

Critical Study of Stoic Pragmatism as Consumption Ethics in the Post-Pandemic Era

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Abstract

This paper shows that Stoic Pragmatism can be an alternative perspective to answer the exclusivity problem of consumption in consumeristic and minimalistic lifestyles, especially in the post-pandemic era. The main problem is an excessive desire to fulfill the lifestyle itself. Stoic Pragmatism allows the recognition of a specific way of life even though there is a consumption tendency and the placement of diverse desires. Stoic Pragmatism attitude is accepting and developing that diversity. The pragmatic dimension emphasizes optimism and enthusiasm that departs from everyday life. The stoics dimension balances the pragmatic dimension with virtues and self-acceptance of some part of reality that must be acknowledged. Thus, an ethic of consumption promoted by Stoic Pragmatism can lead a person to live life towards the highest happiness, namely peace without distraction (*ataraxia*) and tranquility. Stoic Pragmatism offers an art of life that is both optimistic and realistic within existing limitations.

Keywords: consumption, desire, happiness, lifestyle, Stoic Pragmatism

1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2019, the world was shocked by the sudden COVID-19 pandemic, which completely transformed various aspects of human life. During the pandemic, each academic study is required to contribute innovatively to deal with this global crisis. It also applies to philosophical research. Velazquez (2020) in his writing *The Role of Philosophy in the Pandemic Era*, argues that even though philosophy is not directed at efforts to solve practical problems but offers basic understandings regarding the actual situation through a series of rational reflections. On the other side, according to several studies, the pandemic presents factors that have caused a significant increase in consumptive behavior.

Humans as *homo consumericus*, highlighted by Bouwer(2013), were considered consumeristic creatures. Following the development of lifestyle, humans increasingly follow their passion for satisfying their desires, and it is often directed at things that are not needed. This pursuit is based on the desire for satisfaction, which is hoped to bring happiness(Hausen, 2018). Such desire encourages a person to act beyond his abilities and marks the domination of desire over reason, where irrationality takes over and fades inner sensitivity(Wibowo, 2019). According to Featherstone(2007), in this era filled with abundance, consumption is no longer positioned as a direct action as one's effort to fulfill essential needs. It is a means for individuals to show their identity and social strata.

In the desire for consumption, humans are trapped in desire after desire that controls their tendencies to consume. Consumption was interpreted as an essential part of life's existence, negatively impacting contemporary life. In this context, consumerism arises as a form of wasteful consumption, which only traps individuals into demands to continue shopping or to enjoy a commodity. It becomes a kind of lifestyle that has the potential to damage the human mind(Armawi, 2007). Consumption is seen to form identity; what a person consumes marks who he is, among others. Consumption has become even stronger with the sophistication of technology and mass media, such as the internet and advertisements. The presence of the internet and social media, which have become the trend of life for people in the digital era, has strengthened the grip of consumerism even further.

Even though we are in the post-pandemic era, it cannot be denied that we live in an era of abundance. In contrast with the previous era, especially the pre-modern era, where scarcity of things became a fact of life. Commodity after commodity comes with various variants in a much shorter and more efficient production time. This was all followed by an increasingly exploding consumption push. It is not surprising that this new chapter of life is also called the post-scarcity era. Nevertheless, these advantages are the source of real-life problems.

In the era of scarcity, there were limitations and difficulties in access to consumption commodities, mainly due to the inefficiency of production activities and the relatively high price of an item (Wallman, 2015). In the current post-industrial era, so many goods fill the market, even with various styles and fees that are more affordable. All of that, in turn, makes a person more consumptive without even realizing it. They are involved in choices that unconsciously subject them to the urge of the materials themselves (Sasaki, 2017) (Becker, 2016). This slavery of desires is increasingly being pressured by uncertainty in the post-pandemic era. It is due to the belief that material standards can solve many emotional problems (Saltik & et.al, 2013).

Besides that, abundance also gives birth to a new lifestyle in the form of reduced ownership. This is called minimalism. Minimalism responds to consumerism by saying that pursuing material things and excessive consumption will never lead to satisfaction. What there is only people are becoming more and more eager (Becker, 2016). (Millburn & Nicodemus, 2011) define minimalism as an attitude of limitation regarding things considered not adding value to life. This minimalism is even more in demand in pandemic living conditions.

On the one hand, the post-pandemic era has continued to increase consumption. On the other hand, there has also been awareness from people to declare themselves as minimalists, both verbally and behaviorally (Pangarkar, Paurav, & Taylor, 2021). However, behind the attractiveness of the offer it makes, several critical responses highlight minimalism. Like consumerism, minimalism also has ideological sides in it. It also tends to be relatively impractical (Meissner, 2019). Apart from cutting human desires too extreme, the addiction to them generally only affects the upper middle class. Its implementation will lead society to collide with a new ideology.

In short, both consumerism and minimalism have hidden human desires behind them. The two lifestyles are based on desires that revolve around consumption itself, whether in the form of pursuit or limitation of it. Desire is understood as something that is not consciously desired and often ambushes a person without his consent (Irvine, 2009). Desire is a form of will or a drive to achieve something. It is always related to impulses driven by one's representations of a desired object. For this reason, if this desire is not straightened, a person will quickly fall into negative emotions, such as anxiety, suffering from prolonged shortages, and so on, especially in the uncertainty of life being lived in connection with the various complexities presented by the fact of a post-pandemic era.

Velázquez's previous offer and critical identification of the role of philosophy in the pandemic era was not off the mark, but he missed some essential things. To say that philosophy is not intended to solve practical problems is certainly not quite right and seems to be a hasty conclusion. Such an assessment only assesses philosophy from one dimension. The presence of suitable forms of philosophy, such as Applied Ethics, has not been considered. Stoic Pragmatism, put forward by John Lachs, is one of the latest examples of the practical form of philosophy. Besides presenting several fundamental theories and understandings, this integral composition resulting from the wisdom of Roman Stoicism and the spirit of American Pragmatism also offers a form of philosophy of life whose relevance can be embraced, including in the pandemic and post-pandemic situation.

Based on this understanding, this paper looks at alternative improvements for modern human lifestyles by adopting the Stoic Pragmatism approach. This paper intends to show that it is an erroneous reasoning or error of logic in consumption that pervades many typical lifestyles, which is why people are unable to attain tranquillity but instead are trapped in endless desires. The consumerist and minimalist lifestyle is still concerned with external matters, namely extensive and selective consumption. Minimalism is the antithesis of consumerism. It falls into the same problems as consumerism, such as the environmental crisis, which resulted in the removal of many goods and consumption even if in a different form, namely targeting interests that are considered more minimalist and can support their behaviour of retreat from consumerism. Based on what has been explained previously, several significant points can be described in the introduction of this paper. First, there are deficiencies in the two lifestyles generally loved by modern people, namely consumerism and

minimalism. Second, there is anxiety about the purpose and contribution of philosophy to human life today, especially regarding inner human life. Third, the situation of the acceleration of the world through the development of information technology and media has resulted in many tragedies in life, including excessive offers of consumption and the fact of abundance, which in turn creates conditions of life in which humans are swayed by their own emotions and desires, which eventually fall into a crisis of virtue. Stoic Pragmatism offers us an alternative foundation and approach to living life, namely as a kind of art of living that is more balanced.

This paper also departs from the elaboration of several previous studies. Several studies have been conducted on consumerism by (Putra, 2018) and (Miller G. , 2009). Both mediated that many consumers who perform consumption actions, such as buying goods and services, are based on something other than their need for the available power of related products or services. (Kushendarwati, 2006) and (Piliang, 2004) explain from the perspective of Jean Baudrillard's philosophy, saying that the reality of life now runs in the mode of a consumer society. What is consumed is no longer a commodity with essential values such as its fundamental usefulness, but rather the symbolic side of the signs contained in the meaning of the consumption products presented. In addition, some discuss the ethical dimension of the act of consumption, as was done by (Garcia-Ruiz & Rodriguez-Lluesma, 2014). There are also writings that highlight minimalism from various perspectives. (Dopierala, 2017) sees minimalism as a form of lifestyle optimism. That conclusion was also confirmed by (Hausen, 2018). In addition, there is also a critical response to minimalism. Writings by (Meissner, 2019) and (Blonski & Witek, 2019) present pessimistic responses to minimalism. All of this is a starting point and strengthened by an explanation from John Lachs about Stoic Pragmatism and its relevance to consumption facts and the pandemic crisis. Stoic Pragmatism is proposed as an alternative new perspective, which not only harmonizes with continuing to be passionate about pursuing his desires through his pragmatic dimension but also with his stoic dimension, providing an understanding of the limitations one must accept. Everything is aimed at increasing the meaning of life.

2. STOIC PRAGMATISM: THE RECONCILIATION OF OPTIMISM AND SELF-CONTROL

John Lachs offers a promising approach to life's problems, including lifestyle issues. He invites us to look at Stoic Pragmatism insights, which for him, can lead us to practical wisdom. According to (Lachs, 2012), a marriage between Pragmatism and Stoicism is possible and desirable. Stoic Pragmatism contains two conflicting principles but can complement each other. Pragmatism recognizes the importance of the possibility of developing our circumstances (Lachs, 2012). It emphasized development and control over life and progress, including lifestyle matters. Stoicism complements it with inner wisdom. Stoicism brings balance to the spirit of Pragmatism by stressing importance of self-control, including in terms of the desires and values surrounding it (Miller & Taoka, 2015). Pragmatism is rooted in principles that lead to an idea that can function in action and solve the problems faced in the spirit of development. Apart from being an illuminator of meaning with emphasis on practical consequences that can be seen from a thing, Pragmatism pushes towards a vision of progress. Pragmatism also assesses a problem and the opportunity for a solution critically and directly, that is, based on recognition of the existing context. The result is an action that is appropriate to the prevailing cultural context (Stuhr, 2000).

(Lachs, 2012) explains the basis of Stoic Pragmatism insights shared by thinkers of Classical Pragmatism, especially William James and John Dewey. (Lachs, 2012) stated that pragmatists equally agree that a central idea of Classical Pragmatism is to make life better. Classical Pragmatism also encourages the progression of experience, the principles of anti-dogmatism and anti-absolutism. All of these characteristics make Classical ore appropriate for reading the lifestyle issues raised, rather than Neopragmatism which is full of language studies and analysis due to the structure of its insights which is very thick with linguistic arguments and critical responses to Neopositivism.

The stoic dimension is concerned with the limit and suggests that we accept it without complaint. There are three key principles of the stoic dimension. First, "*Oikeiosis*," which is nature or the fundament basic living things to defend themselves. Second, the distinction between something that is "*eph'hemin*" or it is in the corridor of our control (*Up to Us*) with the "*oukheph'hemin*" or those that are "not within our control corridor" (*Not Up to Us*). According to (Epictetus, 2014) , the first area includes our internal dimensions such as opinions, representations, opinions, desires, feelings or aversions, wills, and other actions, while outside of that, including

other external things, are in the second area. The first area talks about the soul as the center of human autonomy that can be managed because it is in the corridor of self-control, while external things outside it have no control whatsoever. According to the beliefs of the Stoics, if the first area is held, a person will not be easily carried away by things beyond his control. Stoics focused more on the first areas, including ratios (Sellars, 2006). The reason is that such an arrangement of the mind will bring about a straight representation of rationality so that life can be lived more happily.

The teachings of Stoicism lead to the third, namely the achievement of conditions such as *apatheia* and *ataraxia*. That is because humans are often swayed by existing emotions, all connected with representations or opinions as impressions they pick up from reality. It's all, of course, very tiring, especially when it comes to negative emotions. All Stoic teachings are aimed to the arrival of *apatheia*, a state of serenity without disturbance. That self-liberation became Stoicism's vision of *apatheia*. The state of being without rebellious drives or desires, without the surrounding environment imposing its standards so that it misleads the individual in endless and painful pursuits. So, with that, all is also embraced by a kind of tranquility or *ataraxia*, which can be seen from the state that the self is no longer pressured and enslaved by negative emotions (Massie, 2018).

Thus, through Pragmatism, the spirit to make life better is fostered, while Stoicism teaches that limitations are something we cannot deny. It's all related to the straight working of the ratio. This acceptance will enable us to represent something not as suffering, failure, or ugliness but as an acknowledgment of the limitations required to try to do more. Pragmatism can bring a spirit of change, and Stoicism provides a balance to always accept conditioning or destiny as limitation (Lachs, 2012).

Lifestyle is understood not as something absolute but as always open to every offer and change. So, it is hoped that by adopting a lifestyle that takes the Stoic Pragmatism approach, one can train the ratios and considerations of their actions, including consumption actions, to become straighter and more balanced so that little by little, one can escape from the trap of excessive desires and attain happiness and serenity.

3. DISCUSSION: STOIC PRAGMATISM IN POST-PANDEMIC ERA

Post-pandemic era is one of the unavoidable facts of the world today. Its presence brings many consequences, especially for the lifestyle of individuals and society, including Indonesia. Various restrictions and prevention rules apply. We are all tossed about by anxiety for ourselves and those we love, isolated at home and quarantined, lost jobs, and beset by other problems. One of them is the question of lifestyle and consumption actions. Several studies have stated that even though they are limited in their space for movement and activity as an anticipatory effort to respond to a pandemic, they do not reduce the intensity of public consumption tendencies but instead present them in a new, more adaptive form (Herianto, Tenri Lala, & Nurpasila, 2021). For example, consumption activities are accompanied by the adoption of health protocols, and panicbuying based on preparation for survival in scarcity, the growing tendency to buy things. The community tries to adapt to fulfill its desires amidst the existing limited conditions (Herianto, Tenri Lala, & Nurpasila, 2021). Likewise, the minimalist-style narrow consumption trend has continued, and its spread has increased widely even amid the pandemic. This was all triggered by many factors, such as the fear of contracting the virus, government regulations and superiors, and the unclear situation, especially in the health and economic sectors during a pandemic (Sandlin & Wallin, 2022).

Many implications can be obtained from adopting Stoic Pragmatism related to lifestyle issues and consumption actions in a pandemic crisis. Previously it has been seen that the PS lens can equip a person with an approach to living life dynamically, contextually, and adaptively and not be bound to a particular pole of lifestyle exclusivity, which is often impractical and cannot escape class criticism. For critical times like a pandemic, Stoic Pragmatism teaches what it means to be grateful for what you have, as a good form of appreciating one's well-being, enjoyment, and freedom and how to position and empower them appropriately instead of continuing to complain, regret, worry or worry about demanding more (Skowronski, 2021). From the pragmatic dimension, (Greenhalgh & Engebretsen, 2022) mention several visions that are relevant in the pandemic era, namely precautionary principles, experimentalism, attention to concrete issues, epistemological pluralism, and democratic and participatory interactions. These all resonate with the Stoic virtues, namely (a) being "prudent" (*phronêsis*): being able to distinguish good from evil, (b) "just-moral" (*dikaiosunê*): behaving according to wisdom, (c) "modest-moderate" (*sôphrosunê*): self-control to know what is needed or merely

wanted; (d) “to be courageous” (*andreia*): not afraid but also not excessive (William, 2020). In uncertainty and uncertainty regarding the pandemic situation, especially regarding lifestyle and consumption behavior, we can base ourselves on ethics that echo PS perspectives such as awareness, moral holidays, the principle of "enough is enough," the principle of "let them be" (Miller & Taoka, 2015).

First, efforts to raise awareness, inviting oneself before consuming or adopting a particular lifestyle to analyze complex contextual situations. An analysis of *oikeiosis* accompanies this. Analyze the impressions of something. Marcus Aurelius saw it as an interrogation of facts to see them for what it is without being covered by layers of moving images. Thus, we will not be trapped by the distortion of ratios due to the insistence of particular value perspectives, for example, the standard of consumption of signs and social status. Thus, we will only overestimate (overvaluing) or undervalue something to stay attached to it (Miller & Taoka, 2015). Then, through *oikeiosis* or appropriation, we are invited to expand our experience by connecting with other spheres and visiting and experimenting with different modes of life (Miller & Taoka, 2015). For example, when there is a difference in the meaning of a particular consumer product, a difference in status and identity, and lifestyle, we will not feel upset. Consumption is not only about grasping for quality, not about fulfilling excessive desires for possessions, nor about escaping from them through limitations of many other meanings. Consumption can be seen as a form of self-development through fulfilling desires and goals. However, on a more reasonable basis, failure to achieve them does not have to be accompanied by self-victimization or lack and regret.

Second, desire is not only a matter of fulfilling ontological status tendencies. Many things can be taken from every existing variety of lifestyles to leave the less relevant aspects. From consumerism, for example, we can follow the example of its anticipatory efforts to buy certain products as a form of preparation in a crisis but not embrace its excessive intensity as happened in the panic buying phenomenon (Indah & Muqstith, 2021). From minimalism, we can learn that excessive and less essential consumption does not lead to happiness or self-fulfillment but rather to deficiencies and other problems. However, by being open to the plurality of lifestyles and consumption tendencies and the positioning of their desires, we can also avoid being overly reduced by radical minimalistic limitations.

Besides worrying about limitations, fear of death is also rife in a pandemic. With the Stoic approach, we are enlightened that death, according to Marcus Aurelius, is natural. According to (Sherman, 2023), Stoic visions can provide us with “mental reservation” so that we can be more adaptive amidst the changing flow of information and ambiguity in meaning and be aware of the understanding and bias of emotions, representations, and negative opinions about a particular thing. All of this is useful for mitigating fear and anxiety in the face of vulnerability and uncertainty in a pandemic, including dealing with certain consumer products and what patterns of meaning and priority must be embraced in responding to them. A respite from the struggle of pursuing what is desired. As William James stated, here we need always to remember that our efforts are limited and only touch a small part of the totality, and even then, with the limitations that are our character, goals, needs, and selective choices (Miller & Taoka, 2015). So, we do not have to respond to those limitations with regret and gloom. (Epictetus, 2014) says, “a good and virtuous person must deal with his impressions to suit nature.”

We need to relax our minds and ourselves to rise to be better and sharper and do more next time. So, it is crucial to do anticipatory meditation that precedes possible bad events. In Pragmatism, this is often called "rehearsal Deweyan" who see the critical role of deliberation as well as tentative training in the mind to experiment with finding out what actions are possible in dealing with the uncertainty of the pandemic and reality itself, which is indeed complex and constantly moving, including the question of the status and meaning of consumption objects (Miller & Taoka, 2015). This can become a sort of limitation to endless consumption without eliminating the need to some degree and the pursuit of fulfillment of desires for self-existence.

Third, the recognition of "enough" by identifying what is "under my control" and what is "not under my control. So, regarding consumption, one must understand that many things are neutral or indifferent. It has no absolute correlation with reality. Ownership of a luxury car is often associated with a specific status; for example, it contributes in a certain way to one's happiness, but it is not absolute for one to be happy. In dealing with external things like that, one should be calm, content, and without excessive attachment. Thus, the adverse effects of external matters can be minimized (Sherman, 2023). This also applies in dealing with particular objects of consumption, including responding to pandemic conditions resulting in panic buying and other harmful lifestyle consequences that can be avoided.

Fourth, the principle of "let them be." The need to enlighten others on the right course of action and to "leave them alone" in their right to build their lives and acknowledge and respect one another after previous efforts had proved unproductive. This is in response to lifestyle and consumption in a pandemic. The difference in meaning is not a problem but something that can further enrich the experience. Consumption should not be interpreted as an effort to compete for status or to satisfy excessive consumptive desires, nor in the context of extreme limitations. A lifestyle pole with various tendencies, meanings, and derivatives is only one of many "narrative rationalities". From many lifestyles, we can take many benefits and leave the lack of a lifestyle with certain parts of other lifestyles that can complement it (Greenhalgh & Engebretsen, 2022). Thus, various meanings can be attached to consumption and lifestyle, for example, to survive a pandemic storm and comply with government recommendations and health experts. This open attitude and mutual understanding are essential in dealing with the complexity of a pandemic with all its uncertainties.

Fifth, courage makes one honest with each other, open, and responsible for failures and goals for the future with each other. These are the unspoken implications of denying finality, clarity, and absoluteness. Life is recognized as inherently full of risks, coupled with all our efforts that may be wrong (fallible) because human beings are limited. Courage is needed in any instability, and uncertainty, especially in a pandemic situation. So, one will also be able to appreciate your existing circumstances and learn to empower all of them comfortably and intelligently instead of complaining about what you don't have or feeling lacking and forcing yourself to demand more (Skowronski, 2021).

It can be seen that with Stoic Pragmatism as the basis of thinking about lifestyles in the post-pandemic era, an ethic can be created that can provide and justify patterns and strategies to achieve a good life by helping us think about what can be done in these difficult times (Skowronski, 2021). Understandably, a pandemic is beyond our control, but we can optimize our efforts. One of them through appropriate actions, namely what must be done rationally or chosen under existing conditions and following the regularities of nature and reality, for example, making the best of it as much as possible, including embracing certain aspects of lifestyle and patterns of consumption, while continuing not to deny and considering the various natural and cultural factors that exist, including the consequences of the decision. Thus, the highest level of happiness (*eudaimonia*), undisturbed peace (*ataraxia*), and inner tranquillity can be achieved in sobriety.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has shown how vital Stoic Pragmatism is as a life practice that brings an ethical dimension to lifestyle, especially consumption. Stoic Pragmatism instills sobriety and beauty in a person so that life can always be lived with optimism and virtue and in conformity with reality. Through Stoic Pragmatism's lens, we are shown how lifestyle symbolizes narrative rationality fabricated by specific values. Thus, certain lifestyle poles, such as consumerism and minimalism, are just a few of the various lifestyles. Consequently, the tendencies and meanings of these lifestyles for consumption behavior are not absolute and final. Stoic Pragmatism vision can be a moral compass in dealing with various existing lifestyle offers and a form of consumption ethics that not only limit consumption to status ontology standards. Thus, individuals will not be trapped in endless pursuits, narrow perspectives, or certain lifestyles. An object of consumption can be approached as essential and tentative. Stoic Pragmatism prioritizes individual enthusiasm and, on the one hand, overrides the status and opinions of others that cannot be controlled. That most objects of desire are indifferent or "partially under my control" is not essential to happiness. Statements or representations of particular consumption objects can be viewed critically. Desire as part of the ratio can be aligned with virtue. Actions of consumption will be addressed more wisely.

Responding to a crisis amid a pandemic, Stoic Pragmatism can become a principle of encouragement and soul-soothing so that individual personalities and community existence can be further developed while still being acknowledged when to say "enough is enough." A pandemic marked by uncertainty and tense situations often interpreted as close to death can be handled better. Regarding lifestyle, the Stoic Pragmatism approach can be the right vision for individuals to live by appreciating what they have and maximizing it while interpreting the movement of reality as something that is inevitable but does not have to be plagued with gloom. If a pandemic can be faced with such a pragmatic spirit and stoic virtue, anxiety can be reduced, and life can be appreciated more. In turn, the individual will think twice about engaging in a panic like response to buying,

hopelessness, reluctance to bring about change, and responding to existing concrete difficulties, but being able to explore many aspects of various existing lifestyles, synthesizing them as experimental motion. That also follows the best suggestion in Stoic Pragmatism to expand self-improvement by doing the best for others. So, by departing from Stoic Pragmatism, at least two things can be embraced. First, consideration of the ethical dimension in consumption will direct one to evaluate in advance the desires and values of a thing faced, as well as the intended state of happiness. Second, Stoic Pragmatism's dynamic style can melt into unlimited situations and create a flexible and responsive fit in facing the uncertain reality that is increasingly being felt amid a crisis such as a pandemic or post-pandemic era.

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