

What do we mean when we talk about ‘pleasing ourselves’?

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outward appearance grows in importance to become one such cue.

Gen Zers are also likely to fall into the pitfall of first impressions. As internet natives, this generation has been exposed to social media since childhood, and has gotten used to quick access to ever-changing information. Furthermore, they generally pursue greater independence and self-expression, and present themselves on social media anytime, anywhere. Driven by these environmental developments and their values, they yearn for efficiency and freedom, and rely more on “at-first-sight attraction” for pleasure-based consumption.

01

“Beauty is Justice.”

There is a slogan that we often hear when it comes to the pleasure economy: “Beauty is Justice.” Gen Zers prefer to buy appealingly packaged products or goods that can make them look good. This desire has fuelled demand across a range of industries related to appearance,

including cosmetics, medical cosmetology, plastic surgery, and fitness. So, why is Gen Z so obsessed with appearance?

When people make decisions, they are influenced by two systems: intuitive thinking and rational thinking. More often than not, people tend to rely on their intuitive thinking system and base their decisions on a few simple cues in the absence of information. In such cases,

02

What are the pitfalls of the pleasure economy?

There are three major pitfalls of hedonic consumption.

First, hedonic consumption is consumerism in disguise. As the hedonic treadmill theory suggests, hedonic activities do not lead to long-term happiness.

Instead, since people's expectations and desires for consumer goods rise in tandem with their well-being, happiness slinks back to its baseline after a period of time. Businesses capitalise on people's desire for instant gratification, and stimulate consumption by hyping the short-lived pleasure derived from the purchase of a product. Consequently, hedonic purchases may become a pitfall of consumerism, one that triggers excessive or indulgent consumption. Consumers may end up fulfilling the illusions hyped by merchants, but leave themselves with insatiable vanities and huge credit card debts.

Second, people who focus on appearance tend to lose themselves in the pursuit of self-gratification, resulting in anxiety about their looks. This anxiety can drive people to create a standardised self that is recognised by the public. Psychological studies have found that this inauthentic self, shaped by the outside world, may lead to emotional exhaustion, depression, diminished self-esteem and persistent loneliness. In interpersonal relationships, it may result in a decline in affection and trust as well as decreased satisfaction with relationships.

The last pitfall is addictive consumption. Businesses persistently reinforce consumers' addictive behaviour by analysing user activity via data and deploying data-powered marketing. Psychologists and neuroscientists believe that for individuals, addictive consumption is about wanting the products, rather than needing or liking them.

03

Businesses should be inclusive to accommodate consumers' self-fulfilment needs

How can businesses create a healthy market environment while pursuing profits?

First, product design, packaging and marketing need to meet both the hedonistic needs of consumers and their need for a sense of meaning.

There are two kinds of happiness: hedonic and eudaimonic happiness. Eudaimonic happiness refers to meaningfulness. Recent US consumer psychology research suggests that when a product meets both of these needs, consumers' trust in, and enthusiasm for, that product will be significantly increased. Thus, companies should not only focus on consumers' hedonistic needs, but also convey a sense of pur-

pose through their products. Oat milk, for example, has become increasingly popular amongst young people as it caters to their quest for a vegetarian and eco-friendly lifestyle.

Second, instead of merely focusing on creating bandwagons, companies should embrace inclusiveness and diversity.

Human beings have two basic needs: a sense of belongingness and a need for uniqueness. When consumers make purchases, they want to feel the same as, but different than, others. Studies have found that while companies seek to create trends, products that make consumers feel unique and different will be comparatively more popular. Chinese drink-maker Wong Lo Kat, for example, launched a customised service during Chinese New Year, which allowed consumers to tailor their packaging by replacing the word 'Wong' with their own surname.





Meanwhile, a product should be inclusive. One example is Chinese lingerie brand NEIWAI's 'No Body is Nobody' campaign, which aroused an enthusiastic response and resonated with consumers. Victoria's Secret had previously been boycotted by consumers over its objectification of women and its focus on just one type of figure. Now, the brand has started using plus-size models, and hired seven elite women to endorse its products.

Finally, businesses need to be socially responsible and ethical. Fostering addictive consumption does provide short-term benefits for businesses, however, it is risky for their long-term sustainability. As consumers nowadays have become more rational, they may boycott brands who deliberately trigger addictive consumption behaviour. Therefore, in addition to commercial marketing, businesses should also take into account their long-term social marketing goals instead of solely focusing on short-term ones. Throughout history, successful companies have avoided exploiting consumers and instead have had long-term visions and a sense of social responsibility.

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Pleasing yourself means staying true to yourself

“ I hope we are free to be ourselves, and achieve true happiness by pleasing our true selves instead of defining ourselves by consumption. ”

So, how can Gen Z truly derive pleasure from consumption?

Consumers should ask themselves one question before making a purchase: “Is it, I shop, therefore I am, or I am, therefore I shop?” In other words, are your consumption needs defined by businesses, society and others, or by your true self? Don't buy things to please businesses instead of pleasing yourself. Instead, spend money on relatively durable consumer goods and per-

sonal development courses, or engage in brand new experiences to broaden your horizons and pursue self-fulfilment and development.

Second, beauty is not everything.

Consumers should resist the impulse to judge others by their appearances, and find more useful information to form accurate judgments. At the same time, consumers must learn to accept themselves as they are. Recently, people have redefined beautiful as be-you-tiful. Psychological studies have revealed that an authentic self is one of the best predictors of happiness, and the key step toward being your authentic self is to accept yourself as you are.

Finally, get rid of addictive consumption.

Self-discipline is freedom. Absolute freedom does not mean that you can do whatever you want, but you can choose not to do things you don't want to do. If human beings allow their desires to dictate their behaviour, they are not making free choices, but are subject to their desires. Therefore, we need to rethink what we want to do with our lives, identify our priorities in life and work on them. Stop addictive consumption, and spend your limited time pursuing personal growth and real freedom.

As one of my favourite songs by Colbie Caillat goes: “Take your make-up off, let your hair down, take a breath, look into the mirror at yourself, don't you like you?” I hope we are free to be ourselves, and achieve true happiness by pleasing our true selves instead of defining ourselves by consumption.