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A postmodern and cultural approach to understanding the new tourist/consumer

Aims and objectives

This chapter explores postmodern society and consumer behaviour in experiential consumption fields such as tourism. The underlying idea is that the consumer society has changed over the past decades due to postmodernism, which has contributed to the emergence of a tourist who has new expectations of products and services. The aim of this first chapter is to uncover the shift from modernism to postmodernism and the implications of a postmodern and cultural approach to understanding the new tourist/consumer. The chapter looks at the foundations of the modern era and its critics, the emergence of a postmodern society and theories of postmodernism, such as the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), which offer a conceptual framework for defining the main characteristics of the new tourist/consumer and postmodernism in tourism studies.

After studying this chapter readers should be able to:

- Define the foundations of the postmodern consumer society and distinguish between the modern and postmodern eras.
- Define consumer expectations and discuss their relevance from a postmodern consumer behaviour perspective.
- Understand the main characteristics of the new consumer/tourist behaviour and the marketing implications related to them.
- Compare and contrast the traditional consumer behaviour models and methodologies with their postmodern equivalents.
- Understand the aims of the Consumer Culture Theory and its importance for studying tourist experiences.
- Explain how personal experience, studied through a Consumer Cultural Approach, can influence consumer/tourist behaviours and expectations.

In the last decade, a new postmodern paradigm in marketing has emerged and has influenced recent research in the consumption and tourism fields. Postmodernism has emerged as a critique of modernism and as a dominant foundation, linked to the constructs of consumer culture (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). In this sense, postmodernism offers an alternative perspective for studying consumption and exploring consumer behaviour in Western consumer society.

Today's consumer society is changing dramatically. New consumption paradoxes and trends related to the omnipresence of digital equipment and the frequent use of new technologies represent an important part of everyday practices. This has influenced the shift in market segmentation from market logic to a consumer-centric approach by taking into account different consumption aspects such as: sociocultural, ideological, symbolic and experiential dimensions. According to Brown (2006, 1995), postmodernism in its varied manifestations is not a marketing concept but a critique of the dominant ideas and the mainstream research in consumption. Furthermore, postmodernism is a pan-disciplinary movement that has marked different disciplines such as anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, philosophy, archaeology, geography, theology, etc.

In respect of the consumption field, it appears that consumer society and post-modern society are near enough and may be considered as synonymous (Falk and Campbell, 1997). This chapter begins with an explanation of the foundations of modernism and postmodernism, followed by a cultural critique of modernism based on the distinction between production and consumption. An example of postmodernism in the tourism field is highlighted at the end of this chapter.

■ From modernism to postmodernism

Although the two concepts of structuralism/poststructuralism and modernism/postmodernism have overlapping meanings, they refer to different fields (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). In the social sciences, authors use the terms of 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' rather than 'structuralism' and 'poststructuralism'. In this chapter, the use of modernism and postmodernism is preferred, to avoid confusion, even though some of the postmodern ideas presented can easily be labelled 'poststructuralist'. Therefore, understanding the shift from modernism to postmodernism, and the implications of postmodernism in the consumption and tourism fields, leads first to clarify and locate the temporal dimension by choosing modernity as a starting point.

Modernity can be explained through two dimensions: economic and cultural. The economic aspect of modernity encompasses the industrialisation and the mass production era. In the modern society, culture is limited to artistic activities that obey the mainstream rules established by tradition. According to Piquet and

Marchand (1998), modernity is intended to free humanity from ignorance and irrationality. Therefore, the modern paradigm is characterised by the idea of the progress towards liberation of mankind. In this sense, the knowledge project of modernism is universal, since society is homogeneous and structured by hierarchies based on objective reality and reason. Drawing on Piquet and Marchand's (1998) definition of modernity, there are five main characteristics of modern society:

- Industrial mass production and hence organizational efforts are important to improve productivity;
- The belief in efficiency and progress and in productive time – in traditional, typically agricultural, societies time is cyclical, but in the modern society time is linear;
- The use of scientific rationality and the experimental method to overcome the imperfections of nature and liberate mankind;
- A bureaucratic type of organization for the optimisation of the results;
- The hierarchy of bureaucracy, and the rational approach, required for production.

In marketing, the modern paradigm highlights the rationality of the consumer, who is able to identify, understand and satisfy his tangible needs. This simplistic view of the consumer led marketing and consumer researchers to set up an adapted marketing mix approach, based on the 4Ps (product, price, place, and promotion), to reach the consumer. This approach has been recently questioned by scholars because of the increasing scepticism towards the paradigm and also the rejection of the foundations of modernism such as reason, progress, science and morality. Furthermore, the increasing doubt about the rationality of humanity (as evidenced by the Cold War, Hiroshima, Nazism, genocide, Chernobyl...) has discredited the modernist ideological framework. As a result, alternative models have emerged and opened the way to the pluralism of values and behaviours.

□ **The foundations of modernism and its critique**

Modernity, and hence modernism as a philosophy, in Western society refers to the period from late sixteenth century or early seventeenth century (Borgmann, 1993) up to the present. For marketing and consumer researchers such as Firat and Venkatesh (1995, p.240), modernism signifies the following conditions:

- the rule of reason and the establishment of rational order;
- the emergence of the cognitive subject;
- the rise of science and an emphasis on material progress through the application of scientific technologies;