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## From Modernism to Postmodernism: The Reconstruction of Consumer Culture and Consumer Society

### Abstract

This article analyzes the transition from modernism to postmodernism through the transformation of consumer culture. It explores the shift from the production-centered rational order of modernity to the symbolic and cultural centrality of consumption in the postmodern era. Modernism is framed around rationalism, objectivity, and differentiation, making a comparative engagement with competing theories essential for understanding postmodern consumer culture. In postmodernity, consumption gains prominence as a cultural mechanism through which status, identity, and social positioning are expressed. No longer merely functional, consumption acquires symbolic and meaning-producing dimensions. Drawing on a comparative analysis of theoretical sources, the study argues that social relations and cultural expressions are increasingly structured around consumption practices, and that the distinction between modernity and postmodernity can be interpreted through the evolving dynamics of consumer culture.

**Keywords:** *modernism, postmodernism, consumption, consumer culture, transformation*

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## Modernizmdən postmodernizmə: İstehlak mədəniyyəti və istehlak cəmiyyətinin yenidən qurulması

### Xülasə

Bu məqalə modernizmdən postmodernizmə keçidi istehlak mədəniyyətinin transformasiyası kontekstində təhlil edir. Tədqiqat modernliyin istehsal mərkəzli rəşional nizamından postmodern dövrdə istehlakın simvolik və mədəni mərkəziliyinə doğru baş verən dəyişimi araşdırır. Modernizm rəşionalizm, obyektivlik və diferensiasiya prinsipləri üzərində qurulmuş çərçivə kimi təqdim olunur və postmodern istehlak mədəniyyətini anlamaq üçün müxtəlif nəzəri yanaşmaların müqayisəli təhlili zəruri hesab edilir. Postmodern şəraitdə istehlak statusun, kimliyin və sosial mövqelənmənin ifadə olunduğu mədəni mexanizmə çevrilir. Artıq istehlak yalnız funksional xarakter daşımır, həm də simvolik və məna yaradan ölçü qazanır. Müqayisəli nəzəri mənbələrin təhlilinə əsaslanan bu tədqiqat göstərir ki, sosial münasibətlər və mədəni ifadələr getdikcə daha çox istehlak praktikaları ətrafında formalaşır və modernliklə postmodernlik arasındakı konseptual fərqlər istehlak mədəniyyətinin dəyişən dinamikası vasitəsilə izah oluna bilər.

**Açar sözlər:** *modernizm, postmodernizm, istehlak, istehlak mədəniyyəti, transformasiya*

## Introduction

Contemporary social theoretical approaches evaluate the transition from modernism to postmodernism not merely as a change of historical stage, but also as a transformation of the system of thought, cultural structure, and principles of social organization. Modernity was shaped on the basis of rationalism, universality, objectivity, and differentiation, and relied on a production-centered economic and identity model. Industrialization, division of labor, and a structured social order constituted the fundamental pillars of modern society. In this phase, relations of production played a decisive role in the organization of society, and social identity and status were primarily determined by one's position within production. From the second half of the twentieth century onward, the stable and unified explanatory framework of this model became the object of criticism. The weakening of belief in grand narratives, the re-evaluation of the process of differentiation, and the increase in cultural multilayeredness created the conditions for the formation of postmodern thought. In the postmodern phase, the commodity-oriented structure was gradually replaced by a consumption-centered cultural system. Consumption ceased to be merely an economic activity and began to function as a cultural mechanism associated with the production of social meanings, the construction of identity, and the display of social status. The aim of this article is to analyze the transition from modernism to postmodernism in the context of the transformation of consumer culture. This analysis makes it possible to present consumer culture as a key theoretical concept explaining structural change in society and to demonstrate more clearly the conceptual shift between modernity and postmodernity.

### **The Theoretical Framework of the Concepts of Modernism and Postmodernism**

Evaluating whether the historical development process of modernism, which is accepted today as a component of social science, has come to an end may be considered a controversial issue. Modernism emerged as a reform movement that questioned the traditional and, in its place, aimed at the formation of new aesthetic and modes of thought. Its historical character and the specific period of its emergence remain open to debate. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that its formation as a concept dates back to the seventeenth century. Among researchers, there is a broad consensus that the main characteristics of modernism include approaches such as rationalism, universality, objectivity, and totality (Baylarov, 2024).

### **Research**

In contemporary literature, modernism is defined as a rationalist mode of thought that emerged alongside the Enlightenment and supported reform through the use of reason (Orujov, 2024). The rise of instrumental reason and the decline of religious authority marked a more emancipated age, in which the individual came to see themselves as a distinct subject and placed their own existence at the center of cognition. This tendency continued until the first quarter of the twentieth century (Sekmen, 2024, pp. 4–6). Individualism became one of the main concerns of modernity, particularly in the context of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. Taylor explains modern individualism as society legitimizing itself through self-created principles rather than external or divine authority, and as an emphasis on controlling and disciplining the self (Taylor, 2020, pp. 10–11).

Giddens argues that although modernism represents a break from tradition, it also contains elements of continuity, with modern social transformations differing fundamentally from premodern periods in intensity and scope (Giddens, 1994, pp. 26–28). Postmodernism has been described as a stage after modernism, a movement generated by it, or a theory inspired by it (Timur, 2017, p. 3). Despite ongoing debates, Giddens maintains that modernity persists, and that postmodernism emerged to address the problems and limitations inherent in modernity (Giddens, 1994, pp. 42–44).

According to Baudrillard, "Postmodernism is a new theory of society that analyzes the current condition of Western societies in the context of both social variables and the consciousness they produce" (Baudrillard, 2021). Postmodernism, leaving behind the quest for modernity, reveals that the unease observed in Western societies constitutes a state of exhaustion nourished by the chaos of a disordered world (Timur, 2017). Bauman characterizes postmodernism as a process directed toward

the re-evaluation of scientific thought and of the human being at the level of society. At the same time, he emphasizes that it carries a character of belatedness and opposition in relation to modernity. He further notes that the entire conceptual framework through which postmodernism seeks to confront and even take revenge on modernity has itself been constructed through inspiration drawn precisely from modernism (Bauman, 2011, p. 46).

### **The Socio-Cultural Parameters of Consumer Culture**

Consumer culture has emerged as a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon shaped by the consumption behaviors, consumption habits, and consumption-related values of individuals and communities. This concept encompasses a broad and interdisciplinary field of research that examines the impact of consumption activities on individual identities, social structures, and economic systems. In this respect, consumer culture provides an important analytical framework for understanding how individuals construct their identities, through which means they determine their social status, and within what context they regulate their social relations (Bocock, 1997, pp. 42–43).

According to Odabaşı, consumer culture has emerged and developed as a central phenomenon in modern capitalist societies, where production and consumption constitute the main dynamics of economic growth. In this context, consumption extends beyond the satisfaction of individual needs and functions as a means of expressing social and cultural identity, while also playing a central role in sustaining social relations. Therefore, consumption provides an important analytical framework for examining the interaction between the individual and social structures (Odabaşı, 2017, pp. 15–20). When consumption is considered as a multidimensional structure, the persistence of society's desire and need for consumption across all areas of daily life is not coincidental. Individuals as carriers of consumer culture use mass media to share and disseminate adopted cultural values with others who have similar preferences. The formation of common interests and similar consumption behaviors reflects the structural characteristics of the consumer society (Baudrillard, 2021, pp. 26–30). The historical development of consumer culture also sheds light on its psychological and sociological foundations, including the symbolic expression of identity, belonging, and social bonds through consumption. Featherstone, in *Postmodernism and Consumer Culture*, evaluates consumer societies from both positive and critical perspectives and analyzes their consumption models and behavioral patterns (Featherstone, 2013, pp. 15–20).

### **The Formation of the Consumer Society in the Context of Consumer Culture**

When postmodernism examines consumer culture and the consumer society within the context of modernity, it emphasizes that cultural forms lose their validity over time and, on this basis, considers their re-evaluation necessary. Weber's association of the differentiation process of modernity with productive activity in the fields of science, law, and morality indicates that the transition to postmodernism occurred within a broader context of cultural production. The realization of this transition, or according to some approaches the dissolution of differentiation, makes a large-scale transformation of cultural production and meaning-making processes inevitable. Within the framework of postmodernism and the consumer society, the nature of cultural change and the theoretical foundations used to explain it have, in the contemporary period, become subjects of broader discussion through mass media (Azizağaoğlu & Altunışık, 2012, p. 36). According to Debord, in the consumer society, communication mechanisms perform a transmission role directed toward the receiver in order to ensure the rapid circulation of signs and images that fill the changing texture of everyday life. It is noted that the theoretical grounding of this process was developed in various directions by Lukács, representatives of the Frankfurt School, Benjamin, Huang, Lefebvre, Baudrillard, and Jameson, and that it was shaped by drawing upon Marx's theory of commodity fetishism (Debord, 2010, pp. 143–144).

Jameson argues that consumer culture is a core component of the consumer society and notes that no previous society has been so saturated with signs and images, directly linking this condition to the media. In such a context, mass media and the changing rhythm of life make individual existence more fragile, while “virtual realities” increasingly replace reality, weakening realism's claim to objectivity. In the postmodern period, the expansion of symbolic production has significantly transformed the

communication environment. Thus, consumer culture and the consumer society, particularly through material culture, play a central role in shaping social life and social relations in the postmodern era.

### Conclusion

Postmodernism is characterized as an indeterminate mode of thought that rejects fixed rules, adopts an ironic stance, and questions even its own assumptions. For this reason, it remains continuously debated and capable of generating opposition, including against itself. In the contemporary era, the rapidly transforming communication environment significantly shapes ways of thinking and perceptions of consumption. The integration of symbolic messages into everyday life through technological tools ensures the continuous reproduction of consumption within consciousness. Although intensified information flows increase knowledge production, they also raise the risk of the weakening of meaning and the manipulative use of information. In the postmodern phase, the strengthening of individualization tendencies and the increasingly open and observable character of life are evaluated in parallel with transformations in communication technologies. Within this context, indeterminacy, polysemy, and the possibilities of open interpretation become defining characteristics of the postmodern stage. Thus, the intensification of individualization and the increasingly intervenable character of life are associated with advances in communication technologies. In this framework, postmodernism brings to the fore indeterminacy, multiplicity of meanings, and openness to interpretation. Postmodernism is characterized as a dynamic theoretical orientation or approach that resists a single and stable definition and remains open to diverse interpretations. In conclusion, in the postmodern period, content strategies that take into account the psychological and sociological aspects of consumer behavior gain particular significance. The new communication channels preferred by the individual in the consumption process become mechanisms that shape the desired perception of consumption and the sense of satisfaction. This situation necessitates a more systematic examination of the interrelationship between consumption, communication, and individual identity in postmodern society.

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