

Nihilism and Modern Consumerism: A Philosophical Exploration of the Search for Meaning

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Abstract: This study explores the relationship between nihilism and modern consumption concepts, analyzes the manifestation of nihilism as a philosophical viewpoint in modern society, and its impact on individuals' search for meaning. By examining the origins, representative thinkers, and modern theories of nihilism, this article further reveals how nihilism affects modern consumer culture, leading individuals to feel lonely and alienated and lose meaning in their consumption behavior. The study also discusses philosophical strategies to address nihilism, proposing ways to make modern consumer behavior more meaningful and valuable through creating meaning, accepting nothingness, and strengthening community relationships. Finally, this study emphasizes the importance of nihilism in understanding modern consumer culture and calls for further philosophical exploration of it.

Keywords: Nihilism; Modern consumer concepts; Philosophical exploration; Loss of meaning; Existentialism

Online publication: August 23, 2024

1. Introduction

Nihilism is a philosophical view that holds that life and the universe are inherently meaningless. Nihilism occupies an important place in the history of philosophy, especially in modern and postmodern philosophy ^[1]. With the advances of science in the 19th century, traditional religious beliefs were challenged and people began to question how religion explained the world. The Industrial Revolution brought rapid economic and social change, disrupting traditional ways of life and social structures, and posing new uncertainties to people. These historical backgrounds have driven the rise and development of nihilism in present society. This article considers the sign of nihilism in the concept of the modern consumer and its effect on the meaning of the people. This paper aims to clarify through investigation the philosophical perspective of nihilism and its influences on the concept of the modern consumer.

2. The basic concept of nihilism

The root and conception of nihilism come from the Latin word “nihil”, which suggests “nothing.” Within the history of philosophy, nihilism has been created from an old skepticism to modern and postmodern philosophy ^[2]. With the collapse of religious beliefs and traditional value systems, nihilism steadily got to be a major philosophical drift. Friedrich Nietzsche was the driving scholar of nihilism, who made the articulation that “God is dead” and criticized the breakdown of conventional values ^[3]. The industrial transformation and scientific advance further promoted the spread of this thought, and the headway of art also provided a means of expressing nihilism. Nietzsche suggested that the passing of God symbolized the collapse of conventional religious and ethical systems, in which individuals might feel lost and empty in the face of a void of values. Nietzsche considered that this state was an inevitable step.

Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre created the concept of nihilism, investigating the association between being and nothingness ^[4]. Heidegger emphasized in “Being and Time” that nothingness is the center of presence and investigated the state of the person’s presence within the confront of nothingness. Sartre emphasized the opportunity of choice and obligation of people, proposing that when confronted with the challenge of nothingness, people should react by making new meanings.

3. The modern theory of nihilism

3.1. Nietzsche’s nihilism

Friedrich Nietzsche was one of the central figures of nihilism, who profoundly criticized the conventional values of the West. Nietzsche indicated that with the growth of science and the advancement of realism, the religious beliefs and moral framework of Western culture slowly collapsed, driving the attestation that “God is dead.” Nietzsche’s “God is dead” does not mean theological passing but refers to the crumbling of conventional values and meanings ^[5]. Under this circumstance, society might not give a binding together meaning and reason through religion or conventional profound quality, leading to a broad emergency of nihilism.

To reply to this problem, Nietzsche developed the concept of “Übermensch”. The “Superman” is a perfect human being, competent in rising above conventional esteem frameworks and building up new, independent values through his imagination and will. Nietzsche argued that only the individual’s transcendence and the creation of innovative values seem to overcome the emergency of meaning caused by nihilism. The “Superman” is not only the reply to nihilism but also the trust for the future long-term development of humanity ^[6]. It advocates a positive nihilism, empowering individuals to effectively make their claim meaning within the confront of nothingness, instead of depending on outside specialists or conventions.

3.2. Nihilism in existentialism

Existentialism is one of the foremost vital philosophical schools of the 20th century that investigates existentialism in profundity. Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre are two key figures in existentialism whose thoughts develop the understanding of skepticism. Heidegger investigates the existential state of existentialism in his work “Being and Time.” He accepts that nothingness is the central address of human presence. Heidegger emphasizes that the presence of the person (Dasein) continuously goes before nothingness ^[7]. Human presence unavoidably faces passing, impermanence, and the limits of life, which is the root of existentialism. Heidegger emphasizes that when faced with nothingness, individuals must courageously accept this truth and rethink the meaning of their own existence on this basis. This attitude towards nothingness is not only a profound reflection on the nature of life but also a true realization of self-existence. Sartre’s existentialism also links nihilism with freedom and responsibility. He proposes that individual freedom of choice is the only way to counteract

nothingness. Sartre believed that the world itself has no intrinsic meaning and that all meaning must be created by individuals through free choice. Faced with nothingness, individuals have both freedom and a heavy responsibility.

3.3. Postmodern nihilism

Postmodernism is a reactionary movement against modernism, one of its fundamental elements is a general skepticism about truth and meaning. Postmodernists believe that absolute truth and objective meaning do not exist and that all truth and meaning are relative and constructed. Jean François Lyotard's concept of the "collapse of metanarratives" suggests that in postmodern society, traditional grand narratives have lost their power, and people no longer believe in a unified historical process or ultimate meaning^[8]. This skepticism toward metanarratives makes postmodern society more vulnerable to the dilemma of nihilism. Jean Baudrillard further explores symbols and virtual realities in consumer society. He believes that consumer behavior in modern society is increasingly moving away from its true meaning and becoming an exchange of symbols. According to Baudrillard, consumer goods are no longer intended to satisfy real needs but to convey a social status or a specific identity^[9]. This symbolic consumer behavior has led to the rise of "simulation", in which the relationship between symbol and reality is completely broken, and reality itself becomes irrelevant, leaving only the play of symbols. With the development of simulacra, people in modern society gradually lose contact with the real world and fall into the abyss of nihilism.

In general, nihilism plays an important role in modern philosophy, especially in the face of the collapse of traditional value systems and the complexity of modern philosophy. Nietzsche expressed his breakdown of traditional values through his assertion that "God is dead" and proposed the concept of the superman, arguing that individuals overcome the dilemma of nihilism through self-creation. Existentialist thinkers such as Heidegger and Sartre further explored the relationship between nihilism and individual existence, emphasizing the importance of free choice and responsibility in the face of nihilism. Postmodernism, by addressing truth and meaning, has uncovered the gap between symbol and reality in modern consumer society, strengthening the impact of nihilism^[10]. Generally, the present theory of nihilism offers a profound philosophical point of view for people to understand the loss of meaning and the situations of the people in current society, and motivates people to think approximately how to rediscover meaning in this active age of instability and imagery.

4. The influence of nihilism on modern consumer concepts

In an advanced society, consumer behavior has become a vital way for people to look for meaning and character acknowledgment. However, with the improvement of consumerism, this way of accomplishing fulfillment through utilization regularly brings a sense of transitory mental meaning and consolation instead of enduring joy. Advertising and media constantly transmit messages to the public, shaping a buyer culture that empowers individuals to fill their inward vacancy by obtaining products. The improvement of virtual reality innovation advances compound this marvel. Individuals are dependent on the appearance and images in virtual space, steadily losing the capacity to think profoundly and reflect on the genuine world. The rise of brief video stages, such as TikTok, has given rise to the wonder of "fun entertainment."

Each day, individuals are overwhelmed with divided data, content missing in substances, and are just a means of entertainment that always stimulates the senses. This phenomenon makes it progressively troublesome for individuals to mull over profoundly and introspect in their day-by-day lives, instead depending more on instant sensory stimulation to escape the void of reality^[11]. The notoriety of this culture has made society more disturbed, and the misfortune of collective awareness has exacerbated the spread of nihilism.

At the level of one's life, modern consumer society has uncovered people to uncommon depression and estrangement. Individuals endeavor to discover self-esteem and a sense of having a place by obtaining products and getting a charge out of administrations, but this effort leads to a loss of more profound meaning. Driven by consumerism, material acquisition is seen as a sign of victory and satisfaction. However, when material satisfaction declines, individuals must continually seek for higher consumption standards and more material products. This endless search continuously results in the person feeling tired and empty mentally, and may inevitably sink into a profound sense of emptiness, making it troublesome to discover genuine fulfillment. The values of modern consumer culture are progressively different and relative, driving the progressive crumbling of conventional ethical benchmarks. In such an environment, ethical skepticism started to spread in society. Ethical nihilists accept that there are no outright ethical measures to direct behavior and that all judgments of esteem are subjective and relative. This point is particularly apparent in consumer societies, where people frequently need clear ethical rules when making consumer choices and depend on their quick desires and inspirations.

5. Philosophical strategies for dealing with nihilism

Nietzsche's theory of the superman offers a positive procedure to combat nihilism. Nietzsche advocates for people to form modern esteem frameworks through autonomous and inventive considering, in arrange to overcome the emptiness brought about by consumerism. The superman is not only a philosophical concept but also a practical guide that encourages people to effectively make themselves possess meaning by confronting the emptiness and instability of present-day society, rather than blindly following external consumer culture and material temptations. Sartre's existentialism further reinforces this view, bringing new meanings to life and consumer behavior through free choice, permitting people to discover a way out of the challenges of skepticism and accomplish self-transcendence in practice.

Confronted with the challenge of nothingness, Heidegger's philosophy proposes a gallant demeanor of tolerating the limits of presence and looking for innovative meanings on this basis. Heidegger suggested that nothingness is not a negative state but rather the basic characteristics of human presence. By confronting the void, individuals can find their meaning in their finite lives, rather than being influenced by external consumerism. Camus' philosophy of the absurd advocates for joy within the foolish, emphasizing that individuals ought to appreciate the present involvement of utilization when confronted with the ridiculousness of life, instead of getting misplaced within the short-lived fulfillment brought by consumerism^[12]. Camus accepted that the crazy is not to be dreaded, the key lies in how people discover delight and meaning in life in this state.

6. Conclusion

The impact of nihilism on contemporary consumerism is broad and its significant effect is evident in social culture, individual's life, moral and ethical quality. Nihilism gives us a unique perspective to understand modern consumer culture, uncovering the vacancy and predicaments made by consumerism. However, this does not mean that people are unable to confront the challenges posed by nihilism. By making meaning, accepting nothingness, and finding new spiritual pillars through community and spiritual activities, people can discover more lasting meaning and value in an age of uncertainty. Future research should further explore strategies to combat nihilism, helping individuals find true happiness and satisfaction in complex modern society.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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