Post-Communist Consumer Culture

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Introduction

Nowadays Europe is united in a shared democratic and capitalist system. However, democracy and its practical implications are not matters of continuity and heritage in all parts of the continent. Indeed, Eastern Europe (namely the former communist states) stands out and stands apart, having relatively recently adapted to the Western ideas of democracy and to the open market. “Reality”, said Lech Walensa, “has mocked all those who thought the over-throw of communism would move the Eastern world closer to its Western counterpart,”¹ and this statement may still stand true today, as there are still observable cultural differences between the two European spheres that the iron curtain once divided.

In 1995 Bennett Korvig wrote: “indeed, the historic tendency to regard Eastern Europe as a separate region, destined to remain backward and turbulent remains strong in Western Europe. (...) The West (...) must (...) adjust its perceptions and priorities in order to bring East Europeans back from the periphery and into the mainstream of modernity.”² What is the situation nowadays, 15 years later? And has the “West” held up a model of modernity for the “East” to imitate? In what respects did the former communist countries pick up lessons on democracy?

Consumer culture is, perhaps, a defining characteristic of the democratic and capitalistic world. Consumer culture implies the entry of consumer goods in the lives of individuals from all social strata, and it is supported by a system that revolves around shopping, advertising, and marketing.³ However, one may ask oneself: how do people in post-communist states regard their former consumer options? And how do they relate to consumer culture in the present? Are they driven by a desire to leave behind the depriving past and swiftly acquire all that they have lacked in the olden days? In matters of consumer choices, is there a communist behavioral legacy, or is there a

¹ Zoltan Barany and Ivan Volgyes eds., The Legacies of Communism in Eastern Europe (Baltimore Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 35.
² Ibid. 41.
re-interpretation of consumer options, based precisely on the desire to leave behind the lessons of austerity taught by the communist regimes?

The items we choose to buy and consume and the services we opt for all make statements about who we are and what we strive to achieve, about our values and behavior. As sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues, every aspect of consumer behaviour says something about where we ‘belong’ in society, about our class, education, ethnicity, religion, generation, etc. Common, shared tastes and choices also ensure access to desired social groups.4

In consumer culture, the meanings that goods bear, given to them through packaging or advertising – which Baudrillard names “sign-values”5 – become more significant to consumers than the actual, material uses and purposes of the products. In fact, the inherent “use-value” (a term Marx used to define intrinsic materiality, utility) of goods has become separate from their symbolic meaning. We now live in a “signifying culture”, one rich in disconnected messages. Since we now seek these messages, and not the material purposes of the goods themselves: “what we buy bears less and less relation to our actual needs.”6

This paper will investigate consumer options and trends in post-communist countries. The paper focuses on Romania, where the former communist regime of Nicolae Ceauşescu implied a particularly severe shortage of basic goods and services, and seeks to question the perception of consumer culture by Romanians. Do Romanians feel they are now entitled to purchase, consume, and access all the goods and services of which they have been deprived? Is this desire to catch up with the capitalistic “West” a driving factor for consumer behavior?

In this pursuit, the paper will be structured into several theoretical sub-sections, dealing with the nature of communist legacy in post-communist countries, based on new practical interests. Also, the reality of scarce consumer options in communist systems will be dealt with, in a second theoretical section, seeking to explain the nature of deprivation of goods and services under Ceauşescu’s regime. A data analysis, namely the analysis and interpretation of a questionnaire, will be the object of a third section. It was distributed online to Romanian citizens, by means of

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6 Cohen and Kennedy, Global Sociology, 236.
various online social media (e.g. messenger, facebook, twitter) and deals with perception of consumer options in communist times and afterwards.

**Communist legacy and experiential learning**

There is no doubt that the process of democratization in Eastern Europe was slow and not without obstacles. And, despite ca. twenty years having gone by since the fall of the iron curtain, some believe that the transition process is still not complete, as there is talk of a “perpetual transition”.\(^7\)

There are also those who believe that progress is only superficial, and that people can still not understand democracy as something other than a ‘wild chase after gain and prey’, because they cannot yet distinguish between value and imposture.\(^8\)

Looking at Eastern Europe requires an acknowledgment of its special character. The communist experience produced a distinctive set of values and learned behaviours that now shape the response of East Europeans when faced with the dilemma of “instant democracy building”, which has proved to be a troubled process.\(^9\)

In the context of powerful changes, Eastern Europe found itself at a crossroad, characterized by the co-existence of social and political cultures. Pre-industrial culture co-existed with remnants of the communist past, and went hand in hand with the reintroduced market-materialist culture.\(^10\)

Building democracy up from the ground, starting virtually from nothing, in the context of poverty and lack of an entrepreneurial class became somewhat confusing, if not discouraging.\(^11\)

The idea of re-building democracy and re-introducing market principles makes one remember the bitter-sweet joke: What is real socialism? The longest and most twisted road from capitalism to… capitalism! Indeed, it appears that in post-communist societies the capitalist system is being re-built from the ground, in an effort to repeat and replicate the steps that Western Europe took

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\(^11\) Korvig, Marginality Reinforced, 34.
long ago. “But”, sociologist Piotr Sztompka warns, “one should not be misled by superficial resemblances. The second birth of capitalism is fundamentally distinct from the first”.12

The process of transition, in Sztompka’s opinion, began suddenly, as a “radical break with the past”.13 The previous socialist system had not allowed a gradual creation of capitalist institutions, lifestyles, values and behaviors. On the contrary, it had dilapidated the market, and had abolished personal property. Consequently, instead of following a natural evolutionary process, Eastern Europe began its road towards capitalism not with small steps, but with a giant leap, struggling to skip stages.14

The issue that Sztompka points out is that Eastern European countries have started their long journey into capitalism at a moment when it was already powerfully developed and offered imitation patterns in other parts of the world, such as London, Munich, Paris, New York, Rome. However, as he notes, modeling change on the image of capitalism at its peak, “we fall guilty of anachronism and fetishization”, and tending to forget about “the long historical path of western capitalism, of the costs incurred along the way, of the heavy price paid for present prosperity (...)

Consequently, we may infer that Eastern Europe finds itself in a situation where it is eagerly trying to fill its historical gaps with capitalistic drive, but it is like building a house with no foundation and no prior building experience.

Thus, we may wonder about the nature of social change in transition towards democracy and capitalism. What is communist consumer legacy, and how is it nowadays enacted, in terms of consumer choices? And can one predict a re-orienting process – away from the past and swiftly towards the future of ‘capitalist comfort’? The premise of this paper is that the defining characteristic of consumer behavior in post-communist times is the desire to acquire the goods and items that were once unavailable, in an effort to catch up with the West. This change is based on a re-interpretation of deprivation experiences in the communist system, in the new circumstances of democracy and capitalism.

13 Ibid, 11.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid, 10-11.
A legacy of communism is something “received from” the communist past. Jan Kubik argues that cultural legacies are patterns (scenarios) of behavior or thought that are transmitted from the past and enacted in the present. They can be transmitted and enacted unconsciously, as “ways of doing things”; or, they can be summoned as models for current actions. The hypothesis of this paper, supported by the collected data, is that legacies are transmitted as scenarios; they are retold in the primary groups of individuals (e.g. family) and it is these scenarios that are the basis of change. Faced with the particular phenomenon of capitalism and the open market, flooded with foreign goods, did, perhaps, in certain social strata, a process of analysis of the legacy begin, based on prior experience and new circumstances?

Richard Rose argues that people shape their current behaviour on prior experiences, depending on how they have interpreted them. He calls this process “a lifetime learning model”, noting that “support for the regime is initially shaped by early socialization and then evolves continuously throughout adult life as initial beliefs are reinforced or challenged by later experiences”.

The experiential approach, as Marc Morje Howard also points out, accentuates real-life experiences, which define attitudes and values. According to this approach, people’s conduct can change, but not in an absolute manner. Change is usually an “adaptation from, or a reaction against previous events, experiences, and patterns in people’s lives”. Howard states that change can be triggered by new circumstances, which lead people to re-evaluate their prior experiences and change their behavior accordingly.

The self-evaluation of life in transition, compared to life in the communist times is, however, a subjective process and depends on the individual’s degree of socialization in communism. For instance, as Alina-Mungiu Pippidi points out, young people and those who work in the private sector, having been socialized in the communist regime for a shorter period of time, will be more individualistic.

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19 Ibid.
Keeping this theoretical approach in mind, we may note that Piotr Sztompka describes the road to democracy and capitalism, as an “escape from”, rather than a “run after”. He believes that the greater majority of people simply want to ‘get away’, and only a rather small group possesses a clear understanding of what the capitalist change truly means: “for large masses it is rather a vague catchword, heavily value-laden: a synonym of the good life: prosperity, affluence, consumption, sometimes also freedom”. This signifies a process of re-interpretation of the past, as a reaction against it; aiming towards a new alternative, which is perhaps not well-understood, as it is seen only in comparison to the old alternative.

Moreover, this change comes with a pragmatic, materialist shift. It implies a new normative order, based on “new values and interests understood as goals and accepted and applied means of realization of these goals, i.e. rules of social behavior”, as Marek Ziolkowski points out. Consequently, in terms of consumer options, it is perhaps a legitimate assumption that consumers in post-communist societies have now created a series of pragmatic interests, triggered by the new open market system, based specifically on the re-interpretation of communist legacy.

In assessing communist legacy as the basis of experiential learning, a fair assumption is that a shift in values has been possible almost ubiquitously. However, the second point made by Ziolkowski, regarding the new social behavior is that it cannot function on all strata, as people with a low income (perhaps a legacy of the communist regime that has created a massive, yet unqualified workforce) can still only aspire to the behaviour of a capitalist consumer. Likewise, in terms of socialization, older people tend to maintain a reserved and cautious spending and consuming pattern, while younger people, with less, or little background in communist socialization, seem to be less aware of an actual shift or change taking place, as they have spent the greater part of their lives in the post-communist regime and capitalist milieu.

Communist consumerism? What was communist Eastern Europe entitled to have?

When communist ideology turned into practice, there were several side-effects that were not exactly what the credo seemed to envision. Perhaps they were written in the fine print of the

22 Ibid.
24 Ibid, 165.
communist social contract, if we may call it that, but people soon discovered that communism, centralization, collectivization, etc., were not all they had promised to be in practical terms, and specifically in terms of lifestyles and consumer options. There are also elements of the Marxist theory that indicate why communist ideology and practice did not care much for the “commodities” of life.

Marx based his criticism of capitalism on the “theory of surplus value”. He believes that labour power is also a commodity, a commodity that “capitalists” take advantage of. Marx calculates that in order for society to carry on, a man needs to work for considerably less than a full workday. What remains of his day’s work is surplus value taken over by the capitalist. However, Marx does not state that each worker is entitled to the full value of what he produces. More like it, Marx regards production as a social process that all people co-operate in, both in terms of input and in terms of output.

Consequently, the right to the whole of what is produced means “the social right of the totality of workers to the whole product of the labour of all”. In the logic of the communist system, it “deprives no man of the power to appropriate the products of society; all that it does is to deprive him of the power to subjugate the labor of others by means of such appropriation.” In theory, once society is thus organized for production and for the distribution of what is produced, all of man’s needs should be met. Nonetheless, what this current section means to point out is that, in practice, people in communist countries were subject to a policy of deprivation. This was certainly the case under Ceaușescu’s regime in Romania, where even basic consumer goods, especially foodstuffs, were not easily available.

In continuing his criticism of capitalism, one other of Marx’s concepts is “commodity fetishism”. Marx argues that commodity production creates a de-personalized economy. The production system, he notes, denies humankind the opportunity for self-realization through creative work and social co-operation, but compensates for this with the availability of the possessions one can procure at the shopping mall. For this reason, Marx believes that in the capitalist system purchases are endowed with a meaning and significance they cannot truely

possess. In other words, we fetishise them. Commodity fetishism is created under capitalism because the market system has become to us more real than the “underlying social relationships (based on inequality and exploitation) which make goods sold in the market possible in the first place”.

Moreover, according to the Marxist economic principles, the service sector and infrastructure were not part of the intrinsic value of the product. As a result, infrastructure (roads, railroads, telephones, sewer systems, and ecosphere) remained undersized, and deteriorated until it became “practically impossible to refit it for the production needs of the twentieth century”. This is a relevant point, as it shows that deprivation of services was not only a tangible side-effect of a faultily applied communist ideology. Underdevelopment of the service sector and infrastructure were even part of the communist theory and Marxist economic principles.

Centralisation and collectivisation of the communist production system had several other effects as well, specifically on the standard of living and the accessibility of consumer goods and of “commodities”. One of the principles of communism was that of state ownership. It was seen as a higher principle, which applied to all spheres: “the state (...) was the owner of nearly everything, including private cars, apartments, dachas, and the like (...”). One practical consequence of this was that people were, to some extent, no longer free to purchase whatever they liked and whenever they liked. In many cases, residences were distributed by the state, and a position on a waiting list for a car could last for years.

In addition to this, the practice of planned production and central pricing had its effects in terms of creating shortages. In theory, everything was planned, and there were clear production targets that had to be met, as opposed to the capitalist system, where the free market system functions by the forces of supply and demand, thus setting the scene for entrepreneurship and competition. One result of this was wide-spread shortage of goods. This is the reason that socialist economies are called “economies of shortage”. Shortages were sometimes relative, but

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29 Ibid.
31 Ibid, 44.
32 Ibid, 44-45.
“sometimes shortages were absolute, since relative shortage often resulted in lowered production, or – as in Romania – since items required for production or consumption were being exported.”

Indeed, having entered into heavy foreign debt, the Ceaușescu regime decided to embark on an ambitious plan to pay it off. This was done by exporting most of the agricultural goods Romania produced, and by rationing food as well as other goods and services, while gas and electricity were frequently shut down. As a result, one may say that the Ceaușescu regime forced the Romanian population to pay for the state’s management mistakes, forcing people to work harder for less: “wages were lowered, nutritional intake fell, heat and lighting were drastically reduced”, and the nation “neared the level of underdevelopment.”

One International Monetary Fund (IMF) assessment of economic conditions in Romania showed that a 40% drop had taken place in the standard of living (“the total value of goods and services consumed per capita”) in the period between the late 1970s and the late 1980s.

The autonomy and freedom of Romanians were annihilated. For instance, all typing machines were registered with the police and everything, including bread, was rationed. Even the liberty to travel internally, between towns, was much reduced in the 1980s. One could not purchase basic goods, such as food, in a city other than one’s own, because of the food-ticket system that allowed people to collect their ration only in the city where they were registered.

During the times of enforced paucity, Ceaușescu presented harmful notions on social practices, frequently repeating his argument that “caloric intake could be reduced, because Romanians did not eat scientifically”. Such ideas “reveal a man out of touch with the needs – often the desperate needs – of the people he ruled.”

There existed, in the centralized communist economy, a difficulty of procuring even the most basic goods. While this created the general feeling that all were equal in their hardships, it also

36 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Curry, *The Sociological Legacies of Communism*, 70.
aroused suspicion when one received special honours, or when someone was able to get some hard-to-get goods, as the Communist Party controlled jobs, travel and other privileges.\textsuperscript{41}

Consumer choices were therefore narrow, as Curry also points out: “until communism fell and Western interests entered (…), the selection of consumer goods was limited enough that people looked pretty much the same”.\textsuperscript{42} This is relevant, as it points out the fact that quite little originality was possible: as there were few goods, and all mass-produced, all people had access to very much the same things. A system that sought to create an equal and fair standard of life did more than people had bargained for – it created a uniform society, where people had little access to originality and had very little choice in terms of diet or fashion.

Thus, pointing out the nature of shortages and deprivation in the times of Ceauşescu’s communist regime is significant to this research, as the key hypothesis is that post-communist consumer patterns are driven by an active desire to overcome the deprivation caused by the communist regime. Pointing out the nature of shortages and items that people were deprived of can help us better understand the nature of consumer trends nowadays.

After the fall of the iron curtain, and beginning with the slow (re-)immersion of the former communist states into democracy and the open market system, the availability of material goods grew substantially. Prices went up, and even expensive or luxury items entered the market. Material possessions and ownership took a new importance: “those who had power or resources were suddenly able to buy. Those who did not, had to deal (…) with the experience of seeing stores that were open but stocked with goods priced so high that they were inaccessible”.\textsuperscript{43}

The growing number of consumer goods and the appearance of foreign products brought with it a heightened awareness and interest for materialistic interests and consumer possibilities. Easy and pleasant lifestyles, with “a touch of luxury” were entering the former communist systems.\textsuperscript{44} These new options resonated with Eastern Europeans, who were seeking new ways to symbolize their ‘belonging’ to a new, liberated way of life: “in the former communist countries there is little doubt that the arrival of products such as Big Mac burgers was eagerly welcomed in the 1980s. They were seen as powerful symbols, which offered access to Western freedoms and consumer

\textsuperscript{41}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43}Ibid, 71.
\textsuperscript{44}Ziolkowski, “The Pragmatic Shift in Polish Social Consciousness”, 176.
As Marek Ziolkowski notes about Poland, in the very aftermath of the collapse of communism, “there is a powerful influx of imported mass culture which plays the role of a substitute for the subject political culture so characteristic of the old regime”.  

Eventually, East Europeans adapted to materialism, in a unique manner. This did, nonetheless, result in some societal contradiction: “those who had been heroes for their suffering suddenly were well dressed and visible in their consumption. This was, at best, a shock”. The nature of social relations changed. In the communist system, shortage of goods lead to a complex nature of relations and connections, as people found alternative solutions for their consumer needs, “whether the need was for spare parts to fix a car or for products that were rarely available in stores”. After communism, the pursuit of individual needs lead to an increased importance of money in relations between people, as a study conducted by Marc Morje Howard shows: “new societal inequalities have arisen, with sharp delineations between rich and poor”, based specifically on the new circumstances of democracy/capitalism.

**An investigation: Romanian perception of communist and post-communist consumer options**

After having gone through a theoretical approach about the nature of deprivation of goods in the communist regimes, and having tried to link this to the nature of consumer drives in post-communist Europe, it is now time to undertake a data investigation. In doing so, we must identify several variables for which to look when analyzing the data yielded by the questionnaire.

A fist variable can be labeled “the existence of a ‘communist narrative’ in the individual’s socialization process”. We may understand this variable as a “story”/“scenario” of communist lifestyle, re-told in the family as a part of the socialization process, reminding the individuals of living conditions under the regime. This is relevant in its connection to the theory of ‘experiential learning’: by re-telling tales of the communist austerity policy, one can, as a response, change consumer options, in the new circumstances of capitalism.

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45 Cohen and Kennedy, *Global Sociology*, 240.
49 Ibid, 130.
A second variable is “a feeling of prior deprivation of goods and services, during the communist regime”. This variable refers to the perception of lifestyle during the communist system, in terms of consumer options. Do respondents identify the communist lifestyle as lacking access to certain goods and services? To what extent is this feeling prevalent?

“A feeling of prior unavailability of diverse choices, in terms of clothing/fashion, dietary habits and other consumer goods” is a third variable. This refers to a perception of consumer options as having been scarce, with little room for original or individual choices. Do respondents perceive that they have had much to choose from, when making their consumer choices? Is “originality” a variable that is currently sought after when exercising consumer behavior – and is it because it was once unavailable?

A fourth variable can be described as “a feeling of entitlement to goods and services that were once unavailable”. This variable seeks to analyze if Romanians now base their consumer behavior on the explicit feeling of entitlement to procure all that they have been deprived of. What are the nuances of this feeling? Do Romanians feel that they are entitled to purchase, possess, and consume the items that were once unavailable, and to do so irrespective of European-wide consumer patterns?

The following, fifth variable may be “consumer options in current-day Romania”. This variable refers to the consumer options Romanians make, seeking to analyze the meanings behind them: how often do Romanians now declare that they go shopping? What are the preferred brands? Do Romanians feel like access to these once-unavailable foreign brands bring more ‘value’ to their lifestyles?

In order to investigate these variables, a questionnaire was created and circulated online through various media (messenger, facebook, twitter, blogs). By utilizing these social media, the obvious outcome was that the age category primarily reached was of those under 30 years; however, there were also respondents over 30 years that completed the questionnaire, including individuals aged over 50, over 60 and over 70. The total number of respondents was 206. However, not all respondents chose to answer all the questions. Nonetheless, all questions had over 200 responses. The majority of respondents, 70.1%, have graduated from university, while 23% have finished high school education and 6.9% have completed graduate studies. The majority of respondents were female (69.6%).
To begin the analysis, let us first explain the variable we have entitled “the existence of a ‘communist narrative’ in the individual’s socialization process”. In trying to analyze this dimension, respondents were asked whether, in their families, there is mention/story-telling/reminiscing of life in the communist times, and how often this happens. Out of the total number of respondents, 39.8% (82 persons) stated that there is occasional mention/story-telling of communist-time lifestyle in their families. Only 6.8% of respondents (14 people) stated that there is often mention, and only 1% (2 people) stated that there is very often mention of this in their families. There were equal percentages (26.2%, i.e. 54 people) of respondents that stated very rare and rare mention of communist times in their families. Consequently, the premise of a “communist narrative” existing in the socialization process is partially supported, even though the large percentages of very rare and rare answers indicate that the trend amongst respondents oscillates between occasional and rare mention (see figure 1). The implications of this are that scenarios are being transmitted in the socialization process, in terms of family mention/reminiscing about communist times. This might serve, in the framework of the “experiential learning” theory, as a fundament for re-analysis and change, leading to a shift towards capitalist consumer patterns. However, the frequency of scenario-retelling did not reveal to be as high as initially assumed.

![Question 1](image.png)

*Figure 1: Frequency of family mention/reminiscing about communist times*

The second variable that the questionnaire sought to investigate is that which was labelled “a feeling of prior deprivation of goods and services, during the communist regime”. In seeking to
analyze this perspective, several questions were built. Respondents were asked whether they generally feel that their families had suffered during the communist regime (of the 206 respondents, 61.2% reported ‘yes’, while 38.8% answered ‘no’); if they had been deprived of certain goods and services, and to what extent; and to what degree did the respondents and/or their families have easy access to certain consumer goods during the communist regime.

One of the most telling questions was: “To what extent do you consider that you and/or your family were deprived of certain goods and services, during the communist regime?” Out of a total of 205 respondents, 100, i.e. 48.8%, perceived that they and/or their families were considerably deprived of certain goods and services, while 36, i.e.17.6% felt that their families were deprived of goods and services to a great extent. Eleven respondents, i.e. 5.4%, reported deprivation to a very great extent. However, the second largest percentage is by far that of respondents who felt that they and/or their families were deprived to a little extent – 49 respondents, namely 23.9%.
(see figure 2)

![Figure 2: Extent of goods and services deprivation in the communist system](image)

Those who answered the questionnaire stated that they and/or their families had difficulties in procuring all the goods that they had needed: 50.5% reported considerable difficulty, while 33.3% great difficulty and 10.8% very great difficulty.

Respondents also reported difficulties in buying specific goods, such as clothing and footwear (108 respondents, i.e. 52.9%, reported considerable difficulty, while 52 or 25.5% reported great difficulty) and electronics (32.2% reported considerable difficulty, while 39% reported difficulty and 22.0% reported very great difficulty).
The implications of the results allow us to speculate about goods and services deprivation as a valid reason to re-interpret the communist past/legacy and to make steps towards capitalist consumer patterns. So far we have gathered that there is mention of communist scenarios in the socialization process, and that perception of the communist consumer options bears the mark of goods and services deprivation.

Moreover, in terms of the variable labeled “a feeling of prior unavailability of diverse choices, in terms of consumer goods”, respondents reported a lack of choices, specifically in terms of clothing and footwear. Out of 204 respondents, 192 or 94.1%, felt that shops did not present a large palette of choice (see figure 3). This response connects to the assumption that consumers in post-communist Romania feel they have been deprived of a chance for ‘originality’. This is further evident as 34.15% (70 respondents) state that it is now important to them to have an ‘original style/look’.

Another aspect that was analyzed was whether the Romanian respondents reported perception of “a feeling of entitlement to goods and services that were once unavailable”. Consequently, three questions were constructed to test this variable, in three different nuances. Respondents were asked whether they now feel entitled to access all the goods and services that they were once deprived of; if they felt they were now entitled to access all the goods and services that they were once deprived of, in a rhythm that will allow them to reach Western-European living standards; and if they felt they were now entitled to access all the goods and services that they were once deprived of, irrespective of European-wide consumer patterns. All three questions were answered affirmatively (see figure 4), thus indicating that Romanians are guided by a feeling of
entitlement to acquire the goods they have been deprived of, no matter if their lifestyle choices are not compatible with European “unwritten” consumer behavior norms, such as recycling, which we will later discuss. This perception of entitlement to previously unavailable goods is further reflected in a following question (no. 15), as 31.53% of 203 respondents reported that having access to the once unavailable goods is considerably important.

Some implications of this variable would be that Romanians now consume heartily, but not responsibly. In 2009, Romania was reported as being second to last in the countdown of countries who have undertaken practices of waste management.50 A remarkable 99% of domestic waste is stored in landfills (with Bulgaria leading the top, at 100%, and Poland following closely at 90%). According to a report of Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Commission, in the EU in 2007 one person produced 522 kilograms of waste throughout the year,51, roughly 41% being stored in landfills, ca. 20% being incinerated, ca. 22% recycled and ca. 17% turned into compost.52 However, in Romania, the practices of recycling, incinerating or composting waste are virtually unused. Consequently, this indicates that Romanians have now become ‘consumers’, with a wide array of possibilities. However, due to the perception of entitlement to consume in order to ‘catch up’ with all they have been missing, irrespective of European Union patterns, the act of consuming has become irresponsible. Romanians pay little attention to the outcomes of their purchases and uses of goods and products.

52  Ibid, 86.
Finally, one last variable that was tested was that of “consumer options in current-day Romania”. More than half of the respondents, 52.7% to be precise, feel that having access to foreign brands has, to some extent, brought an added value to their lifestyle, while 33.99% state that access to foreign brands has definitely brought an added value (see figure 5). Consumers listed several of their favorite brands, which include Zara (41 mentions), H&M (mentioned 26 times, which is interesting, because the H&M chain is not yet present in Romania, meaning that Romanians seek this Western, unavailable brand), Pull and Bear (5), Nokia (13), Adidas (15 mentions), Nike (13), Converse (10), Samsung (11) and Mango (10). In terms of foodstuff, trends lean towards Romanian brands, such as Zuzu (8) and Napolact (14), Dorna (9), but also towards foreign brands, such as Danone (13) and Hochland (6). This may have some interesting implications, as the majority of foreign brands were listed under fashion brands, for clothing and footwear. This may signify that it is even more important to Romanians to be visible in their choice for foreign brands, choosing them for clothing, and listing a preference for Romanian brands, or bio/garden goods, when it comes to foodstuff.
Having analyzed all the variables taken into account, and having presented the results and their implications, we have reached the point of drawing conclusions.

**Conclusion**

After having investigated the theoretical nature of social change, based on a rejection of the communist scenario, and after having taken a look at the nature of goods and services deprivation in the former communist regimes, it is now time to corroborate the theoretical information with the results of the data collected with the aid of the questionnaire.

The results, it is fair to say, have shed further light on some of the driving factors of post-communist, Romanian consumer patterns. The first theoretical approach that we analyzed, that of experiential learning based on the rejection of the communist legacy scenarios, found partial support in the collected data. Indeed, the questionnaire revealed mention of communist-time stories in the respondents’ socialization process. However, frequencies ranged from very rare (26.2%) to occasional (39.8%). Moreover, respondents showed a perception of prior deprivation of goods and services, in the communist period, and displayed a feeling of entitlement to the items they had been deprived of. This clearly points towards the communist experience as a shaping force for behavioural change.

As the collected data shows, consumers now seem aware of the options that were unattainable in the past, and demonstrate a sense of entitlement to the goods they have been deprived of. This rejection of the former deprivation is a prominent variable in the results of the questionnaire. As we have investigated in theory, the nature of shortages in the communist period, and, particularly,
under Ceauşescu’s regime, was strongly perceived by citizens. Previous lack of access to basic consumer goods, rationed consumption, and the impossibility of owning goods have nowadays contributed to a powerful desire to possess.

There is considerable reason to believe that consumer drive and patterns in the former communist economies is based on a desire to re-capture what was lacking in the communist regime, and to do so at any cost, in order to catch up with Western living standards, irrespective of European-wide consumption habits. If this is the case, then the inferring assumption is that Eastern Europe is in a distinct consumer-culture sphere – perhaps still separated by the invisible Iron Curtain – in which the pattern is one of imitation of the West. Respondents of the questionnaire have reported a feeling of entitlement to purchase and consume at a rate that would allow reaching Western living standards, in as much as 84.6% of responses.

Consequently, the collected data supports the theoretical premises: in post-communist states, particularly in Romania, and particularly among the demographic group that was questioned, there exists a rejection of a former scenario, that of the communist lifestyle, a scenario that is retold in the socialization process. The scenario is one of deprivation, where access to consumer goods was difficult and rationed. Thus the rejection of the scenario of scarcity and shortages is based on “learning from experience”, where the individual no longer wants to experience goods and service deprivation. Based on this shift, there is now a desire to swiftly acquire all that was unavailable, and to reach the Western, typically capitalist lifestyle. The implications could further account for some of the wider social and cultural differences between countries of Eastern and Western Europe, such as crime rate in terms of theft, and manifestations of popular culture, and, last but not least, the perception by Eastern Europeans that all things Western are desirable and hold an intrinsic value far greater than local or no-brand products.

Whereas in the west of Europe, consumer culture may be understood as an obvious outcome of capitalist tradition and continuity, in the east of Europe, in the former communist states, it can be understood as an imitation process – hindered by a legacy of deprivation, and enhanced by a desire to access and possess all that had been off limits before. Being that there is no common or synchronized tradition in developing consumer culture, it is a fair assumption that the two spheres remain divided in terms of the values bestowed upon consumer choices. Purchasing a Western brand has become symbolically meaningful in the former communist regimes, where the
mere presence of foreign goods suggests a notion of progress and a connection to the historically inaccessible “rest of the world”.

In the end, Eastern Europe, the former object of a shortage policy, is working towards catching up with Western Europe – becoming Europeanized, in a sense, but, in another, escaping the true nature of European patterns of responsible consumption. Whether consumer culture is developing naturally or whether it has become the casualty of a historically uprooted race – a race to escape a distressing past and to imitate an idealized end – remains to be seen.
Bibliography


