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For this essay I will be discussing consumerism's impact on people's idea of self, deepening my understanding of the connection between consumerism and the philosophical theory of Existentialism. While I am not claiming there to be a direct link between these two aspects of society, I am however interested in the cycle of manipulation of one over the other. To begin my research, I will be delving deeper into what consumerism and existentialism are separately. From here, I will begin to piece the ideas I learn into a creative practice.

A piece of work that first highlighted this cycle between these two aspects of society is the 2008 film: *WALL-E*. A key theme in this film is how the humans of the story are constantly blinded by new products through advanced technology, which is presented in a way that makes them feel as though the choices they make are their decision. The bleak reality being that it is not their decision at all, the decision is manipulated through constant marketing. The story is told from the perspective of a robot going against its programmed function (*WALL-E*, 2008). From this essay and inspiration, I plan to create a short film that highlights my findings through story and symbolism.

At its core, consumerism is just the buying of products. However, it is clear to see that it has evolved far beyond this simplicity. Consumer society can have strong effects on the mental state of individuals. *Cuing Consumerism: Situational Materialism Undermines Personal and Social Well-Being*, is an article that explores a series of experiments conducted to ascertain the effect of a materialistic or consumer-based lifestyle. One of the experiments assigned the volunteers into two groups which were followed by each group being presented with two different types of imagery. One group was shown images of luxury items and the other were shown images of more natural scenery. After this, the two groups then answered a questionnaire about life, social interaction, or self-image. The group exposed to the more materialistic imagery showed a much higher case of low self-esteem compared to the other group. In summary, those who live a more consumer-based lifestyle and depend on material items for their well-being and image, tend to be less happy than those who do not (Bauer, 2012). The author reinforces this point in their findings, "the materialistic mindset orients the individual to competitive concerns about relative standing, producing corresponding feelings of anxiety and dissatisfaction" (Bauer, 2012). Further research from the article *Revenge, Existential Choice, and Addictive Consumption*, claims that the cycle of consumption followed by depression is an existential choice, made by those seeking to find their identity. Using the consumer society as a means to find ways that best represent who they are as an individual, whether that is through clothing or luxury items (Elliott, 1996, p.753). My interpretation of my research is that people can feel trapped by this cycle of figuring out who they are and not finding it. This then fuelling their desire or need to keep buying products to try and express who they think they are, and when this fails it is on to the next item(s).

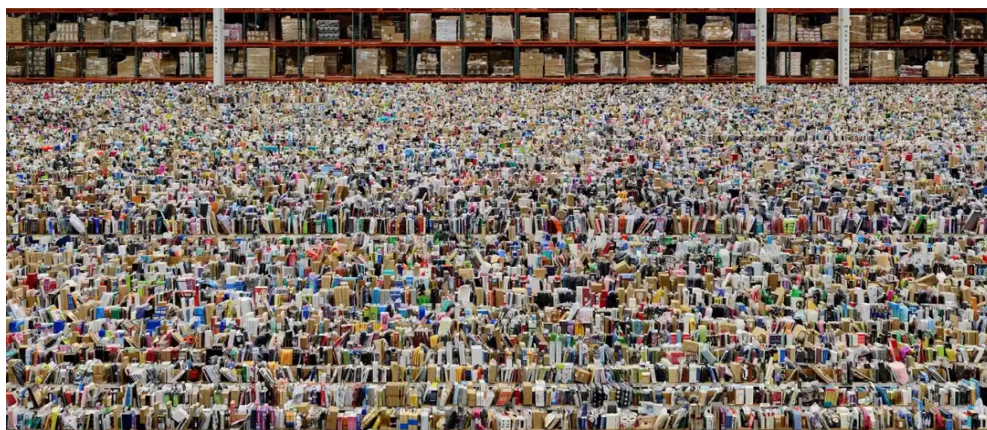
Existentialism can be viewed in several ways and many philosophers have opinions that differ from one another. An article *Existentialism*, written based on existentialist, Nicola Abbagnano, explains that there is a form of existentialism where people are struggling to identify who they are as an individual due to the continuously growing possibilities on how to achieve this. A strong desire to stand out from a collective and have total freedom to express themselves in as true a way as possible is the driving force behind this existential crisis (Abbagnano, 2020).

Moreover, Andrew (2016) writes in her article *The Existential Crisis*, that an existential crisis can occur for many reasons and usually each reason is a product of the age of the individual. Typically, younger people tend to have more identity based existential crisis whereas older people tend to have anxiety regarding achievements or lack thereof. The same article also explains that when ascertaining the extent of the crisis “There are two main domains to consider when measuring the degree of an existential crisis: relationships and careers” (Andrew, 2016, p. 104).

With regards to my creative practice, the main point I have taken from my research into existentialism is the idea of identity causing a build-up of anxiety that leads to an emotional response revolving around the question of ‘Who am I’.

From my research so far, I have decided to create a short film based on a pet goldfish having an existential crisis. The irony of this goldfish being physically trapped in its fishbowl but is more concerned with the internal conflict of feeling trapped through lack of identity. The fishbowl symbolising the idea of consumerism and more specifically, advertisement, both of which have a cage quality in a sense that they can narrow your outlook on the world around you. Limiting your perspective which can lead to questioning your identity. The goldfish then symbolising those who are part of this cycle, due to the limited view they are confined to only expressing themselves through materialistic avenues instead of other means.

While reflecting on my work I began to look at other artists who have explored the theme of individuals and consumerism. Andreas Gursky, a photographer who is described by Ralph Rugoff Director of the Hayward Gallery, as being a capturer of a capitalist world (Rugoff, 2018). Gursky’s *Amazon* image was most striking to me:



(Gursky, 2016)

Newsagent The Guardian made an online article about this photograph and the article sums up the purpose of the image beautifully:

What Gursky gets at are the unyielding, mindlessly cruel forces of global capitalism. Despite the promise of individualism through consumerism, people are lost in the crowd, in a world of excess and waste.

(Sherwin, 2018)

With regards to my work, I understand the impact of an image. The theme of this essay can be summed up with a single photograph, but I want to delve deeper and give it life. I want to create something that represents the impact that the issues discussed in my research can have on people.

To bring this idea to life I plan to have a series of original images which will then be put into stop-motion animation, with an original voice-over, written by me and then pieced with royalty-free music.

The idea of the story is an upper-class family consisting of a husband, wife, and two kids. While at dinner a narration will begin in a male voice which monologues about how unfulfilled he feels in life. He feels that none of the decisions in life were made by him and therefore he hates how his life has turned out. The monologue continues as the image pans in gradually until the focus is on the family's pet goldfish. The twist is that the entire monologue is from the Goldfish and it's been his life.

An artist whose work I have looked at is illustrator, Steve Cutts. Cutts' created the animation *MAN* (2012) which depicts a person's evolution from naturalist to capitalist, focusing on the destruction he ensues along the way. These are two stills from the animation:



(Cutts, 2012)

This is the style of animation I want to achieve in my piece. However, I cannot create a piece to this high standard, therefore I will achieve my vision through less movement in the imagery, requiring fewer frames per second.

In conclusion, I had a concept but no details. The research conducted has given shape to my idea, creating a foundation to build from. Understanding the impact on mental health through a materialistic lifestyle has been the main theme behind my work. So now having a better understanding of this gave me a clear vision for the character's dilemma in my short film, which as a result of my research, is not fuelled through bias

opinion but from academic research on experiments conducted to ascertain the information I need.

Creative decisions that have come from my research are the story, the characters, the environment, and the style of filmmaking I want to experiment with which is stop-motion animation.

Filmmaking can be subjective, creating a story based on bias opinion. My main takeaway from this practice is the importance of researching topics that concern you. Going forward as a creative practitioner, I have accepted that academic research is part of the creative process, I now appreciate the impact research can have on creative work and decisions. Going forward, any project I wish to start, I will be sure to allocate sufficient time to research the area of concern the piece may be based on, to ensure that my work is relevant, correct and features perspective on the subject from multiple angles, not just my own. Having deeper levels of understanding can help create more interesting stories with depth and meaning, instead of making art based on a single point of view that could potentially miss a lot of rich detail that could enhance the story and artwork.

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