

Growing into a culture of the comfort zone

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Abstract

This study argues that consumerism encourages people to make less effort and stay within their comfort zone. This is made possible by the fact that human beings are programmed to conserve energy and thus avoid effort both at the physical and psychological level. The mere amount of products and services available and the ease of their use drives people to give up on challenging themselves. This causes them to become more and more lazy and reliant on consumer products. For this reason, the authors consider that people are trapped by consumerism in a comfort zone. Theoretical arguments for these assertions are offered based on psychology and anthropology. Some possible solutions for overcoming this “trap” are provided by the authors.

Keywords: consumerism, comfort zone, systems of thinking, laziness, effort

In this paper we present the idea that consumerism might be responsible for a series of unhealthy habits of the modern human. More specifically we assert that consumerist society encourages avoidance of discomfort and thus keep individuals in a state of unhealthy comfort. We consider this to be a trap since it offers the illusion of well-being while in fact contributes to the stagnation of individual development.

We started our investigation by observing that most people tend to avoid making an effort towards obtaining their goals, even those that they formulated for themselves. Also, they expect to have gain (either on a psychological or physical level) without paying the price of making and effort.

It is hard to say whether consumerism seduces humans into the comfort zone or forces them into it. Consumerism exerts its influence

by triggering innate mechanisms within the individual. We identified three mechanisms of seduction: (1) the instinct to save energy, (2) the fear of missing out, and (3) emotional decision making. It could also be argued however that consumerism triggers another mechanism, namely shaming the person. This would imply that people are rather forced into consuming by their desire to maintain a certain level of high self-esteem and their desire to belong to a certain group. They end up buying products and using services just to keep up an image that they think is the norm. As this force could truly be a fourth mechanism we consider it to be a variant of the second one (the fear of missing out).

Research in several domains of human behaviour has shown that being lazy, physically and psychologically is deeply engrained in our genes. People have always tended to avoid effort when possible. It is a natural preference. Effort implies the consumption of energy and thus is associated with unpleasant feelings and discomfort (physical or psychological). Humans have a built in mechanism for avoiding effort in order to preserve energy. This mechanism was very efficient for keeping humans alive when resources were scarce. According to Kahneman (2011) “A general ‘law of least effort’ applies to cognitive as well as physical exertion. The law asserts that if there are several ways of achieving the same goal, people will eventually gravitate to the least demanding course of action. In the economy of action, effort is a cost, and the acquisition of skill is driven by the balance of benefits and costs. Laziness is built deep into our nature.” The same author defines laziness as the reluctance to invest more effort than is strictly necessary in a certain activity.

Before modern times people kept “in shape”, both mentally and physically because they had to make an effort in order to survive. They had to spend energy in order to hunt and gather and later grow crops, attend to farm animals, wage wars and cultivate personal social relationships. Whether they liked it or not they had to make psychological and physical effort. So, on the one hand there was the force of “genetic laziness” that drove people to conserve energy and on the other hand there was a force that drove people to make an effort and act, namely the unforgiving environment in which they lived in. This push-pull action between these two forces kept most people outside their comfort zone.

We consider that in these modern times the force of the genetic laziness gained much more ground over the force that motivate people to

make an effort. Furthermore, we propose that consumerism is responsible for this phenomenon. We argue that consumerism changed the environment in such a way that it no longer requires much effort to survive.

We define consumerism as the continuous encouragement of acquiring large quantities of goods and services. This incitement is based on the theory that continuous buying is desirable for the economy. “Consumerism sees the consumption of ever more products and services as a positive thing. It encourages people to treat themselves, spoil themselves, and even kill themselves slowly by overconsumption. Frugality is a disease to be cured” (Harari 2015, 603).

According to the previously cited author consumerism appeared as a new kind of ethic in order to make sure that people will always buy whatever new stuff the industry produces. In this way the modern capitalist economy can constantly increase production and thus keep thriving.

The industrial revolution was a major turning point in the history of mankind. It allowed for the mass manufacture of affordable products. Now everyone could afford to buy items that once were only for the wealthy. Furthermore, the use of credit on a large scale encouraged people to spend money that they didn't have on products they didn't need but were led to believe that they wanted. Once the lower and middle class could afford to buy more and more they used this power to project an image of high status (even if this was very expensive and meant plunging into more and more debt). Thus, consumerism allowed competition between individuals; it allowed them to show off their status.

Consumerism was able to change people's view of themselves and their lives. It has convinced people to let go of the modest way of life by telling them that it is a form of self-oppression that has no benefit for them. It painted a picture in which people only had to lose if they didn't profit from this one opportunity of being alive. It ultimately convinced people that indulgence is good.

In psychology studies most often happiness is measured through another concept, namely subjective well-being. Since it is subjective the only way to access it is by asking people to offer a personal perspective regarding the way they feel about their lives. Thus, we are faced with an appreciation that is given based either on feelings of immediate pleasure or on long term contentment with the way life is going. Long term

psychological research has shown that happiness is mostly influenced by people's expectations that is by what they imagine life should be. In this case two major aspects of our society, mass media and the advertising industry, is responsible for the way people appreciate their subjective well-being. These two aspects of society are also a major part of the consumerist society.

According to Harrari (2015) the speed with which humans obtained their easy lifestyle is so big that nature did not have time to adjust that is to develop checks and countermeasures to keep humans out of the comfort zone. In other words, the environment changed so quickly into one that is relatively easy to survive in that the human survival algorithms did not have time to catch up and adapt. This means that people don't realize that the apparent safety of the comfort zone is actually a trap. This illusion of safety keeps them unmotivated to step out of the trap.

One example of a consumerism trap is overeating. According to one estimate half of humankind is expected to be overweight by 2030. Also, a study showed that in 2010 famine and malnutrition combined killed about 1 million people, whereas obesity killed 3 million (Harari 2017).

Comfort is a state of subjective well-being characterized by a relaxed attitude towards the surrounding environment. The comfort zone is a "risk free" zone, where a person can operate, at an anticipated level of performance, using her skills that she already owns and does not cause discomfort or anxiety (White 2009). This means that the comfort zone delimits automated behaviours which offer the individual neutrality and lack of anxiety. This is a routine which implies stability and the illusion of control but also an avoidance strategy used to diminish stress and risk. It would seem that staying in the comfort zone is a good way to conserve energy and feel safe. If used properly it could offer the opportunity for resting and recovering the depleted energy while preparing for the next step out of the comfort zone. It would seem however that most people prefer to remain there, within its boundaries where they feel safe. In conclusion, the comfort zone permits avoidance of effort and unpleasant feelings.

We define avoidance as the decision to choose a pleasant stimulus for the short term over an unpleasant one while ignoring the cost of having to bear an unpleasant stimulus over the long term. This behaviour is based on the person's ability to anticipate outcomes and make decisions

based on previous experience. Since humans make decisions based on emotions it is likely that they would choose avoidance over confrontation since avoidance offers short term emotional benefits while confrontation offers “misery” over the short term.

As we stated earlier thinking consumes energy; and this energy consumption is rather large. As Kahneman’s research pointed out we have two systems of thinking: (1) a fast System 1 – which requires low energy consumption but it is a superficial mode of analysing information; and (2) a slow System 2 – which enables us to make complex information processing but requires a lot of energy and thus feels like making an effort. Most of the time we use system one, because it takes much less effort on the short run. On the long run however, it might cost us much more. So minimum effort now could mean much more effort later. And thus the trap reveals itself.

A “cold” analysis of whether to confront a situation or avoid it would almost always suggest a confrontational attitude. Such an analysis however would imply effort and the activation of a high energy consuming system of thinking (Kahneman’s System 2). Usually people use a much more economical system of thinking (Kahneman’s System 1) since it offers solutions based on less energy consumption which is rewarding. It is commonly believed by psychologists that all humans conduct most of their lives on the basis of decisions made by System 1 (Kahneman 2011). Thus, in most cases people tend to avoid rather than confront.

Consumerism offers the opportunity to avoid stressors and confrontation with the unknown. For example, online shopping offers compulsive buyers the possibility to avoid social stigma and lower their anxiety. People can compare prices from home without having to physically go to each store, there is no need to stand in line and most importantly there is no need for social skills (since there is no social interaction). Also, online shopping is a highly controllable experience. Each person can browse and shop at their own pace. The products can be tried out at home and may be returned without any additional cost. Essentially online shopping is a rather danger free experience which is highly rewarding.

Online shopping is a very rewarding experience also due to the phenomenon of delayed gratification. It would seem that having to wait for the purchased items makes the shopping experience even more

pleasurable. Research has showed that delayed gratification activates the pleasure centers in the brain while waiting for the purchased item to arrive. Thus, online shopping offers us the immediate burst of pleasure obtained by the purchase itself and the long term pleasure obtained from waiting for the item to arrive (Castle 2016). People use online shopping for various reasons such as enjoyment/psychological relaxation, the ability to find whatever one is looking for (practicality), ease, time restrictions, a wide variety of products (practicality), and boredom (free time) (Günüç and Keskin 2016). According to a Eurostat report from 2018 online purchases by internet users increased in the 2018 by 19 percentage points compared with 2008.

Consumerism offers simple and affordable solutions to a large variety of problems. Virtually anyone can find anything with a relative low economic and social cost. Consumerism opens up a variety of market possibilities such a vlogging which perpetuates consumerism by offering solutions to problems that people don't even know they have until they are told by the vlogger. Also, easy access to products, even fake ones, helps people to maintain an image of high status and thus maintain a high level of self-esteem. Furthermore, consumerism maintains confirmation bias by offering products similar to those that the person has already shown an affiliation for.

The easiness with which one can attain products and services increases every day with each new product and service that appears on the market. This amplifies the inherent laziness in humans. Consumerism actively encourages skipping over the step in which the individual evaluates the costs and benefits of a purchase.

Thinking requires energy consumption. Maintaining a coherent line of reasoning with yourself (like the internal dialog for example) requires some effort. The brain is programmed to conserve energy and it does this by creating automatic responses for familiar situations. In this manner the minimum amount of energy is used for generating an adequate response in similar situations. A reflex operates in the following manner: a stimulus is presented, the stimulus is detected and interpreted by the brain, the central processor (the brain) decides upon the appropriate response, and finally a response is emitted. All this happens most of the time unconsciously, the brain deciding on the appropriate response based on prior experience (based on rewards). Consumerism allows for

the formation of such reflexes with regard to decision making by encouraging the overutilization of System 1 (consumerism urges us to indulge). This system functions with much less energy than System 2 thus is the default system in most scenarios. It is obvious then that certain shortcuts in thinking will occur and decisions will be made upon existing reflexes (automatic thoughts that are triggered for decision making).

Self-control means consuming energy, it is a form of effort. Also, it requires attention, which itself is energy consuming. Each instance of self-control depletes the body's energy resources, thus at a certain point, when the energy resources are exhausted the person will be left with no capacity of self-control. This phenomenon has been labelled "ego depletion" and has been described as a loss of motivation. The person could exert self-control but doesn't have the motive to do it. Utilizing System 2 requires self-control which is unpleasant thus it is less likely to be used. The road is clear for System 1.

People do not like cognitive effort since it is felt as unpleasant and thus avoid it as much as possible, this makes them become overconfident in their "intuitions". One of the main functions of System 2 is to monitor and control thoughts and actions 'suggested' by System 1, however overriding System 1 and turning on System 2 takes a lot of work (which means energy consumption) thus, we fail to check the intuitive answer given by System 1 (Kahneman 2011).

Good feelings and a happy mood is associated with cognitive ease that is with the operation of System 1. This creates judgments based more on intuition and gullibility and less on vigilance and logic. On the other hand, System 2 is more likely to be used when people experience bad feeling such as sadness. This means that when in a negative emotional state more vigilance and suspicion is used when making judgments (Kahneman 2011).

An important mechanism by which consumerism is exerting its control over humans is the innate fear of missing out. It is a variant of the well documented loss aversion bias. Fearing loss is also deeply engrained in the human genes. Mass media and social media rely on this fear to convince people to invest more of their money in the acquisition of goods and experiences. By showing people what they might miss if they don't go along with the newest service or product they trigger and reinforce the fear of missing out. Now, with these affordable prices could

you afford not to be part of it? Could you afford to miss it? You only have one life, go for it, buy it and enjoy it. Buy it again and again to stay on top of progress and enjoy your life. With no or little effort you could enjoy life to the fullest. Shopping has become a pastime and sometimes a coping mechanism for emotional turmoil. Also, consumer goods have become essential mediators in inter-human relationships.

In conclusion, is relying on comfortable services like ordering food or getting your groceries delivered a bad thing? Does that mean you are in your comfort zone? Not necessarily. It does save time, and you could order healthy food. So when does that become a bad thing? When are you trapped? It is bad when the cost efficiency is bad for you. If you have shopping delivered to you, such as food and groceries and you are able to save precious time which you use for work or quality time with your family or friends or some activity that contributes to your development (like going to the gym or reading something useful) then you are not doing it to further your comfort; this service is an instrument that helps you. If, however you use these services in order to avoid effort, like physical activity or social interaction, or use the time for some activity that further contributes to your comfort zone then it is a bad thing. How do we draw the line between bad and good?

As a general guideline we propose looking at whether the person's action is a way of confronting or avoiding; is the person putting in the effort or is choosing the option that helps her avoid effort. In order to keep out of the comfort zone or leave it people need to pay more attention to the amount of how much they consume and only indulge from time to time. They should consider whether they use certain products (e.g. the electric scooter) or services (online shopping) in order to avoid discomfort. For example, do they use the electric scooter in order to avoid physical activity or to be more efficient at getting where they have to go? Do they use online shopping because it is less time consuming or because they avoid social interaction?

Another way for people to avoid or leave the trap would be to constantly challenge themselves. That means making a conscious effort to do something that is somewhat uncomfortable. As neuropsychological research has pointed out a moderate degree of stress is necessary for learning to take place. Without this condition neuroplasticity is not

triggered (Arden 2010). That degree of stress can be attained by reducing the merchandize they buy and the services they use to keep comfortable.

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