Article

Meaningful choice: Existential consumer theory

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Abstract

It is controversial whether consumption can constitute genuine, existential meaning for the individual. Building on philosophical explorations of subjective meaning, this study suggests a dynamic relationship between existential and teleological consumption. On the one hand, consumers demonstrate deep-level engagement with entities in the marketing eco-system (such as brand narratives and certain service encounters) to explore their own potentiality and develop an authentic vision of the good life. This is existential consumption. On the other, consumers adopt teleological modes of consumption where products and services are used more instrumentally to enact their vision of the good life. It is proposed that consumer choice is existentially meaningful insofar as it is conducive to the development or realisation of the individual vision of the good life. The theory and its implications are discussed in the context of recent deterministic and pessimistic/nihilistic challenges to marketing theory.

Keywords

authenticity, consumer choice, existentialism, meaningfulness, narrative identity, nihilism, pessimism

Introduction

How, if at all, can we engage with brands, products and services in ways that are conducive to the meaning of life? This is a hotly debated topic that divides contemporary marketing theorists. Under the banner of 'terminal marketing', one group of scholars argue that the very idea of meaningful consumption is at best naïve, but more likely deeply illusional and manipulative (Ahlberg et al., 2022). This is in no small part due to the lack of genuine consumer agency in a capitalistic marketplace based on exploitation of power imbalances. In the other camp, marketing theorists submit to a much more optimistic view on the relationship between consumption and the subjective experience of meaningfulness. For example, a collective of 17 marketers recently proposed a model

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for how marketing management can enable consumer wisdom in support of both subjective happiness and advancement of the common good (Ozanne et al., 2021).

In such a polarised climate of scholarly debate, this study is likely to be met with harsh and politicised critique: We seek to explain the nature of meaningful consumer choice, an endeavour that flies in the face of the terminal marketing movement. However, an 'either-or' debate is likely to be unproductive because most difficult questions do not have binary answers. As Belk and Sobh (2019) observe:

> "Too often we tend to assume that there is only one right answer and that other interpretations must therefore be wrong (Festinger, 1957). But it is possible that two theories, even if they seem to be competing, are both good (read: fitting, useful, and consistent with the evidence) explanations of a phenomenon. As Niels Bohr once said, "[There are] two sorts of truth: profound truths recognized by the fact that the opposite is also a profound truth, in contrast to trivialities where opposites are obviously absurd" (Bohr, 1967)."

Our underpinning assumption is the following: The extent of consumer agency is limited by external market conditions which seek to exploit consumers in the pursuit of corporate profit maximisation (Anker, 2020). At the same time, nearly every imaginable action that we undertake in contemporary society is mediated through the use of brands, products and services. This means, logically, that if we do not submit to extreme nihilism but believe that meaningfulness is a genuine human pursuit, then there is a substantive relation between consumption and existential meaningfulness. As marketing theorists, we need to take this relation seriously if we genuinely wish to understand the ontology of marketing. Accordingly, in this study we are asking the controversial question: What does it mean for a consumer to make a meaningful choice? The article develops a theory that explains the structure of meaningful consumer choice.

We propose that meaningful choice in consumption is a function of the degree to which a choice coheres with, or contributes to the development of, the consumer's vision of the good life. We will refer to continuous consumer choices that enact their vision of the good life as *teleological consumption*. We further propose that consumers develop their vision of the good life through a period of personal development characterised by attempts at defining and developing an authentic self-identity mediated through narrative brand engagement. We will refer to this as *existential consumption*. Teleological and existential consumption thus denote two different levels of consumer meaningfulness.

Our theory of meaningful consumer choice takes inspiration from existential philosophy (e.g. Kierkegaard, 1971 [1843]; 1957 [1844]; 1962 [1844]; Heidegger, 2010 [1927]; Sartre, 1992 [1943]) that has the problem of personal meaningfulness as its core project. Our approach is to isolate a set of core ontological constructs that existentialism has identified as constitutive of human existence and meaningfulness. We will then demonstrate and define their specific meaning in contexts of consumption and explain how contemporary consumer research implicitly addresses these constructs of meaning and where future work is needed to empirically test the full array of manifestations of meaning in consumption. The result is an ontological framework that provides a comprehensive definition of meaningful consumer choice, offers an overview of existing research and a roadmap to future topics of exploration.

It is controversial whether consumption can ever play a positive role in the realisation of an authentic vision of a meaningful life and, even more controversial, whether brands can play a positive role in fundamentally shaping and defining the individual's vision of the good life (Baudrillard, 1998 [1970]; Klein, 2000; Ritzer, 1993). Likewise, critical marketing scholars have

questioned whether consumers can – and *should* – escape the market in order to create authentic lives not defined by commercialisation (Arnould, 2007a, 2007b; Kozinets, 2002; Shankar et al., 2006). Finally, some existentialist accounts of meaningfulness are bound up on rather extreme assumptions about the scope and nature of individual freedom and human capacity to define subjective visions of the good life in isolation from social influence and contextual pressures. For example, Sartre's existentialism does not accept the existence of any external influence on human will: the individual is radically free to determine its own future without being influenced by its past or present (Sartre, 1992 [1943]). Contemporary theories of the self and meaningfulness provide a more balanced view, particularly stressing the relational nature of identity and how individual choice is always mediated and conditioned by social influence, status and stratification (Andersen and Chen, 2002; Chen et al., 2011; Wills and Petrakis, 2019). Our theory of meaningful consumer choice fully acknowledges the impact of social influence on individual choice. We accept that existentialism overclaims the role and power of free will and individual choice. At the other end of the extreme, we find marketing scholars denouncing the notion of freedom of will and portraying consumer autonomy as delusional (Ahlberg et al., 2022; Gabriel, 2015). Likewise, we find that to be an overclaim of our inability to influence our own lives, take responsibility and have agency. We, therefore, submit to a moderate position on freedom of will and personal autonomy that takes individual consumer agency to be a complex function of the interplay between social influence and subjective will (Anker, 2020). Accordingly, we assume our life-long endeavour to define and enact a vision of the good life to be a continuous dialectic negotiation between subjectivity and socio-cultural influence. Understanding how consumers use their subjectivity to define and realise visions of the good life is, therefore, an important part of the overall scientific ambition of getting to grips with that intriguingly nebulous term: the meaning of life.

The phrase 'the good life' is both a colloquial expression and a subject-specific term in philosophy. Aristotle (see Irwin and Fine, 1995) used the expression to refer to the ultimate goal of human life – happiness – which was achievable only through years of practical life experience and education, enabling the individual to develop a virtuous character such that the right choice would always flow naturally from their decisions. The good life is thus defined as something inherently ethical and normative. In modern ethics, Ricoeur (1992) extends this line of thought by defining existential meaning as a good life lived with and for others in just institutions. By contrast, we use the term 'vision of the good life' as a meta-concept where 'good' denotes a life-form for the individual that does not refer to general or shared normativity. What the individual consumer deems to be good and meaningful for them is an existential choice that does not refer to a broader ethical framework and may run counter to society's ethical beliefs. The conflict between individual meaning and societal ideas of right and wrong is a common trope in popular culture and the singer-songwriter Camilla Cabello hits the theme perfectly in Cinderella: 'If you tell me I'm wrong, wrong. I don't wanna be right…' Taylor Swift takes on the same theme triumphantly, singing 'They say I did something bad. Then why's it feel so good? They say I did something bad. But why's it feel so good'? Existential consumer theory posits that the pursuit for meaning and the formulation of a vision of the good life through existential consumption is a non-normative, non-ethical endeavour as it is entirely up to the individual to negotiate the dialectic tension between external socio-cultural influence and subjectivity. What we are hoping to achieve in this study is a discussion and theorisation of how we as meaning-seeking individuals use consumption to define and enact a personal vision of the good life that is uniquely, subjectively meaningful.

Critical marketing approaches such as terminal marketing will question our foundational assumption that perceived meaningfulness mediated through consumption may be genuinely meaningful and, consequently, that there is a substantive relation between consumption and

existential meaningfulness. We respond to the challenges posed by terminal marketing in the discussion section but as this critique concerns the conceptual backbone of existential consumer theory, it will prove useful to briefly foreground the discussion at this point. The crux of the matter is differing views on the relationship between ontology (i.e. actual meaning) and phenomenology (i.e. perceived meaningfulness). Terminal marketing progresses its critique from the assumption of a fundamental disconnect between ontology and phenomenology: consumption-based meaning is *perceived* meaning which is structurally disconnected from *ontological* meaning (if such a thing even exists or can exist). By contrast, we build on the predominant assumption among existential philosophers that ontology and phenomenology are *not* semantically, perceptually or metaphysically disconnected. Following Heidegger in particular, we assume that our pursuit for existential meaning is an ontological fact about the human condition and that perceived meaning under most circumstances has a real-world correlate and, thereby, is ontologically grounded. Disconnects between perceived and actual meaning are real and occur, for example, when people are subject to deception or mindlessly accept tradition and socio-cultural expectation as constitutive of meaning. But such disconnects are the exemption to the rule.

We contribute to several evolving areas of consumer research. First, prior work has established consumption characterised by goal-directed behaviour to be positively correlated with meaningfulness (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) but it has remained an open question why and how this is the case. Our distinction between teleological and existential consumption answers these questions: goal-directed (i.e. teleological) consumption obtains meaning by enacting the consumer's vision of the good life which has been supported and facilitated through existential consumption. Second, existing research has found that consumer experiences that transport the individual beyond their everyday life into an extraordinary experience tend to enhance meaningfulness (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014), even sometimes when the unique experiences are aversive, unpleasant or dangerous (Keinan and Kivetz, 2011). Indeed, Scott et al. (2017) demonstrate how painful extraordinary experiences offer consumers the opportunity to re-discover their corporeality. Extreme consumption (Avery and Norton, 2014) plays an important role in existential consumption by offering the consumer an opportunity to take a specific life-form to its extreme and, thereby, expose or uncover personal values and beliefs in an attempt to develop and formulate an authentic vision of the good life. Third, we add to mainstream consumer culture theory (Ahuvia, 2005; Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Escalas and Bettman, 2000; Marion and Nairn, 2011; Ourahmoune, 2016; Schembri et al., 2010; Shankar et al., 2001, 2009) by articulating how consumer engagement with brand narratives goes beyond the construction and expression of self-identity: consumers use brand narratives as an exploratory devise to remove boundaries of imagination and, thereby, to expand their existential potentiality defined as the total set of existential possibilities open to them at any given point in time.

Finally, Wertenbroch et al. (2020) discuss how the rapid digitalisation of society offers threats and opportunities to consumer autonomy and agency. On the one hand, critical marketers argue that digitalisation significantly limits the agency of consumers (Cochoy et al., 2020), a point which is supported by the growing evidence of how, especially, the use of predictive algorithms on social media platforms reinforce exposure of harmful and offensive content (Karim et al., 2020; Patchin et al., 2023). On the other hand, Anker (2023), exploring the relationship between consumer autonomy and social technology, found both positive and negative correlations. Particularly, online immersive consumption in the metaverse promises to enhance consumer agency by removing barriers of time, space and body and enable valuable subjective experiences that would otherwise not have been possible. One open question is whether such virtual experiences are 'real' and whether this ontological question has any bearing on consumer freedom and autonomy.

Wertenbroch et al. (2020) argue that what matters is *perceived* freedom or autonomy, whereas Anker (2023) cautions against consumer experiences that decouple *perceived* from *actual* freedom. Our study contributes to this discussion. Periodic decoupling between perceived and actual freedom – say, through metaverse consumer experiences that enhance self-belief and self-confidence in the virtual world but without boosting these qualities in the offline world – can be meaningful in the exploration of one's vision of the good life (existential consumption). Yet, sustained decoupling would lead to what we shall later refer to as inauthenticity and bad faith, because there is then no guarantee that the individual's actions are aligned with their vision of the good life.

Existentialism and meaningful choice

Potentiality

In existentialism, potentiality expresses that a certain kind of freedom is a necessary part of being human. It is part of the ontological fabric of our lives that we are always already faced with a choice that concerns our being in the world (Heidegger, 2010 [1927]). Despite the external social pressures, we have a degree of freedom to become something that we are not already and, thereby, to influence the development of our own lives. Potentiality denotes this existential freedom directed at the constitution of our self.

Freedom and the self. Humans are faced with two different types of potentiality. On the one hand, we have the capacity to choose between one or more alternatives. This is the everyday way in which we choose between such things as coffee or tea for breakfast, studying to become a dentist rather than a philosopher, etc. On the other, humans are characterised by their special relationship to their everyday possibilities [(Heidegger, 2010 [1927]; Kierkegaard, 1957 [1844]; 1962 [1844]; 1971 [1843]; Sartre, 1992 [1943]): the choices we make are only meaningful and significant in relation to the fact that we usually have a certain range of possibilities in most situations. At a meta-level this means that not only do we have to make specific choices, we also face a higher order choice concerning what we want to do with the degree of freedom that we have. Although mediated through social influence, our degree of choice is still of a magnitude that can cause anxiety. It is an existential challenge to define our vision of the good life and act accordingly. The psychological response to our degree of freedom lies at the heart of the concept of existential authenticity. The next section will explore this in detail.

Consumer existential potentiality. Marketing and consumer behaviour substantially influence existential potentiality in two different ways. One which is linked to the realisation of potentiality, and a deeper and up-until-now unexplored relation between the ontological status of potentiality, consumer behaviour and branding. Obviously, products and services are necessary means to realise a vast range of opportunities available to any consumer at any point in time. Opportunities that reflect the individual's vision of the good life generally require some level of active agency that will be mediated through the utilisation of products and services. The agentic mediation is sometimes contingent, but more often necessary, as the consumer simply would not be able to realise these specific opportunities without deployment of products or engagement with services. We live in a consumer society in the sense that most of what we do is foregrounded in one type of consumption or another (Baudrillard, 1998 [1970]). Assume, for example, that a consumer wishes to lead a healthier life, including improving diet and engaging in regular physical exercise. While any diet is logically dependent on products (or at least produce), physical exercise is, in a strict and narrow

sense, possible without use of any products. You *can* run barefoot and naked through the streets of New York, but it is neither advisable nor particularly appealing to most. Given the structure of modern life, most activities that can be carried out without the mediation of products or services (such as regular physical exercise) are, in a pragmatic sense, necessarily preconditioned on utilisation of products and services (such as running shoes, gyms, instructors, coaches, communities, etc.). Thus, products and services are deeply embedded in the realisation of existential potentiality.

At a deeper level, the ontological status of potentiality is connected to branding and consumer behaviour in an interesting and surprisingly under-researched way. Heidegger points out that reflecting on or anticipating one's opportunities are intentional acts that 'must always already have disclosed the horizon and scope in terms of which something can be expected' (2010 [1927]: 337). As such, the boundary conditions of existential potentiality are set by the limits of our imagination. If we understand potentiality as a field of sets of opportunities, then our imagination determines the size of the field in a way that is ontologically connected to branding and advertising: some consumers may be unable to imagine a range of opportunities that in a pragmatic sense would have been available to them had they been exposed to certain ideas, symbols and aspirations through commercially produced brand narratives. A young girl might never have considered a career in the aerospace industry, a family might never have thought it possible to escape the rat race and live off-grid, and a black man might never have felt a sense of pride had it not been for the exposure to career options, lifestyles and cultural narratives through mass marketing, advertising and branding (Davis, 2018). Branding provides cultural material that can emancipate consumers' imagination by adding sets of opportunities (that would otherwise have been invisible to them) to their total field of potentiality.

Extant consumer research demonstrates indirectly that consumers explore their existential potentiality through consumption. Keinan and Kivetz (2011) find that some consumers seek to build 'an experiential CV' through collectable consumer experiences based on products and services, which involve unpleasant or even painful experiences. Appau et al. (2020) have followed religious consumers and find that certain consumption practices underpin existential transitions between life stages. In other areas of marketing and consumer research, there is growing emphasis on understanding extreme and extraordinary consumers as these are seen to be lucrative segments for enhanced service experiences, loyalty programmes, brand ambassadors and product innovation (Avery and Norton, 2014; Chung et al., 2018; Keinan and Kivetz, 2011; Redden and Steiner, 2000). Anker (2023) explains how technological advances such as augmented and virtual reality offer novel forms of consumer experiences where the normal ontological limits of consumption – time, place, space, body – are removed and, thereby, enable experimental consumption in extreme contexts, which boosts perceived agency and gives consumers the opportunity to explore the boundaries of self-identity.

However, extreme consumers are also existential consumers. Bhattacharjee and Mogilner (2014) have shown how what consumers value changes over time: young consumers tend to rate extraordinary experiences highly, whereas older consumers find value in everyday routines that reflect their vision of the good life. We speculate that these consumer choices reflect existential potentiality: faced with the existential challenge to formulate their own way of life, young people engage with extreme consumption as a means to explore potential ways of life that may, or may not, reveal sources of deeper existential meaning. Extreme consumption offers the individual an opportunity to take a certain life-form to its limits and thereby critically scrutinise values, desires, beliefs, attitudes and experiences that could form the foundation of an authentic self-identity or vision of the good life. A comparison between the motivation of recreational athletes to participate in conventional and ultramarathon races shows that extreme consumption has something unique to offer, in existential

terms (Mueller, 2012). Ultramarathoners report distinct physiological and psychological experiences as well as employment of distinct cognitive skills: their bodies experience muscular degeneration and severe mental and physical exhaustion, which is off-set by a frequent experience of a 'mystical state of consciousness' (Mueller, 2012). As such, we propose that consumers engage with extreme products and services to test their field of existential potentiality in order to define authentic sources of meaning in their own lives.

Propositions. We propose two propositions that connect meaningful consumer choice with existential potentiality.

The realisation of potentiality. A consumer choice of a product or service is meaningful to the extent that it enables agency that realises concrete opportunities in accordance with their vision of the good life.

The ontological determination of potentiality. By exposing the consumer to a range of lifestyles, values, aspirations and symbols, consumer brand engagement expands the consumer's perception of what is possible and, thereby, supports the construction of a personal vision of the good life.

Authenticity

Existentialism is concerned with authenticity as an expression of the extent to which the individual has succeeded in using their degree of freedom to define and realise their own vision of the good life. Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre disagree over what properties and relations characterise an individual life as being lived with authenticity. However, they all agree on the underlying ontological condition that authenticity is defined by how we as individuals respond to the degree of freedom we possess (Heidegger, 2010 [1927]; Kierkegaard, 1957 [1844]; 1962 [1844]; 1971 [1843]; 1980 [1849]; Sartre, 1992 [1943]).

Existential authenticity. Authenticity is a type of self-reference. As Kierkegaard puts it: 'The self is a relation that relates itself to itself' (1980 [1849]: 13). Authenticity, then, occurs when the self obtains a certain relation to itself. Heidegger (2010 [1927]) defines the authentic self-relation as follows. As humans, we are defined by the permanent tension between who we are at any given point in time and what we might become in the future: consciousness of our potentiality and degree of freedom to choose our own vision of the good life implies that our personal identity is always somewhat at stake. The human condition of potentiality forces us to continuously make a choice between re-confirming our self or trying to change who and what we are. Authenticity is, thereby, a form of self-confirmation or self-recreation. It is not the outcome of the existential choice that denotes authenticity, but the stance towards our potentiality – it is the way in which we choose to engage with our potentiality that matters. If we, overwhelmed by the responsibility to define our identity and meaning of life, seek escape in the existing value system of the social context in which we live, then we live in inauthenticity. By contrast, if we accept the challenge and understand that we have some degree of influence over the opportunities we have and what choices we make, then whatever life we choose – be it conservative pronvincialism or metropolitan globalism – is characterised by authenticity because it is our conscious choice of our own identity.

Authenticity and meaningful consumer choice. Authenticity is central to understanding meaningful consumer choice (Abolhasani et al., 2017; Hietanen et al., 2020). Understood as responsibility for

influencing one's identity and formulating a vision of the good life, consumers enact authenticity through consumption across two different dimensions: consumer experiences that express the authenticity of the self; and, consumer identity-projects where brands are used to construct and express the self. First, Bhattacharjee and Mogilner (2014) demonstrate how identity formation through consumer experiences remains important throughout life, but with changing emphasis. Younger consumers tend to value extraordinary experiences to develop their character and express a distinct subject-position, whereas older consumers who feel less of a need to negotiate their self-identity often develop a preference for ordinary, everyday experiences reflecting the lifestyle they have chosen (Lambert-Pandraud and Laurent, 2010). This is a practical manifestation of Heidegger's (2010 [1927]) notion of authenticity which is not tied to a specific type of identity (e.g. ordinary or extraordinary consumer experiences), but to the conscious choice of specific activities that either creates or sustains a desired identity and mode of being-in-the world (e.g. self-definition relative to life stage (Heckhausen et al., 2010).

Second, and as discussed above, consumers are using brands as narrative material to construct and express an authentic self-identity (Ahuvia, 2005; Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Escalas and Bettman, 2000; Marion and Nairn, 2011; Ourahmoune, 2016; Schembri et al., 2010; Shankar et al., 2001, 2009). Belk (1988) has famously shown how our material possessions become a part of our extended self and contribute to our sense of meaning in life. It may seem contradictory that brands can ever play a positive, functional role in defining authentic self-identity because they come with a pre-loaded set of associations and cultural values created through commercial marketing. However, Holt (2002) finds consumers are able to master a subtle semiotic capacity to modify and re-create brand meanings. Through adopting certain brands into a specific lifestyle (e.g. skaters adoption of the Vans brand; hip-hoppers adoption of Adidas), consumers are capable of altering the intended brand meaning so that logos and other signifiers are attributed with new meanings that – at least initially – are unique to the social group (Anker et al., 2015).

The use of brands as a semiotic resource to aid the construction of narrative self-identity is closely aligned with existential authenticity: our aim as individuals is to *individualize* by defining our own identity, purpose and mode of being-in-the-world. It is a common characteristic across existentialism that no particular type of lifestyle is normatively superior to another: the hallmark of authenticity is the autonomous decision to use one's degree of freedom to formulate a desired identity and act accordingly. As such, consumers' semiotic engagement with brands is a form of existential identity work aimed at creating an authentic self.

Proposition. We propose the following proposition which summarises how the notion of existential authenticity underpins meaningful consumption.

Authenticity and the self. Marketing foregrounds existential meaningfulness by enabling the construction and expression of an authentic self through consumer engagement with brand narratives and service experiences.

Theory development

This conceptual study has responded to the call for more research on the role and nature of meaningful consumer choice (Aaker, 2014). In an ideal world, all consumer spending would reflect individual visions of the good life and, thereby, be aligned with personal values and, ultimately, be existentially meaningful. However, as we have seen, meaningful choice is a complex function of different types of consumption. At the heart of the proposed theory of meaningful consumer choice

lies the distinction between existential and teleological consumption. On the one hand, we use this distinction to demonstrate how consumers engage with brands to explore different modes of life and basic values which then form the basis of the construction of an authentic, narrative self and a vision of the good life. We termed this existential consumption. On the other hand, we use the notion of teleological consumption to account for how consumers enact their visions of the good life through everyday consumption. We formulated three propositions that articulate different aspects of meaningful choice. The definition, below, employs the distinction between existential and teleological consumption to summarise the propositions and explicate the essence of meaningful consumer choice.

Meaningful choice

Consumer meaning is a dual function of *existential consumption* through which the consumer draws on brands, products and services to explore and define a vision of the good life and *teleological consumption* through which the consumer materialises and enacts their vision of the good life.

The definition relies on an ontology characterised by three core phenomena, that is potentiality, authenticity and narrative self-identity, which are influenced and activated by consumption of different types of material and immaterial objects belonging to the broad domain of marketing (e.g. brand narratives, products and services).

Consumer culture theory (CCT) has been instrumental in bringing about a deep understanding of how consumers use brands and other entities from the marketing eco-system to construct self-identity and catalyse authentic self-expression (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Much of our theory of meaningful consumer choice is consistent with CCT and, indeed, takes inspiration from this stream of research. However, the fundamental concept of consumer agency embedded in our theory's notion of existential meaning-making departs from established consumer culture research. In CCT, the consumer is an agent that is always already positioned in a context of consumption and it is the collective culture that defines the boundary conditions of meaning-making (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Cova et al., 2013). Consumer cultures exist as assemblages of consumers where meaning-making occurs as a cultural expression and, thereby, an outcome of collective agency. CCT is an excellent framework to account for the exchange of meaning between consumers and how individual meaning transforms into collective expressions that signify social status and group belonging within a consumer culture. But, the theory struggles to explain how meaning originates in the first place, because the infliction point of new meaning is individual agency: in order for new meaning to emerge, someone has to initiate the process of meaning-making. To better understand how new meaning is created, we will introduce a distinction between semiotic force and content.

When an individual consumer creates an expression of meaning – for example, the use of brands as narrative material to express their identity in a new way – then new semiotic content has been created. New meaning enters into a cultural context as the result of individual agency (or individual will to meaning, to put it in Nietzschean terms). This new semiotic content, however, is without any force. While it means something to the creator of the content, it does not have any wider impact before it is being recognised as meaningful by other consumers. In this way, individual meaning (i.e. semiotic content) becomes a cultural expression of meaning through sustained social recognition by other consumers (i.e. semiotic force). The distinction between semiotic force and content explains how individual consumers can use their degree of freedom to shape their own identity, at least partially, and genuinely create an authentic, original and personal identity that embodies their vision

of the good life. The distinction also explains how individual meaning transforms into cultural expressions through continued recognition by other consumers.

Discussion and theoretical implications

Freedom of willing and freedom of acting

In *Essay on the Freedom of the Will*, Schopenhaur (1999 [1839]) develops a theory that distinguishes between freedom of willing and freedom of acting. The core theoretical assumption is that humans enjoy freedom of acting, but not willing: we often face a number of opportunities through which we can materialise our will in different ways, but what we aspire to, hope for, desire, intend and want is beyond the reach of our willpower. This insight is also found in more poetic and religious formulations in Kierkegaard's work where each individual is bestowed a unique purpose of life but is at liberty to reject this and live in inauthenticity (bad faith) or accept it and use their freedom of acting to realise their purpose in whatever way they can and want.

The distinction between freedom of willing and acting corresponds to our distinction between existential and teleological consumption but with a crucial difference of emphasis. We have argued that consumers use existential consumption (for example, in the form of extreme consumption (Avery and Norton, 2014) or immersive online consumption (Anker, 2023) to explore different life-forms, values, beliefs, etc. in their pursuit to formulate authentic, individual visions of the good life. What they want, aspire to, and believe is not only being toyed with through existential consumption, but shaped, formed and authored. Once stable visions of the good life are established, consumption habits change and become more goal-directed and teleological. As Bhattacharjee and Mogilner (2014) show, younger consumers are more attracted towards extraordinary and extreme experiences (which we have conceptualised as existential consumption), whereas older consumers tend to find value in everyday routines that reflect their vision of the good life (which we have conceptualised as teleological consumption).

Our theoretical proposition is, thereby, that humans do indeed have both freedom of willing (expressed through existential consumption) and freedom of acting (expressed through teleological consumption), but that once stable visions of the good life have been established, freedom of willing fades away while freedom of acting endures.

The challenge of determinism

Our theory builds on the baseline assumption that humans have freedom of will and agency. We adopt a moderate position whereby we fully accept and incorporate the importance of external influence on the formation of the will, but maintain that humans have a degree of freedom whereby they can initiate, control and terminate actions according to their will. We also make the stronger claim that humans, to a certain degree, have freedom to influence the structure of their will, in our case by engaging in existential consumption to explore alternate life-forms, beliefs, values, experiences, etc. in their pursuit to define authentic visions of the good life.

However, evidence from the biological sciences is challenging this assumption. Indeed, recent marketing research develops a biological perspective of consumers and argues that most of their traits, including personality, desires and actions, are determined by genetic code and other biological influences (Daviet et al., 2022; Zheng and Alba, 2021). Add to that the influence of external forces on what might be left of freedom of will and action, and human beings are individuals largely moved

by causes that we have no influence over. Following philosophical tradition, we will refer to this position as determinism.

Several positive implications of determinism for marketing and consumer behaviour may ensue. Daviet et al. (2022) convincingly outline how marketers, especially, but certainly not exclusively, in the pharmaceutical sector can use consumer genetics to predict future demand of products, often years in advance. For example, knowledge of genetic dispositions for early hair loss in male segments may be used to target specific remedies to these segments at a point in time where these consumers are causally most likely to develop the condition. Put differently, in a causal world knowledge of consumer genetics is the ultimate key to predict demand for products and services. Zheng and Alba (2021) are also optimistic about the benefits of determinism for consumers: knowledge of one's biological constitution and appreciation of the fact that one's actions are pre-determined by biological forces should encourage consumers to set more realistic goals, moderate ambitions and engage less in self-criticism.

Contrary to popular opinion, the position known as compatibilism in contemporary moral philosophy holds that determinism is logically compatible with moral responsibility. Fischer and Ravizza (1998) argue that, insofar as an individual is in control of their actions and responsive to reasons for and against doing those actions, then they are autonomous and, thus, morally responsible. We find this to be a logically compelling, but existentially unambitious account of our enduring perception of having freedom of will and action. We have, thus, offered a more optimistic view of consumer freedom, what it is, what it means and what our limitations are.

This study is, however, not the place to settle the debate. We will simply point to the fact that there is, indeed, conclusive empirical evidence that our genetic make-up influences and even causes many of our actions but, at the same time, there is *no* conclusive evidence that all of our actions are pre-determined by our genes or other external or internal forces over which we have no control. Whilst being alien to Sartre's extreme position that no human behaviour is ever determined by prior circumstances, we do submit to the basic Sartrean dictum: the question is not so much what you are, but what you do with what you are. There seems to be a strong case for *a degree of human freedom of will and agency* and it is this 'elbow room', as Dennett (1984) elegantly terms it, that we claim as the ontological space for existential consumption and exploration of potentiality. This is a bounded freedom but, nonetheless, a genuine freedom to shape our vision of the good life and act accordingly – within our limited but not insignificant breathing space of free will and action.

The challenge of nihilism

One objection is looming large: is authentic individuation of personal identity through branded material exactly what Sartre would classify as bad faith and Heidegger as inauthenticity? This occurs when someone denies that they have a degree of freedom to create a personal identity and unique purpose of life, and escapes into internalising an existing value system (Heidegger 2010 [1927]; Sartre, 1992 [1943]). We find that this argument overlooks the fact that consumers use brands as narrative material to construct and express self-identities that are not already entailed by, or embedded in, any brand per se. Anker et al. (2015) discuss several such cases where consumers use their semiotic power to deconstruct brands and attribute new and unintended meanings to them. This shows that brand-mediated consumer identities are not necessarily inauthentic internalisations of commercially produced brand meanings but can be genuine expressions of consumer subjectivity or inter-subjectivity.

In contemporary consumer society, nihilism challenges the notion of meaningful choice in a novel way. Some consumer groups seem to accept the nihilistic baseline assumption that values do

not exist and that the only claim to meaning an individual can make is to manifest their own will and desires embodied through consumption (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020). As Cronin and Fitchett (2021) argue, this is a logical conclusion to neo-liberal society where consumption is seen as an emancipatory realisation of one's true and unique potential. In more concrete terms, Dion and Borraz (2017) point towards a new wave of nihilism in luxury consumption. They demonstrate how high-end brands are shifting strategy away from understanding products in terms of consumers' desire to signal wealth and status. As the luxury market continues to grow and is no longer a privilege of the super-rich only, focus is now turning to managing 'customer experiences that make consumers enact status positions' (Dion and Borraz, 2017: 67). Likewise, Eckhardt and Bardhi (2020) detect a new dynamic of social status with focus shifting away from actively signalling wealth to more under-played, inconspicuous and fluid manifestations of class, social status and hierarchy. This may seem like a subtle shift, but it is seismic: signalling status (which used to be the core appeal of luxury branding) implies using brands as a communicative device in cultural contexts; however, enacting status positions through brands (which is the emerging, nihilistic trend) implies the operational-isation of brands as functional tools to assert oneself as an authentic individual in a sea of sameness across all tiers of stratification. Luxury brands want to leverage the raw desire for power and dominance by removing emotional barriers to unhindered enactment of will power. A luxury product or service encounter offers the consumer an opportunity to enforce their will onto the world in a way that does not simply signal wealth, but enacts the social role associated with being rich, enacting the top role in the hierarchy of the Alpha-individual (Dion and Borraz, 2017). As Nietzsche puts it in *The Antichrist* (Nietzsche, 1954 [1895]: §2):

> What is good? Everything that heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself.
>
> What is bad? Everything that is born of weakness.
>
> What is happiness? The feeling that power is growing, that resistance is overcome.
>
> Not contentedness but more power; not peace but war; not virtue but fitness.

Terminal marketing

The term 'terminal marketing' was recently introduced to denote the growing awareness of consumer culture as a bleak cultural aporia which communicates surface-level happiness through brand-mediated semiotics, whereas the harsh reality underneath the luxury branded veneer is one of despair and commercial exploitation. Ahlberg, Coffin and Hietanen describe the phenomenon as follows:

> "We note a growing number of studies that have directly engaged with a concept of consumer culture marked by runaway *excesses*, which override assumptions of coherent subjectivities and individualized 'meaning' in consumption, and an absence of teleological stories, resisting the utopian urge to find narrative resolutions. We term this mood *Terminal Marketing* (TM) … TM has risen to throw a pessimistic view of marketized society into the discourse, to caution how consumption might only provide illusions of transformation without changing any of the fundamentals of capitalist markets (Ahlberg et al., 2022: 669)."

Nietzsche's existential nihilism foregrounds the type of critique that the terminal marketing movement is offering, and there are important structural similarities. Nietzsche was a nihilist whose ontology was incompatible with any notion of individual meaning, apart from the expression of

unrestricted will to power. This assumption seems to underpin the terminal marketing movement, too, as it dismisses the construct of existential meaning and replaces it with satisfaction of desires to which consumers *attribute* meaning, although these are in and of themselves ontologically *meaningless* (Ahlberg et al., 2022). The movement is characterised by three tenets:

> "(T1): a concept of subjectivity as fragmented and largely non-coherent, with consumption conceptualized as momentarily exhilarating but never truly transformative.
>
> (T2): an understanding of 'meaning-makings' as fantasies and inscribed lies of agency.
>
> (T3): a devaluation of goal-directed explanations and teleological narratives. (Ahlberg et al., 2022: 4)"

The three tenets offer a rebuff to the theory of meaningful consumer choice developed in this article. However, the terminal marketing movement seems to suppress important nuances in consumers' complex struggle for meaning. Our theory of existential meaning implicitly makes the claim that consumption can be transformative in the sense that it can support the individual in their formation of a vision of the good life as well as the enactment of that vision. The theory accepts that consumption may only be 'momentarily exhilarating' but finds a constructive role for exactly this type of consumption in the experimental exploration of different modes of living which informs and guides the formulation of an individual vision of the good life. Indeed, we have referred to studies finding that consumers consciously seek and engage with 'momentarily exhilarating' experiences in order to explore potential identities, and then switch to routine patterns of consumption once they have formed durable and stable identities (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014).

There is a final nuance in the discussion about the relationship between phenomenological and ontological meaning that must be addressed. Terminal marketing accepts the *perception* and *sensation* of meaning as real and in that sense possibly being a phenomenological experience with a real-world correlate. What terminal marketing ultimately rejects is that this supposed real-world correlate of meaningful consumption can be constitutive of genuine meaning because meaning is an epiphenomenon occurring as a subjective response to consumption without being substantively connected to consumption. This is a variation of the sceptical argument in philosophy originally developed by Plato and reinforced by Descartes in his 'dream argument'. The basic idea is that our senses and the experiences, beliefs, emotions, etc. derived from our senses are fallacious and that we have no substantive way of distinguishing between sensations that constitute true or false, justified or unjustified, knowledge because all markers of reality may be subject to error (Plato) or occur in a dream (Descartes). In this vein, the ultimate argument of terminal marketing is that we are bound up in a vicious, epistemic circle where we are being misled to accept consumption-based experiences as meaningful because we have no other marker of meaningfulness than consumption itself.

There is no answer to this challenge that will satisfy terminal marketing: any counterargument must explain and justify the concept of meaningful consumption by reference to experiences of meaningful consumption, which is a circular and therefore fallacious argument. Pressing the scholarly discourse to this level of detail, we reach the boundary of rational exchange of ideas and must make what Kierkegaard would refer to as 'a leap of faith' whereby we accept foundational axioms, principles and assumptions based on intuition rather than logical proof.

Meaningful choice and the liquification of society

Bauman's (2000) theory of liquid modernity reveals how contemporary society is moving into a state of permanent flux where identities, relationships, organisational structures and economies are

constantly changing. Individuals negotiate and construct new identities, workplaces rapidly change from office-based work to remote working to hybrid, social and romantic relationships are more fluid than ever mediated as they often are through dating apps like Tinder and Grinder, and different types of economies (circular, sharing and capitalistic) co-exist within the same social system at the same time. This is liquid society. Consumer researchers have adopted Bauman's theory to launch explorations into liquid consumption, with particularly novel contributions to the changing ontology and phenomenology of social status and distinction (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020).

The structure of liquid modernity and consumption also underpins our theory of existential consumption. When consumers use brands, products, communities or services as exploratory devices to investigate their own potentiality, they are effectively engaged in liquid consumption. However, we possibly draw another conclusion than what is anticipated in extant research on fluid consumption. Informed by evidence about how consumption habits change from exploratory and existential consumption in younger consumers to more teleological and routine consumption in consumers with stable visions of the good life, we suggest that fluid consumption characterises certain individual phases of consumption but that the fluidity of consumption gradually solidifies into more permanent patterns of consumption as identities settle into stable visions of the good life. It is, however, not only perfectly possible but, indeed, likely that many consumers progress through multiple phases of liquid-stable consumption, whereby existential consumption and exploration of new visions of the good life are re-ignited. This is likely to be the case when consumers progress from one life stage to another, for example, when children move away from home and the 'empty nesters' re-negotiate their relationship and priorities; when people retire and have money, time and resources to pursue new interests; or, when people start new lives after the breakdown of intimate relationships, etc. We call for future research into the changing nature of existential consumption across different life stages to better understand the fluidity and relative stability of meaningful consumer choice.

Care and existential consumption

The theory of meaningful consumer choice presented in this study should not be understood as representing an exhaustive theory representing all important aspects of meaningful consumer choice. Rather, it is a skeleton structure that clearly demonstrates the different levels of consumption (existential and teleological) that consumers operationalise in their deep-level identity work and surface-level everyday consumption to make meaningful choices. It is a task for future research to further develop the model into a fully fleshed theory of meaning in consumption. One area that is ripe for further exploration is the notion of care in consumption. Care (Sorge) is a key existential in Heidegger's philosophy and much of his main opus, *Being and Time*, is devoted to exploring how care is entangled with other existentials such as the Self and the Other, potentiality and psychological states (e.g. anxiety). Shaw et al. (2017) have developed a theory of care that examines how consumption manifests care and caring. Care is also directly correlated with our key concept of authenticity. Some forms of consumption such as gift-giving are obvious candidates for authentic manifestations of care for others: Being kind to others and showing appreciation through gifts are likely to be strongly associated with many consumers' vision of the good life (Chan and Mogilner, 2016; Park, 1998; Wolfinbarger and Yale, 1993). By contrast, retail therapy – which is often conceptualised as a form of self-care for managing negative mood and anxiety – is less clear cut: while research demonstrates that retail therapy does have positive effects on the individual consumer, the therapeutic value decreases quickly (Atalay and Meloy, 2011; Kang and Johnson, 2010; Mouakhar-Klouz et al., 2016; Rick et al., 2014). There is, thus, a clear need for future research to explore what forms of

consumption are authentic expressions of care and, by inference, when caring for others and self through consumption is meaningful.

Concluding remarks

This study stands on the shoulders of a large body of consumer research. It is fair to say that the underpinning assumptions of our argument (especially our reliance on consumers' use of brands as authentic cultural material to construct narrative self-identity) would have been impossible to make without the landmark contributions of the CCT tradition. Nevertheless, existential consumer theory breaks new ground by conceptualising a more optimistic and all-encompassing view of consumption as a social practice intimately connected to the ontological and phenomenological structure of the meaning of life.

Ontologically, the core of our argument is that the structure of the meaning of life is necessarily bound up with consumption practices. On the one hand, consumers use existential consumption to develop their subjective and authentic vision of the good life. On the other, consumers use goal-directed, teleological consumption to enact their individual vision of the good life. This structure is *ontological* as opposed to *phenomenological* because the efforts to define an individual purpose of life and live accordingly are always already embedded in contexts of consumption. While it is possible to imagine life-forms where meaning of life is detached from consumption, our argument is that existential consumption is a necessary feature of a meaningful life in the market economy we live in. The terminal marketing movement denounces this ontology of meaning as an illusion because it builds on the fundamentals of capitalism (Ahlberg et al., 2022). However, we have shown how consumers can gain control and agency over brands, products and services and use them as exploratory devices to experiment with alternate life-forms and value sets in their formulation and enactment of authentic visions of the good life. Consumers use brands to explore their existential potentiality in ways that substantively transcends commerciality and signifies genuine consumer autonomy (Anker, 2020).

Our contribution is also phenomenological. We have discussed different ways in which consumers use brands, products and services as exploratory devices to expand their horizons of what types of life might be open to them and experiment with personal values and beliefs in their pursuit of an authentic vision of the good life. As examples, we pointed towards extreme consumption as a means to experiment with alternative life-forms and explore values and beliefs that differ from those the consumer currently holds. We highlighted immersive, online consumer experiences as means to remove temporal, spatial and physical barriers, both in the exploration and realisation of authentic visions of the good life. These examples are embedded in the phenomenological reality of contemporary consumer society but are not indicative of consumers' future pursuits of the meaning of life.

As long as we live in a consumer society, it is an ontological premise that our search for meaning will be structured as existential and teleological consumption. At the same time, the phenomenology of meaning is fluid and will change relative to societal developments, particularly new consumer technologies. It is, therefore, one of the most important tasks of future consumer research to observe, analyse and critique the phenomenological manifestations of our search for meaning as they unfold into new horizons.

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