Emotions, Imagination and Consumption : A new research agenda

Eva Illouz

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ARTICLE

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A new research agenda

EVA ILLOUZ
Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

Abstract.
This article has three objectives. The first calls on vigorously injecting the notion of emotion in the sociology of consumption. In particular, I show that the former has much to contribute to the latter, especially when consumption is conceived as inherent in the process of identity building and maintaining. In this respect, and this is the second goal of this article, I argue not only that the category of 'emotion' can be heuristic for a sociology of consumption, but also that the sociology of consumption has long been, albeit unknowingly, dealing with emotions. Making explicit this analytical category helps strengthen, conceptually, much of the sociology of consumption. The third purpose of this article is to offer preliminary thoughts on the ways in which consumers' volatile desires and emotions are mediated by culture. For the category of 'emotion' not to be psychological or individualistic, we need to understand just how it is infused by cultural meaning through and through. The conceptual link explaining the articulation between emotion and consumption is to be found in the notion of 'imagination', understood as the socially situated deployment of cultural fantasies.

Key words
body • consumption • desire • emotion • imagination

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EMOTIONS IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION

It is something of a truism to point to the inner contradictions of the culture of consumption. Consumption leans on an extraordinarily ruthless economic engine, yet it speaks to the softest crannies of our psyche. It draws together various socioeconomic groups in the same homogeneous structure of the market, yet it cultivates differences at an increasingly microscopically individual level. It gives us access to an unprecedented variety of material objects, yet encourages the pursuit of post-material values, spirituality and New Age. One of its main legitimating discourses is utilitarian hedonism, yet it demands from the self an arduous work of self-management and discipline.

Far from threatening the institutional foundations of contemporary culture, these contradictions are intrinsic to it. As Zygmunt Bauman put it in a somewhat evocative if imprecise way: the very volatility of consumption 'which results in the perpetual insecurity of actors' has been made 'into the most reliable of pattern-maintaining factors' (Bauman, 2001:7). In his view, consumption rests on a paradox: it wields a formidable power – to drive production, draw workers inside the arena of capitalism, provide legitimacy to the welfare state, generate wealth and employment, organize lifestyle groups, transform culture – yet this power derives from the perpetually moving sands of consumers' desires and even – in Bauman's words – 'insecurity'. What Bauman posits as a paradox might be better viewed as a discontinuity between action and structure and is somewhat reminiscent of the juxtaposition Weber drew between the anxiety that was at the heart of Calvinists' faith and the formidably powerful cultural engine of capitalism, the anxiety about one's fate in the face of a distant and inscrutable divinity producing a cultural system based on rationality, control, and predictibility (Weber, 1958). In a similar way, there is here a discontinuity between the formidable apparatus deployed by consumer capitalism, and the volatile mechanics of consumers' desires, wants and needs.

This article argues that understanding how the fickleness and transience of consumers' desires works within the overall context of an ever expanding consumer culture is an urgent task of the sociology of consumption. In particular, we need to better understand how the 'volatility' of consumers' desires is seamlessly interweaved in the culture of consumption. What is the mechanism that helps explain how the micro motivations of actors translate in the cultural structure of consumption and vice-versa, how the cultural structure of consumption translates itself into consumers' behaviour and fantasies? This article addresses this question by trying to tread a path between the Marxian view that needs, wants and desires are manufac-

tured from 'above', and the postmodern view that consumer culture liberates (and creates) libidinal energies, in turn viewed as the real fuel of its economic engine.

At face value, Baudrillardian sociology of consumption has already addressed the question raised above in its argument that consumption is founded on a 'lack', that is, on the perpetual desire for something that cannot ultimately be obtained (Baudrillard, 1998). But such assertion begs more questions than it solves, as it is based on the notoriously slippery and empirically dubious hypothesis of an unconscious. Unless we presume the existence of a (largely Lacanian) unconscious, the question is precisely to understand how this lack – or following Bauman, what we may call 'volatility' – is culturally and socially produced. I argue that the volatility of consumers' desires can be adequately accounted for only if we examine the *emotional* dimension of consumption. 'Emotions' are an essential, albeit unsufficiently acknowledged mechanism explaining how consumer needs and desires connect to the system of production of wants.

This article has then three objectives. The first calls on vigorously injecting the notion of emotion in the sociology of consumption and shows that the former has much to contribute to the latter, especially when consumption is conceived as inherent in the process of identity building and maintaining. In this respect, and this is the second goal of this article, I show not only that the category of 'emotion' can be heuristic for a sociology of consumption, but also that the sociology of consumption has long been, albeit unknowingly, dealing with emotions. By making explicit this analytical category, we will be in a better position to show that much of the analytical premises of the sociology of consumption can be reinforced by the sociology of 'emotions'. The third purpose of this article is to offer preliminary thoughts on the ways in which consumers' volatile desires and emotions are mediated by culture. For the category of 'emotion' not to be psychological or individualistic we need to understand just how it is infused with cultural meaning through and through. The conceptual link explaining the articulation between emotion and consumption, is to be found in the notion of 'imagination', understood as the socially situated deployment of cultural fantasies. Thus, taking the problem of 'the stability of volatility' as its starting point, this article hopes to introduce to the sociology of consumption two concepts that are simultaneously absent from it and crucial to it: emotion and imagination.

At one level, the suggestion that emotion is central to consumption is somewhat banal. Indeed, as has been abundantely documented, the culture of advertising – which has bestowed cultural meaning, legitimacy and

spiritual aura to consumer goods (Williams, 1980[1962]) – has transformed material acquisition into a cultural experience saturated with icons, images, and affect (Leiss et al., 1988; Marchand, 1985; Williamson, 1978). The semiotic approach to consumption suggests that in advertising, material objects are suffused with semiotic codes that in turn carry emotional meanings. The toothpaste stands for 'youthful energy', the diamond for 'eternal love', the insurance company for 'fatherly care'. Consumption is thus less about the utilitarian value of objects than it is about their symbolic meaning. Viewed in this way, it seems easy to understand why emotions might play a crucial role in consumption: If commodities are supposed to provide meanings and experiences – rather than sheer utilitarian satisfaction – then consumption becomes, by definition, if not a *stricto sensu* emotional experience, at least suffused with emotionality: commodities themselves are not so much material objects as they are cultural meanings that in turn provide access to emotional categories and experiences. This now standard semiotic view of consumption indeed constitutes the starting point of this article. Yet, it remains unclear whether the emotional meaning of a commodity makes the very act of consuming these objects into an emotional experience, and if yes, how. If the objects we use are 'suffused' with emotionality – the 'commodity-sign' – then just how exactly does their emotionality 'spill over' and overlap with the emotional meaning of the act of consumption itself? As Colin Campbell reminds us, 'consequences cannot explain actions unless they also coincide with intentions'. (Campbell, 1993). The fact that the toothpaste connotes energetic youthfulness or the insurance policy 'care' and 'nurturance' does not necessarily make the subjective intentions behind their purchase and their use into straightforward emotional acts. The emotionality of the commodity-sign may and does suffuse the act of consumption, but just how it does that remains to be examined. While in practice it is difficult to disentangle the semiotics of consumer goods from the emotionality of consumption, we should try to keep these two categories analytically distinct precisely in order to better understand the ways in which they are connected. This requires us to raise, again, the question of the motivational structure of consumption (Campbell, 1994).

EMOTION AS A CATEGORY OF CONSUMPTION

In much of postmodern (Baudrillardian) sociology of consumption, the notion of 'desire' has done the work of providing the key to such motivational structure (Belk et al., 2003). It is a standard phrase to characterize consumption as the 'democratization of desire' and the USA itself has been

dubbed, in the context of the history of consumption, the 'land of desire' (see Leach, 1994) suggesting that 'desire' has been commonly viewed as both the engine and the chief cultural characteristic of consumption. The notion of desire was meant to replace the utilitarian and rational approaches to consumption and to provide a fuller understanding of its libidinal and unconscious components. 'Desire' also suggested, in the vein of Lacan's work, that at the heart of the culture of consumption was a basic 'lack', a free-floating and diffuse longing for goods that could never be truly satisfied. Yet, while it has fulfilled an important role, the notion of desire contains a number of conceptual flaws that, I argue, can be alleviated if we use instead the notion of emotion.

First, the notion of desire is undifferentiated. This means that it does not distinguish between the different ways in which goods are differently desired and differently incorporated in the relation the self entertains with its social environment. Even if the literature on consumption views desires as relating 'to the human body and its various capacities for essential enjoyment and aggressive action' (Bocock, 1993: 97), by and large it has not developed an empirically differentiated account of how different forms of desires relate to consumption. Belk et al.'s otherwise excellent study of consumers' desires (2003) avoids referring to emotions, when these would seem to be crucial conceptual categories to provide empirical content to 'desire'. Similarly, Baudrillard's metaphor of the system of consumption as a process of 'craving' (in Schor and Holt, 2000: 75) is unhelpful to clarify both theoretically and empirically how consumption is incorporated in a system of wants and motivations. Second, while most sociologists of consumption hold the view that desire is socially shaped, few if any have specified just how it is shaped. The result has been that the notion of desire frequently entails a view of consumption as consisting of a disorganized arousal of desires. For example, to quote again an otherwise excellent sociologist of consumption, 'modern consumption depends upon advertising and the display of commodities in shopping centers, shopping malls, in a way which *creates and elicits desires*' (Bocock, 1993, emphasis added). In this quote, desire is so-to-speak directly induced by advertising and by the spatial organization of shopping, thus making it difficult to conceptualize just how cultural and social structures shape the fleeting feelings implied in the activity of shopping and wanting goods. Even if desire has marked an important conceptual move to account for the 'affect-ladden' aspect of consumption, it has not done a very good job at specifying on an empirical level how desires, cultural presentations and social relationships actually connect with each other.

A third problem with the notion of desire is that it has either too little or too much agency in it. Too little because for many scholars of consumption, desire is acted upon by the unconscious, whether individual or collective. An example of the latter is Deleuze and Guattari's famous characterization of consumers as 'desiring machines' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977). In their views, 'desire' is that which ensures a smooth incorporation in the capitalist system. Desire here stands for capitalist social forces ineluctably determining wants and pleasures that contain an illusion of autonomous subjectivity and freedom. In contrast to such a view, postmodern sociology has endorsed the notion of 'desire' not only to refer to a view of the subject aware of his/her wants and determined to pursue them, but also to celebrate the anarchic libidinal impulses implied in desire (Lipovetski, 1994; Maffesoli, 1996). Here, 'desire' stands for a free subject, acted neither by ideological nor rational motivations, but rather by a search for pure pleasure and sensations. Because in the consumption literature desire is used in an inconsistent way – having either too much or too little agency in it – it seems ill-equipped to account for the intricate relationship between the powerful constraints exerted by the market on needs and motivations on the one hand and the real experience of freedom and pleasure consumption procures on the other.

Emotion is a stronger concept for the analysis of consumption, both because it does not suffer from the conceptual flaws of the notion of desire, and because it enables the generation of its own original empirical insights on the process of consumption. Let me try and explain why.

Better than other concepts, emotion explains how consumption is anchored in cognition and culture on the one hand, and in the motivational structure of drives and of the body on the other. For an emotion to be activated, a few components of human action need to be put into motion: first is a cognition, that is, a belief about the world (e.g. 'to be nicely dressed is a sign of femininity and to be feminine is to be sexy'); second is an evaluation that is, a positive or negative attitude towards a specific object ('I like this dress because it is feminine and sexy and being feminine is very desirable'); third, is a bodily reaction that can run from mild to acute physical sensations ('I felt twitches of pleasure when I tried this fancy dress on'); fourth, an affect ('I feel sensual and self-confident when I put this dress on');[1] and finally, emotion also contains a motivation to act ('wanting to buy this feminine, sensual dress'). While emotion is *not* action per se, it is what orients and implicates the self in its social environment. It is both what gives a particular 'mood' or 'coloration' to a particular act, and the inner energy that propels us toward that act. Emotion can thus be defined as the

'energy-laden' side of action, where that energy is understood to simultaneously implicate cognitions, affect, evaluation, motivation and the body. What makes emotion carry this 'energy' is the fact that emotion always concerns the self and the relationship of the self to its environment. Emotion is less a psychological entity than it is a cultural and social one: through emotion we enact cultural definitions of personhood as they are expressed in concrete and immediate relationships with others. Emotion is thus about where one stands in a web of social relationships. Why then is 'emotion' a particularly apt way to understand the inner dynamic of consumption? There are number of reasons for this:

1. Consumption is a cultural system characterized by the simultaneous deployment of images, pictures and concepts, the relentless creation of affects, and the massive mobilization of the body (Featherstone, 1987a, 1987b, 1990, 1991; Turner, 1996). Consumer behaviour and the consumer self have been recruited in the market through this cognition–affect–body complex (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). With regard to cognition, although advertising and consumer culture are cacophonous, they nonetheless provide a coherent meaning system about the good life that in turn is the source of a wide number of beliefs and cognitions. This meaning system could be summarized in a few key propositions: 'a good life is a life in which all needs are satisfied'; 'freedom of choice is a fundamental human right'; 'youth and a shapely body are preferable to old age'; 'goods provide respectability'; 'happiness is a matter of having everything one needs'; etc. Because consumer culture has such wide institutional resonance, these cognitions – whether under the form of propositional content or under the form of visual images – are likely to be particularly salient and, more importantly, to become infused with personal meaning. A second characteristic of consumer culture is that it is saturated with affects. This is because much of the commodities that are sold on the market are sold as forms of experiences. This is undoubtedly the case for the culture, leisure and tourist industries, which sell mostly experiential goods, that is, intangible goods whose value lies in the kind of experiences provided by the act of consumption itself. Consumer culture is also saturated with affects because the signifying capacity of goods is their main attraction. As numerous scholars have documented, advertising plays a central role in attaching meanings and symbols to commodities, by associating disconnected signifiers to signifieds and by endlessly breaking and recombining these associations

(see Williamson, 1978; for a good empirical analysis see also Goldman and Papson, 1998; Holt. 2004). As Walter Benjamin (1973) suggested long ago, consumption creates fantasy worlds that offer to the modern individual a variety of identities, vicarious experiences and emotions. Finally, perhaps the most striking aspect of the meaning system of consumption is the fact that it has massively recruited the body in multiple ways. Indeed, the diet–fashion–cosmetics–health industries have created the consumer through an intense aestheticization of the body. Consumer culture is premised on the assumption of the plasticity of the body and the intrinsic desirability of self fashioning. As a result, the market encourages the self to think of itself in terms of the visual clues and cues other people can see and evaluate: the shape of our body, our clothing, our choice of food, our way of dancing, all of these constitute visual and bodily cues through which we evaluate others and think others evaluate us (Bauman, 1988: 63). Inasmuch as it is the repository of habitus, the body is the surface on which objects of consumption get inscribed and acquire their social meaning. It is through the body that objects take on their social significance and become integrated in a dynamics of 'social distinction'.

I thus suggest that emotion is not only a highly relevant analytical category to account for the dynamics of consumption but also a very robust one, because it includes both the cognitive-cultural dimension of consumption advocated by culturalists and its bodily aspect advocated by phenomenologists (see Thomspon and Hirshman, 1995). If being a consumer means participating in a powerful cognitive system that makes us evaluate positively certain forms of life, experience a variety of sensations and affects and use our body in a variety of ways, more than the category of 'desire', emotion best accounts for these different levels and for their mutual dependency. Emotion provides a stronger empirical ground to explain how the cognitive and evaluative aspects of the culture of consumption translate into behaviour because 'emotions are not theoretical states; they involve a practical concern, associated with a *readiness to act*' (Ben-Zeev, 2000: 61). Emotions also specify the ways in which body and cognition connect.

2. Emotions are a more differentiated way to describe consumption than the notion of desire because they can account both for positive and negative incentives to consume. Consumption can occur through a variety of both negative and positive emotions such as envy, a lingering sense of humiliation, fear or anxiety as well as love, hedonism and eroticism. The ability to offer a more differentiated account of

consumption makes it possible to explain not only how different objects are differently consumed, but also that an object can be consumed for a variety, and sometimes even conflicting, emotional reasons. My decision to spend my vacation in an exotic resort may be motivated by my envy of my friends who went to a similar destination last year, by my desire to break with my own routine, by my anxiety that my lover is getting bored with me, and by my sheer love for and desire to please my lover. Emotions can sometimes be played 'solo' but quite often come in clusters, thus better accounting for the fact that consumption is the outcome of a complex array of motivations and emotions. These emotional clusters may include a variety of emotions that belong to the same broad category (for example, envy, resentment, anger can be clustered together as belonging to the same category of negative emotions). But as the example above suggests, emotional clusters can also include emotions of opposing categories (such as envy and love).

3. As a conceptual category, emotions help resolve the problem of having too much or too little agency in social action. Emotions are by definition meaningful and purposive in the sense that they involve the intentions, appreciations, motivations and goals of the subject. (Crossley, 1998). For phenomenologists, emotion is a way of perceiving, apprehending and understanding the world: it is emotions that provide the meanings of things as they stand with regard to my well-being and that engage me in the world. This is why phenomenologists view emotions as 'embodied consciousness' (Crossley, 1998: 25). Another way to say this is to suggest that emotions refer to a pre-reflective state of consciousness that nonetheless engages the whole person in it. Emotions contain cognition but a kind of cognition that does not always and necessarily entail self-consciousness. Indeed, as Martha Nussbaum argues 'cognitive appraisals need not all be the objects of *reflexive self-consciousness*' (Nussbaum, 2001: 126). In that sense, emotions refer us to the store of cultural knowledge that orients our practices in a tacit and non-reflexive way, yet simultaneously involve the intentions and goals of the subject. Emotion may thus account for a paradoxical feature of action: at the same time that it is a force over which we have little control, it provides a heightened sense of agency (precisely because through emotional experience we enact our deepest values, goals and sense of self).
4. Finally, a central feature of emotions helps account for an important aspect of the culture of consumption, namely the fact that emotions

> are eudaimonic, that is, they express one's point of view on the world from the standpoint of one's goals, values and conceptions of the good life. Grief, joy or anger are all about my position in the world and about what is good for me in that world. 'Emotions look at the world from the subject's own viewpoint, mapping events on to the subject's own sense of personal importance or value' (Nussbaum, 2001: 33). In that sense, they are particularly well suited to understanding the dynamics of consumption, which caters first and foremost to the self and is the first cultural system based almost exclusively on the ideology of personal well-being and self-satisfaction. Because the market encourages consumer choices based on the cultivation of a hyper-individualist identity, it provides full legitimacy for judging and evaluating reality from one's own emotional perspective, in turn reinforcing the mechanism by which we may clarify our priorities. Emotions are supremely efficient tools in the consumer market because they help prioritize preferences. In a market saturated with an endless list of choices, emotions alleviate the paralysis that should plague us were we not equipped with an internal mechanism to rank our priorities. This has another consequence: inasmuch as they are eudaimonic, emotions frequently entail a sense of urgency – they compel one to action. Emotions are not to be equated with action, but compel us to it. Emotions might be said to be a central mechanism of the market because they enable us to hierarchize priorities and choose between a dizzying variety of consumer choices.[2] Thus, emotions explain very well how actors can prioritize their preferences through a mechanism that both explains how they are compelled to act the way they do, and provides a sense of agency and autonomy.

My point so far is in that emotion is a more malleable and sophisticated concept than 'desire' not only because it is analytically clearer and offers a better empirical grasp on consumption, but also because it accounts much better for the nature and structure of the experience of consumption itself. In particular, emotion may help elucidate at least three properties of consumption: the fact that much of consumption goods are experiential goods; the dynamics of taste and distinction; and the deeply social and relational character of consumer goods.

Emotion and experential consumption

Commodities are 'emotional' in that consumer culture is characterized by the manufacturing of experiential consumer practices, that is, consumption

of non material objects that are instead better viewed as forms of experiences. These experiences in turn produce 'emotions': a cruise may induce 'relaxation'; a trip to the Himalaya 'a sense of excitement and adventurousness'; a football match may produce a feeling of 'national pride'; going to a special concert a feeling of 'social distinction'; purchasing McDonalds' food in Moscow means 'feeling a member of the American way of life'; etc. Moreover, experiential consumption is closely entangled with interpersonal relationships. For example, in *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, Illouz (1997) argues romantic feelings and bonds are produced and sustained by the invisible presence of a variety of leisure commodities. At the turn of the 20th century, the commodities offered by the nascent consumer market channelled and transformed the definitions of romance and love: leisure goods (as movies or restaurants) now provided symbolic outlets to channel and ritualize romantic feelings. Diffuse longing for 'fun', the desire to experiment with new forms of sexual freedom and the search of emotional intimacy were systematically invoked by the nascent leisure industry, to the point where it became difficult to disentangle the emotion of 'feeling romantic' from its consumer experience. 'Walking on the beach in a far away country', 'going to a French restaurant' or 'going to a formal dance', would become cultural synonyms with what is conventionally called a 'romantic atmosphere'. This in turn suggests that emotional romantic affects were built in the consumption of a wide variety of leisure goods and also that goods became constitutive of romantic sentiments and relationships. (Illouz, 1997).

Emotion and taste

The second aspect of consumption that 'emotion may help clarify is the role that taste plays in regulating the mechanics of differential consumption. By viewing 'emotion' as a force that compels action, provides agency, yet does not assume the rational consciousness or autonomy of the subject, we are in a better position to explain how 'taste' – the central mechanism regulating membership in lifestyle groups – is activated. Indeed the notion of 'taste' plays a central role in the increasingly large literature in the sociology of consumption inspired by the works of Pierre Bourdieu. However, because for Bourdieu taste is a form of 'social judgment' enacted through symbolic classifications, it has suffered from a too strong cognitivist bias. Instead, I suggest taste is activated not only by classification schemes – themselves the product of one's social position – but also by emotional operators that can range from 'intense and primitive feelings to complex, intellectual evaluations' (Ben Zeev, 2000: 50). If taste is acquired through a

long process of socialization of the body, the best way to make sense of this process of acquisition is to view it as operating through emotions: disgust, emotional detachment, loyalty, fervour or emotional identification constitute emotional *dispositions* that explain, no less than the concept of 'symbolic classification', how objects are unconsciously yet wilfully incorporated in an ongoing process of identity-making and identity-claiming.

Emotions, consumption and social relationships

Finally, inasmuch as objects and experiences of consumption always bear the trace of social relationships that they signal and constitute – they should be viewed as nodal points around which converge a multiplicity of relationships between self and others. Because social relationships generate and are in turn sustained by an ongoing emotional work, and inasmuch as commodities help organize and negotiate these social relationships, it seems an obvious move to argue that commodities and emotions are 'somehow' intertwined with each other. In particular, emotion may help clarify the process of de-commodification of consumer objects, that is, the fact that consumer objects can be taken out of the circuit of exchange and acquire a personal meaning in a network of social relationships. Indeed, if objects acquire different values in different 'spheres of exchange' and consequently circulate differently in them (Appadurai, 1986), that mode of circulation cannot be disentangled from the emotional logic at work in that sphere. For example, the fact that in the 19th-century children became 'priceless' (Zelizer, 1985) cannot be divorced from the emerging definitions of parental and more especially motherly love. Objects can leave the sphere of consumption and the market and become incorporated in interpersonal relationships when they circulate in spheres of meaning that are also and perhaps primarily emotional spheres.

CONSUMPTION AND EMOTION

If, as I have argued so far, emotion is essential for the understanding of consumption then it means that the sociology of consumption has either ignored a fundamental component of consumption or has been in fact dealing with it all along without acknowledging or making explicit its presence. I retain the latter hypothesis and suggest that we re-read much of the sociology of consumption as using and referring, unknowingly, to emotions. That is, I suggest that either some of the positions of sociologists of consumption do not make sense without assuming the presence of emotions or that some sociologists have indeed acknowledged certain emotions as central to consumption, but have not theorized that fact.

Without an adequate meta-theory, the sociology of consumption remains oblivious to the ways in which a variety of emotions pervade consumption. In the following, I will therefore review some of the current works on consumption and show that when put together, these works point to a systematic connection between consumption and emotion.

Background emotions and consumption

I suggest that consumption is structured by emotions in at least two ways: following Martha Nussbaum, I draw a distinction between background and situational emotions (Nussbaum, 2001). A background emotion persists through a variety of contexts and situations. More: a background emotion is an emotion that is structurally embedded in the culture of consumption. A situational emotion, on the other hand, is attached to a particular context and situation. Situational emotions refer less to the structural properties of the culture of consumption than to the immediate contextual features in which the activity of consumption occurs. Here again, in practice, the two types of emotions are closely intertwined but ought to be analytically distinguished.

Disappointment and boredom

Economists A.O. Hirshmann (1977) and Scitovsky (1976) have each, in separate studies, suggested that *disappointment* is at the heart of the dynamic of consumption. In his analysis of consumer dissatisfaction, Scitovsky suggests that consumption is contained within and activated by two separate psychological drives: one is a drive to excitement, the other is a drive to comfort. Excitement derives from encountering new objects or having new experiences. Comfort, on the other hand, is obtained when familiarity replaces novelty. According to Scitovsky, neither the drive to excitement nor the drive to comfort can be sustained. For a continuous level of arousal would lead to discomfort, while comfort always eventually results in boredom, which can be alleviated only by a new experience of excitement. Summarizing Scitovsky's argument, the economist A.O. Hirschman suggests that there is 'a contradiction between pleasure and comfort: for pleasure to be experienced, comfort must be sacrificed temporarily' (Hirschman, 1982: 27). This has one important implication: the excitement that accompanies or precedes consumption often ends in boredom, which in turn marks the start of a new desire for consumption. Thus, we may say that for these two economists, two fundamental emotions invisibly regulate consumption: the emotion of disappointment and the emotion of boredom.

Although cast in a different theoretical framework, an example of the relevance of these emotions for the analysis of consumption can be found in Betty Friedan's notorious *Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 1984). In her book, Friedan argued that the boredom and joylessness of the American suburban housewife were key to understanding why she was made into a frantic and enthusiastic consumer. Because the tasks and chores of housecleaning and housekeeping were so tedious, boring and meaningless, the housewife was easily persuaded by advertisers to transform her home and her work inside the home into arenas in which she could exert (the illusion of) competence and 'expertise' (in a wide variety of cleaning products that would presumably make her task more enjoyable because more varied).

This example suggests not only that disappointment and boredom are at the heart of consumption, but also that the relationship they entertain with the emotion of excitement may constitute the key to understanding what makes consumption compulsive: if the excitement attached to the consumption of novel goods is doomed to end in boredom then only the purchase of novel goods can alleviate disappointment and boredom. In other words, according to Scitovsky and Hirschman, consumption is the result of the cyclical passage from excitement to comfort and from there to boredom, which in turn results in a new cycle of excitement, comfort and boredom. Incidentally, this is congruent with the view put forward by philosopher of emotions, Aaron Ben-Zeev, that emotion is a basic reaction to change. 'Emotions typically occur when we perceive highly significant changes in our situation' (Ben Zeev, 1996: 228). As Hirshman and Scitovsky suggest, consumption has institutionalized change, which both produces and leans on an invisible and pervasive dynamic of emotional change. Because change and excitement are structurally embedded in the culture of consumption, boredom – the only emotion characterized by and, in fact, caused by a lack of change – becomes culturally salient.

Envy and anxiety

A second example of a background emotion occurs in the context of competitive consumption. I suggest that some of the descriptions and explanations traditionally provided for competitive consumption can make sense only if we assume the existence of specific background emotions. Veblen has famously argued that the search for honour, reputability, and the esteem of others, are key to explaining why people amass riches and display them in acts of ostentatious and wasteful consumption (Veblen, 1934). It is because of this need for approval by others that people engage in competitive behaviour, since outdoing others is precisely praiseworthy. This attempt

to outdo others is in turn symbolized in conspicuous and wasteful consumption. This sets off the dynamic of what Veblen called 'pecuniary emulation', or the desire to 'keep up with the Joneses'. This view clearly suggests that the impetus of consumption is of a social and emotional nature. In order to understand the motivational structure of pecuniary emulation, we must bring in three key emotions – and the relationship they entertain with each other: envy, status anxiety and self-esteem.

Envy

Envy is an emotion whose chief concern is inequality (Ben Zeev, 1992). Structurally embedded in the emotion of envy is the assumption that one is equal to the object of one's envy and that this object enjoys privileges one is deprived of. Envy consists in the desire to remove the inequality separating the subject from the object of envy. This is a particularly apt way to describe consumer culture, for envy is likely to be particularly predominant in those societies – like consumer societies – which have both a strong democratic ethos and yet are sustained by social and economic inequalities and by an intense work of social distinction. Indeed, envy is most intensely felt when the difference separating the subject and object of envy is small rather than large. In other words, a member of the middle class is far more likely to be envious of the glamorous vacation or beautiful home purchased by his/her next-door neighbour than the 25-bedroom castle in Provence purchased by the multi-millionaire CEO of a powerful company. This is congruent with the view – especially defended by Bourdieu (1979) – that the dynamics of consumption is one of emulation and competition and that this competition – and the resulting emotion of envy – is most visible and intense at the seam lines separating very proximate groups or among the sub-fractions of a single social group. Envy is thus fundamental to explaining the mechanics of competition. Moreover, envy can generate consumption not only through one's negative comparison of self to others, but also through one's anticipation of others' emotion. As John Berger suggests, 'the spectator-buyer is meant . . . to imagine herself transformed by the product into an object of envy for others, an envy which will then justify loving herself' (in Holt and Schor, 2000: 82). Here envy is imaginatively projected on to others and is connected with the emotion of self love, thus suggesting, again, that the dynamics of consumption includes more than one emotion, that it intertwines both positive and negative emotions, and that this emotional dynamics involves the relationship of the self to (real or imagined) others.

Status anxiety

Competitive consumption generates not only envy but also another important emotion, namely anxiety. Contrary to Darwin's claim that 'emotions of low spirits' – such as anxiety – invite inaction (see Barbalet, 1998: 85), I suggest that the kind of anxiety that is generated by consumer culture invites frantic action. Anxiety takes two main forms: the one that is best well-known to sociologists is status-anxiety, which derives essentially from an uncertainty about one's social status and the attempt to compensate for it through conspicuous consumption. For example, in his analysis of the expansion of the consumer market in 16th-century England, Grant McCracken (1991) has suggested that 'the consumer boom of the 16th century' was provoked by the social competition that 'took place among the Elizabethan nobility'. Indeed, noble men became dependent on royal favours for their social survival, which meant that they had to spend more (on the Queen's behalf and on their own behalf.) These noble men left their locality to go to court to London where they found themselves competing with others for the Queen's attentions and favours.

> His [the noble man's] reaction to this new crowd of status-seekers was one of anxiety-stricken concern for his honor, his social standing, and his relationship to the monarch. It was almost inevitable that he should have been drawn into a riot of consumption. (McCracken 1991:12).

This anxiety is likely to be particularly acute in modern consumption in which the 'contest may go on and on' with the number of participants in that contest only growing (Bauman, 1988: 57). Quoting Veblen, Bauman suggests that 'since the struggle is substantially a race for respectability on the basis of invidious comparisons, no approach to a definitive attainment is possible' (auoted in Bauman, 1988: 58). Anxiety here is closely intertwined with envy, the quest for respectability and social competitiveness.

But anxiety is connected to consumption in yet another way. Consumption entails a painstaking process of self-fashioning through commodities. This process of self-fashioning is made all the more strenuous when the market recruits the consumer through the sysiphian exercise of his/her freedom to choose who he/she is. Consumer capitalism sells goods by producing infinitesimal differences that call on consumers to be thoroughly individual and authentic, whether that true self be that of an athlete, an adventurer or a housewife. Consumption calls for a sysiphian, endless project of self-making in which the consumer is summoned to find him-/herself in a multiplicity of minute acts of self-creation. This is why

the groups that are most '*likely to feel anxiety* are those with a tendency to high stylisation (youth, cultural intermediaries, conformists)' (Warde, 1994: 893, emphasis added).[3]

This anxiety is redoubled by a fundamental property of emotions, namely the fact that their intensity is likely to be increased by the presence and availability of alternative scenarios. For example, to use one of Ben-Zeev's examples, our dread at learning that someone who was meant to be on another plane boarded a plane that subsequently crashed is far greater than if that person was meant to be on that plane all along. Again, this insight is particularly apt for characterizing consumer culture, for consumer culture is characterized by the relentless availability of competing scenarios concerning the good life and possible selves. This permanent availability of alternative scenarios is likely to make even more acute the anxiety involved in the process of fashioning one's own self, simply because it engages us in an endless process of self-comparison with others. The result is that, as Zygmunt Bauman put it, while 'production is a collective endeavour[, c]onsumption is a thoroughly individual, solitary and in the end lonely activity' (Bauman, 1998: 30). We may well add that it is also loaded with a diffuse anxiety, for such loneliness, based on the incessant activity of free choice, brings with it the possibility of self-doubt and self-blame when failures in image-management arise (see Warde, 1994: 879).

Rebellion

The fourth background emotion that might be viewed as structural to consumption concerns what Herbert Marcuse has called controlled or repressive desublimation (Marcuse, 1955). The consumer, having been totally integrated into the production system through the harmonious and seamless imbrication of the private and public spheres, becomes an agent of the capitalist system through the development of specialized needs, which the capitalist system is in turn eager to cater to. In particular, the consumer is put in the position where he/she must be 'liberated'. But this liberation takes the form of a 'desublimation', that is, a liberation that takes place within the context of consumer culture and is even defined by it. In this way, consumer culture fosters feelings of rebelliousness that in turn become vehicles for consumption. Two short examples will illustrate this. In the 1920s, cigarette smoking meant for women sexual openness and even naughtiness. 'In the 1920s, cigarettes came to be a personal and social marker for "the new woman," a sign of divorce from the past and of inclusion in the group of the new, young, and liberated' (Schudson, 1984: 196). Many consumer products geared to women played with the message of the

feminist revolution – rebellion against a patriarchal order and self-realization through autonomy and freedom (Bordo, in Schor and Holt, 2000).

Another example can be found in Thomas Frank's *Conquest of Cool*. In this book, Frank argues and examines the ways in which consumerism channelled the desire for rebellion. In particular, the consumer culture that emerged after the students' movements simultaneously channelled pre-existing diffuse feelings of rebellion and codified them through oppositional sub-cultures of consumption. This is apparent in advertising strategies. 'Recent TV ads for the Isuzu Rodeo off-road vehicle tap into busters' feelings of rebellion' (Frank, 1997: 234). Repressive desublimation that both elicits and channels rebellion feelings is of particular relevance to understanding the market of consumer goods geared to teenagers.

To sum up, disappointment, boredom, excitement, envy, self-esteem, anxiety and the search for an authentic self through 'rebellious consumption' are structurally embedded in and constitutive of the culture of consumption. These emotions are both generated by the culture of consumption and in turn generate further consumer practices. It is important to notice that these emotions may vary in their intensity and in their level of self-awareness. Some might be the unspoken and implicit background of our consumer choices, while others might be rather self-reflexive. Some may have preceded the rise of consumer culture (as envy), others might have become particularly salient with its advent (e.g. boredom).

At face value, my argument may seem close to Campbell's seminal thesis that the culture of consumption has been intertwined with the excitation of emotions. But where Campbell substitutes one emotion usually deemed to explain consumer behaviour – emulative envy – for another – the desire to protect one's claim to virtue and morality – I suggest that it is unreasonable to assume that one single emotion is at the heart of consumer culture (Campbell, 1993). It seems far more intuitive and in line with our current understanding both of consumer culture and of emotion to assume that the variety and complex mix of emotions lie at the heart of consumption.

Situational emotions

Situational emotions pertain less to the structural dynamic of consumption than to the underlying motivation of specific individuals for consuming particular goods or for shopping in a particular way. An attention to situational emotions would require a thorough investigation of the phenomenology of shopping, bearing in mind that shopping mixes both

situational and background emotions. This is congruent with Falk and Campbell's view that the motives for shopping have 'little to do with the act of buying' (Falk and Campbell, 1997: 188). In the view of these authors, the motives for shopping are varied and range from:

> role playing, diversion from the routine of daily life, self-gratification, learning about new trends and ideas, physical activity, sensory stimulation, social experiences outside the home with friends, communication or gossip with others, peer group interaction, enjoying status and authority, and finally the pleasures of haggling. (Falk and Campbell 1997: 188)

Clearly, this suggests that shopping cannot be reduced to its instrumental aspect and that it is an autotelic activity that contains a variety of affects. What is thus required here is an ethnography of shopping as involving a variety of transient affects and emotions. Lack of space means that I cannot develop this idea but will only provide a few brief illustrations and possible directions of study.

In his study *Shopping, Place, and Identity*, Daniel Miller shows how the activity of shopping in malls is motivated by the *fear of others*. Central to the shopping centre is the experience of '[providing] a domesticated shopping space where middle class consumers feel safe' (Miller, 1998: 112). Fear and longing for security orient our spatial choices of where and how to consume. Or to give another example, in his study of celebrity cults, O'Guinn argues that celebrity – which might be said to be at the centre of the consumption of popular culture – is motivated by love. Barry Manilow, for example, is referred to by his fans as a significant other, 'most typically as lover, husband, or friend' (O'Guinn, 2000: 160). More generally, I would argue that love is an important component of the consumption of what we may call 'charismatic goods' – the commodification and marketing of the talent or personality of a single person that in turn invite a great deal of 'parasocial interaction', namely living and entertaining a real lived relationship with a distant, fictional yet loved character, with the result that this parasocial relationship entails a great deal of consumer activity. Although the object, intensity and form of love is likely to vary with one's gender, ethnic, economic and social position, such parasocial love is a fundamental ingredient of the consumption of celebrities. Many students of advertising have shown how numerous consumer goods are sold in virtue of their association with a loved or admired star, a fact that is very well exemplified by the campaign of Nike and its association with Michael Jordan. I would suggest that this love contains and generates another funda-

mental emotion, also central to shopping and consumption, namely, confidence. Confidence is an emotion – and not simply a 'feeling' or 'affect' – and plays a fundamental role in economic behaviour (Barbalet, 1998). As Barbalet claims, confidence arises 'from acceptance and recognition in social relationships' (Barbalet, 1998: 87) and from the feeling that one is wanted (1998: 89). Confidence also results from access to resources. Consumption provides access to confidence both through mechanisms of social recognition and through the sheer sense of material possessions. This is particularly likely to be the case when the goods are associated with loved stars: goods function as narcissistic appendixes to identity through the projected fantasy of the love, admiration, attraction or envy others may feel toward us, which in turn will be conducive to confidence. In that sense, 'confidence' always opens up the self to a projected future. We may suggest that in this respect, consumer goods stand opposed to another category of object: the relic. By definition, the relic bears the traces of a single dead person (or past sacred event) made present through the ritual appropriation of the object. The relic marks the irruption of the past inside the present through a unique and unreproducible object. Consumer goods are similar to relics in that they also open up inside the present a temporal breach: however what is opened up here is not the past but the future, through infinitely reproducible goods. As Barbalet put it, 'confidence is an emotion through which a possible future is brought into the present' (Barbalet, 1998: 87). It is the imaginative projection of oneself in the future through the admiration, respect or love of others that makes consumption generate the emotion of confidence, in turn central to the activity of shopping. As in Randall Collins's interaction ritual chains, such confidence is built incrementally, through the accumulation of numerous microscopic interactions, here viewed as the outcome of the successful use and display of consumer goods, in turn supposed to generate or maintain a general state of confidence.

A final example of a situational emotion can be found in the consumption of touristic sites that are designed to produce intense experiences of nostalgia and authenticity. Hyperreal sites are designed in such a way that they reconstruct an ideal past that becomes compelling in virtue of the fact that it synthesizes meanings of authenticity (the past being always more true or authentic than the present) and nostalgia for a past that may be real but may also be imagined, as was the case with the Santa Claus Village in Finland (Graillot, 2003). Nostalgia is deemed to be central to the construction and pleasure dervied from hyperreal environments.

All these examples suggest that in order to understand the consumer dynamics of situational emotions, it is imperative we pay close attention to

the ways in which emotions orient the activity of shopping as well as to the ways in which goods are packaged and designed so as to generate specific emotions in the context of specific social relationships. In particular, I would suggest that if 'the history of shopping is largely a history of women, who have overwhelmingly been the principal shoppers both in reality and in the multifarious representations of shopping' (Bowlby, 2000: 7) and if women's socialization during the 20th century has put a particular premium on the experience and expression of emotions, clarifying the entanglement of women's emotions and shopping activities might shed an important light on the role women have played in the history of consumption.

Thus unbeknownst to itself, the sociology of consumption has long dealt with the category of emotion and cannot provide a reasonable account of consumer practices without it. Future research should investigate the interaction between structural and situational emotions and should produce an empirically thicker and richer account of their role in consumption. Moreover, it is unlikely that a single emotion (as a Veblenesque or Bourdieuian sociology would sometimes suggest) dominates the field of consumption. Rather, it seems more likely either that consumption is made possible by a complex array of emotions, or that some emotions characterize certain consumer practices, or that different emotions dominate the consumer practices of different social groups.

IMAGINATION, CONSUMPTION, EMOTIONS: THE VOLATILITY OF STABILITY

After what may seem like a long detour, let me now go back to my earlier question and ask again why the category of 'emotion' may help explain the paradox of volatility and stability of consumer's desires.

As most of the examples discussed previously suggest, the emotions triggered by and intertwined with the culture of consumption need not take place in 'real' social relations, nor be triggered by 'actual' experiences. Rather, much of the emotional power of the culture of consumption resides in the fact that emotions, while being real, are experienced on the *imaginary* mode. This means that consumer emotions need not be the result of concrete social relationships, but rather that they often are the result of consumers' interactions with a realm of signs and images. More exactly, the emotions that drive consumption or are intertwined with it, are no less the result of the imagination as the result of concrete real social relationships. Indeed, from the end of the 19th century, consumption was associated with the excitation of the imagination: department stores, advertising, movies,

billboard posters, window displays, women's magazines, sales catalogues – all of these presented a world of goods that gained cultural power in virtue of its association with glamorous figures and the core symbols of consumer society. The efficiency of these symbolic representations of goods lay primarily in their ability to propel the subject into a realm of possibilities entertained through the exercise of imagination (this is incidentally the very direction taken by Appadurai's work). An example of this can be found in a contemporary novel in which the hero suddenly craves a new and racy car. Faced with his wife's surprise at his desire for a new car, he self-reflectively muses:

> What could I tell her? You don't tell a wife that some inanimate object somehow represents all those things you know you are never going to have. The place you are never going to see, the women you are never going to love, the things you are never going to do. You can't tell a wife all that stuff' (Parsons, 1999).

In this example, consumer culture creates desires for imaginary places, women and experiences that cannot be satisfied. This multiple and diffuse desire is in turn displaced onto a definite object of consumption – the car – which summarizes so-to-speak this man's dreams, desires and fantasies. Longing for new loves and for excitement is simultaneously satisfied through a material and imaginary practice.

As Colin Campbell has suggested, consumption is driven by dreams and fantasies that connect the individual to the question of who he/she is. In his seminal *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Consumerism*, Colin Campbell has argued that consumer culture has capitalized on the very losses generated by accelerated production, most notably what we may broadly call 'losses in meaning' (Campbell, 1987). In response, consumer culture has put at its centre stage the 'romantic self', a self full of feeling and longing for authenticity. The romantic self not only euphemizes consumption under spiritual meanings, but in fact becomes the vector of further consumption. To quote Don Slater on Campbell, consumerism is a culture in which 'emotions are stimulated, incited, made into obsession through the use of imagination, the production of "longing" and imaginative dissatisfaction, along the model of day-dream' (Slater, 1997: 96). Campbell offers a very compelling approach to consumption – namely the view that it is based on the excitation of emotion and the imagination. In his discussion of anticipated consumer experiences Campbell argues that 'the essential activity of consumption is . . . not the actual selection, purchase or use of the products, but the imaginative pleasure seeking to

which the product image lends itself' (Campbell, 1987). Yet, he does not specify the ways in which imagination and emotions constitute each other to form the consumer self. The two concepts of imagination and emotions – central to his argument – have remained undertheorized and the exact nature of their relationship left undiscussed.

The notion of imagination has a number of characteristics that may help clarify its connection to emotions. Put in the jargon of philosophers, consumer imagination has both a cognitive and an appetitive dimension. Cognitive because 'imagination' is put into motion by cultural scenarios of the 'good life', and appetitive in the sense that it is oriented toward the *desire* of objects, persons or forms of life. It is in this dual capacity to be both cognitive and appetitive that imagination provides an important way to understand how consumer culture produces emotions.

At a simple level, imagination is 'that which represents the absent as present, with all the thoughts and feelings it would bring if it were present' (Feagin and Maynard, 1997: 41). In this view, imagination is the capacity to substitute for the 'real' experience of the real object, by feeling sensations that are close to what they would be in real life. In other words, imagination leans and relies on sensations, feelings and emotions to make present that which is absent. To imagine myself in this beautiful dress is to invoke simultaneously a concrete image, as well as my emotions when wearing it (a kind of self-confidence provoked by my anticipated joy at others' envy and admiration, or a feeling of sensuousness, etc.). Imagination is thus, as Jeffrey Alexander put it, 'intrinsic to the very process of representation. It seizes upon an inchoate experience from life, and forms it, through association, condensation, and aesthetic creation, into some specific shape' (Alexander et al., 2004: 9).

Imagination has thus creative capacities, in that it not only evokes and conjures emotions but also generates them. Philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard's concept of imagination argues forcefully for the imagination as a creative faculty of the mind. For Bachelard, imagination is 'the faculty of *deforming* images provided by perception' (quoted in Kaplan, 1972: 2). Emotions play an important role in deciding the direction in which images provided by sensuous perception will be deformed: whether this particular advertising provokes in me feelings of anxiety or sensuousness will shape differently the content of my imagination and day-dream. But the converse is also importantly true, that is, imagination also generates emotions and in that respect consumer imagination seems to be a special case of 'fictional imagination'. In the context of fictional reading, Bijoy Boruah defines imagination as 'species of unasserted thought – a truth that is indifferent to

truth on referential considerations (Boruah, 1988: 3). Unasserted beliefs are beliefs about actions and characters that we know do not exist. Yet these 'unasserted beliefs' – imagination – provoke real emotions. Boruah suggests that fictional imagination can trigger action through a specific subset of emotions he calls 'fictional emotions'. To be sure, fictional emotions are continuous and contiguous with 'real-life' emotions but are not equivalent to them in that they can be triggered by things we know to be unreal, and even impossible ('I cry at the end of *Anna Karenina*, even if I know she has never existed'; 'I leave the movie happy because the main protagonists managed to reunite at the end'). Similarly, consumer culture thrives on emotions that do not necessarily have a referent in reality: nostalgia, confidence, envy or anxiety might be provoked in reference to real persons but may very well also occur, as we say, 'in one's head'. I may know that this toothpaste will not make me joyous or that a particular brand of car does not 'really' make me more aggressive and competitive, yet these commodity-signs and commodity-narratives based on 'unasserted beliefs' do generate types of emotions, similar to the emotions we may feel when reading a novel in 'real life'. The question is precisely to know how it does that.

The style of consumer imagination

In his celebrated *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (1991) suggests that ways of imagining communities differ not according to whether they are true or false but rather according to *their style*. Similarly, the kind of daydreaming and imagination excited and elicited by consumer culture have a particular style, which in turn may explain how emotions are elicited by consumer culture. To understand this style, let me start this discussion by quoting a paragraph from a 1987 *Time Magazine* (quoted in Berry, 1994: 3):

> A Lake District Hotel is offering weekend breaks costing nearly 1000 pounds a day. Guests paying 1995 pounds each will be served grouse, venison, filet steak, lobster, caviar, truffles and paté de foie gras. Ms. Caroline Graves, a director of the Hotel, said 'the big spending break is for people who work so hard that holidays are a rarity and have to be crammed full of a year's worth of pleasure . . . Those include return helicopter travel from up to 200 miles, a self drive or chauffeur driven Rolls-Royce, the hotel's luxuries suite with its spa bath and sunbathing tower, a case of champagne per person, the pick of the cellar, a personal chef to cook whatever takes the guests'

> fancy, and two sheepskin coats and personalized crystal decanter and glasses as souvenirs.

This vignette elicits imagination and emotions in an obvious and intuitive way: what elicits our emotions – such as envy, or excitement, or an anticipated self-confidence – is a set of fuzzy imaginary associations and vice versa, the act of imagining this luxurious vacation is sustained by the subtle emotions that now underlie it. Thus, in more than one way the emotions elicited here bear an affinity with the emotions that may accompany the exercise of the imagination involved in the act of reading fiction. Yet I would suggest that in consumer culture, emotions and daydreaming are intertwined through a particular cultural style. This is what I try to briefly analyze now. What does this style consist of?

1. The first characteristic of the consumer imagination is that *frustration* plays a central role in it. In this respect, in his famous essay on the imagination, Sartre argued that when confronting a difficult situation in which we are unable to get what we want – perhaps the most distinctive position in which consumer culture puts us – that situation will be transformed through our imagination in order to make it more bearable (see Sartre, 1948 and Crossley, 1998). Frustration thus bears an intimate affinity with imagination. To use an example provided by Nick Crossley (1998), through imaginative scenarios, the object of my envy can be turned into an object of hatred, which in turn will make me forget my initial envy. As he suggests, emotions not only constitute the core of this imaginative 'magical' attitude but also can generate other emotions through an emotional chain process. Frustration sets off a dynamic that makes emotions 'magical' in the sense that they combine freely reality with imaginary desires that in turn can become impervious to reality. Through imagination, envy can turn into hatred, desire for another into fear, love into anxiety, anxiety into rebellion, anxiety into a search for honour, etc. In other words, the use of imagination – when provoked by frustration – *lengthens* the chain through which different emotions connect to each other, *bundles them together* and is thus likely to make the emotional dynamics deeply ambivalent and unstable. Frustration makes the emotional dynamic all the more powerful that some of its components and processes become repressed.
2. Let me now make a further point: luxury goods are paradigmatic of the dynamic of imagination–emotion–frustration through the cultivation of a more general process of *refinement*. Contrary to needs,

which are always fixed, refinement is inherently unstable: even the most gourmet of food can always be surpassed. Wine, coffee, tea, fine cuisine, clothing, jewellery, furniture and many other almost endless commodities have been submitted to an increasing process of refinement, refinement being the most basic economic and cultural engine of consumer capitalism. Refinement implies that a commodity is subdivided in a variety of versions of itself, each version presumably expressing both an improvement over the 'standard generic good' and a nuance of it (obvious examples are tea or coffee), each nuance consumed expressing in turn one's own singular increasingly refined taste. The process of refinement has two important implications: one is that goods become the object of an elaborate lexical work (think of the dizzying variety of names one must master when going into a specialist coffee shop); the second is that goods become inherently transient: to be refined is precisely to look for ways to improve the shade supposed to express one's deepening sense of singularity and refinement. 'A luxury is not something static, it is dynamic; it is subject to development as the desires, and necessarily attendant beliefs, are met and then fueled with further quantitative modifications or refinements' (Berry, 1994: 18). Inasmuch they become highly differentiated, linguistic categories – names, adjectives, adverbs – become increasingly important in enabling the consumer to draw fine distinctions between a variety of similar yet imperceptibly and subtly different goods. In this way, there is a considerable expansion of the awareness of the sensory world, of one's needs and emotions, and of the vocabulary linking the world of goods to that of desires and emotions.

Thus the dynamic of refinement implies an increasing attention to the realm of the sensory, which leans on an increasing differentiation of commodities through linguistic categories. Buying a sofa of a light orange colour means one will be faced with a dizzying variety of fabrics and colours, which run from 'early sunset', 'camel' or 'sand', to 'peach cream', 'soft apricot', 'light salmon' and many others. As the advertisement for a furniture designer put it: 'Our entire collection of furniture, carpets, wallpaper, and window treatments is available in an *infinite array of fabrics, finishes, and configurations*' (New York Times, 2004, emphasis added). In other words, the dynamic of refinement generates both an increased and sustained attention to the sensory level of our experiences and a considerable expansion of our cultural lexicon to guide us in this realm of increasingly developed sensations. The synthesis of these two levels – the sensory and the linguistic – provides

the key to another characteristic of the consumer imagination.

3. In the luxury vignette evoked above, imagination is not only an invocation of mental images, derived from the depths of one's own psychic life but also 'a synthesizer of all modes of consciousness' (Kaplan, 1972: 5). In other words, imagination mediates between and synthesizes sensations and feelings on the one hand and discursive thought, and conscious linguistic and visual categories on the other. The process of refining goods has consisted precisely in combining different levels of consciousness, linguistic, visual, perceptual and emotional. As the vignette evoked above suggests, luxury elicits emotions by catering to various senses through a profusion of words and visual images. It is in the synthesis of different modes of consciousness that consumer imagination is best aroused. A brief example of the history of consumption can illustrate this claim.

   During the 18th century, the market for luxury goods expanded considerably as the ranks of middle and upper middle classes swelled (see Brewer, 1997: 74). Now, it is interesting to observe that a not insignificant amount of luxury goods that were intensely desired during the 18th century were exotic (they came from foreign and remote places) and were characterized by the fact that they exerted particularly powerful sensorial stimuli. Let me take the example of four colours that appeared in 18th-century England and that were used in textiles. The first two colours are 'Turkey red' (to be found in cotton and linen textiles imported from India and the Levant, see Lowengrad, 1999: 104) and 'Nankeen' (yellow-brown found in China and later in India, 1999: 104). The original foreign source of the colour and of the textile is preserved in the names given to these colours. Two other colours that appeared also in the 18th century but were invented in England, were interestingly enough also given names that located them outside England: one was 'Pompadour' (pink shade) and the other one was 'Prussian blue'. These colours serve as examples of the ways in which a powerful visual stimulus such as colour was combined with linguistic categories that, by definition, aroused the imagination in their invocation of foreign and unknown locales. The importance of exoticism in the development of consumer culture can be found in 19th-century America as well. As the historian of American consumption Jackson Lears suggests: 'Cosmetics as well as food and even laxative advertising wallowed in exoticism during the last two-thirds of the nineteenth-century. Breath and body perfumes, talcum powders and toilet water, all were placed in exotic settings

redolent of luxuriant sensuality' (Lears, 1989a: 54). The point of all this is that in the process of refining the colours of fabrics, consumer imagination, in contradistinction to purely literary imagination, worked by synthesizing aspects of the sensory world – touch and vision – with linguistic categories with strong connotations, with the result that these new goods could be a new source of imagination and emotional craving. Let me be more precise about what is at stake here.

Literary scholar Elaine Scarry has argued that we connect to the sensory realm in three possible ways: one is through immediate sensory content (the ordinary sensory grasp of the world); the other is through 'delayed sensory content' (which provides instructions for the production of actual sensory content as with a musical score for example); and the third has no actual sensory content (e.g. fiction), but produces imagination through what Scarry calls perceptual mimesis (Scarry, 1999). Scarry assigns each imaginary mode to a specific art (painting has sensory content, music or poetry offer a delayed sensory content, while fiction produces the imagination through perceptual mimesis). Consumer culture – and this is a crucial point – elicits the imagination by constantly soliciting these three levels, sometimes simultaneously and sometimes alternatively: the sensory realm is made obvious by the multiplication and increasing refinement of the sensory aspects of goods. A great deal of money and research is invested by companies in order to improve and multiply the sensory stimuli provided by commodities (children's toys or computer designs are a very good example of that process). Indeed, an important recent trend in marketing is focused precisely on marketing goods through the use of scent, touch, sound and even taste. In fact this new form is of marketing is called 'emotional branding' (Weisman, 2003). As the brand manager of Air France put it: 'The more a brand is present on all possible points of contact with a consumer, the stronger the brand is and the more the consumer retains a brand image' (Weisman, 2003). This is why Air France is investing 300 million euros to refurbish the cabins of its long-haul fleet. A key part of this budget will go to an extensive music programme that will be played during the stressful times of boarding and disembarking. In other words, goods insert themselves in an imaginary economy of self and identity by eliciting and synthesizing a variety of sensations and emotions. Clearly, throughout the history of consumption, there has been an intensification of the marketing of commodities as vectors and sources of a variety of sensations and emotions. As Scott Lash puts it:

> designers in today's design-intensive post-industrial economy heavily invested affect in the tools of design . . . and in the artefacts, the things that they design. But this has not a lot to do with a utilitarian calculus. Indeed, though a tool of design is a means, the more it is invested with affect, the more we live with these tools and artefacts in our everyday activities, the less these objects are utilitarian commodities, and the more they become not commodities but 'singularities'. (Lash, 2002: 42).

Given that much of our prior knowledge of commodities is mediated by the realm of advertising, consumer fantasies are elicited by the ways in which advertising evokes the sensory character of goods. In this respect, I would argue that advertising simultaneously provides a 'delayed sensory content' – that is, the instructions for the production of the sensory content – and 'perceptual mimesis'. A simple example of an advertisement that provides instruction for the production of sensory content would be an advertisement for Camel cigarettes in which we see a man lying near what seems to be a lake, with a caption reading 'Slow down. Pleasure up'. Or in an advertisement for a frequent-flyer programme that shows two beautiful Asian women carrying luscious and exotic flower baskets, we can read 'Travel back in time to the wonders of Luang Prabang, a fascinating world heritage site teeming with ancient cultural landmarks'. These ads clearly give us the instructions for producing an actual sensory experience, thus creating a relationship between them and the actual consumer experience that is similar to the relationship between the musical score and the actual played music. But advertising also uses mimetic perception, that is, it requires from us to imagine not the object itself but rather what it means to own it without any sensory grasp of the world. This is an example of an ad from *Time Magazine* in 2003 for a Rolex watch, showing a good-looking blonde woman, Diana Krall:

> Her piano will woo your heart while her voice seduces your soul. Diana Krall's fingers dance across the piano keyboard with delicious grace and delicate power. Her voice will grip your heart with its gravelly texture in one moment, and then melt it with its sensual smoothness the next. She creates a sound that not only satiates the most sophisticated jazz purists, but has broadened the aural pleasures of pop audiences around the world . . . Among the great divas of jazz, there is a new name: Diana Krall.

In the text of this advertisement, the object itself is absent. We are invited to think of it by imagining a character, who here has a name, a profession, a face. Almost from the beginning, advertising invited consumers to identify with individual stars or well-known personas because advertisers knew intuitively that imagination is best exercised when readers/consumers identify with a character that is now in focus. Indeed, in fascinating experiments, the psychologist Paul Harris has shown that when adults are asked to imagine an event, they do it by working out its emotional implications from the standpoint of the protagonist who is in focus in one's mind. (Harris, 2000). Thus the advertisement for Rolex works by having us focus on one character and imagine her living a glamorous musical life. What characterizes this character is the fact that she provides us with a variety of sensory instructions: she makes us hear the subtle and rich textures of her music, the touch of her piano, and she makes us see her, with the Rolex watch at her wrist. In other words, even the non-perceptual content of advertising works by actively mimicking a variety of sensations or sensory experiences, with the result, I would argue, that the object – the Rolex watch – is invoked through the mimetic perception of a variety of sensations, which in turn will enable the work of emotions to appropriately take place.

4. More exactly, and here we get to a last important characteristic of consumer imagination that pertains to the ways in which advertising content is organized, inquiring about the question of why fiction material elicits emotions, Kendall Walton argues that vividness is the cause. Vividness is defined as the ability of some representations to provoke the mind by relating, contrasting and invoking clear objects in the mind. Many objects of consumption are made vivid through advertising, which incessantly uses a large battery of rhetorical devices, such as metaphor, contrast, hyperbole, understatement, metonymie, to present their object in a way that will stand out in the flow of perceptions and memory. Advertising has also another important additional characteristic, namely the fact that its content is mostly realistic. Realistic representations are more likely to generate imagination and emotions because they mimic ordinary perceptions. Indeed, cognitive psychologist Andrew Ortony and his associates have argued that emotions are particularly likely to be elicited if a fictional situation is described in a realistic way (Ortony et al., 1988). In the context of consumer culture, imagination is particularly activated by the intensely realistic aesthetics and rhetorics of advertising. Consumer

> culture is characterized by an intense realism, as is made obvious by its massive use of images, photographs and hyperrealistic style (Messaris, 1997), a quality that, as communication scholar Messaris suggests, heightens the viewer's illusion she is interacting with the real world. This realist aesthetic is particularly pronounced in advertising culture: for, contrary to the literary imagination, which is self-contained, the consumer imagination is *always* deitic; it always points to the 'real' object (the 'real' exotic vacation resort, the perfume, the bottle of cognac . . .), which is also the real economic object of the consumer narrative. Because consumer fiction is simultaneously 'referential' and 'ideal', real and imaginary, it is able to recruit consumers through a battery of emotions that have their origin in the consumer 'imagination' thus understood. This property of consumer culture explains why emotions are particularly likely to proliferate in a culture that privileges dissatisfaction, realism, imagination and the narcissistic cultivation of the self.

To summarize, I have claimed that consumption generates emotions and is in turn sustained by them through the deployment of an imagination with a particular style, likely to generate a variety of both intense and low-key emotions. This style is characterized by the centrality of frustration that is inherent in the dynamic of refinement, which in turn works by expanding the realm of the sensory through an expansion of the vocabulary of objects. This in turn has the result of creating a cultural structure in which a variety of sensory levels are mixed together. This mixture, when cast in the vivid and realistic style of advertising, is particularly likely to excite both imagination and emotions.

Let me now go back to my initial inquiry about the stability of volatility. The previous remarks may help us draw a few conclusions. Emotions are almost by definition of brief duration: it would be difficult to imagine someone feeling the same emotion in a wide variety of contexts and across a long time span, unless that person was living in a somewhat pathological state of mind. Grief, resentment or love can persist through time, but they cannot be present in every and each context. Not only are most emotions of brief duration, they are also and perhaps mostly responses to specific contexts. Emotions are the pegs around which actors shift from one situation to another. Inasmuch emotion is the 'energy-laden' side of action, we may surmise that it compels the subject to act in different ways in different contexts, with the result that action is characterized, as many analysts have repeatedly observed, by a lack of consistency, coherence and unity. Yet,

emotion – espcially when deployed through imagination – puts us in close contact with the deeper layers of our self. Emotions are a strange sociological centaur, half perpetually shifting, the other half reflecting the core and stable sense of self. This explains why the experience and expression of various emotions do not threaten the unity of the subject. Emotions can not only easily shift from one situation to the other, they can also happily coexist with each other. This is because of some of the properties of emotions previously discussed: one is that emotions exist in the mind, and are quite often generated by imagination; another is that they implicate the self in a highly energetic way and constitute the least reflexive aspect of consciousness, two properties that 'unburden' the self from the problem of being coherent and non-contradictory. Inasmuch as emotions are highly context dependent, they can and do change with the different situations within which the self is implicated. Status anxiety can happily coexist with hedonistic consumption in the same person, the quest for excitement and novelty with the desire for security, envy with feelings of solidarity, boredom with fear, anxiety with self-esteem, without fragmenting the subject or making him/her the site of unmanageable contradictions.

One of the keys to explaining the cultural power of consumption does not lie in postulating the existence of a postmodern subject forever fragmented and anarchic. Rather, it lies in the fact that like no other organized cultural institution, it mobilizes, elicits and uses a variety of emotions – love, sexual desire, nostalgia, envy, shame, anxiety, rebelliousness, self-esteem, boredom. Inasmuch as consumption mobilizes simultaneously a wide panoply of emotions through the excitation of the particular form of imagination that creates long chains of emotions and accentuates their transience, it explains why and how actors can switch swiftly from one consumer practice to another and feel a perpetual longing for goods through a variety of emotional states, whose intensity may vary from being low-key and invisible, to being engulfing. Both the volatility of emotions and the fact that several emotions can coexist with each other in imagination without violating a principle of coherence of the self provide one explanation for the fact that consumer practices are volatile – transient and changing, and yet stable – emotions always refer back to the self. The brevity of emotions, their energetic and pragmatic character, the way in which they are set off by the dynamics of imagination–frustration–refinement, the way in which emotions are made both constantly present and constantly transient in consumers' imagination, thus starts explaining the stability of volatility that is at the heart of consumer culture.

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Notes

1. It should be noted, however, that there is no one-to-one correspondence between an emotion and a physical sensation.
2. In that respect, emotion may perhaps help explain why the idea of 'choice' – on which so much of the legitimation of consumer culture rests – is not an illusion. It is the real and outcome of lived emotional dispositions with regard to consumer objects.
3. Warde himself does not agree with that claim

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Eva Illouz's research interests are in the history and sociology of emotions, and in particular in the ways in which public culture and capitalism transform and shape emotional life. She is the author of five books: *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (University of California Press, 1997), *The Culture of Capitalism* (in Hebrew; 2002); *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery: An Essay on Popular Culture* (2003), *Cold Intimacies* (Polity Press, 2007) and *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (University of California Press, 2008). *Address*: Department of Sociology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel. [email: illouz@mscc.huji.ac.il]