

The Evolution of Consumerism from a Historical and Marketing Perspective

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Intro:

Consumerism has been a concept in humanity for many decades. It is part of the foundation of much of our societies economic and social ideas that we have today. Throughout history, though consumerism has remained an important and fundamental part of culture it has also evolved with time. The marketing industry has witnessed these changes firsthand and has been a part of the evolution as well. As consumerism has evolved the marketing industry has adapted and evolved right along with it. Consumerism and marketing are two mutually beneficial concepts, they often help each other grow and evolve with the times. Consumerism has evolved and grown to be the ideology that we know today and the marketing industry has had a major impact on this evolution.

What is Consumerism:

Consumerism is an economic theory that states the idea that consumerism spending is the most desirable goal and factor in a country's economy (Masterclass, 2022). It is the ideology that consumer want and spending is good and important to a human beings well-being and happiness. (Hayes, 2022). Consumerism is a social movement that seeks to increase the power of buyers in the purchase cycle (Granzin and Grikscheit, 1976). Essentially consumerism is the movement and ideology that purchasing is good for the consumer and that the consumer should have all the power when it comes to buying stuff. This definition of consumerism have evolved for many decades.

Background History of Consumerism:

Despite humans being consumers for almost all of their time being on this earth, this modern concept of consumerism has only arrived in the past century, starting in the 1920's. This

idea of consumerism truly began to take shape after World War I (Higgs, N/A). This is because after World War I, the economic impact of consumption increased tenfold. Leading up to this time consumerism was increasingly growing in society in the 1890s, we see the rise of things like, the expansion of shops throughout the country as well as a big surge in mail-order shopping (Higgs, N/A). Historians even argue that by the eighteenth century the consumerism we see is the full-blown modern consumerism that we know (Stearns, 1997). While its clear that full blown-consumerism is truly more of a modern concept (Stearns, 2006), the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries served as a stepping stone to modern consumerism as the ideas that would become the modern concept began to slowly evolve in those centuries. In these centuries there was a global buildup of international trade and urbanism (Stearns, 2006). This buildup was a major part of societies all over the world becoming truly consumerist as wanting goods and shopping for those goods were becoming much easier to do. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there is an explosion of shops that make it easier for consumers to get the goods they need as well as maybe ones they don't need but want. As mentioned before, mail-order shopping became prevalent. All of these things led to the boom of modern consumerism in the 1920's.

Consumerism's Evolution 1920s-1980s:

Modern consumerism started in the 1920s and since then has evolved into the consumerism we have in the year 2023. From the rise of the modern consumerism concept after World War I, another leap towards the consumerism that we have today came after World War II, when the true "consumer age" begun (Issit, 2020). After World War II in the 1940s and the 1950s, consumers and consumption began to grow rapidly. The people of America had just been

through the Great Depression and the Second World War back to back and they were beginning to experience an economic freedom they hadn't before since the country's economic recovery depended on consumer spending (Issit, 2020). More and more Americans were becoming suburbanites during these two decades and a new consumerist evolution was born because buying the newest gadgets, clothes, and appliances gave these middle class American's the illusion of wealthiness (Issit, 2020). This was a major increase in consumerist ideals and it led to an increase of quick consumerist places such as fast food restaurants like McDonalds and more. Consumerism like this continued to evolve through the 60's and 70's and took another big jump in the 1980s. In the 1980s we see a large jump in consumer spending because more women entered the workforce than any decade therefore there was more money to spent by double-earning families (Johnson and Golburgh, 2022). Clothing consumerism was also reaching a new peak in the 1980s, with more women working there was a new demand for women's professional clothing that there wasn't before, in addition, in this decade more than ever people were looking to the tv for fashion advice and trends making fashion consumerism an entire new market (Johnson and Golburgh, 2022). In addition, the rise of malls as a place where people would simply hang-out in the 1980s added to this constant consuming, even if people didn't go to the mall with the intention to shop, more likely than not you were leaving with purchasing something from a store or even the food court. In short in the 1980s consuming became more accessible and to this day it is becoming more and more accessible thanks to the rise of the digital age of consumption.

Digital Consumerism:

The digital age of consumption can be traced back to the 50s with the rise of the tv in the American home, it's the television age that paved the way for the digital age (Issit, 2020). It then grew stronger as time went on with each and every digital development. Television only grew throughout the 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s, influencing culture, fashion, and peoples exposure to products with the rise of TV commercials (more on this in a different section). In the 1980s this digital age grew even more with the introduction of the personal computer (Issit, 2020). Not only was the computer useful for consumption but it opened up a whole new side to consumerism that was not there before, now people couldn't get enough of having the latest technological achievement. Often new products were being debuted before the previous model became obsolete (Issit, 2020). By the 1990s most people in America had an in-home computer of some kind and in the 90s came the invention of the internet which would revolutionize consumerism forever. The internet birthed the concept of e-commerce and brand new way to buy and now even sell goods. Thanks to the internet, people who previously would never be on the other side of the consumer cycle could now become the sellers as well as the buyers (Issit, 2022). This added an entire new level to consumerism that had never been there before and has only increased into this modern era. It also opened up consumerism to the entire world, previously only big corporations could trade internationally, now the at-home consumer could purchase something from Norway in America with the click of a button. The digital revolution as the decades in the 20th century passed, continuously opened up new doors and broadened the idea of consumerism by making consumption so much more accessible then before, without this constant accessibility that was ushered in the digital age we wouldn't have the constant consumerism that we have today. In the 21st century consumerism got even more constant, with

the birth and rise of social media consumption and consumerism are now around us twenty-four seven and its all thanks to the evolution of consumerism throughout the years.

Marketing and consumerism:

Consumerism and marketing have always gone hand and hand. They feed off of each other and as the decades have past they have responded to each other's evolution. Marketing isn't simply advertising the consumer goods, though that is a large part of it, it is also the communication of a brand or products value to potential customers. Because of this marketing is a huge part of consumerism and throughout history they would evolve with each other.

Consumerism is pro-marketing, it can be very beneficial for companies when it comes to marketing (Kotler, 1972). The heavy increase of consumerism in the past century and even the past few decades has made marketing more lucrative than ever. The two concepts are very mutually beneficial, in order to better market their product or brand, companies need to understand what the consumer wants and consumerism is all about. Understanding consumer behavior is critically important for a successful marketing campaign (Parker, 2023).

Consumerism and its rise has helped marketers get a better feel for what the consumers want and it allows them to tailor their campaigns to get better results, which is another way the marketing and consumerism have been mutually beneficial to each other. Marketing has also given consumers the ability to make informed decisions with what they purchase which gives them a strong sense of comfort when purchasing which helps feed into and grow consumerism. The evolution of how marketing is presented to us is also a big factor in how consumerism has evolved to what it is today.

Evolution of Marketing Mediums and Consumerism:

The way companies market their products and the mediums they have used to market them have changed greatly and this has had an effect of consumerism. Advertising dates back centuries and companies have been taking advantage of consumeristic ideals for that long as well. The earliest fashion magazine can be traced back to France in 1670s and by the 1770s advertisers were putting in the latest products into these small pocket books and almanacs (Stearns, 2006). Newspaper ads were also becoming commonplace at this time, and in these ads companies began using a technique that is commonplace even now, testimonials about the products from the rich and famous (Stearns, 2006). We can see a clear link to the boom of modern consumerism in the 20th century with the development of new mediums to advertise. In the 20th century we have the rise of radio, another place for companies to place ads directly into the home as well as motion pictures, people would go to see movies and before movies an ad reel would play of news as well as commercials, and during war-time there was propaganda. Then in the 40s, 50s, and 60s the rise of television also provided a brand new medium for advertisements. By the 1960s people were being shown more advertisements on the daily then ever before, and this directly correlates with the big shifts we see in consumerism. The constant flow of marketing had a direct impact of the rise of consumerism. Consistently being shown new products more than ever before encouraged more people to purchase them. This consistent exposure to marketing has increased through the 21st century with the rampant rise of the use of social media and social media personalities for marketing. This medium of marketing has been the most successful in catapulting consumerism and it is because the prevalence that social media has in the people of today's lives and it is unlike any other medium mentioned above.

Social Media Marketing and Consumerism Today:

Social media marketing allows for a constant consumption that we have never known before. Brands in this day have truly taken advantage of the new outlets in which they can advertise. Influencers being one the biggest outlets, taking the celebrity endorsements to the next level. People on social media follow influencers because they are obsessed with recreating their lifestyle, down to almost everything they own, if an influencer is seen to be using a brands product, it will be purchased by thousands that same day, it is the feeling of “needing” to have something and this contributes to consumerism immensely. The rise of marketing on social networks also means the rise of consumer opinion being voiced more often and more rapidly which in the eyes of the consumer is great because the consumers always want to be heard (Vangelov 2022). Social media marketing has also allowed a closeness to brands that companies and consumers have never experienced before, which increases brand loyalty and therefore increasing consumerism. The speed at which brands and consumer can communicate on social media has greatly impacted the world of consumerism today. It takes all of the marketing tactics of the past, and makes them so much faster and so much more accessible. On social media there is almost no break from marketing, which subconsciously entices the consumer to have the want to purchase because they have the feeling that they need to based on an influencers latest post or the carefully calculated ad they receive, which is another way that social media marketing increases consumerism today. All the ads on social media are targeted and tailored directly to a specific consumer, which cannot be done in any other medium, this increased their interest in the ad and therefore again increasing consumerism in todays world because more people are likely to buy a product based on an ad tailored to them over one that was made for millions in magazine

or on television. The increase and evolution of marketing throughout the years has directly affected the evolution of consumerism throughout the years.

Conclusion:

Overall, consumerism as an idea has been around a long time and in that time it has evolved immensely. From its first trickling's of appearance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to the beginnings of modern consumerism after World War I to its sudden boom in the 1980s, consumerism is a strong constant in society. Marketing has played a major role in shaping consumerism into what is today and marketing's evolution directly correlates with that of consumerism. Throughout history consumerism has really evolved into what it is today and marketing has had a very large impact on this evolution.

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