

Condom consumption: a cross-analysis using Herbert Simon, Pierre Bourdieu, Freud, and other socio-economic and psychoanalytical theories

Diletta Cerasuolo

BSc Business Management

MSc International Business management

Royal Holloway University of London

dilecerauni21@gmail.com

Or

ZKTM457@live.rhul.ac.uk

This essay showcases the consumption of condoms through three different consumer behaviour perspectives, namely economic, social and psychoanalytical. Each perspective will be addressed via a specific school of thought; the economic through Herbert Simon's concept of bounded rationality, the social through Pierre Bourdieu's capital theory, and lastly the psychoanalytical through Freud's principles of the ego. The same analysis is done afterwards on other consumption situations; the use of different theories will demonstrate which perspective is best matched to certain consumptions. According to the findings that will follow it is evident that condoms consumption is best explained via Freud's theories.

Simon

When buying condoms, consumers generally adopt a rational approach due to the high costs that would incur if the contraceptive was not purchased and used (ie. pregnancy and STDs). The limits of bounded rationality would present themselves whereby the consumer wishes to avoid the aforementioned consequences, but also wants to feel maximised sexual pleasure at the same time; in the condom sector, it often occurs that passion is privileged over responsibility (Measor, 2006). This will cause friction between the consumer's cognitive system, as they try to find an adequate alternative. Whereby the selling point in question offered a varied array of condoms, the consumer could satisfy its desires by buying an ultra thin condom that does not inhibit physical pleasure. In the opposite scenario, the user could surrender to the condom to maximise safety, or succumb to their knowledge gaps about alternative, dicey ways to safeguard oneself during unprotected sex.

Bourdieu

Each capital type affects condom purchase differently; furthermore, their amount, whether big or small, also affects the buying process. Big economic capital is more likely to delay condom purchase than small economic capital, as the former minimises the consequences of condom-free intercourse, particularly pregnancy, better than the latter; even in the case of STDs, strong economic capital can ensure better access to treatment. The direct relation between social capital and condoms is a bit opaque, given that individuals are very unlikely to disclose their sexual lives with their social networks; therefore, one's social capital size does not influence condom purchase much. Cultural capital on the contrary, is a strong driving force; for instance, an English consumer is more likely to buy condoms than an Indian one, as their culture is oriented on birth rate parsimony.

Freud

The condom consumer likely undergoes a conflicting dynamic due to their three psychological drives. The Id 'pushes' for condom-free sex so that the deep, carnal impulses are fully satisfied; the Superego exalts the paradigms of avoiding unwanted pregnancy or potential STDs, thus emphasising the value of responsibility over "beastly drives". The ultimate decision is heavily dependent on the Ego, which according to the consumer's background, will either gravitate towards the Id or the Superego demands. Whereby the Id and Superego's desires are very polar to one another, the consumer's inner, decisional conflict will be enhanced. In this case, a balanced outcome can only be secured if varied condom options or equally valid contraceptives are available.

Comparison

Pursuant to Simon's theory, "the complexity of the environment and humans' limited cognitive system make [utility] maximisation all but impossible in real-life decision-making situations" (Campitelli & Gobet, 2010). This fully emerges in the condom purchase example of the consumer conflicted between pleasure over responsibility. Notwithstanding the conundrum faced by the consumer, as they stare at the condom shelves puzzled, in Simon's theory the individual possesses an adequacy criterion nonetheless, to decide whether an alternative (eg. thin condoms) is satisfactory; the consumer should choose the first option that fulfils such criterion (Campitelli & Gobet, 2010). This way though, the person does not evaluate all available options, and foregoes the cost-benefit analysis of all available options (eg. pills, negotiation), thus exposing themselves to the anchoring effect. When buying condoms, choosing a good enough option (satisficing), which apropos does not equate to best option, becomes arduous due to the intricate nature of erotic consumption. Whilst theoretically dissimilar, such decisional hurdle is amplified whereby the consumption is analysed through Bourdieu's capital theory. Buying a condom is a 'playground' that cannot be simplified to a single aggregate of isolated agents (sexual partner, societal expectations, gender norms, family) or the sum of juxtaposed elements (passion and responsibility); it is rather a magnetic field made up of various power lines (Bourdieu, 1971). These power lines could be deemed similar to Simon's cognitive frontiers; in either theories, both impede the decision-making process, and could divert the consumer towards less sensible options like take the risk and have unprotected intercourse. Via Bourdieu and Simon, condoms purchase acquires a material, consumeristic nature, that leaves out the more visceral, animalesque elements of eroticism; these are

given space only if the consumption is examined through Freudian psychoanalysis. Freud believed that sexual desire results from the convergence of biologic drives, psychologic motivations, and cognitive aspirations (Levine, 1984). The consumer in question in this essay longs for pleasure; their biological drives are minimised, nonetheless their psychologic motivations fall onto physical recreation. As of their aspirations, these could span from enjoying themselves with someone they are attracted to, or augment their alpha status if male.

It could be argued that the Freudian view of condoms explored earlier is the best suited perspective through which condom consumption can be analysed. The reason why, is that condom purchase is rooted into sexual desire, which apart from being tremendously intricate, cannot be reduced into a homogenous force like thirst or hunger (Levine, 2002); furthermore, sexual desire can take place in various degrees, and occur on a myriad of different levels, so much that it becomes impossible to pinpoint all factors at play when buying condoms. A psychoanalytical approach is the only perspective that can capture a quasi complete picture. Certainly, this quality is not limited to Freudian theory; indeed, condom consumption can be perfectly observed through other psychoanalysts too such as Lacan. Here the view would however gain a more mechanic slant; Lacan does in fact separate the bodily needs (*phallus*) from the biological penis, and claims masturbation as the ‘zero form sexuality’ of humans (Hook, 2007). Lacanian theory deems human sex as narcissistic, fantasy-ridden and constructed (Gammelgaard, 2011); ergo, the condom arguably becomes a secondary, even futile, device, and the decisional complexity surrounding it diminishes.

The psychoanalytical perspective would fall short on consumption events like buying food or renting a house. The former is best discussed through classical economics, particularly Adam Smith’s theory of utility maximisation. A hungry person buying an apple, will gain diminished marginal utility as they buy and eat the second apple; utility is also gained by the apple farmer, whose production is not moved by benevolence for the consumer, but but their regard of their own interest namely profit maximisation (Haring & Smith, 1959). On the other hand, renting a house is best explained via Marx’s idea about the social structure. The wealthy bourgeois own one or multiple estates that are reinvested by renting it to lower classes (proletariat) that cannot afford to own property. Another example that would be quite mismatched to the psychoanalytical perspective is the purchase of an expensive watch; the latter is best applied to Bourdieu’s capital theory, mentioned earlier in the essay. A person buying an expensive watch might possess a big economic capital, yet have a medium to small social capital; the drive behind the watch purchase could be the desire to increase one’s social capital through display of wealth.

Conclusion

Before concluding, it could be interesting to explore the value of condoms using Jean Baudrillard sign value theory. In accordance with Baudrillard's ideas, a commodity entails both exchange value and use value; in the case of condoms, the use value lays within the contraceptive's features of illness and pregnancy prevention. Conversely, exchange value, which is abstract and vague, may adopt different forms depending on the context. For instance in the realm of casual sex, the male party agrees on using a condom, hence partly giving up on his pleasure, in exchange for intercourse from the female counterpart. What of sign-value though? For Baudrillard, the latter predominates use and exchange value; condoms' sign value is very intricate because when reviewing the literature, it is unclear which social labour exactly determines their value. In less developed countries, condoms are employed whereby individuals fail to abstain or be faithful to one partner; they hence become stigma and markers of infidelity (Broderick et al., 2023). The narrative changes in developed, western countries whereby condoms' sign-value becomes dichotomous; condom usage holds both positive and negative connotations, and the dominance of either is determined depending on the context. The positive side equates to shrewdness for oneself and one's sexual partner, whereas the negative echoes infidelity, promiscuity and in some cases reduced masculinity (Picca & Joos, 2009).

In closing, condoms possess an intricate nature, making it difficult to exactly pinpoint and assess their consumption. As displayed throughout this essay, it is nevertheless possible to 'dissect' them by employing several theoretical frameworks as scalpels.

References

- Artinger, F.M., Gigerenzer, G. and Jacobs, P. (2022) 'Satisficing: Integrating two traditions', *Journal of Economic Literature*, 60(2), pp. 598–635. doi:10.1257/jel.20201396 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Baudrillard, J. (1981) 'Chapter 5 - THE ART AUCTION: SIGN EXCHANGE AND SUMPTUARY VALUE', in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Telos Press Publishing.
- Baudrillard, J., Lovitt, C.R. and Klopsch, D. (1976) 'Toward a critique of the political economy of the sign', *SubStance*, 5(15), pp. 111–116. doi:10.2307/3684064 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Belsey, C. (1993) 'Desire in theory: Freud, Lacan, Derrida', *Textual Practice*, 7(3), pp. 384–411. doi:10.1080/09502369308582173 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Bourdieu, P. (1971) 'Reproduction Culturelle et reproduction sociale', *Social Science Information*, 10(2), pp. 45–79. doi:10.1177/053901847101000203 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Bourdieu, P. (1987) 'What Makes a Social Class? On The Theoretical and Practical Existence Of Groups', *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 32, pp. 1–17. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41035356> (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Brown, N. and Szeman, I. (2000) *Pierre Bourdieu fieldwork in culture*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Brubaker, R. (1985) 'Rethinking classical theory', *Theory and Society*, 14(6), pp. 745–775. doi:10.1007/bf00174049 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Broderick, K. *et al.* (2023) 'Stigma of infidelity associated with condom use explains low rates of condom uptake: Qualitative data from Uganda and Tanzania', *Reproductive Health*, 20(1). doi:10.1186/s12978-023-01563-6 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).

- Brown, R. (2004) 'Consideration of the origin of Herbert Simon's theory of "satisficing" (1933-1947)', *Management Decision*, 42(10), pp. 1240–1256. doi:10.1108/00251740410568944 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Callebaut, W. (2007) 'Herbert Simon's silent revolution', *Biological Theory*, 2(1), pp. 76–86. doi:10.1162/biot.2007.2.1.76 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Campitelli, G. and Gobet, F. (2010) 'Herbert Simon's decision-making approach: Investigation of cognitive processes in experts', *Review of General Psychology*, 14(4), pp. 354–364. doi:10.1037/a0021256 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Caplin, A., Dean, M. and Martin, D. (2011) 'Search and satisficing', *American Economic Review*, 101(7), pp. 2899–2922. doi:10.1257/aer.101.7.2899 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Dauids, E.L. *et al.* (2021) 'Exploring condom use decision-making among adolescents: The synergistic role of affective and Rational Processes', *BMC Public Health*, 21(1). doi:10.1186/s12889-021-11926-y (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Fennell, J.L. (2011) 'MEN BRING CONDOMS, WOMEN TAKE PILLS: Men's and Women's Roles in Contraceptive Decision Making', *Gender & Society*, 25(4), pp. 496–521. doi:10.1177/0891243211416113 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Gammelgaard, J. (2011) 'Love, drive and desire in the works of Freud, Lacan and Proust', *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 92(4), pp. 963–983. doi:10.1111/j.1745-8315.2011.00355.x (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Garnham, N. and Williams, R. (1980) 'Pierre Bourdieu and the Sociology of Culture: An introduction', *Media, Culture & Society*, 2(3), pp. 209–223. doi:10.1177/016344378000200302 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Haring, J.E. and Smith, G.C. (1959) 'Utility Theory, Decision Theory, and Profit Maximization', *The American Economic Review*, 49(4), pp. 566–583. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1812912> (Accessed: 22 February 2024).

- Hatchuel, A. (2002) 'Towards Design Theory and expandable rationality : The unfinished program of Herbert Simon', *Journal of Management and Governance* [Preprint]. Available at: http://innovbfa.viabloga.com/files/Hatchuel___Toward_Design_Theory_and_Expandable_Rationality___2002.pdf (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Hook, D. (2007) *Lacan, the meaning of the phallus and the 'sexed' subject*, *LSE Research Online*. Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/960/1/Lacanthemeaning.pdf> (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Katsikopoulos, K.V. and Lan, C.-H. (Dan) (2011) 'Herbert Simon's spell on judgment and decision making', *Judgment and Decision Making*, 6(8), pp. 722–732. doi:10.1017/s1930297500004150 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Lanier, C.D. and Rader, C.S. (2018) 'The irrepressible and uncontrollable urge: Sex, experience, and consumption', *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 22(1), pp. 17–43. doi:10.1080/10253866.2018.1431222 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Levine, S.B. (1984) 'An essay on the nature of sexual desire', *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 10(2), pp. 83–96. doi:10.1080/00926238408405794 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Levine, S.B. (2002) 'Reexploring the concept of sexual desire', *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 28(1), pp. 39–51. doi:10.1080/009262302317251007 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Measor, L. (2006) 'Condom use: A culture of resistance', *Sex Education*, 6(4), pp. 393–402. doi:10.1080/14681810600982093 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Mendoza, D. (2010) 'Commodity, sign, and spectacle: Retracing baudrillard's hyperreality', *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy*, 4(2), pp. 45–59. doi:10.25138/4.2.a.5 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).

- Picca, L.H. and Joos, K.E. (2009) 'The Great Condom Adventure: Analyzing College Students' Narratives of buying condoms', *Journal of Sociological Research*, 1(1). doi:10.5296/jsr.v1i1.201 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Pinxten, W. and Lievens, J. (2014) 'The importance of economic, social and cultural capital in understanding health inequalities: Using a bourdieu-based approach in research on physical and Mental Health Perceptions', *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 36(7), pp. 1095–1110. doi:10.1111/1467-9566.12154 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Power, E.M. (1999) 'An introduction to Pierre Bourdieu's key theoretical concepts', *Journal for the Study of Food and Society*, 3(1), pp. 48–52. doi:10.2752/152897999786690753 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Rainey, H.G. (2001) 'A reflection on Herbert Simon', *Administration & Society*, 33(5), pp. 491–507. doi:10.1177/00953990122019857 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Richardson, R.C. (2017) 'Heuristics and satisficing', *A Companion to Cognitive Science*, pp. 566–575. doi:10.1002/9781405164535.ch44 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Riley, D. (2017) *Bourdieu's class theory - The Academic as Revolutionary*, University of Berkeley. Available at: <https://sociology.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/faculty/Riley/BourdieuClassTheory.pdf> (Accessed: 22 February 2024) (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Sent, E.-M. (2005) 'Simplifying Herbert Simon', *History of Political Economy*, 37(2), pp. 227–232. doi:10.1215/00182702-37-2-227 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Shape, R.K. (1970) 'Vi. Freud on conscious and unconscious intentions', *Inquiry*, 13(1–4), pp. 149–159. doi:10.1080/00201747008601605 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Starks, T.J. *et al.* (2013) 'Contextualizing condom use: Intimacy interference, stigma, and unprotected sex', *Journal of Health Psychology*, 19(6), pp. 711–720. doi:10.1177/1359105313478643 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).

- Strickland, J.C., Marks, K.R. and Bolin, B.L. (2020) 'The Condom Purchase Task: A hypothetical demand method for evaluating sexual health decision-making', *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, 113(2), pp. 435–448. doi:10.1002/jeab.585 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Velupillai, K.V. (2010) 'Foundations of boundedly rational choice and satisficing decisions', *Advances in Decision Sciences*, 2010, pp. 1–16. doi:10.1155/2010/798030 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).
- Young, T.M. *et al.* (2017) 'Situational influences on condom purchasing', *Sexuality & Culture*, 21(4), pp. 925–941. doi:10.1007/s12119-017-9431-0 (Accessed: 22 February 2024).