

Inauthenticity in a Consumerist Society

When I find something that I want when I am out shopping with my mom, she always asks me, “Is this something that you really need, or do you just want it?” The majority of the time I know that I don’t need it. Other times, when I am not with her, I find myself buying things I want that are fashionable, but when I get home they end up sitting in my closet with the tags on them because I didn’t really need them or even like them that much in the first place. I’m not sure what attracts me to purchasing the things that I do. Is it because they are the newest style? Do I have an obsession with purses? Do commercials have a strong impact on what I buy? Or do I just want to fit in with the standards created by consumerism? I think that a big reason why people feel the need to buy these items is because the media tells us that they are “in” and that we need them to be considered attractive. Media tells us an “ideal” way that we should look and act, even if it is unattainable to a majority of the population. When people strive to achieve these perceptions of beauty, they end up losing part of themselves in the process and start to become inauthentic. Authenticity isn’t necessarily about being real; it is about being true to ourselves. It starts with an understanding of who we are and what we stand for. Consumerism causes inauthenticity in the population, which could lead to unhappiness. I am analyzing the concept of inauthenticity with respect to the standards created by consumerism so I can understand how the idea of inauthenticity would grow our understanding of consumerism and how it relates to unhappiness.

Can we achieve happiness through consumerism? According to Mike W. Martin, author of *The Paradoxes of Happiness*, happiness cannot be found when we are too focused on ourselves. “According to the paradox of self interest, aiming directly and exclusively at self-interest is self-defeating. It fosters self-absorption and thereby constricts the range and depth of gratifications available in pursuing interests in other people, activities, and events” (Martin 173). He argues that if we pursue interests that only benefit ourselves, it is going to harm us in our pursuit of happiness. For example, when we go shopping, whom do we usually purchase things for? We buy things for ourselves unless it is somebody’s birthday or other holiday, and even then we don’t always want to get them something too expensive. Being only interested in oneself promotes narcissism and self-centeredness. He claims that this limits the range and depth of gratifications available in pursuing interests that aren’t directly connected to us. It limits this because part of the pleasure that we get while doing something not directly connected to us is the satisfaction from doing something for another person. When we are too focused on ourselves, we do not gain this satisfaction.

On the contrary, according to Dwight R. Lee, new things can make us happy, but because of sensory adaptation the happiness will not be lasting. “It has long been observed that things people are at first intensely aware of soon blend into the background and go largely unnoticed” (Lee 391). According to the concept of sensory adaptation, new things are very noticeable to us at first, but once we get used to them we become less aware of them and soon they fade into the background and start to go unnoticed. This can be said about a new purchase. We feel good and are happy when

we buy something new, but after we have that item for a while, that happiness fades and we feel the need to buy something else to get that feeling back.

Furthermore, according to Mark Kingwell (in response to Cindy Jackson in *Happiness and Leisure: an Ethnodrama, act 1*), consumerism can cause happiness, but it is empty.

“I don't know whether this might make things clearer or more complicated, but my interpretation of your arguments lies in understanding our consumerist culture that has adopted what I call "machinery of better living" to create unnecessary desires and distort our sense of ourselves, serving as a technique to provide happiness in material goods. (*Sighing*) . . . so we indulge ourselves in this cheap happiness, which might be efficient but is in my opinion rather empty” (Dieser Grybovych 35).

Assuming that the definition of consumerism that they are referring to is: the concept that the increase of consumption of goods is advantageous to the economy, they are saying that our culture puts a large emphasis on consuming, believing that it is good for the economy. Advertisements and media make us want things that we do not need and alter our sense of self by making us believe that we are not good enough unless we are up to their standards. They argue that this culture has embraced the idea that possessing more unnecessary material goods will make us happy. Sadly, the happiness that we gain (if any) is hollow because it is not lasting, so we have to keep going back to the source of this empty happiness to try to achieve more. These authors have covered how consumerism is related to happiness, but what they left out is how inauthenticity, which is caused by consumerism, leads to unhappiness.

Inauthenticity created by consumerism causes unhappiness. But before we can fully understand how to avoid living an inauthentic life, we must first understand the concept of Dasein. Dasein is categorized as a human's existence in the world and can exist in two forms, authentic or inauthentic. According to Heidegger, one can achieve

an authentic Dasein only after they get a firm understanding of who they are and they are aware of the fact that everybody is distinctly different and separate. Once they have realized that everyone has their own distinct destiny to fulfill, then they will no longer feel the need to do what everybody else is doing, which results in an authentic existence and ability to fulfill their full potential. On the other hand, Heidegger says that a person with inauthentic Dasein does not live as his or her own person, but as how others live and in a state of fear.

According to the authors of *Communicating and Philosophizing About Authenticity or Inauthenticity in a Fast-Paced World*, it is very difficult to lead an authentic life. "Very few individuals are able to lead authentic lives. Most people are caught in the trap of forfeiture, which is the lack of self-awareness of one's true self and of the world" (Cooley et al 401). This trap of forfeiture is when people get too distracted with their hectic everyday lives to recognize their true Being. Their individual is sacrificed to focus on what is outside of who they are rather than trying to understand who they are. They lack their self-awareness because they are too focused on the needs of everybody else before their own needs. An example of this could be when a single mother puts her life on hold and plans her day around going to work and taking care of children and bringing them to their events and activities, and leaves taking care of herself and her needs as an afterthought.

Furthermore, Heidegger argues that our current society is cursed with things that distract us from living authentically. "With authentic lives we reject the neediness of our current society that is materialistically and technologically cursed with entities that distract us from our Dasein" (Cooley et al 398). The consumerist society that we live in

today is focuses too much on material things rather than on more productive things such as intellectual, moral, or spiritual values. When consumerism tells us that we need to do what everybody else does and buy certain things, it makes it very difficult for someone to focus on their Dasein. When we live authentic lives, we reject this consumerist society and do what we feel is true to ourselves.

In addition, Becky DeGreeff, Ann Burnett, and Dennis Cooley claim that unhappiness is caused by inauthenticity. "Gone are the illusions of existence and forfeiture that make us inauthentic, and which lead to actual unhappiness as we attempt to realize ourselves using false goals and desires" (Cooley et al 398). When we look to outside sources to find ourselves, rather than finding ourselves from within, it gives us illusions of our existence and makes us inauthentic. These illusions can come from the media, our friends, celebrities, etc. When we are inauthentic we give up our true wants and needs (aka: Forfeiture) to pursue false goals and desires. They argue that this makes us unhappy because fulfilling these false goals and desires does not fulfill the aspirations of our true, authentic self.

Mark Kingwell would agree with this concept and could argue that consumerism is a type of forfeiture. "...our consumerist culture that has adopted what I call 'machinery of better living' to create unnecessary desires and distort our sense of ourselves" (Dieser Grybovych 35). Since forfeiture is the lack of self-awareness of one's true self, it can be argued that this is exactly what consumerism does to us. Consumerism makes us inauthentic and unhappy because it creates false desires and requires us to forfeit our true selves for something that fits in with the standards of

consumerism. Once we have given ourselves over to consumerism, we lose part of ourselves trying to fit the standards and in the process become inauthentic.

On the other hand, Mike W. Martin might disagree with the concept of Dasein according to the paradox of self-interest. "...aiming directly and exclusively at self-interest is self-defeating. It fosters self-absorption and thereby constricts the range and depth of gratifications available in pursuing interests in other people, activities, and events" (Martin 173). While Dasein tells us that we need to look inside to find ourselves, and not just do what makes other people happy. It also focuses on how the individual fits into the world as a distinct entity, not as part of a group. Martin would argue that although it is important to find ourselves and our place in the world, focusing too much on oneself promotes narcissism and harms us in the process of finding happiness.

Although most people would consider consumerism a good thing (i.e. good for the economy), as we look deeper into the subject we learn that today's consumerist society has the ability to create inauthenticity throughout the population, which can cause unhappiness. This subject has a long way to go until we fully comprehend the effects of inauthenticity, but by exploring this idea, we can become more aware of the standards that are forced upon us and realize that we do not have to conform to them to be happy. I believe that everybody has the ability to see through the standards created by the media and live an authentic life. So let's go through our closets and return all of the clothes that still have the tags on them and live our lives the way we want to live them, not the way that others think we should.

Works Cited

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