



*Special Topic: Technology and the Media Environment of the Information Society*

## Future Marketing as Technology for Manipulating Symbolic Consumption

Alexander Vladislavovich Pletnev (✉) 

Saint Petersburg University of Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russian Federation, St.Petersburg, st.  
Pilutov, 1, 198206, Russia

[venger.vin@rambler.ru](mailto:venger.vin@rambler.ru)

### Abstract

At the end of the 20th and in the beginning of the 21st centuries, many publications appeared with the aim of trying to characterize the new state of society, which is characterized by an orientation towards economic goals and values. The concept of a consumer society continues to develop, and many authors associate the peculiarities of modern consumption with the spread of digital technologies. An analysis of these publications, as well as the latest trends in social economic development, made it possible to identify the cause of the latest socio-economic changes – the formation of a new neo-capitalist formation. There was a reorientation of the entire economy from the production of real goods to status consumption. Within the framework of neo-capitalism, the purpose of consumption of goods and services is not to satisfy real needs, but to obtain status characteristics that are associated with a product or service. This type of consumption requires an individual to invest more and more financial resources, since the average consumer does not have the financial ability to maintain high standards of status consumption. Neocapitalism stimulates consumer activity and production well, but it has a destructive effect on society as a whole. Failure to maintain the desired level of consumption leads the individual to a state of psychosocial stress – anomie. In general, the proposed concept will be of interest to both marketing practitioners and specialists in the field of socio-economic theory. It will allow you to move from an intuitive understanding of the changes taking place to a conceptual explanation.

**Keywords:** Neo-capitalism; Marketing; Consumer society; Social change; Virtualization; Anomie

### Аннотация

На рубеже 20-21 века появилось множество публикаций, целью которых является попытка дать характеристику новому состоянию общества, характеризующееся ориентацией на экономические цели и ценности. Продолжает развиваться концепция общества потребления и многие авторы связывают особенности современного потребления с распространением цифровых технологий. Анализ этих публикаций, а также новейших тенденций социального экономического развития позволил выявить причину новейших социально-экономических изменений - становление новой неокapиталистической формации. Произошла переориентация всей экономики с производства реальных благ на статусное потребление. В рамках неокapитализма целью потребления товаров и услуг является не удовлетворение реальных потребностей, а получение статусных характеристик, которые ассоциируются с товаром или услугой. Этот тип потребления требует от индивида всё большего вложения финансовых средств, поскольку среднестатистический потребитель не имеет финансовой возможности поддерживать высокие стандарты статусного потребления. Неокapитализм хорошо стимулирует потребительскую активность и производство, однако деструктивно влияет на общество в целом. Неспособность поддерживать желаемый уровень потребления приводит индивида к состоянию психосоциального стресса – аномии. В целом предложенная концепция неокapитализма будет интересна как маркетологам-практикам, так и специалистам в сфере социально-экономической теории. Она позволит перейти от интуитивного понимания происходящих изменений к концептуальному объяснению.



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## **Future Marketing as Technology for Manipulating Symbolic Consumption**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The first two decades of the 21st century are characterized by rapid trends of social change. In the scientific literature on sociological and economic problems, consumption (Ivanov, 2018) and inequality (Burawoy, 2015) in the distribution of wealth between individuals and social groups remain central themes. The consumer society persists, but researchers note changes in its structure (Holm, 2016, p.190), as well as a large dynamics of changes in this society. Sociologists and economists associate these trends with the digitalization of communication, the virtualization of social relations, and the emergence of Industry 4.0.

However, despite the large number of scientific publications and the proposed paradigms of understanding the social economic situation, the conclusions of the researchers relate rather to the symptoms and consequences of deep social processes without touching upon their real causes. Scientific publications are fragmentary, revealing only a certain aspect of the phenomenon. This contradiction lies at the heart of the research question of our study, which consists in the need to identify the real reasons for significant changes in the socio-economic situation at the beginning of the 21st century, as well as to find out their impact on the development of marketing communications – the relationship between the consumer and the seller of a product or service.

### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The main goal of the study is to identify the reasons for the increasing role of symbolic consumption practices in society and the growing influence of consumerism as a lifestyle in society as a whole. The second goal of the study is to identify the reasons for the obvious increase in socio-economic processes at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. The third goal of the study is to identify the impact of digitalization on socio-economic processes.

To achieve the set goals, particular research objectives need to be formulated. An important task is to analyze scientific publications devoted to the problems of the latest socio-economic changes and the role of virtualization in public life. Another task is to conceptualize the state of today's current economy, to provide its comprehensive theoretical explanation. The practical task of the study is to determine the nature of marketing communications in this economy.

### **METHODOLOGY**

As the epistemological orientation of the research, we have chosen interpretationism. In the realm of ontology, we relied on sociological nominalism and constructivism. The theoretical basis of the research was the concept of the hypernovel economy by Dmitry Ivanov, as well as our own concept of neocapitalism. We are using



the methods of concept reconstruction and theoretical synthesis carried out in the research.

To analyze the scientific literature during the research process, we compiled a sample of scientific books and articles in peer-reviewed scientific journals for the period from the beginning of the 1980s to the present. It was a focused sample of scientific publications on the latest change in consumer behavior.

### **ELABORATION OF THE PROBLEM**

The phenomenon of consumer society has been comprehended by sociologists and economists for more than a century, and this topic is not new (Evans, 2019, p. 506). Among the many theorists who have covered this topic are Jean Baudrillard, Andrew Benett, Colin Campbell, Aytekin Firat, Matthew Shadle (Davis, 2021; Baudrillard, 2016). In its most concise form, the idea of a consumer society was formulated by Philip Kotler as a desire to meet the needs of customers (Kotler et al., 2021, p. 6). In general, most of the literature on consumer society issues is based on the classical Marxist understanding of capitalism (Hartmann et al., 2020).

Innovations in the theory of consumer society can be considered the identification of the latest trends in the functioning of this society, which consist in the transition to demonstrative consumption. The emergence of conspicuous consumption was noted by Thorstein Veblen in his theory of the leisure class. Dmitry Ivanov highlighted conspicuous consumption as the central tendency of the economy in the concept of glam capitalism “glam capitalism grows when producers in a hypercompetitive market are forced to attract consumers with aggressively beautiful goods / services” (Ivanov, 2017, p. 154). Gernot Böhme in his book "Critique of Aesthetic Capitalism" (Böhme, 2017) noted that modern capitalism has already satisfied the basic needs of a person and the further development of the economy should take place through the production of aesthetic values, it should be aimed at human self-improvement. Much attention in the literature to the problem of consumer society is also given to the role of the Internet and social networks in the consumption process (Ritch & McColl, 2021; Seymour, 2020). Some researchers are trying to apply the achievements of related sciences in order to stimulate consumer activity (Lawes, 2020). However, these authors remain within the framework of the classical paradigm without changing it, only noting some trends in the development of economic and social processes. In the past two decades, many original publications on economic and social theory have appeared (Cohen et al., 2019), but they do not add up to a single system that would be able to explain hypernovel economic trends and replace the prevailing paradigm. The emergence of many new phenomena in the economy, the shift in economic emphasis from production to consumption indicate that the prevailing paradigm must be revised.

### **THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT AS A SPACE FOR CONSUMER MANIPULATION**

In many scientific publications devoted to social and economic issues, the latest trends in the economy and social life are associated with the phenomenon of digitalization. Various concepts use metaphors to describe this phenomenon, describing



society as “virtual society”, “information society”, “digital society”. Digital technologies undoubtedly have a huge impact on society. However, we need to determine the nature and extent of this influence in order to understand the extent to which digital technologies determine the specifics of the supernova society and the supernova economy.

When the theory of virtualization appeared, this process was interpreted simply as computerization, distribution of computer technology in people's lives (Buhl, 1997). Arthur Cocker created a theory of the virtual class where the virtualization process was interpreted from a neo-Marxist standpoint (Kroker & Weinstein, 1994). From Crocker's position, virtualization is not just a transition of processes to a digital space and not just the existence of a virtual analogue of a real object, but also a new economic reality. In this reality, a new exploiting class appears – the virtual class, which is the owner of the virtual means of production. It should be noted here that any virtual enterprise has a very real staff and physical embodiment. Virtual capitalists, as interpreted by Crocker, still do not create an economic system, completely divorced from physical reality. Virtualization was interpreted by Dmitry Ivanov (2018) as virtualization of real social processes. Finnish sociologist Ollis Ollinaho (2018) proposed the phenomenological concept of virtualization as virtualization of the life world.

A similar theory of virtualization is the theory of the Fourth Industrial Revolution by Klaus Schwab (Industry 4.0). Schwab proposed the idea of a fundamentally new stage in the development of the economy (Nicoletti, 2020), including virtual technologies (Schwab, 2017, p. 7). Schwab also proposes to accelerate the process of this technological revolution by taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the coronavirus infection (Schwab & Malleret, 2020). Should be noted that Schwab was never able to provide a clear definition of Industry 4.0. In fact, he lists all the latest technologies (Um, 2019) and does not highlight any specific feature that would make it possible to judge the onset of the era of the fourth industrial revolution.

The concept of virtualization, the global information field Web 5.0, describes a promising virtualization, which is associated with the connection of a computer network and the human nervous network. This will allow a person to directly influence the virtual space with the help of electromagnetic pulses (Pletnev, 2020).

For the purposes of our research, the interest is not so much virtualization itself, but rather its impact on socio-economic processes. Virtualization or digitalization in any of its interpretations creates a new communicative space (Felix et al., 2017) and a space of representation. This space will be used by individuals to demonstrate their status and consumption possibilities. In fact, virtualization creates another dimension of inequality (Hoffman & Novak, 2018). Since conspicuous consumption in a virtual environment can cover a much larger number of observers than conspicuous consumption in physical reality (Boatca et al., 2017), virtual reality will attract more and more consumer interest and attract more and more money (Munsch, 2021).

## **NEOCAPITALISM AS A KEY TO UNDERSTANDING SUPERMODERNITY**

The growing role of symbolic consumption (Bostrom, 2020, p. 273), an increase in the intensity of social processes in society are not random phenomena or temporary



trends, but a consequence of fundamental socio-economic changes. On the other hand, there is no reason to speak of the onset of a fundamentally new post-modern era. All the concepts of postmodernity are based on Baudrillard's idea of a fundamentally new era, the replacement of the usual sociality with simulacres, and the virtualization of social interaction. Baudrillard analyzed social reality, but he interpreted the concept of "reality" in a purely physical sense. Obviously, social phenomena are not real in the sense in which material things are real. This contradiction in Baudrillard's concept also determines that postmodern theories are false.

Simulacra in Baudrillard's logic are copies without originals. The signifier does not refer to the signified, does not indicate any real phenomenon. This concept has a certain meaning when applied to market relations. If we pay attention to any advertising of goods and services on the modern market, then we can note that advertising does not indicate a product. For example, advertising for a car actually demonstrates youth, sportiness, and respectability. In fact, it is not a thing that is sold, certain qualities associated with a thing. This is the main feature of the supernova economy, where the consumer pays for symbolic consumption (De Bock & Coussement, 2016). He is primarily interested in the status associated with the product, and the material thing itself is the bearer of this status. Even such a physiological need as food consumption in the logic of the supernova economy turns into an act of status consumption. For example, while dining in a trendy restaurant, a cooked dish can be photographed and posted on Instagram. In this logic, it makes no sense to consume something prestigious if no one finds out about it (Cochoy et al., 2016). These examples demonstrate the basis of a supernova (economy of neo-capitalism) – status consumption. In this economy, the profit of an enterprise is not made in the workshop, it is not produced by the sweat and blood of workers, but is created in the office of a marketer. We can talk about the emergence of a new formation, since the main role in the economy is now played by the superstructure and not by the base. Neocapitalism is a supernova formation or a type of economic culture in which the basis of the economy is status consumption (Pletnev & Ignatjeva, 2019). As for the digitalization processes, they are only a means of functioning of the neo-capitalist economy, and by themselves they do not create a fundamentally new type of economic culture. The indicated signs of new capitalism have long been considered in the economic literature, however, they have been considered in part, they have not been consolidated into a single system and the reason for the changes that have taken place in society has not been identified. Figuratively speaking, sociologists and economists are like doctors who scrupulously listed all the symptoms, but we never made a diagnosis. are not brought into a single system and the reason for the changes that have taken place in society is not highlighted.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

Our research has shown that the reason for the increase in the number of symbolic consumption practices in society is a change in the nature of needs. The act of consumption in an ultramodern society is not the satisfaction of a need in the traditional sense, but the consumption of status. The consumption of status, in turn, leads to an increasing intensity of socio-economic processes. If the implementation of real technological innovations in production and services requires a certain amount of time



to develop, then it is relatively quick to create a subjective feeling in the consumer that he is being offered a new product. For example, developing a new shoe technology can take years. However, every year or every season within a year, you can declare a certain type of footwear fashionable and encourage consumers to make new purchases.

In the process of studying the role of the virtualization in a supertemporal society, we found out that virtualization does not play main a role in this process. In a supernew economy, virtual space is becoming an additional place for symbolic consumption.

The main result of the study was the substantiation of the concept of neo-capitalism as a supernew formation, which is based on symbolic consumption and not real production. The introduction of the concept of neocapitalism can help various specialists to obtain a systemic vision of socio-economic processes, to separate the real reason for the changes taking place from secondary factors.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The presented theoretical study made it possible to identify the causes of social changes at the beginning of the XXI century. This question is purely theoretical, but it can be effectively used to build marketing communications with consumers and generate profits. The reason for the ongoing social change lies in the development of a new formation or a new type of economic culture – neo-capitalism. The emphasis of the entire economy is shifting from satisfying real needs to creating and satisfying symbolic needs. Symbolic consumption is the main goal of economic actors and the main driving force behind economic processes. Marketing communications in the future will not be based on studying consumer behavior, but on constructing it from a social point of view. Non-capitalism has significant drawbacks since the consumption of goods and services in this case does not lead to consumer satisfaction, but to an increase in the feeling of dissatisfaction and socio-psychological stress. Neocapitalism destroys traditional values, replacing them with the values of status consumption. The destruction of values, in turn, leads to an increase in anomie, which is the source of various types of deviant behavior. The concept of neo-capitalism explains the high rates of crime, drug addiction, alcoholism and suicide in Western societies. The destruction of values, in turn, leads to an increase in anomie, which is the source of various types of deviant behavior.

This concept can be criticized because it is not always easy to identify its symbolic share in the price of a product. This issue requires additional empirical research. For many products, such as mobile phones, it is possible to compare the price of products from the category of luxury brands and the price of their inexpensive counterparts, since the cost of production of these products is comparable. However, the concept of neo-capitalism is based on facts, is based on logic, explains regularly recurring phenomena, is capable of predicting economic processes, and meets other characteristics of a scientific theory. The concept of neo-capitalism is a good basis for both marketing research and the further development of social and economic theory.

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