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“Buy ____ it will change your life”: How influencer culture has affected societies' proclivity to over-consume.

In today's society, consumerism is the standard and products rule our lives. So much so that an entire career has been developed with its sole purpose being to influence the public to consume more and more products. With the rise of social media came the creation of internet influencers. Nearly every person with access to a cell phone and the internet knows what an influencer is, and can most likely name at least 5 influencers off of the top of their heads. ‘Influencers’ are internet personalities who have gained some degree of fame through the creation of content on any given social media platform. They then make brand deals with large companies who will pay these influencers to create posts in which they persuade their ‘followers’ to buy whatever product that company is selling. It's the new world of advertising, and in this world normal people turned ‘influencers’ make a profit off of over consumerism, which has possessed the public. Future generations will look back on this culture of ‘influencers’ and overconsumption by the public that runs rampant throughout our society and condemn us for what it has done to our world.

Modern consumerism has been around long before ‘influencers’, social media, and the internet. Many historians argue that the current definition of consumerism originated in Western Europe and dates back to a time before the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution then contributed greatly to the spread of consumerism and by the 1950s and 60s, which was considered the ‘golden age of consumerism’ consumerism was the standard of society. Consumerism is a major driver of nearly all economies around the world, and has become

essential to the survival of the economies of major world powers such as the U.S. However, in this day and age, we have surpassed the basic ideas of consumerism and have entered an era of extreme over consumption that may prove to be detrimental to society, human life, and the environment.

In his article, “What Will Future Generations Condemn Us For?” Kwame Anthony Appiah makes the claim that there are three ways in which one can judge whether a certain practice of the present will be condemned in the future. “First, people have already heard the arguments against the practice” (Appiah 226). By this Appiah means that arguments that opposed whatever the practice is had been occurring long before the practice was ended. The influencer culture of today, although seemingly commonplace does have many opposers. Various people have come out against the ways in which we as a society prioritize the words and actions of internet influencers, and how much of a grip we allow for them to have on the public.

Appiah's second claim is also relevant to the case of influencer culture, “Second, defenders of the custom tend not to offer moral counter arguments but instead invoke tradition, human nature or necessity.” (Appiah 226). Many arguments we see in favor of influencer culture and over consumption claim that it is ‘just the way the world works’ and that there is not much to be done about it. This argument doesn’t take a moral or ethical stance and instead uses human nature and the idea that consumerism is a necessity to the survival of today’s society to defend the concept of influencer culture and over-consumption.

Appiah’s third and final claim of how to spot a practice that will be condemned in the future is, “...supporters engage in what one might call strategic ignorance, avoiding truths that might force them to face the evils in which they're complicit.” (Appiah 226). People like watching and consuming the content of influencers. And influencers like to benefit off of life

with the title of ‘influencer’. People don’t want to think about the damage they may be causing because they don’t want to have to give it all up.

Robert Heilbroner explains this idea in his piece, “What Has Posterity Ever Done For Me?” Heilbroner states, “How many of us would be willing to give up some minor convenience—say the use of aerosols—in the hope that this might extend the life of man on earth by a hundred years.” (Heilbroner 896). And this is true. People don’t want to think about the moral implications of influencer culture or the ways in which we all contribute to overconsumption because it’s comfortable and we like it. But once you look deeper into the concept of a culture run by ‘influencers’ and over-consumption, you begin to realize that they pose extreme ethical dilemmas that could affect the future of the world as we know it.

The ways in which we produce and consume in today's society are simply unsustainable and will affect all life on Earth at some point in the future, “...at this point, according to the U.N. panel that studies global natural resources, consumption is the leading driver of our environmental problems around the world today...” (J.B. Mackinnon, personal communication, November 30, 2021). Yet, instead of promoting the end of overproduction and consumption, we as a society continue to support those with careers specifically designed to continue this practice that is killing our Earth. This may be because it doesn’t affect us today, so why should we care who it affects, if it won’t be us? Heilbroner argues that economist Adam Smith would say that even a man of humanity would continue about his or pleasure so long as whatever plagues the world is in the distance, not at his door. This idea applies to the situation we see with influencers and the public’s promotion of them today.

Even if overconsumption doesn’t affect *our* lives on Earth today, there is still a major ethical dilemma with not only being an influencer, but also supporting them. Most influencers do

not take on this role as a career with ill intent, as they're just regular people. But the truth is that every video they put out, and every company they choose to promote must be thought out in an ethical sense because of the sheer amount of power they now hold over the public. There are many influencers who take on this role and do think and act ethically and morally online. However, there are plenty of them who don't. This is a major issue with the idea of influencer culture, as it allows the public to be swayed and controlled by people who may not act responsibly, morally, or ethically with that amount of control.

While influencers do hold a great deal of power over the public, it is also the public's responsibility to consume this media ethically. Who we as a society choose to watch and support directly affects who gets to hold the power of an influencer. When an influencer, that a person decides is trustworthy, promotes a certain company or product, that person is likely to then support said company or buy said product. A study by the Pew Research center reports that, “54% of 18- to 29-year-old social media users say influencers impact their purchasing decisions a lot or a little.” (Faverio & Anderson 2022).

This will directly affect what companies and products are being pushed over the internet, and therefore what companies and products are being supported and bought. If done ethically, this could be a very positive way to change the ways in which our economies work. However with the current trends of influencer culture leading to severe over-consumption by the public, I fear that this may not be the case. If we buy what they're selling, we keep these influencers in control, these companies in power, and the world continues to over produce and we continue to over consume. Future generations will look back on this and wish that we had consumed our media and our products more ethically.

Citations

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