

CONTRADICTIONARY PHENOMENA IN
THE ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT:
'ANOMALOUS CONSUMPTION'

9

SILK PURSES OUT OF SOWS' EARS

Mass rarefaction of consumption and the
emerging consumer-collector*

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INTRODUCTION

One of the phenomena which most permeates the economic environment of industrialized countries is, without doubt, that of complexity (D'Aveni 1994; Hamel and Prahalad 1994). Among the properties attributed to complexity, one is particularly relevant to our study: the simultaneous presence of contradictory events (Vicari 1994). The increasingly international dimension of cultural, economic and political phenomena coexists with highly localized events. Moreover, the increasing compression of time in productive phenomena (the reduction of the lifespan of products, the shortening of the time-to-market phase, etc.) is accompanied by a prolongation of the effects of firms' strategic decisions (i.e. high investment in flexible production lines).

We will focus on one of these contradictory phenomena, in order to analyse the simultaneous presence of two apparently contrasting consumption phenomena. The first of these, defined as 'hypertech mass customization' is based on the possibilities offered by an increasing number of innovative, sophisticated and progressive productive technologies. The second, 'anti-tech mass customization' concerns goods and services that are anachronistic, pre-modern, anti-technological – these are products whose production processes employ out-of-date, obsolete or disappearing technologies.

Our main purposes are to discover whether it is possible to find a single reading key of the two phenomena mentioned above and to find out if this key makes it possible to propose an interpretative model of emerging consumption patterns.

In December 1994 Levi's announced that in selected outlets clients could supply information regarding their favourite colour, size and other features and receive a personalized, custom-made pair of jeans. The attention that this proposal attracted focused on the company rather than the event itself, because Levi's then manufactured one of the mass goods par excellence, a globally recognized symbol of aggregation and homogenization. While the possibility of personalizing a product no longer attracts particular attention, a custom-made pair of jeans is an index of further changes. Several companies offer this kind of service in different sectors. From Japan, the National Panasonic Bicycle markets over ten million models of bicycles that are modified according to the preferences and individual measures of its clients. From Italy, Natuzzi, a leader in the sector of leather sofas, offers a million different combinations of its products. Hairdressers can give their clients the chance to see the final result of a new haircut on a computer screen before receiving a haircut. In many perfume shops it is possible to have a rapid skin test in order to choose the most suitable cosmetic.

These are very common examples of a phenomenon which is going to modify the traditional purchase and consumption habits of western consumers. Several authors believe that advanced economies are experiencing a change in the prevailing technological paradigm. This change can be characterized as a move away from mass production towards flexible and automated production (Davis 1987; Cozzi *et al.* 1988). The former characterized industrial development from the time of the Industrial Revolution until the early 1970s. From the point of view of the company, mass production entails manufacturing standardized goods at moderate prices. The regulating principle of production is efficiency, obtained thanks to vast plants which make economies of scale possible. Given the inelasticity of these plants, the consumer is forced to accept a low price but standardized product. The role of consumers is therefore passive. If they want a product that meets all their requirements they must look for it outside the industrial circuit, in the handmade world – but they have to be prepared to pay larger sums.

From the oil crises of the 1970s onwards, the emergence of the new information-based technologies (computers, telecommunications), resulted in considerable changes. The flexibility of plants relying on the new technologies allows consumers to overcome the 'either/or' logic of standard goods or high prices – and to shift to a 'both/and' pattern, in which they can obtain personalized products at moderate prices. The mass production era is turning into the mass customization era (Davis 1987; Pine 1992). The regulating principle in this case is not efficiency but effectiveness, that

is to say the production of goods and services which meet consumers' requirements.

The most interesting factor in this process is that the role of consumers changes radically. In the era of automated and flexible production they become active because they take part in the process of designing and creating the product, by supplying information regarding their exact requirements. The former mass production paradigm was characterized by information asymmetry in the relation between company and consumers. This favours the stronger subject, the company. This relationship is more balanced in the case of flexible production: both subjects have their own competencies.

Although in the cases cited above the personalization of goods and services relies on increasingly refined, innovative, and 'progressive' technologies, there also exist other cases which do not share these characteristics – and their number is increasing. More and more frequently, the preferences of consumers are directed towards goods that can be defined as anachronistic, pre-modern, and anti-economic both in the performances they offer and in their purchase prices (these are often considerably higher than more recent products). The production processes of these products are based on out-of-date, obsolete and sometimes nearly extinguished technologies. However, the contrast is only apparent. These cases in fact demonstrate a further evolution of the mass customization paradigm of the technological matrix – perhaps the first collective reaction to its diffusion. We can therefore sketch a taxonomic grid of the different category of goods subjected to the above mentioned phenomena. We have listed these under the heading 'consumption of anomalous goods and services'. In the following they are classified into specific types based mainly on consumers' interpretations of them:

- jurassic goods;
- revival goods;
- handmade goods;
- nostalgia goods;
- antique and discarded goods.

Jurassic goods

'Jurassic goods' are either products which have not gone out of production in the last thirty to forty years, maintaining their characteristics unaltered, or products which have been brought back into production without any modification. This category includes motorcycle models such as Harley Davidson, Guzzi, Ducati, Piaggio, Lambretta, Triumph and BSA, that only five years ago were nearing extinction or had disappeared altogether. Examples in the car sector include the Mini Morris, the Fiat 500, the

Citroen Dyane, the Volkswagen Sedan, several models manufactured in the USA, as well as the DDR, Trabant and the Lada produced in Romania which have acquired cult status in western markets. Further examples from other sectors include Kelvinator refrigerators, Roberts radios, General Electric fans, small electrical appliances by Quick Mill, several Rolex Models, Mont Blanc and Parker fountain pens, some Ray Ban and Persol glasses, Ronson lighters, Converse shoes by All Star and the Adidas 'Gazelle' line. In the field of fashion and cosmetics, examples can be found in the boom in secondhand clothes and international phenomena such as Barbour or Husky LTD coats, not to mention 'classics' such as the Hermes 'Kelly', Chanel Number 5, or Gucci moccasins.

These goods have retained their technical and aesthetic features unaltered for the past forty years, never bowing to the demands of 'progress' and 'innovation', never attempting to keep pace with time. Despite going through phases of acute crisis, when they seemed to be doomed to disappear, to bow to the rigorously evolutionary destiny of goods, these products managed to remain the same, unaltered, stepping through the traps of time unharmed and taking unexpected and remarkable revenges.

Revival goods

'Jurassic goods' should be distinguished from another, very similar group, that of 'revival goods'. 'Revival goods' are products which make their first appearance on the market now, but which are clearly inspired by products of the past, from which they copy colours, lines and shapes. These goods combine a technologically hyper-advanced core with aesthetic features referring back to those of the past. Examples of 'revival goods' include Mazda's Spider Mx-5, Wurlitzer and Rok-ola jukeboxes, certain models of Bosch refrigerators and some electrical appliances designed by Alessi and produced by Philips. Further examples can be found in the furniture, design and fashion sectors, where revivals are very common.

Handmade goods

The 1970s and the 1980s were notable for a return to handmade products in various sectors. Examples of such products include the reintroduction of tailor-made garments or handmade shoes, the success of handmade products in the field of furnishing or interior design, the reappearance of materials such as copper and wood for kitchens, and developments in ceramics for vases, plates and kitchenware. It should be emphasized that this was a very widespread phenomenon that involved not only the wealthiest consumer groups, but also attracted a vast and heterogeneous public.

Nostalgia goods

We have now to take into consideration less obvious, but not less important, cases of anachronistic, pre-modern goods. These are characterized by an explicit declaration of mistrust in the fascination and the advantages of progress, technology and innovation. We refer to them as 'nostalgia goods'.¹ Examples of nostalgia goods include the booms in biological foods, chemical-free products, natural fibres, homeopathic medicines and other forms of 'natural' remedies, and the popularity of farm holidays. Nostalgia goods can also be limited mostly to packaging, for example, soaps, shampoos, teas, cocoa, chocolate, biscuits and jams. All are excellent examples of forms of consumption whose satisfaction is derived from, or focused on, a return (real or imaginary) to a pre-industrial, pre-modern past. The nostalgic contention is that food was genuine, healthy and tasty, and products were comfortable and made with care and affection, sixty or one hundred years ago. Nostalgia goods are perceived as having optimal levels of quality. Technology, progress and innovation put an end to this idyllic golden age, bringing pollution, pesticides, preservatives, terrible allergies, and so on. Therefore, it is not surprising that the post-modern era of goods starts with a curious return to the past, an exaltation of the pre-modern and most of all of the pre-industrial.

Antique and discarded goods

Further confirmation of the phenomenon is given by the huge growth of the sector concerning antique and modern goods. Markets, fairs, outlets and specialized magazines crop up everywhere, focusing on the purchase and sale of objects belonging to the remote or near past. It is important to note the diffusion of this phenomenon on a mass scale, the inclusion of these kinds of goods among the preferences of a steadily growing number of individuals. For the first time they see in the 'old', the 'antique' and the 'discarded', a potential 'treasure' which places the past above the future, tradition above innovation, and the hand of man above the machine.

'Anti-tech goods' nowadays enjoy an undeniable but puzzling success. Why should consumers prefer goods that are technologically obsolete, aesthetically old-fashioned, uncomfortable, noisy, energy wasting and offer low levels of performance? What is it that persuades those who consume these kinds of goods to prefer them to more recent products? What is it that makes them reject the possibilities offered by new technologies?

ON THE INEFFECTICACY OF TRADITIONAL ECONOMIC ANALYSIS

In an attempt to provide answers to the questions raised above, the traditional analysis of consumer behaviour offers no structure on which to lean.² This is because it has only recently begun to face the question of 'anomalous' consumption patterns. In marketing studies, the prevailing paradigm is that of information processing (Bertman 1979). These models interpret consumer behaviour as a response to determined external and internal stimuli. As in the case of microeconomic models, it is assumed that the individual is a rational problem solver who is able to handle and manage a considerable flow of information. Moreover, it is assumed that the consumer's aim is to meet well-defined needs thanks to the usefulness of the features of the good. As in the modern microeconomic theory of consumer behaviour (Lancaster 1966), these models assume that the individual is able to choose between and evaluate the elements forming goods and services. The functionality of the product to the need is analysed mainly by reference to economic criteria, and the aim is to maximize usefulness.

Given these premises, attention focuses mainly on the handling and processing of data that the individual gathers in the presence of particular stimuli (internal data are concerned with the consumer's needs, and external data with company communications). The analysis concentrates on the purchase behaviour that results from the consideration of these data.

Of the three main factors in the consumer purchase process, cognition, affect and behaviour, most emphasis is given to cognition. The choice, the final result of the process, is considered to be principally affected by the cognitive process and only indirectly by affect. Preferences are developed as a result of the rational process of data elaboration. Variables concerning affect play a secondary and derivative role. At the same time, behaviour is reduced to the act of purchase, with very little importance attached to the consumption process. There is, therefore, an overlapping with microeconomic studies. At the end of the process, consumers, whether satisfied or not, achieve their meta-goal, i.e. the gathering of further information to face future problems or needs.

The assumptions on which this paradigm is based, however, restrict its application to certain types of consumer behaviour. In particular, how is it possible to explain the purchase of those highly symbolic goods which are difficult to section in attributes, whose purchase is not wholly justified by reference to economic utility? Further, how can we explain that, in these kinds of products, consumer need is driven by aesthetic satisfaction, rather than traditional product functionalism? Is it therefore possible to establish some common features that can bring together two apparently contradictory phenomena such as mass customization determined by technological

progress and the growth in anomalous consumption patterns at odds with the beneficial effects of progress and technological innovation? Is it possible to unite them under a single interpretative key? In our opinion, the answer is positive. The common factor is that the relationship between producer and consumer becomes individualized and is expressed through unique and/or rare, virtually irreproducible products, which have a noticeable aesthetic and semiotic content. The personalized Levi's jeans mentioned in the first case are unique and irreproducible because they are tailor-made, while the Volkswagen Sedan is unique and irreproducible because it is no longer in production and is therefore becoming rarer and rarer. Both cases represent 'rarefaction processes'³ of firm-consumer relationships. By the term 'rarefaction process', we do not mean that the relationships decrease numerically, but rather that standardization is reduced, because there is a shift from a system in which the firm has relationships with anonymous and unknown buyers, to one in which there are relationships with identifiable and known consumers.⁴

This process is intended to create a unique and unrepeatable relationship between firms and consumers, based on the production and consumption of unique and unrepeatable goods. Looking again at previous examples, the Levi's jeans buyer supplies his or her requirements that are recorded on computer to design and create his or her product; while in the case of the Volkswagen Sedan the buyer gains admission to the 'club', the community of Sedan owners (often institutionalized). In these cases, therefore, the firm-consumer relationship is different from all the others and is unique or rare.

In this sense, we can conceive the spread of anomalous consumption as an early, logical reaction to mass customization of technological origin. If technology can produce unique and rare goods through 'high-tech', what can further distinguish a consumer from the former kind of owners than the possession of rare and unique goods that deny or refuse technology itself?

Rarefaction processes are ascribable both to production and consumption. In the first case, increased competitiveness forces firms to take advantage of the potential offered by new technologies in order to distinguish themselves from competitors. In the second case, certain social-cultural phenomena occurring in industrialized countries, such as raised income and education levels and the variety and variability of social roles, increase the need for differentiation, spurring consumers towards innovative and highly individual consumption models (Christopher 1989). Figure 9.1 represents the variables that determine the rarefaction processes.

Hyper-tech and anti-tech personalization can be ascribed to rarefaction processes that lead towards a world of unique and rare goods. But both these phenomena have properties that are identical to those of collectable goods. So, we believe it is also possible to analyse some general consump-

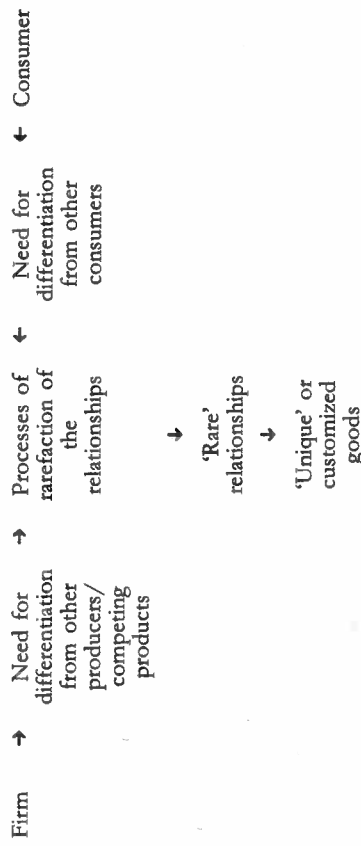


Figure 9.1 Rarefaction processes in the firm-consumer relationships.

tion processes through a consideration of goods as collectable goods and consumers as collectors.⁵

PROPERTIES OF COLLECTOR ITEMS: HEURISTIC POTENTIALS

Collectable goods are par excellence unique or rare. Their functions bear least relation to consumer need. It is interesting to note their principal characteristics, from an economic point of view.

Uniqueness and rarity/distinguishing features

The collectable good is unique or rare. Sometimes it is the nature of the production process that decreases its uniqueness, as in the case of handmade goods which are imperfect but unrepeatable. In other cases, it is time that selects and rarefies a set of goods which were originally identical or very similar (Rheims 1956, 1990, 1992; Eccles 1968; Alsop 1982; Pomian 1987, 1993; Schnapper 1988).⁶ Finally, the producer's distribution strategy can affect the destiny of a good, directing it towards collections or to the anonymity of a hard discount. A typical example is that of the introduction of CDs, an event that transformed a significant proportion of vinyl recordings into collectable goods.

In our standardized society, which is obsessed with the need to make distinctions, the charm of the 'unique piece' is irresistible (Baudrillard 1968). Possession of a unique product reveals the uniqueness of the owner. A 'single good' underlines the singularity of its fortunate possessor. The collector protects and elevates his individualism thanks to the possession of something that is possessed by no one else or, at best, by only very few.

Such a possession guarantees distinction. Moreover, the unique good is usually authentic. Copies and fakes threaten it, but less effectively than occurs with other types of goods, such as luxury goods. Collectable goods reduce or limit the risks of participating in the quotation game between originals and fakes.

Reduced or lost utilization values and functions

When an object becomes collectable, it is removed from the world, and from the 'vulgarity' of circulation (Pomian 1987). It loses its original functions and values of utilization. This loss or suspension of function in keys that do not lock, wines that are not drunk, china sets or silverware that will never touch lips or food, and stamps that will never frank a letter is evidence of their owner's resources and of his power to keep them unproductive, outside consumption.

In the collector's purchases there is no evidence of other needs than pleasure. The pretext of 'investment' conceals a powerful intention to show the world the collector's ability both to remove goods from the world, and to return them to it, according to whim. The good is therefore reduced to a mere sign, a piece of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1971).

Seriality

The single collectable good cannot be separated from the ideal and real series it belongs to: 'Whether denied, forgotten, destroyed or virtual, the *series* always remains operative. As much in the humblest of everyday objects as in the loftiest of rarities, it is the indispensable nourishment of ownership and the passionate game of possession' (Baudrillard 1994: 15). The meaning and value of a collectable good issues from its membership of a group, a class, or a set. These categories represent the first referent of the series which the collector always tries to complete. Hence, the missing piece will always be more important than the last acquisition. The perennial tension directed towards the creation of a series that is endless and impossible to complete is the most fascinating feature of the collector and it leads to the prototype of the 'serial consumer'. As Muensterberger (1994: 11) observes: 'Whatever the motivation, there is little question that collection is much more than the simple experience of pleasure. If that was the case, one butterfly, or one painting, would be enough. Instead, repetition is mandatory.'

Aesthetics

Collectable goods are loaded with aesthetic properties. In fact, they are the main conveyors of aesthetic projects, first individual and later collective.

The processes described above remove the product's original utilization functions and values and replace them with aesthetic properties – shapes, colours, sounds and scents. These kinds of goods owe their survival in time to their aesthetic properties.

A collector of fountain pens does not value them principally as writing instruments, and will usually not use them to write. Instead, he discusses the materials from which they have been made, the quality of their design, and their subtle or daring chromatic match. In praising the subtlety and the refinement of the design he draws attention to the pleasant sound produced by the nib stroking the paper, or the unique scent of a certain piece in his collection. The product, the object, the piece, leaves the world of goods to enter that of sensations, of messages, of evocations, in a complete aesthetic sphere.

We are therefore entering a field which is still foreign to economic research. Neither price nor quantity, technical features nor technologies, can explain the success or failure of certain goods, the development of consumers' preferences, their choice processes, and the evolution of their demand. Shapes, scents, colours, flavours and sounds have long been banned from the sacred enclosure of rational choices. And yet these underestimated variables which economists too often confine to the vague and treacherous analytic category of 'taste' (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 24) affect the choices of an ever-growing number of consumers today, and will become crucial in the future.

Semiotics

Collectable goods are outstanding as 'signs' (Pomian 1987, 1993). They convey meanings and symbols. These are signs of distinction and homology, of tradition and innovation, of continuity and breaking off, of belonging and the extraneous.

We cannot state that the phenomenon of collecting always and a priori represents a form of adaptation or submission to legitimate and prevailing models and cultural patterns (Bourdieu 1979). On the contrary, the excessive interest shown in the 'high' forms of collecting, in particular art collecting (Elster and Cardinal 1994), has drawn the attention of researchers away from other forms of collecting which are clearly antithetical to aristocratic or upper-middle-class cultural referents. From an hermetic point of view, a 'collection' of tattoos or the 'rings and bars' of body piercing accomplish the same function as a collection of seventeenth-century *faience*. They identify the ownership group, its mechanisms of cooptation and legitimization, a communal linguistic, cultural and behavioural code, and a shared symbolic universe (Bourdieu 1971: 69).

This evocative and communicative power explains the steady and inexorable growth in collecting as a mass phenomenon. A single good is no

longer an unerring indication or reliable testimony of its owner's identity from a socio-economic and cultural point of view. The combination of possibilities resulting from the relationships in the matrix of 'goods owned/socio-cultural profiles' is endless, as are the opportunities of using goods as shelters to defend identities or weapons to attack social prejudices. Conversely, the series or collection could prove the loyalty of the owner to his or her reference group, the steadiness of his or her membership.

History and time

A collectable good is a son of time, the amber that captures its moments, the totem and the hourglass of the contemporary and endless time of goods (Laurens and Pomian 1992; Olmi 1992). Ours is a society which has delegated its memory to machines, which has lost the sense of time and makes no distinction between history and the recent past. In such a society, in which history is perceived as a process without gradations or depth, the product of the day before yesterday can have an historical meaning and dignity equal to that of a fossil. Both belong to the past and both reify it, making it present. The fact that 1977 punk T-shirts or 1970 Barbies are already put up to auction and sold for considerable sums should stimulate reflection.

'Survival in time' has always been seen as an index of the quality and importance of a good. Time was the final and supreme arbiter of the value of a good, while centuries and decades were the parameters of its judgement. In a society such as the contemporary one, goods do not perish physically and are not 'consumed' – they are whimsically abandoned to their destiny as trash after a few hours or months.⁷ Thus, a time horizon of ten years seems as great as the glacial era. In such a society a 1978 television set or a 80/88 micro-processor seem unquestionably, unbearably or romantically ancient. Therefore, collecting 1992 telephone cards, early 1980s computers or 1989 records becomes for thousands of people a plunge into the past, a way to exorcize it, to beat it or to relive it (Baudrillard 1994). The goods, even more than feelings or emotions, are the notches that mark the passing of life, of time. If up to the last century objects reminded us of our past, of our roots, of a communal identity that took us painlessly back to nature and to the earth, today they can only talk about the future, anxiously projecting us towards something that is not yet here.

THE EMERGING CHARACTER OF THE CONSUMER-COLLECTOR

However, if the world of goods is moving towards a 'collectable' dimension, the 'old' character of the traditional consumer is also shifting in the same

direction. The final result is the emergence of the 'consumer-collector', whose characteristics are described in the following pages.

Affect-driven behaviour

The relation of the consumer-collector to the world of goods and objects is mainly affective, sentimental, humorous, often fetishistic, never merely instrumental nor spurred by the search for economic utility. The consumer-collector is spurred by enjoyment, desire for gratification, self-complacency, never by need, at most by the need for pleasure. Most important are fantasies, imagination and daydreaming: in this sphere the borders of reality can be stretched at one's leisure. The consumer-collector draws satisfaction from pure possession rather than use, rewarded not by the purchase act itself, but by the phases that precede it (the search for the piece, the discovery, haggling with the seller), and those that follow immediately afterwards (becoming acquainted with other consumer-collectors, meeting them, exchanges, pacts, rivalries). These elements of socialization and negotiation seem to represent the main behavioural motivations, rather than more technical and rational aspects.

Semiotics and aesthetics

The consumer-collector is attracted more by the aesthetic and semiotic values of goods than by their functional properties. The meaningful stimuli are non-verbal and sign language is fully developed: the semantic contents of products and product communication are not as important as the syntactic ones, those concerning structure, style and the stimulation of the senses. The Swatch example is not an isolated one, but clearly illustrates the inexorable trajectory that an ever-growing number of goods is taking towards a merely communicative, immaterial dimension, which reduces the object to a pure sign, indication or signal.

Seeking individualism

There are no objective parameters (utility, economic value) driving the individual, but only subjective borders, related to excitement, entertainment, sensory stimulation and joy. Through the objects owned, the consumer-collectors distinguish themselves from others, thus confirming their individuality, taste, flair and culture. The acquisition of a piece is thereby perceived neither as a vagary nor as consumerist excess, but as another membership card to be placed in the difficult formation process of an autonomous and recognizable identity. This does not prevent consumer-collectors from perceiving themselves as members of an élite of enthusiasts

who share their interests and can recognize and value their flair and personal, individual talent.

Creativity: the 'past as novelty' seeker

The consumer-collector demonstrates exploratory behaviour. The explorer is someone who dares to enter unknown places, who only has a vague idea of the destination and the path to be taken. They cannot make use of previously acquired information and therefore have to build up a set of data gradually, during the journey. Therefore we can talk about 'novelty seeking' (Hirschman 1980: 284), distinguishing between 'inherent novelty seeking' (e.g. the desire to search for the new piece of the collection, meeting other consumer-collectors to exchange information) and 'actualized novelty seeking' (e.g. the behaviour of acquiring a piece for the collection). The 'new' object to be consumed or collected is rarely a good that has never been produced in the past. More often it is an 'old' good, rediscovered and reinterpreted with new functions and meanings. Therefore we can talk about use innovativeness (Hirschman 1980: 289).⁸ The consumer-collector plays with the stock of existing goods, makes up new functions, new meanings and new combinations which subvert the previous order, hierarchy and relationships. In a revolutionary fashion they redefine the functions of whole categories of goods, changing not only their destination of usage, but even the category they belong to. They are free to create these kinds of features, to intervene subjectively, and to express their own personalities more explicitly.

Seriality of consumption

The most important characteristic of the consumer-collector is probably the inclination to serial consumption. If the single good cannot on its own be the membership card of a social, economic or cultural group and cannot accurately define the life style adopted as its reference pattern, the series, the collection, can do this. Loyalty and attachment towards the goods that form a series are the irrefutable proof of the trust in which the group or reference models are held. The more the series is completed, the more the value of the 'missing piece' increases. In order to acquire it, the consumer-collector 'does not mind the expense', and is prepared to buy 'at any price'.

Increasing or constant marginal inclination to consumption and demand inelasticity

In cases such as these, the marginal inclination to consume does not decrease with an increase in the number of repetitions/amount owned.⁹ Instead, it is positively connected to the size of the series/amount possessed

and is therefore increasing or steady anyway. The desires of the consumer-collector have no end. From this perspective, the consumer-collector might be seen as the prototype of the ideal consumer, from a company point of view. However, consumer-collectors are unpredictable, demanding and fickle, because of attention to changes and the most subtle differences. They can thus become a nightmare or an irritant to a company because they demand constant changes, differentiation, innovations and attentions. They impose never-ending changes and are uncontrollable subjects of environmental transformation. The consumer-collector is a strong example of the active consumer. Like any great collectors, they do not only make purchases, but become patrons. Rediscovering the pleasures of patronage, they cooperate in the creative process, defining the details and specifications of the product, and imposing their own taste on the producer. The factors discussed above explain the consumer-collector's relative inelasticity of demand with respect to price and quantity. The unique/rare good is 'priceless', and has to be bought 'at any price'. It is impossible to resist the temptation to purchase. The market is therefore reduced to a virtually endless series of auctions for unique pieces. Variety stretching out towards infinity becomes the main criterion determining preferences.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF RAREFACTION PROCESSES

Although the rarefaction processes in the relationship between the company and consumer and the emergence of the consumer-collector can be considered as the interpretative keys of these phenomena, it is nonetheless clear that the two phenomena also have different characteristics.

In our opinion, what distinguishes them are the different types of rarefaction processes involved. If rarefaction derives from developments in the world of production and consumption, certain processes are more clearly 'directed' by enterprises and others by the consumer, while others stem from circular dialectics. We will therefore define the first type as firm driven, the second as consumer driven and the third as market based. Figure 9.2 illustrates these three types along a continuum that stretches from the enterprise to the consumer.

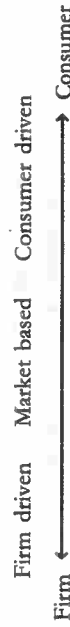


Figure 9.2 Types of rarefaction processes.

Firm-driven processes

In the case of several products, the possibility that a relationship might become unique depends both on a specific strategic plan and on the technological know-how of the enterprise. This allows a simplification in the specification of consumer needs and their translation into coherent product attributes (Cozzi *et al.* 1988). Unique and rare goods are the natural result of contemporary production technologies and represent the response of enterprises to competitors and consumer pressures. However, it should be emphasized that the choice to favour the 'collectable' dimension is not invariably accompanied by positive results (serial consumption, loyalty, indirect advertisement). It also exposes the enterprise to considerable risks due to the perennial renewal of the products, to a general atmosphere of constant innovation and to the volatility and short duration of position profits. When technological elements cease to play a fundamental role in the formation process of consumer choice, and are replaced by semiotic and aesthetic features, then creativity, imagination, willingness to risk, hazard and bet become crucial elements. These factors, apart from very limited cases (Ben and Jerry ice-cream) are still penalized both by the selective mechanisms of enterprises and by educational strategies adopted by high schools and universities.

Apart from the causes and hypothetical consequences which are still largely unpredictable, we believe it is necessary to focus attention on the strategies that enterprises can adopt to handle the rarefaction process. We have identified some of them.

Positioning strategies on collectable markets

Enterprises can decide to put their products directly into collectable markets.¹⁰ This is a very common procedure in the field of cultural industries. In the record and publishing industry, for instance, 'productions' addressed to collectors often coexist with 'normal' ones: special editions, republications and 'bootlegs' are typical examples. Even in the film industry the whole sector of gadgets linked to merchandising is addressed mainly to collectors, as are specific movies in the home video sector.

Product family strategies

Companies can apply rarefaction techniques either directly by producing unique goods or by aiming at rarity, as in the case of a limited series. A minor but interesting form of rarefaction is the specialization of the market achieved by extending and deepening choice. Such 'series productions' are introduced into the market as 'winter-autumn collections': shoes, clothes,

perfumes and cosmetics are only a few minor examples. The emphasis put on product lines, through the filter of the brand, of the name, is a polite though tacit form of invitation to collecting, to serial consumption. If someone already uses an aftershave or a deodorant by Vichy or Clarins, why then not buy the other products in the series and ultimately the whole collection? If a consumer already owns the whole Nike Air collection, why not buy the latest models in the 1998 collection?

Price and distribution strategies

Price and distribution strategies usually involve fixing a high price and exclusive distribution networks to restrict entrance the segment of potential purchasers. This strategy creates an élite of consumer-collectors selected according to income – the rarity of the good becomes a warranty of distinction.

Communication strategies

Companies always try to profit from the latent collection potential of certain forms of consumption by resorting to promotional mechanisms which evoke 'game-like' or, more specifically, collection elements.

Such strategies include tokens or picture cards (Castaldo and Mauri 1994), competitions, lotteries, drawing of special prizes. These are important components of extra gain, designed to shift the act of consumption towards a totally different sphere, the sphere of entertainment, bargaining, gambling and loyalty with the consumer-collector. They are an attempt to take advantage of the inclination to serial consumption. Therefore, it is not by chance that the dominant promotional strategies are based on tokens that allow the consumer to obtain pieces of a reference 'collection' (kitchenware, garments, and so on).

Consumer-driven processes

In other cases, rarefaction processes are imposed by the consumer. The causes of this phenomenon are as follows.

The need for hyper-differentiation

Hyper-tech mass customization can perhaps appease the need for distinction of large numbers of consumers, but it can also paradoxically drive other large groups to look for even more subtle, refined, snobbish and ingenious forms of distinction.

The affirmation of the consumer-collector is probably the symptom and the most blatant proof of this phenomenon. Their choices and their

behaviour are fascinating, surrounded by an invulnerable aura of uniqueness, of exclusiveness. They imply a search, a selection, and an individual story.

Collecting behaviour as a mass phenomenon

One of the main reasons for the emergence of the consumer-collector is the transformation of collecting into a mass phenomenon. The first symptoms began to show up at the end of the last century. In the *ancien régime* society, dominated by poverty and the spectre of famine, collecting remained the exclusive prerogative of the clergy, the aristocracy and financial elites. It had a very precise social and political meaning. At the end of the nineteenth century, while the small and middle bourgeoisie were consolidating and average incomes were increasing, a growing number of individuals permanently escaped the grasp of material needs, therefore increasing the amount of surplus resources usable for purposes previously precluded. Mass consumption was born, together with mass society and its distinction phobia, its maniacal attention to symbols which indicate social hierarchies, barriers, inter-class connections and neutral territories. Is any behaviour nearer to the high-bourgeois and aristocratic ethos, providing the fallacious or real perception of social distinction, of uniqueness in the greyness of the mass, than collecting? Thanks to the remarkable increase in average incomes, collecting has become, in the last few years, a mass phenomenon. It does not only involve the holy of holies of traditional artistic production (elevated, not accidentally, to the role of economic fetishes), but it affects every part of the huge world of goods. Simply reading the catalogues of minor or specialized auction houses, it is easy to perceive the uncontrollable growth in new collectors' items (Stewart 1984; Opie *et al.* 1994). This increase in the number of people prepared to devote part of their resources to collectable items extends the concept of such items until it becomes omniconsumptive, contaminating even the sphere of ordinary, everyday consumption.

Globalization of markets, fragmentation of life styles and reduction of product life cycles

Another reason for the emergence of the consumer-collector is the globalization of markets and the presence of more and more articulated and unsteady consumption models. These phenomena allow the consumer to play on international mismatching. The 'last novelty' on the Bulgarian market can be a potential good in Azerbaijan, out of date in Paris, venerated like a fetish in Japan, and in full revival in the USA. This possibility extends the potential length of economic life of a good or category of goods. Therefore, the normal life cycle of the product and

its subsequent collectionistic life cycle cannot be distinguished. The permanence in the intermediate position of refuse, of trash, becomes shorter and shorter and sometimes even non-existent. This phenomenon subverts traditional views considering the 'new', in which the 'last' product is seen as the best and most desirable for consumers. What happens if the myth of 'progress' breaks down before an implicit but significant declaration of distrust in contemporary productions, if the 'old', in the form of collectable goods, bursts successfully into the limelight of mass consumption?

We believe that these questions are worth the attention of economists. This speeding up is surely a novel thing. It was only recently that at least twenty or thirty years had to pass before an object could be 'rediscovered and relaunched' as a collectable good. Nowadays, only a few months, or even days, are sufficient. Goods that are still in production in certain countries have already become a cult and highly collectable in other geographic areas, and the same phenomenon involves different groups of consumers. The possibility of playing on different tables is endless, thanks to very different consumption and production models and to the ubiquitous collectors' willingness to guarantee a positive final outcome to the process.

Institutionalization of collectionistic consumption

Not only are more and more categories of goods being elevated into the pantheon of collectables more quickly than ever before, but most important of all they are rapidly institutionalized as such. Up to a few years ago it was possible to distinguish the different phases of this process very clearly. Originally, goods that had not yet acquired collectable status were available only in junk shops, dumps, flea markets, car boot or yard sales. Gradually, the most innovative antique dealers started participating in mid-level sales, the first collectors' fairs were organized, and the first annotated catalogues published. The final consecration was achieved with the publication of specialized magazines, theme auctions, newsletters and permanent exhibitions. In the past this process required years to be completed and therefore prices remained low for a long time, allowing remarkable collections to be built up at moderate cost.

This does not happen any more. The processes of institutionalization and canonization are amazingly rapid. In a few months, hyper-specialized magazines crop up, fanzines and newsletters mushroom, 'collectors' stock exchanges proliferate, together with exchange weeks, international conventions and sales in the most prestigious auction houses. Monographs and catalogues are published more and more often, the number of experts and opinions grows and, most important of all, specialized museums are opened. These phenomena speed up the process of 'historicization' of the objects and guarantee to collectors the exciting sensation of 'taking part in

history', of possessing a sempiternal niche in the immortal pantheon of collectors, whether specialized in billboards of hillbilly groups, 3D post-cards or 1970s porn picture-stories.

Moreover, these factors make the community, the collectors' group, immediately distinguishable and they are more rapidly provided with a common and fundamental identity. The relationship with other collectors involves friendships or idiosyncrasies, exchanges of pieces and information, trips and tours together. The collectors' community becomes an important social point of reference. These phenomena do not, however, affect the dimension of privacy. The collection is also the last, inviolable personal and private space of people which remains constantly on call. If compared to the imaginary communities described by Ussitalo (1998), collectors' communities also have the undeniable advantage of being real. The collection can reflect imaginary or dreamlike social models, but nothing is more concrete than the group of collectors with whom one shares the same passion.

In the above cases, the consumers utilise goods in a creative way on the basis of codes and symbols of their own sociocultural reference group. Even standard goods acquire features of uniqueness, because they can express the uniqueness of the individual who uses and consumes them. In this case companies have a very limited chance to intervene. They can either adapt their production levels to meet market demand, recuperating the productions once decentralized in underdeveloped countries, where these goods were sold as 'western latest fashion' or restart production lines that had long lain idle. In either case, the consumer-collectors subvert the strategic choices of enterprises, forcing them to follow, flatter and court them.

Buying whole series of objects rather than isolated pieces, acting on the matching combinations offered by the series and playing their inherent semiotic games, the consumer-collectors can invent new forms of consumption. They can save goods from the extinction to which a strictly evolutionist destiny would condemn them, once they have reached a certain age. They can restore goods and enterprises from anonymity and can specify and impose their requirements on companies in the same way as a consumer-client. Thus, they force producers to alter their production methods constantly, by renewing supply or by changing other strategies.

From this point of view, consumer-collectors are exceptionally active. Their range of choice is endlessly extended and the ability to impose themselves on the market increases constantly. They play a fundamental role as decisional rather than economic subjects.

Market-driven processes

Finally, we would like to analyse those processes involving situations which fall between the two described before. The rarefaction process has its origins in the playing of a deferment game between enterprise and

consumer, a game in which each player tries to enter the symbolic field of the other, creating in turn new codes and languages.

Swatch watches, for example, are manufactured in limited collections and their distribution therefore 'plays' on the simultaneous presence of different groups of consumers: collectors and common buyers. When the occasional buyer can afford to buy a piece with potentially a very high economic value, the watch virtually becomes a lottery ticket and consumption enters the 'game-like' sphere, attracting consumers stimulated by the gambling, extra-gain component. The same holds true in the car and motorcycle sectors, where many producers manufacture models in limited series. A notable example is Ferrari, which not only restricts the production of certain models to a predefined number of pieces, but assigns its product to a small élite. It would be fascinating to know the criteria adopted to conceive the list of customers.

This is an intermediate area, whose borders are still uncertain and which surely needs further studies, especially empirical surveys. We believe that this sector will soon become not only more and more crowded, but crucially important in a future dominated by unique and rare goods, where 'transactions involving signs will form the continuously expanding core of economic activity, while the production and consumption of material goods will stagnate' (Hutter 1998).

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NOTES

- 1 On 'nostalgia goods' see the articles and related bibliographies of Havlena and Holak (1995) and Holbrook and Schindler (1995).
- 2 From a theoretical point of view criticisms of the traditional economic analysis of consumer behaviour are expressed in this book by Bianchi, Ranchetti and Gualerzi. The only exceptions in the previous panorama are represented by Thompson's marvellous book (1979), in particular Chapters 2, 5 and 6 and the article of Belk *et al.* (1991).
- 3 In Anglo-Saxon languages, the verb to rarify means to make or become less dense or solid'. In our interpretation, we restore the term rarefaction to its

original etymological meaning, derived from the Latin *rarefacere, rarum-facere* – 'to make rare'. In this sense, we want to stress the processes or actions which transform a normal, common good into a rare good. This phenomenon can be ascribed both to factors independent of human will (the disruptive action of time, which physically destroys goods) and to deliberate strategies and actions (i.e. in philately and numismatics certain collectors deliberately destroy certain pieces in order to increase the value of the remaining ones, as well as firms which produce 'limited series' to create artificial conditions of scarcity).

4 This trend is empirically demonstrated by the fact that firms in industrialized countries are moving from traditional communication instruments (mass advertising) to direct marketing, which allows individual and interactive contact with the consumer. Further, marketing literature nowadays assumes the shift from transactional marketing (based on spot exchanges) to relational marketing (based on the construction of long-term relationships). In this regard, original contributions have been introduced by European scholars, such as Gummeson (1987); Fiocca (1988); Gronroos (1989, 1991); Grandinetti (1993); Castaldo (1994).

5 Our hypothesis can be seen as an extension of a paradigm already mentioned in consumer behaviour studies, even if it is a somewhat marginal one – the paradigm of the experiential consumer and of hedonistic consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Unger and Kernan 1983; Hirschman 1984; Holbrook *et al.* 1984; Havlena and Holbrook 1986; Holbrook and Grayson 1986; Arnould and Price 1993; Lacher and Mizerski 1994). Holbrook and Hirschman's article (1982), which can be considered as the 'manifesto' of the new paradigm, demonstrates that several purchase acts can be better understood if this hypothesis is considered.

6 For further information see also the articles printed in the *Journal of the History of Collections*.

7 On these aspects, see the observations of Thompson (1979), in particular Chapters 2 and 3.

8 Another behaviour which is traditionally recognized in the marketing literature as an expression of consumer creativity is adoptive innovativeness (Rogers and Shoemaker 1971; Hirschman 1980). This occurs when an individual buys a new product to satisfy his/her functional or hedonistic needs.

9 On these aspects see Haskell and Penny (1981), Laurens and Pomian (1992), Saarinen (1958), Taylor (1954).

10 On collectable markets see Stoller (1984), Colonna and Henry (1989), Gueroni (1995, 1996).

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