

The doctrines of good and meaningful life – Investigating a good everyday life among Gen Z consumers

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Cite as:

Grénman Miia, Hakala Ulla, Mueller Barbara (2020), The doctrines of good and meaningful life – Investigating a good everyday life among Gen Z consumers. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 49th, (64100)

Paper from the 49th Annual EMAC Conference, Budapest, May 26-29, 2020.



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Abstract

Consumer research is increasingly trying to discover what constitutes a good life and what promotes human flourishing. Similarly, individuals themselves are concerned about fulfilling their optimal potential and achieving meaningful lives. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the doctrines of a good and meaningful life by investigating the perceptions of being well and a good everyday life among Gen Z consumers. To address this purpose, ten focus group interviews with 78 participants were conducted at a major university in Southern California in October 2019. The interviews were analyzed employing a qualitative content analysis. The findings were discussed in relation to Seligman's (2012) PERMA framework. According to the findings, a good everyday life embraces the elements of pleasure, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment emphasizing the eudaimonic pursuit of meaning and living well. The outcomes indicate interesting theoretical and managerial implications.

Keywords: Positive psychology, Transformative consumer research, Gen Z

Track: Consumer behavior

1. Introduction

What constitutes a good and meaningful life and promotes human flourishing? This is a question that researchers—delving into consumer well-being, happiness, and quality of life—are increasingly interested in (e.g., Joseph 2015; Huta & Waterman 2014; Mick et al. 2012; Mick & Schwartz 2012). Similarly, individuals themselves are more and more interested in and motivated by fulfilling their optimal potential and achieving pleasurable and meaningful lives (Joseph 2015; Baumeister et al. 2013). Today, consumers seek meaningful experiences that are rooted in authenticity and nature, allowing them also to become connected to the well-being of others and the entire ecosystem (Merriman 2015; Mick et al. 2012).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the doctrines of a good and meaningful life through two different theoretical standpoints of positive psychology and transformative consumer research. These standpoints offer different lenses through which the issue is interpreted: the first one discusses a good life in terms of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being; the second one adds to this view and provides an understanding of a good life in relation to consumers' attitudes, behaviors, and consumption habits. We investigate this concept among an emerging generation—Gen Z (born in the late 1990s)—by focusing on the adult consumers age between 18 to 24 years. To explore this purpose in greater detail, we investigate, in particular, the perceptions of being well and a good everyday life by seeking answers to the following research questions:

- (1) How do Gen Z adults interpret the notion of being “well”?*
- (2) How do Gen Z adults define a good everyday life?*

Gen Z is a consumer cohort that is said to be the “next big disruptor,” with unique values, beliefs, expectations, and behaviors. The generational shift from Millennials (born 1981–1996) to Gen Z (born 1997–2010) began to showcase in the early 2010s (although consensus has not yet been reached on the exact ending birth year). Gen Z was born into an era of technology and digitalization, mega-celebrities and pressures to look “Insta-worthy”, as well as social media and fake news, all of which have greatly influenced their worldview. In addition to being “diginatives”, their attitudes toward sustainability and environmental issues, in particular, differ from previous cohorts (Witt & Baird 2019).

They currently represent one-fourth of the global population and are forecast to become a highly influential consumer cohort in the future with significant spending power. In the U.S. alone, it is estimated that Gen Z has a direct spending power of between US\$29 to \$143

billion and an indirect spending power of US\$600 billion (Research and Markets 2019). And their impact only increases as they mature and become mainstream consumers. Yet to date, there is a considerable lack of academic research on this emerging, yet highly influential, consumer cohort.

The current global and regional challenges concerning social, economic, political, and environmental issues have raised new concerns, but also collective consciousness, about individual and collective well-being (Mick et al. 2012; Mick & Schwartz 2012; Ozanne et al. 2011). This can be witnessed in the growing awareness among younger and more educated consumers who acknowledge that their choices carry meaning, purpose, and impact beyond their own individual fulfillment (Mick et al. 2012; Witt & Baird 2019). For these reasons, it is important to greater insights into, and an understanding of this emerging generation: who they are, what they value in life, and how they see the world.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Positive psychology – Combining hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives on well-being

Well-being is a complex construct incorporating optimal human experience and function (e.g., Ryan & Deci 2001). From the beginning of “intellectual” history, there has been considerable debate regarding what defines “optimal experience” and what constitutes “good life” (Ryan & Deci 2001). Research on well-being has been strongly influenced by a variety of sciences, including different fields of psychology (Lambert et al. 2015). Currently, academics suggest that well-being refers to the balance of individual, subjective perceptions on a variety of positive and/or negative states, such as happiness, life satisfaction, inspiration, awareness, a sense of meaning, functioning, feeling carefree, and vital (Huta & Ryan 2010).

As a recent branch of psychology, positive psychology can be traced back to Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2000), who realized that the scope of psychology is not only about disease, weakness, and damage, but also strength, virtue, and conditions that lead to high levels of happiness and civic engagement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000). This perspective suggests that individuals should be conceptualized and understood such that they are capable of cultivating their inherent potential for developing positive character traits and virtues (Nafstad 2015).

Historical, philosophical, and epistemological discussions are at the root of positive psychology, an accepted scientific field of optimal human functioning. Conceptualizations of a good life and a life well-lived have encompassed two major philosophies: hedonism and

eudaimonism. Both represent ethical philosophical traditions that are often juxtaposed as opposing perspectives on well-being and happiness (Lambert et. al. 2015; Ryan & Deci 2001). Hedonism is defined as emphasizing the pursuit of happiness and pleasure, whereas Aristotelian eudaimonism emphasizes the actualization of human potential and the pursuit of a meaningful life (Waterman 2008; Peterson et al. 2005; Ryan & Deci 2001). These two perspectives have been debated by philosophers for over 2,000 years. Current research on well-being also addresses these perspectives, making the hedonic–eudaimonic distinction an important one in the context of positive psychology (Huta 2015).

Individuals are interested in, and motivated by, fulfilling their optimal potential and achieving a pleasurable and meaningful life (Joseph 2015; Baumeister et al. 2013). Today it is critical to focus on what makes life worth living and what makes people happy, how meaning and purpose in life is found, and how one’s maximum potential is achieved (e.g., Joseph 2015; Huta & Waterman 2014; Baumeister et al. 2013). The positive psychology movement has offered and encouraged discussions and analyses of means to enrich human life and enhance human functioning (Nafstad 2015). Additionally, it has provided a common identity to scholars and practitioners interested in human flourishing and well-being (Joseph 2015).

Seligman (2012), one of the founders of positive psychology, drew from the hedonic and eudaimonic traditions and first introduced the authentic happiness framework of well-being, which he later revised, and thereafter introduced a new understanding of happiness and well-being: well-being theory. As a substitute for happiness, the focus of positive psychology is well-being, the measure of well-being is flourishing, and the goal of positive psychology is to increase flourishing (Seligman 2012). Well-being theory, thus, consists of five elements: pleasure, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA). The inclusion of positive relationships in the PERMA framework suggests that “other people” actually matter. The element of accomplishment was included to address that individuals also pursue success, accomplishments, achievements, and mastery for accomplishment’s sake.

2.2. The emergence of transformative consumer research

What actually constitutes a good and meaningful life is an important issue also addressed in transformative consumer research (TCR). One of the key questions is: are material consumption and the quality of life interrelated, or is there a discrepancy between them? Current global and regional challenges concerning social, economic, political, and environmental issues have raised new concerns about individual and collective well-being (Mick et al. 2012; Mick & Schwartz 2012; Ozanne et al. 2011).

TCR emerged from the need to focus on issues meaningful and important to consumers themselves. This field examines various individual and societal problems, but also opportunities related to consumer behavior and consumption, such as sustainable consumption and preventive and healthy behaviors, with the goal of improving consumer well-being (e.g., Mick 2006). TCR can benefit and support not only consumers in particular, but also societies and the environment in general (Mick et al. 2012).

According to Mick et al. (2012), consumer well-being refers to a state of individual flourishing that involves health, happiness, and prosperity. It incorporates seven dimensions: emotional, social, economic, physical, spiritual, environmental, and political. TCR and positive psychology have the same goal: to help one reach one's full potential and achieve a good life. Early on in its development, it was even proposed that TCR be called "positive consumer research" (Mick 2006; cf. Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000) as both movements provide tools for individuals to utilize their positive energy toward a favorable transformation.

Today, TCR and positive psychology have become generally accepted movements that focus on well-being, happiness, and the search for a good life. The promotion of both individual and collective well-being does not, however, come without challenges. Accordingly, TCR seeks to improve well-being while maximizing social justice and fair allocation of opportunities and resources. In its current form, it approaches the eudaimonic tradition of living well, wherein individuals strive to be better by developing themselves through talents and virtues and then by using these virtues to serve the welfare of others (Peterson et al. 2005).

3. Data and Methods

Data was collected by conducting a series of focus group interviews at a major university in Southern California in October 2019. In total, ten focus group sessions were conducted with six to ten participants in each session (n=78). The sample represents Gen Z adult consumers with age ranging from 18 to 24 years. Two thirds of the participants were female (n = 53, 68%; male, n = 25, 32%). Ethnically the sample was very rich; the participants comprised of Whites, Hispanics, Blacks, and Asians.

The focus group interviews embraced several themes. Here, we focus is on a good everyday life by discussing and analyzing two questions: (1) *What does being "well" mean to you?* and (2) *How do you define a good everyday life?* The sessions can be considered extended focus groups; prior to discussing the various themes, participants were asked to respond to a questionnaire related to their own understanding and experience on the subject.

These preliminary questions were valuable ice-breakers in terms of getting into the theme and subsequently generating and guiding the discussions. All sessions lasted 90 minutes and were tape-recorded and transcribed in full.

The focus groups interviews were analyzed employing a qualitative content analysis, a directed approach. Analysis began with existing theory on the doctrines of a good and meaningful life and human flourishing (e.g., Huta & Waterman 2014; Ryan & Deci 2001) that guided the initial coding. Throughout the analysis, the existing theory and data were compared and discussed jointly by the investigators to validate and confirm the findings (see Belk et al. 2013). The analysis was divided into two steps. In Step 1, the initial concepts were first identified in the data and then grouped into categories, using simple descriptive phrases from the original responses (i.e. first order themes). In Step 2, axial coding was performed by grouping similar first order themes. In the following, the main findings are briefly presented.

4. Main Findings

When asking the participants “*What does being “well” mean to you?*” most answers fell into the broad categories of happiness and health (Table 1). The participants described the hedonic pursuit of happiness and pleasure in various terms including being happy, feeling stress free, being content and good state of mind, feeling good, enjoying life, and being positive. The eudaimonic pursuit of meaning and living well was described in several terms, namely, being healthy and in good health, being in balance, engaging in healthy behaviors, taking care of oneself, achieving goals, being successful, and having good social life.

Table 1. Interpretations of being “well”

Second order themes (n/% of all comments)	First order themes and description of themes (n = 135)
HEDONIC TRADITION – <i>Happiness and pleasure</i> (n = 55; 41%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being happy (19) • feeling stress free/nothing too stressful (11) • being content (8), being in good state of mind/sound mind (7), feeling good (4), enjoying life, being positive (4), being in positive mindset
EUDAIMONIC TRADITION – <i>Meaning and living well</i> (n = 53; 39%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being healthy (31), being in good health (3) • being in balance/homeostasis (4) • eating well/good (2), exercising (2), making healthy decisions and taking responsibility, taking care of oneself • achieving goals (2), being successful, being economically sound, have stability, have a purpose in life • have a sense of belonging, have a good social life, family and friends
OTHER (n = 27; 20%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being okay/average (14), have nothing bad going on in life/nothing major to complain about but nothing awesome (11), everything goes smoothly (2)

Note: Some participants provided multiple responses (number of descriptions 135)

The second question of “*How do you define a good everyday life?*” was discussed in relation to the PERMA framework introduced by Seligman in 2012 (Table 2). According to the findings, a good everyday life embraces the elements of pleasure (positive emotions and feeling good), engagement (being completely absorbed in activities), positive relationships (being authentically connected to others), meaning (purposeful existence), and achievement (a sense of accomplishment and success). Of these, the most influential among the participants are pleasure, engagement, and achievement, the last two representing a strong emphases on eudaimonic tradition of meaning and living well.

Table 2. Elements of a good everyday life interpreted with the PERMA framework

Second order themes (n/% of all comments)	First order themes and description of themes (n = 182)
PLEASURE (n = 55; 30%)	<p>Happiness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being/feeling happy (8), happiness (7), doing things that make you happy (4), have a happy mentality <p>Positivity/optimism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being positive (3), have a positive and optimistic mindset (2), have positive things in life, a feeling of purpose to serve positivity <p>Sense of feeling good</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feeling fulfilled (3), being satisfied (2), being/feeling content (3), doing something that you enjoy (2), having things to look forward to <p>Sense of feeling stress free</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not feeling stressed (8), being able to relax (3), not having strong worries (3), no major struggles in life (2), not being in stressful situations
ENGAGEMENT (n = 51; 28%)	<p>Engage in healthy activities and behaviors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being healthy (12), healthy routines (5), healthy lifestyle • healthy diet (5), sleep (4), being/staying active (4), exercise (2), • balance in life (6), “me”-time (4), doing something that is important for yourself (3), doing things that you want (2) • meeting the basic needs (3)
POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS (n = 24; 13%)	<p>Relationships and social connections</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social relationships/connections (10), good relationships (5), family and friends (4), close connections, positive relationships, being surrounded by people that lift you up, meaningful connections, a healthy balance in yourself and relationships
MEANING (n = 15; 8%)	<p>Purpose</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have a reason to wake up (3), security (3), feeding your body, mind and spirit (2), appreciating life (2), have a purpose in life, have a thirst for life, living every day to the fullest, finding things to be grateful for, stability
ACHIEVEMENT (n = 37; 21%)	<p>Sense of accomplishment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • achieving goals (8), accomplishments (3), being successful (2), achieving goals and dreams, personal growth <p>Productivity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being productive (8), getting things done (4), taking care of your obligations, feeling motivated <p>Routines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • routines (5), routines and schedules of daily life (3)

Note: Some participants provided multiple responses (number of descriptions 182)

6. Conclusions

In this paper, we discussed the doctrines of a good and meaningful life through two different theoretical standpoints of positive psychology and transformative consumer research the focus being on the hedonic and eudaimonic perceptions of well-being. We investigated, in particular, the perceptions of being well and a good everyday life and how they are perceived by Gen Z adult consumers.

As the findings confirmed, there are two different roots to well-being. The notion of being “well” was perceived through both hedonic and eudaimonic interpretations. The hedonic pursuit of happiness and pleasure (i.e. a way of feeling) was described in various terms stressing happiness, pleasure, enjoyment, and comfort. The eudaimonic pursuit of meaning and living well (i.e. a way of living) was mainly described with terms emphasizing growth, development of one’s potential, function, engagement, interest, meaning, and purpose.

The hedonic and eudaimonic pursuits were also perceived in the interpretations on what constitutes a good everyday life. These elements fell into the categories of the PERMA framework introduced by Seligman in 2012. For Gen Zers, a good everyday life consists primarily of pleasure (happiness, positivity/optimism, a sense of feeling good and being free of stress), engagement (healthy attitudes, activities, lifestyle choices and consumption habits), and achievement (a sense of accomplishment, productivity and routines). In addition to the strong emphasis on happiness and positivity, the eudaimonic purposes, i.e. living well, were discussed in every group.

The participants focused heavily on maintaining a healthy lifestyle and healthy routines: consuming a healthy diet (e.g., organic foods), engaging in physical activity (e.g., going for a run or visiting the gym), and getting enough good quality sleep in. Similarly, the goal and driven orientation of Gen Zers’ was emphasized; the participants talked about the importance of achieving something in life, working towards goals, being productive, and having daily routines in order not to “waste” time and have a balance in life. The participants also indicated the importance of “other people” by relating social connections as their main sources in reaching individual and collective well-being.

The current paper contributes to existing literature by bridging positive psychology with transformative consumer research, and by discussing a good everyday life – a concept not prominently addressed in transformative consumer research literature. In addition, looking at the issue from the Gen Z perspective, the paper contributes to the still scarce understanding on

this highly influential consumer cohort with significant spending power in the coming years, who are also said to set the benchmark for future consumer generations. As to managerial implications, our findings suggest that savvy marketers hoping to appeal to the Gen Zers should increase their understanding on this segment and consider means of more closely connecting their brands to better fit with the segment's unique views regarding a good everyday life.

Our study should be considered in the light of its limitations, which can lead to interesting avenues for future research. First, the analysis covered only parts of the discussed themes, and therefore, the analysis will be extended to cover other themes important in understanding a good everyday life, such as Gen Z's values in life and future expectations. Another important stream of future research would be to analyze how these values and future expectations influence Gen Zers consumption patterns and choices as their attitudes toward sustainability and environmental issues, in particular, differ from previous cohorts. Furthermore, data was collected in a single state in the U.S. In the future, it would be of great interest to compare descriptions of a good everyday life across different regions and countries.

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