CrossMark

THE ETHICS OF CONSUMERISM

Natasha Fenwick

The definition of consumerism is multifaceted, extending from the consumption of goods and services (which may be perceived as advantageous to the growth of the economy, both localized and global) to its more negative connotations: the obsessive consumption of goods, exploitation of the people who create them and greed. In a society heavily influenced by consumerism, we find ourselves manipulated by social media and targeted advertising to buy goods or to cultivate a certain lifestyle, raising important ethical questions about responsibility and our autonomy to make decisions. How has the nature of how we create and consume goods evolved and how is this linked to moral responsibility and autonomy? Can it also be argued that there is aesthetic appreciation to be gained from some of the items that we create and consume?

The issues surrounding consumerism have become increasingly prevalent during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Distaste of vapid consumerism is rightfully justified, most recently in reaction to so-called social media influencers who have broken travel restrictions and continue to flaunt goods to those who wish to emulate their lifestyles. Even the more cynical social media user may find themselves manipulated into becoming an active consumer through targeted advertising and other methods employed to encourage further spending. For example, Zhang et al. (2017) were able to see a correlation between cumulative social media usage and shopping activity, although such

doi:10.1017/S1477175621000488 © The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Royal Institute of Philosophy
Think 61, Vol. 21 (Summer 2022)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175621000488 Published online by Cambridge University Press

studies are limited in making absolute connections between both. It is easy to see how social media encourages us to consume more. By their very nature as 'social', platforms such as Facebook and Instagram allow us to become part of a community where we may feel inadequate in comparison to influencers and others sharing their lifestyles and goods. We develop 'FOMO' or 'Fear of Missing Out' if we do not buy into a certain type of lifestyle and an artificial community is created in which businesses use familiar words such as 'family' and 'self-care' to lure consumers into thinking they have individuals' best interests at heart. In many ways, the intricacy of the methods that create this false sense of community and knowledge about ourselves are to be highly praised. Algorithms, which trace our web activity and are then able to give us targeted adverts, are becoming more complex, making the reality of the highly personalized shopping experience seen in *Minority Report*, in which adverts essentially 'speak' to us and encourage us to become more active consumers, a very possible reality in the near future.

What about the ethical dimension of mass personal data collection, where we appear to surrender a part of ourselves to have it given back as a product or voting recommendation? In November 2020, an independent report commissioned by the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation in the UK was published, outlining the issue of algorithms which create and encourage bias. The report highlighted important ethical issues about this, instructing the general public to question the data that feed these algorithms, which must not be used blindly or without raising important questions. The Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which user data on Facebook was used to target American voters, also brings difficult but relevant ethical questions to the surface. Is our data truly part of ourselves? Do we blindly give away a significant amount of our personalities, thoughts and desires to allow social media to influence our voting and consumer patterns? Are we willing to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175621000488 Published online by Cambridge University Press

compromise on this, to spend more time on what is relevant to us and our choices?

Once this happens (either by choice or by companies sharing and selling our data), we then begin to move towards a society where online platforms seem to know us intimately, raising ethical issues about human relationships and interactions. A study by researchers at the University of Cambridge and University of Stanford in 2015 focused on a computer model that was able to judge someone's personality more effectively than their families and friends. This was based solely on Facebook activity; such is our consumption of social media and the data we provide it with. Similarly, the development of social media bots, created to imitate human behaviour online, has been discussed and derided in political arenas and bots' interference in terms of how we communicate and consume online should also be recognized. It is now the common experience of the online consumer to be forced to communicate with automated responses instead of real-life interactions with humans. Replacing humans with artificial intelligence/automated systems to deal with customer enquiries appears to make us question the very notions of personhood, as outlined by John Locke. Locke defined a person as, 'a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection', one that is able to have reciprocal relationships with others. Companies that encourage us to consume via intricate algorithms through social media and targeted advertising and then encourage us to converse with such automated systems may be viewed as a direct threat to how we perceive ourselves as persons: are we truly thinking, rational and intelligent if we are so easily manipulated by our own data into consuming more or voting a certain way? Furthermore, are we easily fooled or satisfied by automated response systems and smart technology, which in some ways attempt to replace relationships from human to human? These are all questions to be understood, in relation to the ethical issues surrounding consumerism and how this is linked to technology and social media.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175621000488 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The positive aspects of consumerism, especially at a time of decreasing financial security and happiness, must also be considered. Prior to a third lockdown in December 2020, research showed that 90 per cent of UK online shoppers still purchased in store. During this period, Royal Mail's 'Delivery Matters' survey showed positive trends in spending online and in store, keeping businesses afloat and maintaining job security for many. This is in stark contrast to the more recent news on the collapse of the British High Street. Previous behemoths of the British High Street such as Debenhams and Arcadia have been forced to close UK shops, resulting in the loss of 12,000 jobs and currently 700 job cuts, respectively. While other reasons for the decline of these previously heralded stores and companies have been well documented, the decrease in consumption of clothes and non-essential items of the last year has led to their inevitable demise. A decrease in consumerism has a very human cost; a lack of job security, identity and steady finances has and will have an inevitable toll on those who are affected. While this cannot be fully remedied by encouraging further consumerism in challenging times, there may be an ethical slant to encouraging people to become active consumers again and by doing so, maintain large and smaller business which employ thousands across the UK.

As well as the growth of consumerism and retail, how we create and consume goods in the home has also evolved throughout the last century. An interesting example of this is the change from domestic service in the home to the mass production and consumption of appliances to do these jobs. Prior to the modern home as we understand it today, Dr Lucy Worsley writes, it was more cost effective to employ people to do many household jobs such as laundry, even though the foundations for the modern washing machine we use were first mooted by Sir John Hoskins in 1677. The development of these appliances as opposed to hours of back-breaking work (in 1908, Dr Worsley notes, an eight-room house required eighteen

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175621000488 Published online by Cambridge University Press

hours of cleaning per week just to remove dust, an additional twenty-seven hours to clean windows and walls before other housework was taken into consideration) not only would appear to result in the 'greater happiness' of people who could spend less time on household chores and more time on other pursuits but would also go some way to addressing gender roles within the family. Also known as the 'Appliance Boom' or 'Second Industrial Revolution', the microcosm of a working and industrialized society within the home was seen to contribute to society in the wider sense, by allowing more women to enter the workforce by not being tied to a continuous series of domestic chores and drudgery.

However, it is clearly impossible to measure how the increased consumption of such goods contributed to the overall 'happiness' of men and women and it would therefore be difficult to measure the effects of this by using ethical theories such as utilitarianism. Similarly, this development of household consumerism was not welcomed by all. A fascinating clip within BBC Archives illustrates this well. Women using the Silchester Road baths in Kensington, for manual laundry rather than machines, are interviewed, with modern-day appliances overwhelmingly viewed negatively. Instead, the concept of a modern launderette is seen as a threat to social interaction and community within this short clip. Environmental effects of such appliances, resulting in UK emissions from households' fossil and fuel and electricity being projected to rise by 11 per cent by 2035 (according to research from LSE), should also be an important part of the discussion of ethical consumerism and whether increased consumption of such goods and pursuit of the 'ideal home', heavily promoted within social media and other mediums, is ethical. It should, however, be noted that selling these goods remains an important part of the UK economy, with 1.134 billion pounds spent on major household goods in the first quarter of 2020, as well as further encouragement of energy-efficient devices and appliances. The discussion of the ethics

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175621000488 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of consumerism in the home and in wider society is equally necessary.

The ethics of consumerism is relevant to discuss at the most personal level as well, within the items we wear and the historical and present-day exploitation of other human beings to create these items. One of the most famous historical examples of this was the application of mercury to hats, as part of the felting process. Significant health issues with this process were highlighted as far back as the mid-eighteenth century, resulting in paralysis, permanently damaged hands, trembling, excessive sweating and, sometimes, the deaths of the workers involved. Movements to address mercury poisoning were varied and not wholly successful, with cases diminishing due to a decrease in hat-wearing from the 1960s and a shift in expectations of formal dress rather than a radical change to laws. David (2015) offers a fascinating yet harrowing account of the experiences of the aforementioned hatters who worked to meet consumer demand and societal expectations. The tragic experiences of the 'Radium Girls', women who ended up dying in agony from radium-poisoning complications, after landing the coveted jobs of painting radium onto watch dials, has also been well documented. The advancement of technology and fashion within society, while driving economies and consumer trends, may come at the cost of vulnerable workers who do not have the autonomy to choose 'better' and safer jobs. Within both of the examples above, men and women entering into these professions did not have a significant amount of choice in terms of job prospects and little compassion was shown towards their situation and horrific ailments. An understanding of Kant's Respect for Persons theory (we have autonomy as persons and should be treated with respect, with human life considered sacrosanct) is to also be included as part of the discussion of responsible and ethical consumerism.

The case of the Radium Girls continues to be of ethical importance, beyond the premature and painful deaths of women who were initially unaware of the dangers of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175621000488 Published online by Cambridge University Press

radium, licking paint brushes without a second thought to ensure accuracy and occasionally painting it on their teeth and clothes to create a glow in the dark effect. After these cases became public, employers in America were forced to accept more responsibility for the health of their employees and better regulations were brought in to protect workers. The rights of workers who should not have to suffer (and sometimes die) unnecessarily to meet consumer trends and fads remains a key issue within present-day discussions of business ethics.

We have also seen a heightened awareness of ethical consumerism through social media (ironically, the main method by which it is sustained and promoted), making consumers further aware of unethical business practices such as the production of iPhones in the Foxconn City factory in China and the exposure of increased suicides from humiliating and difficult working conditions within this factory. While iPhone sales have dropped in recent years, financial studies into this have not been directly attributed to customer dissatisfaction with business practices, but rather to people replacing phones less often, particularly in 2020/21. While most people aspire to be labelled an ethical consumer (particularly online), this is a convoluted issue to unravel, as outlined in the *Huffington Post*'s article 'The Myth of the Ethical Shopper' (Hobbes 2015). A brand message of corporate social responsibility may be 'window dressing' for some companies or businesses may genuinely believe they are promoting ethical consumerism when this is far from the truth. Factory inspectors may be fooled, suppliers may outsource to other less ethical suppliers for better profit margins, but the consumer buys the products, completing this chain, and unknowingly fuels further growth of unethical business practices and exploitation.

So, what does ethical consumerism mean in 2022? As consumers, we have been forced to reassess what is necessary and what is extravagant and unneeded. The backlash against 'fast fashion' towards more sustainable and longer-lasting goods appears to be a permanent

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175621000488 Published online by Cambridge University Press

change. Does this mark the end of a consumerism-driven era? Alexander Langlands, in *Craeft* (Langlands 2019) questions the creation of products and machines that do a job that can easily be done by humans and appears to be a regression of society rather than moving forward. The Covid-19 pandemic has seen a partial return to this type of craft or 'craeft', defined by knowledge, power and skill, with more people buying from local businesses or creating goods themselves. This may be observed within changes to consumer trends. John Lewis, in 2020, saw a 127 per cent increase in sewing machine sales compared to the beginning of that year, with sales of fashion decreasing by 28 per cent. The return to craft and use of skills also elegantly links to the origins of the philosophy that provides the foundation of our understanding of philosophy and business ethics today. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle outlines his thoughts on consumption, in comparison to the attribution of virtues and skills. Consumption, for Aristotle, is to be categorized under pleasure, 'a life of grazing cattle' driven by greed and wanting more than what is allocated to you (*Nicomachean Ethic*s 1095b16, b19-20, quoted in Lockwood 2014: 335). Clearly, Aristotle was writing considerably before the age of mass consumerism as we understand it, but his points may seem pertinent in most recent times as well.

A return to craft and sustainable consumerism rather than disposable goods may also allow us to appreciate the aesthetic value of what we own, create and consume. William Morris, leader of the Arts and Craft movement, outlined these ideas in his famous dictum: 'Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.' Utility, beauty, a lack of unnecessary production and consumerism also underpin Japanese beliefs about aesthetics and design; it is unsurprising to note that Morris's work and writings were very well received in early twentieth-century Japan. However, Japanese beliefs about aesthetics and design significantly predate William Morris and their philosophical and religious backgrounds (founded in both Shinto and Buddhist beliefs) are both interesting

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175621000488 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and relevant to the development of ethical consumerism inside and outside Japan. Wabi-sabi combines ideas of incompleteness, impermanence and beauty; an imperfect product may be created which holds and reflects these beliefs. Other elements of Japanese design also reject gaudiness in favour of modesty and naturalness. And yet, economies and individuals rely on the production and consumption of goods that are not individualized, but mass produced, and we can also see a certain beauty and elegance in these examples that are enabled by consumerism. Take, for example, the *Mad Men* episode 'The Wheel'. While the setting is fictional, the product (the Kodak Carousel) is not. Don Draper, the protagonist of the series, embodies thoughts of painful nostalgia and memories in an advertising pitch to Kodak, allowing the viewer to empathize with Don in terms of how our lives and memories take place and are filtered through the popular goods we are encouraged to buy and consume. A cynical reading of this may be that we are emotionally manipulated to consume more through clever advertising, especially adverts that are now carefully targeted to us. However, it is important to see consumerism as not wholly negative or unethical. We live our lives through such goods that, partially, help us to understand ourselves as human beings. As mentioned above, responsible consumerism also develops economies, resulting in better living standards and levels of education (such as the industrialization of Taiwan from the mid-twentieth century). Inevitably, clear issues arise when we are also seen as a commodity: worked relentlessly in sweatshops (in the UK and globally) to improve profit margins and with scant transparency from multinational corporations, which grow at the cost of human happiness and lives.

Natasha Fenwick is Head of Humanities at St Anthony's School for Boys, Hampstead, London, UK. 901natasha@gmail.com

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175621000488 Published online by Cambridge University Press

References

David, A. M. (2015) *Fashion Victims: The Dangers of Dress Past and Present* (London: Bloomsbury).

Hobbes, M. (2015) 'The Myth of the Ethical Shopper', <https://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/the-myth-of-the-ethical-shopper/>.

Langlands, A. (2019) *Craeft: An Inquiry into the Origins and True Meaning of Traditional Crafts* (New York: W. W. Norton).

Lockwood, T. (2014) 'Competing Ways of Life and Ring Composition (*NE* x 6-8)', in R. Polansky (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 350–69.

Zhang, Y., Trusov, M., Stephen, A. T., and Jamal, Z. (2017) 'Online Shopping and Social Media: Friends or Foes?', *Journal of Marketing* 81: 24–41.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175621000488 Published online by Cambridge University Press