

SUMMARY

AFFLUENZA

HOW OVER CONSUMPTION IS KILLING US-AND HOW TO FIGHT BACK

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Summary of «Affluenza: How Overconsumption Is Killing Us--and How to Fight Back» by John de Graaf and David Wann

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Part self-help guide and part social commentary, this witty expose takes a hard look at America's obsession with consumerism, how it's ruining our lives, and how we can eradicate this toxic behavior in ourselves.

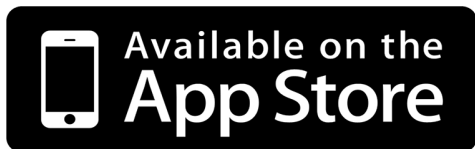


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Introduction

Has your grandmother ever remarked about how “lazy” your generation is? Have you ever sat through an older person’s rant about labor saving devices and why we don’t need them, or perhaps a lecture about how hard things were “back in my day?” Each of these arguments are common and, as Affluenza notes, they’re built on the assumption that technological advances will shorten our work days, give us more time, and lighten our load of responsibilities, which in turn will make our lives happier and easier. As a matter of fact, Affluenza remarks that in 1965, the United States Senate theorized that our work weeks would probably only be about 14 hours long by the year 2000. (We all know that didn’t happen!)

Instead, as we know all too well, our work weeks have evolved to become longer and more detrimental to our mental health because— thanks to the technological advances of cellphones and apps that keep our work emails at our fingertips 24/7—we work more than ever and we’re more stressed than ever. And we attempt to alleviate that stress through buying more stuff as if this will bring us happiness. Affluenza examines this addiction through exploring a few key issues in detail. These issues cover such broad topics as: the reasons we’re compelled to buy and consume (even to the point of excess); overconsumption’s detrimental impact on mental and emotional health; overconsumption’s detrimental impact on our environmental and moral, religious, and philosophical attitudes toward overconsumption through the ages, in addition to providing us with practical steps for fighting affluenza on both a personal and national scale.

Overcompensation

Affluenza charts our obsession with overconsumption by analyzing the Industrial Age's impact on our spending habits. Inviting us to imagine how quickly different periods of time would pass if the history of Earth were to be compressed into a scant seven days, the authors theorize that the development of agriculture could be summarized in two seconds, while the Industrial Age— the period of time which encapsulates the past 200 years— would pass by in one one hundredth of a second. This, they suggest, is because the world has sped up so much in the past 200 years and our pressure to consume material goods has increased in response.

Observing that the Industrial Revolution dramatically increased our productivity by enabling us to work faster, employ a smaller work force, and produce more at lower costs than people were ever able to do before, the authors go on to note that because of this, present-day consumers have actually consumed more resources than all people in Pre-Industrial human history put together. So, what are we consuming? Where does all our money go? Well, according to de Graaf and Wann, modern day Americans spend 71% of their \$15 trillion economy on consumer goods of all sorts.

And not only have we not created shorter work weeks and higher levels of happiness, de Graaf and Wann observe that, according to economic studies, the United States actually reached a “happiness plateau” in 1957. This means that there was once a certain point in our society in which increased consumerism might have made us happier. At that point, labor saving devices and pleasurable new gadgets might have actively contributed to shortening our workdays and bringing us more joy, but we've now passed that stage. Our ability to be satisfied by a certain level of consumerism has peaked and yet we continue to engage in futile attempts at boosting our happiness levels by the purchase of more goods.

The authors theorize that this is due to more and more Americans becoming ensnared in the trap of believing that they can facilitate joy through the purchase of goods. Although in reality, engaging in exercise or meaningful time with our family and friends would bring us more genuine happiness, many Americans fail to realize this. This is partly because we're all so exhausted from the daily pressures of

our jobs that we turn to quick and automatic fixes, like the temporary joy of buying something we want, rather than investing more of ourselves and our energy in relationships. Inviting readers to consider how many times the end of our day is punctuated by exhaustion, the authors correctly assume that most of us would prefer to simply flop on the sofa in front of the television rather than engaging with real relationships.

This in turn can often generate a cycle of mindless consumerism. As we turn off our brains and allow ourselves to get lost in the alternate realities of television programs, our shows are interrupted by commercials, all of which are enticing us to buy more, better, or newer things. And whether we consider ourselves to be immune to propaganda or not, the truth is that we're often far more susceptible than we think. So, in the end, it doesn't matter if we realize it or not; the pressure to consume is still creeping into our thoughts and affecting us, even when we're trying to turn off our brains.

The combination of consumerism and a predilection for thoughtless relaxation can be toxic to our relationships as well. And because we often choose the comfort of relaxation over building genuine connections with others, this can generate a cycle of futilely attempting to spark our failing relationships through materialism, and this can be seen through a variety of examples such as parents who buy their children expensive gifts to "make up" for failing to spend time with them. Likewise, we've all probably met someone who attempts to facilitate relationships by cultivating a certain "brand" or aesthetic; if they look the part of the popular, fun, or trendy person, the assumption is that people will be drawn to them.

However, both of these examples are only shallow facsimiles of real identities and connections with others and the problems presented here could be solved by refusing to play the part offered to us by a consumerist culture. When we come to believe that the consumption of material goods can fix our problems or heal our failing relationships, we're not creating a better life for ourselves. Rather, we're only ensnaring ourselves more thoroughly in the web of consumerism.

Environmental Impact

We all know saving the environment is important, but how often do we incorporate that knowledge into our purchasing decisions? Although we may be conscious of turning off the lights in our homes to reduce electricity or conserving our usage of water, do we pause to think about the natural resources that are plundered to create the gadgets we enjoy? Do we ever think about the fact that when we buy things we don't need, we're generating unnecessary waste that contributes to landfills and to the depletion of Earth's already limited resources? What about the environmental impact of the mass production demanded by overconsumption? Chances are, when we buy the newest, flashiest electronic gadget, we don't think about the copper that was mined to create it. But *Affluenza* reminds us that in just twenty-four years, we've mined over half of the Earth's copper to satisfy our ever-increasing demands.

But so what? In the case of issues that don't directly affect us, it's often easy to lapse into ambivalence and the authors target this possibility by providing readers with such scathing practical examples as the fact that excessive copper mining lead to the collapse of one prominent copper mine in Salt Lake City. They also acknowledge that our demand for oil has also lead to over-mining, as illustrated by the case of the Deepwater Horizon Mine. Over one mile of this mine ran into the ocean and when overmining caused it to explode, the explosion caused 4.9 million gallons of oil to pour into our oceans for a period of 87 days. This has catastrophic effects for our marine life, our oceans, and the very ecosystem on which we depend. In the course of presenting us with these harsh realities, de Graaf and Wann challenge us to consider if overconsumption is worth these consequences.

Inequality

The concept of financial inequality is never far from consumerism; even as we flock en masse to holiday sales like Black Friday (surely the pinnacle of overconsumption), charitable toy drives remind us to buy more for children in need. And while providing underprivileged children with toys is a wonderful and heartwarming thing, how often do we consider the impact of our materialism outside the holiday season? Because although we may forget it, impoverished people exist all year round and all over the world, and they are irrevocably affected by our demands for mass production.

Whether it's the factory workers who labor in developing countries like Bangladesh—where our labor is often outsourced—or impoverished families in the US who internalize lifestyles of excess wealth as the standard for their aspirations, our societal obsession with affluence affects everyone negatively. And while it's often easy to imagine that extreme poverty exists only in developing countries far away from our own, the authors remind us that the social inequalities which create horrific labor conditions in countries like Bangladesh are also prominent in the US. Any time we espouse the worldview that one life is more important than another due to socioeconomic factors, we invite prejudice and abuse, and this premise is readily apparent in the example of working conditions in one part of Louisiana.

Primarily a manufacturing area, with factories existing as the town's primary industry, this area has been nicknamed "Cancer Alley" due to the excessive prevalence of carcinogens in the town's air and water. And because this area is populated almost exclusively by working class factory employees, their lives are not considered valuable enough to warrant a significant modification to the town's health and safety policies. Despite the fact that they keep the factories running and literally give their lives so that others are enabled to consume more, their lives are not deemed worthy of safe living and working conditions. This, Affluenza posits, is a prime example of the true toll of overconsumption, for it clearly illustrates how our obsession with material things leads us to disregard the lives of others.

De Graaf and Wann also observe that statistics support this assumption because, out of twenty-two leading industrial nations in the world, the United States is ranked last in income equality. In light of this, they argue that our key take-away from this chapter should be the need to give a little more thought to how our consumerism impacts that inequality.

Overconsumption is Human Nature

Acknowledging that this is one of the most frequently used excuses in defense of overconsumption, Affluenza quickly refutes the idea that our obsession with consumerism is unavoidable. Citing examples from different cultures and different time periods ranging from remote tribes in modern day to cave dwellers in the Stone Age, the authors illustrate that overconsumption only exists as a facet of industrialization's pressure for people to constantly produce and consume goods.

Citing examples from both ancient Greek philosophers and religious figures like Jesus, the authors assert that advocating against overconsumption is both timeless and universal. In fact, many well respected philosophers and sacred texts have argued that human beings should pursue a simpler way of life might, encourage each other to be satisfied with what we have, and re-direct our energies toward helping and connecting with others. Although greed might be a part of human nature, succumbing to it is not inevitable and does not have to be indulged.

Overconsumption is Part of the System

If you've ever watched a single television commercial or seen an advertisement on the highway, you already know that. Everywhere we go, whether we're in real life or scrolling through social media, everyone is trying to convince us that what we have is not enough. You need to buy that product, eat that thing, wear those clothes to become the best and happiest version of yourself. And as if these pressures to buy weren't enough, many companies deliberately downgrade the quality of their products with the express intent to force us to buy a new one as soon as it stops working. (If you've ever owned an iPhone, you've experienced this firsthand!)

But that trap isn't limited to function. As we know all too well, often a perfectly useful product is revamped and marketed with a brand new style, tempting us to abandon the functional device we already have in favor of one that simply looks cooler. Acknowledging that this trend originated after the Great Depression and World War Two, the authors invite us to remember that companies do this with everything from cars to razors to cell phones and it's part of a calculated trap.

It also has a heavy impact on our finances. Because as our pressure to consume grows, so does our need for more money. The desire to keep up with everyone else—or even with our own ideal of what we think we should have—often leads us to taking out loans we don't need or accruing debt through credit cards. Because these offer us the opportunity to spend now and think later, the authors point out that overconsumption isn't just hurting our relationships, environment, and mental health— it's decreasing our ability to make sound financial decisions and it's skyrocketing our debt.

We're Very Sensitive to Marketing

Affluenza also observes that even our children's homework can be littered with advertisements. After all, who hasn't seen a math problem along the lines of "If Joe has 30 Oreos™...?" and suddenly started craving cookies? These types of advertising strategies are more pervasive than we think and their presence in spheres that invite our trust—like schools and research organizations—clearly demonstrate their predatory nature.

By inserting consumerist hints in safe spaces where we're inclined to accept information, these advertisers encourage thoughtless consumerism, leading us to accept organizations like "The American Council on Science and Health" and "The Heartland Institute" as reputable sources when, in fact, they exist as funding front groups to promote the interests of chemical groups and fast food companies. This not only leads to severe misinformation, but it encourages us to accept advertisements as facts without thinking for ourselves.

You Can Get Out of the Trap!

Fortunately for us, Affluenza doesn't simply present us with a problem without offering solutions. Operating on the principle that knowledge is power, the authors invite us to take the information they've provided and use it as a tool for identifying the symptoms of affluenza in our own everyday lives. If we begin by practicing thoughtful consumption— that is, acknowledging that our purchases bring us temporary, not lasting happiness— we can break down the toxic thought patterns that encourage overconsumption.

Offering examples like that of the stockbroker who concluded that his wealthy co-workers weren't much happier than the people he saw in the ghetto, Affluenza reminds us that we can point to empirical proof that money doesn't buy happiness. In fact, as they illustrate through a 1995 study conducted by the Center for a New American Dream, this survey actually revealed that 86% of Americans experienced higher levels of happiness after they made an active effort at decreasing their consumption of material things.

The authors also suggest that looking for ways to make the most of what you already have, removing yourself from the temptation to buy, and thoughtfully considering the advertisements directed at you can help you break free from affluenza. Likewise, replacing your desire to consume with the active cultivation of healthy friendships, relationships, and new hobbies can increase your happiness and overall quality of life.

Affluenza is a Virus and we Need Immunization

Positing that our constant exposure to consumerist media is what metaphorically infects us with the affluenza virus, the authors suggest that positive media can help inoculate us. Anti-advertisements can be very beneficial because they lure us into watching by employing the same principles as an advertisement, only to provide us with a mentally stimulating plot twist as they're revealed to be the opposite of what we expected. These anti-ads can make us think, challenge our pre-conceived notions about consumerism, and— with the rise in children's exposure to media— they can be especially beneficial to kids. They also have an increasingly positive effect when they're used to combat harmful products like cigarettes.

Final Summary

The pressure to consume material goods in mass quantities is all around us and it's so unhealthy, it can be likened to a virus, as illustrated by the term "affluenza." America's obsession with overconsumption is harmful to the environment, to our relationships, and to our mental health, and it's important to fight this mindset through being satisfied with what we have, improving our relationships and physical health, and being aware of the toxicity of advertising. We can also immunize ourselves against this virus through increasing our self-awareness and engaging with the messages behind anti-ads which promote avoiding toxic products and consuming less.



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