goods” into a lifestyle, an identity narrative, and a desire production process. In this aesthetic regime, beauty and desire are shaped not only by individual preferences but also by societal norms and ideological apparatuses. Thus, consumption becomes central to the spectacle society, bringing the individual onto the stage: every choice is an image, every product a role, every display window a stage.

Conclusion

It is now an undeniable truth that consumer behavior is far too complex to be explained solely by economic choices or rational calculations. As demonstrated in this study, individuals consume not only to meet their needs, but also to construct their identity, feel a sense of belonging, approach the values they desire, and satisfy their yearning to be an aesthetic being. Modern consumption gains meaning not only by “what is bought,” but also by “why it is bought” and “what meanings are associated with the

purchase.“ Themes such as ethics, freedom, pleasure, desire, and belonging, which lie at the heart of decision-making processes, are redefined and reshaped through the products offered by capitalism.

A person's consumption behavior is no longer determined solely by the money in their wallet or the price-performance ratio of a product. A drink bought from a coffee chain with the desire for self-actualization, an expensive pair of shoes worn during a morning run, a simple lifestyle image shared on social media... Each of these is actually a message given to the outside world, a direction, a reflection of meaning. When a consumer buys an object, they are also choosing a feeling, an ethical stance, or an aesthetic imagination. These choices are not random; they emerge at the intersection of the individual's inner world of meaning-making, societal representations, and cultural codes. In this context, consumption transforms from an action into a narrative. A t-shirt is not just clothing; it represents support for the sustainable fashion concept. A car is not just a mode of transportation; it can symbolize status, environmental sensitivity, or a passion for speed. Thus, every consumption choice provides clues about the individual's inner value map and the shape of the relationship they want to establish with the outside world. The consumer, through products, attempts to show where they stand in life: minimalist, environmentally conscious, nostalgic, or innovative?

In conclusion, this article aimed to approach consumer behavior not only in terms of economics or psychology but also through its philosophical, ethical, and cultural layers, aiming to reveal the invisible logic behind these behaviors. The comprehensive analysis obtained demonstrates that consumer decision-making processes are directly linked to not only what they choose but who they want to be. The most powerful apparatus of today's capitalism, consumption, is no longer a decision, but a stance, a direction, a declaration of identity. And this declaration carries not only individual but also social, cultural, and ontological content.

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