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The Invisibles of Happiness: How Vulnerability Erases Smiles in Consumption

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Introduction

The pursuit of happiness through consumption represents one of the most pervasive yet paradoxical aspects of modern life. Consumption experiences are deeply intertwined with emotions, serving as both cause and consequence of our purchasing behaviours (Gerhard et al., 2020). The consumption process is widely recognized as a hedonic experience that can generate positive feelings, improve mood states, and provide a temporary escape from life's worries and routines (Trabelsi, 2020). This perspective characterizes consumption as "a phenomenon directed towards the pursuit of fantasies, emotions, and fun" that can reduce stress and alienation while providing psychological benefits (Trabelsi, 2020).

However, the relationship between consumption and happiness is complicated by several psychological phenomena. Adaptation effects play a crucial role in this dynamic, as humans quickly adjust to new possessions or experiences, diminishing their long-term impact on well-being (Graham, 2011; Ng, 2022). This adaptation process explains the curious paradox where "some individuals who are destitute report to be happy, while others who are very wealthy report to be miserable" (Graham, 2011, p. 105). Different types of consumption also yield varying effects on happiness. Hedonic consumption—expenditures on products providing pleasure and enjoyment—is generally associated with positive feelings and improved mental health (Li et al., 2025). Similarly, experiential purchases like travelling or dining out tend to enhance well-being more effectively than material possessions (Li & Zeng, 2025; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). The variety in hedonic spending may also contribute to happiness by reducing the adaptation effect, as diverse experiences can avert hedonic adaptation (Gladstone et al., 2024).

Underlying these consumption patterns are fundamental human psychological tendencies. The broaden-and-build theory suggests that positive emotions expand people's thought-action repertoires, motivating them to engage with their environments and partake in a wider range of activities (Fredrickson, 2001; Gladstone et al., 2024). Conversely, negative emotions narrow perceived choices to promote quick and decisive action (Cacioppo et al., 1999; Gladstone et al., 2024; Watson et al., 1999). The modern understanding of happiness economics acknowledges that human decision-making about consumption is often flawed due to three key limitations: inaccurate perceptions of what truly brings happiness, universal challenges like poor self-control and self-understanding, and the tendency to prioritize immediate gratification over meaningful long-term value (Wong et al., 2023). These limitations, combined with adaptation effects and environmental disruptions, widen the gap between consumers' expectations and the actual happiness derived from their purchases (Ng, 2022).

In contemporary market dynamics, consumers in vulnerable situations - whether economic, social or emotional - are particularly exposed to the promises of happiness linked to consumption (Albertson Fineman, 2017; Baker et al., 2005; Berg, 2015; Mason & Pavia, 2015). Limited by material constraints, contextual pressures and emotional fragility, these individuals face greater difficulties in making conscious choices geared towards lasting well-being (Abuhussein et al., 2021; Ahuvia & Wong, 2002; Sirgy, 2021). Their consumption decisions, often motivated by the search for immediate relief from adverse situations, end up reinforcing cycles of frustration and dissatisfaction, since the emotional benefits provided are fleeting and rarely contribute to building sustainable subjective happiness (Gerhard et al., 2020; Gladstone et al., 2024). In this context, vulnerability acts as a central factor in understanding compensatory consumption patterns and the challenges to realizing a deeper and more lasting well-being.

And despite the growing pursuit of happiness through consumption, consumers in situations of social, economic and emotional vulnerability face significant challenges in achieving lasting states of subjective well-being. Influenced by cognitive limitations, difficulties with self-control and the prioritization of immediate gratification, these individuals tend to adopt consumption patterns that, while initially providing emotional relief, do not result in sustainable gains in happiness. In this context, *How the market invisibilises vulnerable consumers in narratives of happiness and what strategies these individuals adopt to resist and emotionally cope with the pressure for well-being in contexts of deprivation*?

The aim of this essay is to critically discuss how market dynamics produce the invisibilization of vulnerable subjects in the narratives of happiness associated with consumption. It seeks to understand the mechanisms by which consumers in situations of vulnerability are excluded both materially - through their inability to access goods and services - and symbolically - through their lack of representation in dominant narratives about happiness and consumption.

The Invisibles of Happiness: How Vulnerability Erases Smiles in Consumption proposes a critical reflection on the limits of consumption as a path to subjective happiness, especially when considering the reality of consumers in situations of social, economic and symbolic vulnerability. These "invisibles" are constantly exposed to promises of well-being associated with consumption, but in practice they face barriers such as discrimination, economic precariousness and cultural marginalization. The result is the frustration of unfulfilled desires and the symbolic denial of their presence in consumer spaces. Thus, the smile - a metaphor for the happiness flaunted and idealized in hyper-consumer societies - is erased from these experiences, reinforcing a cycle of exclusion and subjective suffering.

The relevance of this essay lies in its academic contribution by broadening critical debates on the limits of consumption as a path to happiness and proposing new theoretical perspectives on consumer vulnerability. Socially, it sheds light on exclusion mechanisms affecting vulnerable groups, supporting discussions on more equitable and sustainable well-being policies. Managerially, it encourages ethical and responsible marketing practices that avoid exploiting emotional fragilities and foster more conscious and humanized business strategies.

Theoretical Foundations

Subjective Happiness: Between Market Ideals and Social Realities

The concept of subjective happiness, although apparently intuitive, proves to be complex when subjected to rigorous analysis. Ed Diener, one of the pioneers in the scientific study of happiness, proposed the term "subjective well-being" (SWB) as an attempt to scientifically operationalize what we commonly call happiness (Diener, 1984, 2012; Diener et al., 2018). According to the author, SWB comprises three distinct components: satisfaction with life (cognitive evaluation), the presence of positive affect and the absence of negative affect (emotional dimensions). Diener argues that "subjective well-being refers to the evaluation, both cognitive and affective, that people make of their lives" (Diener, 1984, p. 542), thus establishing an approach that privileges individual perception over external criteria of well-being (Gladstone et al., 2024; Ryff, 1989).

This concept was later expanded by Sonja Lyubomirsky, who developed the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS), a psychometric instrument that seeks to measure the overall level of subjective happiness. Lyubomirsky and Lepper emphasize the importance of subjectivity in

the study of happiness, defining it as “a subjective evaluation of how happy or unhappy someone is” (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999, p. 139). This approach, although valuable because it recognizes the personal dimension of the experience of happiness, ends up reinforcing an individualized view of well-being, disconnected from its social and structural determinants (Jovančević & Milićević, 2021).

Martin Seligman, considered the founder of Positive Psychology, initially proposed a model of happiness based on three pillars: positive emotions, engagement and meaning (Seligman, 2012). Later, in his work “Blossoming”, expanded this model to also include positive relationships and fulfillment, creating the acronym PERMA (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment) (Seligman, 2019). This theoretical evolution reflects an attempt to overcome the purely hedonic view of happiness, incorporating eudaimonic elements related to purpose and the fulfilment of human potential (Farhadi, 2023).

However, despite these conceptual advances, it is remarkable how happiness, when appropriated by the market, undergoes a process of simplification and standardization. The cultural construction of happiness as a consumer ideal transforms complex subjective experiences into marketable products, creating what we can call an “aesthetic of happiness” - a set of images, narratives and practices that visually define what it means to be “happy” in contemporary society (Dreon, 2015; Hammer, 2015). This aesthetic rarely takes into account human diversity in terms of class, race, gender or physical abilities, establishing a normative standard that excludes a large part of the population (Rocha & Casotti, 2018; Wang & Tian, 2014).

In this context, the critique developed by Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz in “Happycracia: Fabricando cidadãos felizes” (2019) becomes fundamental. The authors denounce what they call the “dictatorship of happiness”, a regime that transforms subjective well-being into a moral obligation and individual responsibility. According to them, “the billion-euro happiness industry claims that it can shape individuals and make them creatures capable of resisting adversity and adapting to constant change” (Cabanas & Illouz, 2022, p. 12). This promise, however, hides a perverse reality: by individualizing responsibility for happiness, it systematically ignores how structural factors - economic inequality, discrimination, violence - limit the possibilities of well-being for marginalized groups.

Cabanas and Illouz's (2022) critique goes further, pointing out how positive psychology, by allying itself with neoliberalism, creates a “psychological subject” who must constantly work on themselves to maximize their happiness, regardless of external circumstances. This alliance between psychological science and neoliberal ideology produces what the authors call “psychological capital” - a set of emotional and cognitive attributes that supposedly guarantee success and well-being in a competitive and unstable world. The problem is that this discourse, by emphasizing individual agency, obscures the power structures that determine who can and cannot access the resources necessary for well-being.

The so-called “happiness industry” imposes standardized models of well-being, associating smiles and satisfaction with the acquisition of products and lifestyles, disregarding the singularities and realities of individuals (Davies, 2015; de Boer, 2024). The transformation of happiness into a marketable product is one of the most significant phenomena of contemporary consumer culture. The market not only sells goods and services, but also experiences, lifestyles and, fundamentally, promises of happiness. As Lipovetsky (2007) observes in “Paradoxical Happiness”, we live in the era of “hyper-consumption”, in which the symbolic and experiential value of goods often exceeds their

use value (Lipovetsky, 2007; Scorsolini-Comin, 2009). In this context, happiness becomes the normative horizon that guides consumption practices, establishing an implicit equation between consuming and being happy.

Advertising plays a crucial role in this process, not just by promoting specific products, but by selling narratives of personal transformation through consumption. Advertisements rarely sell just the product itself; they sell the promise of a better, fuller and, invariably, happier life. As Baudrillard (1995) points out, advertising creates a system of meanings in which objects function as signs of status, belonging and, increasingly, emotional well-being. The problem is that these advertising narratives rarely represent human diversity, favoring images of happiness associated with white, young, thin, heterosexual and economically privileged bodies (Rocha & Casotti, 2018).

Parallel to the commodification of happiness in the realm of material consumption, we can see the expansion of a specific industry dedicated to well-being: self-help books, meditation apps, spiritual retreats, life coaching, motivational talks and a plethora of products and services that promise to teach the way to happiness (de Boer, 2024; Farhadi, 2023; Gladstone et al., 2024; Mojica et al., 2024). This industry, which moves billions globally, is based on the neoliberal logic of individual responsibility, suggesting that happiness is a matter of choice, mental attitude and the development of specific emotional skills (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). The happiness industry therefore operates as a normalizing device that establishes specific standards of behaviour, thought and emotional expression (Davies, 2015; de Boer, 2024). The ideal “happy person” is one who demonstrates constant optimism, resilience in the face of adversity, gratitude for what they have and the ability to transform negative experiences into learning. This normative ideal not only sets a standard that is impossible to achieve continuously, but also pathologizes negative emotions that are a natural part of the human experience, such as sadness, anger or discontent.

Vulnerability and Smiles: Impacts on Consumption Patterns

Consumer vulnerability is a multidimensional phenomenon that describes the powerlessness consumers experience during marketplace interactions (Nishadi et al., 2022). This powerlessness arises when individuals become dependent on others or lack control in consumption situations (Coelho, 2021). The concept has evolved significantly over time, with the first book on the subject, "The Poor Pay More" by David Caplovitz, published in 1963, though substantial research interest only emerged in the 1990s (Luna et al., 2022). The most widely cited definition of consumer vulnerability comes from Baker et al. (2005, p. 134), describing it as "a state of powerlessness that arises from an imbalance in marketplace interactions or from the consumption of marketing messages and products. It occurs when control is not in an individual's hands, creating a dependence on external factors (e.g., marketers) to create fairness in the marketplace". This definition emphasizes that vulnerability emerges from interactions between personal states, individual characteristics, and external conditions within contexts where consumption goals may be hindered (Bol et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2021).

More recent definitions build upon this foundation. Hill and Sharma (2020) define consumer vulnerability as a state in which consumers are subject to harm because their access to and control over resources are restricted in ways that significantly inhibit their ability to function in the marketplace (Hill & Sharma, 2020; Scott, 2023). This definition highlights how restricted access to resources creates vulnerability, echoing concerns about financial abuse in certain contexts (Scott, 2023). Consumer vulnerability fundamentally alters purchasing decisions and consumption patterns, often leading to choices that may not serve long-term well-being. When

individuals experience vulnerability—whether through economic hardship, social marginalization, or other forms of disadvantage—their consumption behaviors frequently shift toward compensatory patterns. Research indicates a direct relationship between vulnerability and decreased rational decision-making, with vulnerable consumers more likely to make purchases that are unsuitable, mistaken, or misinformed, ultimately reducing their well-being (Duarte et al., 2023; Lee & Soberon-Ferrer, 1997; Shi et al., 2017).

The relationship between materialism and vulnerability presents another important dimension. Research shows that individuals with high materialistic tendencies are more susceptible to negative emotional states including unhappiness, discontent, depression, and anxiety (Batmaz & Ergen, 2022). This creates a potentially harmful cycle where vulnerability drives materialistic consumption, which then exacerbates emotional vulnerability. However, consumption amid vulnerability isn't uniformly negative. For economically disadvantaged consumers, certain forms of consumption can foster self-esteem, well-being, resilience, self-confidence, agency, and self-care (Hutton, 2015; Martin & Paul Hill, 2012; Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco, 2022). These positive outcomes typically occur during the actual consumption experience, providing temporary emotional relief even if long-term benefits remain limited. Financial technologies may help mitigate vulnerability's negative impacts on consumption (Scott, 2023). Mobile payment systems, for instance, show particular promise in enhancing subjective well-being among socially vulnerable groups, including elderly individuals and those with lower income or education levels (Wu et al., 2022). This suggests that accessible financial tools can potentially reduce consumption-related vulnerability by facilitating more informed and controlled purchasing decisions.

What stands out here is the intersectional dimension, which recognizes how different axes of oppression (class, race, gender, sexuality, ableism) interact, producing specific experiences of vulnerability (Akotirene, 2018; Chai et al., 2023; Wang & Tian, 2014). This dimension is particularly relevant to our discussion. Consumers who occupy intersectional positions of marginality - such as low-income black women, LGBTQIA+ people with disabilities, undocumented immigrants - experience specific and intensified forms of vulnerability that cannot be reduced to the sum of isolated categories (L. Allen et al., 2022; Beudaert et al., 2023; Dubost, 2018). As Crenshaw (1989, 1991) argues, intersectionality does not operate as a simple addition of disadvantages, but as a complex system that produces qualitatively distinct experiences of oppression. In the context of the consumer market, advertising and marketing play a crucial role in reproducing stereotypes and making vulnerable subjects invisible (Mowatt et al., 2013; Rocha & Casotti, 2018).

Studies on representation in advertising consistently demonstrate the under-representation or stereotyped representation of marginalized groups. People who are black, indigenous, disabled, LGBTQIA+, elderly or outside hegemonic body standards rarely appear in advertising campaigns and, when they do, they are often portrayed in a tokenized or caricatured way (A. M. Allen et al., 2019; Lima & dos Santos, 2024; Mowatt et al., 2013; Rocha & Casotti, 2018). In addition, invisibility in media representations of happiness and consumption conveys an implicit but powerful message: some lives and experiences are more valued than others. When advertising campaigns systematically exclude certain bodies and identities from their narratives of happiness, they communicate that these people are not considered part of the target audience worthy of attention and representation (Hall, 1997). This symbolic erasure constitutes a form of violence that profoundly affects the self-esteem and sense of social belonging of marginalized groups (Crenshaw, 1991, 1991; Quaye et al., 2023).

In marketing contexts, the presence of smiling faces in advertisements can create emotional

contagion effects that influence consumer evaluation of products (Isabella & Vieira, 2020; Xiao & Ding, 2014). This effect appears to be particularly pronounced for individuals with an interdependent self-construal who value harmony in relationships and thus respond more positively to smiling endorsers that signal happiness and harmony (Hofmann et al., 2021; Kulczynski et al., 2016; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Smiles play a complex role in consumption contexts, particularly for vulnerable consumers, functioning as both emotional regulation mechanisms and powerful social signals. Research indicates that smiling during distressing experiences can boost positive affect and decrease subjective distress, serving as an intrapersonal coping mechanism (Papa & Bonanno, 2008; Svetieva et al., 2019). This self-regulatory function appears to be particularly effective when involving genuine smiles that engage both the zygomatic major and orbicularis oculi muscles, distinguishing them from smiles displayed during embarrassment or nervousness (Frank et al., 1993; Svetieva et al., 2019).

In consumer contexts, the pressure to display positive emotions through smiling can create additional challenges for vulnerable consumers. The standardized expressions of emotions expected in consumer interactions may fail to acknowledge the full range of emotional experiences, particularly for vulnerable individuals (Arnelid et al., 2022). This can lead to what researchers call 'servile self-erasure' where individuals conform to social expectations by displaying positive emotions while suppressing their true feelings (Arnelid et al., 2022; Kim, 2018). Consumers are not entirely passive in this dynamic, however. Some research suggests that consumers can protect themselves against advertising's persuasive effects by consciously regulating emotions that ads attempt to induce, such as by deliberately not smiling in response to humorous advertising (Lewinski et al., 2016). This represents a form of consumer resistance against the emotional manipulation that often characterizes advertising targeting vulnerable populations.

Critical Discussion

When Happiness is a Privilege: Material and Symbolic Exclusion in Consumption

The promise of happiness propagated by consumer markets comes up against an inescapable reality: unequal access to material resources. In societies marked by profound socio-economic inequalities, as is the case in Brazil, happiness associated with consumption effectively becomes a class privilege (Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco, 2022). Economic barriers not only limit access to goods and services considered superfluous or luxurious, but often compromise the satisfaction of basic needs, creating a chasm between the happiness promised and the reality experienced by a large part of the population (Wang & Tian, 2014). As Hill (2001) argues, consumers in poverty face a constant dilemma between competing needs, being forced to make difficult choices that consumers with greater purchasing power don't even have to consider. The inability to participate fully in consumer culture is not only a matter of material deprivation, but also of exclusion from meaningful social experiences which, in contemporary society, are mediated by consumption. Celebrations, leisure, socialization and even the construction of identity are processes that are increasingly intertwined with consumer practices, making poverty not just an economic condition, but a form of social and cultural marginalization.

Alongside material exclusion, an equally pernicious symbolic exclusion operates (Svetieva et al., 2019). A critical analysis of representations of happiness in advertising reveals a systematic pattern: the 'happy faces' that populate advertisements for products and services rarely reflect human diversity. Instead, they present a homogenized and idealized vision that

privileges white, young, thin, non-disabled, heterosexual and middle- or upper-class bodies. This selective representation is not neutral or accidental (Marr & Luchies, 2023), but reflects and reinforces existing social hierarchies, implicitly communicating who 'deserves' to be happy and who should remain invisible in narratives of well-being and personal fulfillment.

The question that arises is: who appears in advertisements for happiness? A study conducted by Corrêa (2018) on representativeness in Brazilian advertising campaigns found that black people appear in only 17% of commercials, despite making up more than 50% of the national population. People with disabilities, the elderly and individuals outside the hegemonic body standards are even more underrepresented. When they do appear, they are often portrayed in a stereotyped or tokenized way, reinforcing rather than challenging existing prejudices (Brough et al., 2016). This symbolic exclusion has profound psychological consequences. As Baudrillard (1995) argues, in the consumer society, objects function as signs that communicate status, identity and belonging. The impossibility of fully participating in this language of signs, whether due to material limitations or not seeing oneself represented in the dominant narratives, can generate feelings of inadequacy, shame and social exclusion. What's more, constant exposure to images of happiness associated with inaccessible consumption practices intensifies the perception of relative deprivation, contributing to psychological suffering and a decrease in subjective well-being.

In this context, the phenomenon of 'compensatory consumption' emerges - consumption practices aimed at compensating for feelings of inadequacy, exclusion or low self-esteem. According to Rucker and Galinsky (2008), individuals who experience feelings of powerlessness or low social status can engage in compensatory consumption as a way of restoring a sense of power and belonging. For vulnerable consumers, this behaviour can manifest itself in prioritising visible goods that communicate status, even when resources are scarce for basic needs. Compensatory consumption, while understandable as a coping strategy, often results in negative consequences such as debt, financial stress and an intensified cycle of frustration. As Bauman (2008) notes, the consumer society promises immediate satisfaction, but generates perpetual dissatisfaction, since new desires are constantly created to replace those momentarily satisfied. For vulnerable consumers, this dynamic is particularly perverse, as it adds financial pressure to lives already marked by material precariousness (Scott, 2023; Yazdanparast & Alhenawi, 2022).
The intersection between material and symbolic exclusion is even more complex when we consider dimensions such as race, gender and sexuality (Chai et al., 2023; Crenshaw, 1991). Black women, for example, face a triple exclusion: economic (due to racial and gender inequalities in the labour market), representational (due to under-representation or stereotyped representation in the media) and social (due to everyday racism and sexism) (Cuffee et al., 2024; Svetieva et al., 2019; Wang & Tian, 2014). This intersectional experience of marginalization cannot be understood by simply adding up isolated categories, but constitutes a specific reality that requires its own analysis.

Erased Smiles: The Denied Emotions of Invisible Consumers

The contemporary imperative of happiness not only sets a normative standard of well-being, but also pathologises negative emotions that are a natural part of the human experience. As Cabanas and Illouz (2022) argue, the 'dictatorship of happiness' turns sadness, anger or discontent into emotional states to be overcome quickly, rather than legitimate experiences that can contain their own value and meaning. This pressure to 'be happy' at all costs is particularly oppressive for vulnerable people, whose concrete conditions of existence often

justify feelings of indignation, frustration or sadness (Paul et al., 2016). Psychologist Barbara Ehrenreich (2010), in her book 'Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World', denounces how the culture of positive thinking functions as a mechanism of social control, discouraging criticism of the status quo and blaming individuals for circumstances that are largely beyond their control. The insistence on compulsory optimism serves specific political and economic interests, distracting attention from structural injustices and channelling discontent towards individual and market solutions (Ehrenreich, 2010).

For vulnerable consumers, the pressure to demonstrate happiness despite adversity constitutes a form of symbolic violence that denies the legitimacy of their emotional experiences (Mérida-López et al., 2022; Mojica et al., 2024). When the media, advertising and dominant discourses on well-being systematically ignore the structural conditions that limit the possibilities of happiness for certain groups, they implicitly communicate that their suffering is irrelevant or, worse, the result of personal failings rather than social injustices. This emotional erasure is intensified by the promise of unattainable happiness propagated by consumer markets. As Lipovetsky (2007) observes, the hyper-consumer society creates a paradox: the more happiness is sought through consumption, the more it seems to escape, generating a perpetual cycle of desire, acquisition, disappointment and new desire. For consumers with limited resources, this cycle is particularly perverse, as it adds to material frustration the feeling of personal inadequacy at not being able to achieve the socially valued ideal of happiness.

Intersectional analysis reveals how this emotional erasure takes on specific contours for different groups (Chai et al., 2023). Women, for example, face contradictory social expectations: they must demonstrate happiness and satisfaction with their multiple roles (professional, maternal, marital), even when these involve overload and exploitation. Black people are often pressured to downplay experiences of racism so as not to be labelled as 'victimizers' or 'bitter'. LGBTQIA+ people are expected to celebrate partial conquests of rights, even when they continue to face daily violence and discrimination (Cardoso et al., 2025).
These differentiated emotional expectations reflect and reinforce existing social hierarchies. As Ahmed (2023) argues in 'The Promise of Happiness', happiness is not just an individual emotional state, but a political construct that defines who can legitimately aspire to well-being and which forms of life are considered 'good' or 'desirable'. In this sense, happiness functions as a normative device that rewards conformity and punishes deviance, establishing a distinction between lives that 'deserve' to be happy and those whose unhappiness is naturalized or made invisible. And the psychological impact of this dynamic is profound. Vulnerable consumers often internalize responsibility for their 'unhappiness', blaming themselves for not being able to overcome adversity through individual effort or a 'positive mindset' (Mérida-López et al., 2022; Mojica et al., 2024). This internalization can manifest itself in feelings of shame, inadequacy and low self-esteem, contributing to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. Paradoxically, the pressure to 'be happy' can intensify psychological suffering, creating an additional layer of anguish at the inability to live up to socially valued emotional expectations.

Invisible Resistance: Happiness Outside the Market

Despite the powerful forces that seek to standardize and commodify happiness, vulnerable consumers develop diverse forms of resistance and coping mechanisms that challenge the dominant logic. These alternative practices in the search for well-being often remain invisible

in hegemonic discourses, but constitute important strategies for emotional survival and affirmation of dignity in adverse contexts. A significant form of resistance manifests itself through the construction of networks of solidarity and mutual support. In marginalized communities, collective practices such as mutirões, cooperatives, community banks and non-monetary exchanges not only respond to material needs, but also strengthen social ties and promote feelings of belonging and recognition. These collective experiences challenge the individualistic conception of happiness promoted by the market, demonstrating how well-being can emerge from relationships of reciprocity and mutual care (Davies, 2015).

Spirituality and religious practices are also important sources of well-being for many vulnerable consumers. As Hill (2001) notes, religious communities often function as spaces of welcome, emotional support and the construction of meaning in contexts of material deprivation. Faith provides not only psychological comfort, but also an alternative value system that challenges materialist logic, valuing virtues such as simplicity, generosity and contentment with enough. Popular culture and community artistic expressions represent another significant dimension of resistance (Lobo, 2021). Manifestations such as hip-hop, funk, samba, marginal literature and graffiti not only denounce social injustices, but also celebrate experiences, identities and forms of pleasure that escape hegemonic standards. Through these expressions, marginalized groups transform experiences of suffering into aesthetic creation and cultural affirmation, constructing alternative narratives about what constitutes a good or meaningful life.

Minimalism and conscious consumption practices are emerging as another form of resistance, especially among young urbanites. By questioning the equation between consumption and happiness, these approaches propose a redefinition of well-being based on values such as sustainability, voluntary simplicity and slowing down (Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Tubilleja, 2024). Although often associated with the educated middle classes, versions of these practices are also found in low-income communities, where reusing, repairing and sharing goods are everyday survival strategies that inadvertently challenge the logic of consumerism. The emotional coping mechanisms developed by vulnerable groups are particularly relevant to our discussion. Humour, for example, often works as a tool of resistance, allowing painful experiences to be processed and oppressive structures to be criticized indirectly. Irony and sarcasm in relation to the unattainable standards of happiness propagated by the media are forms of critical distancing that protect self-esteem and preserve a sense of agency.

Reframing negative experiences is another important mechanism. Many vulnerable consumers develop alternative narratives that value qualities such as resilience, authenticity and the ability to survive in adverse conditions. These narratives do not deny suffering, but integrate it into a broader understanding of identity and purpose, challenging the simplistic dichotomy between happiness and unhappiness promoted by marketing discourse. Building affective communities based on shared experiences of marginalization is also a powerful form of resistance (Cardoso et al., 2025). Groups such as feminist collectives, LGBTQIA+ organizations, black movements and associations of people with disabilities not only fight for rights, but also create welcoming spaces where emotional experiences denied by the dominant discourse can be expressed, validated and transformed into political action.

These diverse forms of resistance and confrontation reveal a conception of happiness that escapes the logic of the market - a happiness that is not based on the accumulation of goods or conformity to aesthetic and behavioural standards, but on the construction of meaningful relationships, the affirmation of marginalized identities and the collective struggle for dignity and justice. As hooks (2000) argues, true happiness in contexts of oppression cannot be

separated from resistance and the search for social transformation. However, it is important to emphasise that these forms of resistance do not eliminate the real suffering caused by material and symbolic exclusion. Recognizing the agency and creativity of vulnerable consumers should not serve to romanticize poverty or minimize the urgency of structural transformations. Celebrating survival strategies does not replace the need for public policies that effectively promote equity and social justice.

In the first line of reflection - ***When Happiness is a Privilege*** - I try to understand how access to happiness, mediated by consumption, is selective and unequal. I realise that the logic of the market constructs a narrative of well-being based on the acquisition of goods, services and aesthetic experiences, which excludes those who don't have the necessary capital - economic, cultural or social - to participate. Happiness thus ceases to be a universal right and becomes a privilege accessible to the few. This realisation reveals to me how the market actively contributes to the reproduction of inequalities, transforming well-being into a rare commodity, the absence of which causes frustration, resentment and the painful feeling of inadequacy. In the second line of reflection - ***Erased Smiles*** - I delve into the emotional dimension of exclusion to analyse how suffering is denied as a form of silencing. I understand that vulnerable consumers not only have their desires ignored, but also their pain invalidated. The culture of positivity and optimism, imposed as an ideal of happiness, is configured as symbolic violence. Pain that isn't converted into consumption or that doesn't fit in with the aspirational shop windows is systematically erased. In this scenario, I see smiling becoming a forced gesture, often demanded, masking with a veneer of normality the privations and insecurities that mark the lives of many. Finally, in the third line of analysis - ***Invisible Resistance*** - I recognise an ethical counterflow to the dominant logic of the market. I realise that vulnerable people are not passive: they develop silent, everyday strategies of resistance. Support networks, spirituality, cultural expressions and small self-care rituals reveal alternative forms of happiness, unrelated to consumption. In my opinion, this is relational and affective happiness, deeply subversive because it escapes market impositions. By reinventing the meaning of living well, these individuals express a practical critique of the false promises of consumption and broaden, even for me, the horizons of what it means to exist with dignity.

Final Considerations

Throughout this essay, we have sought to explore the contradictions between the promise of happiness propagated by consumer markets and the social reality of vulnerable consumers. Our analysis has revealed how the commodification of happiness, while establishing this feeling as the supreme goal of human existence, creates and maintains structures that make this ideal inaccessible to a large part of the population, especially those who occupy intersectional positions of marginality.

Subjective happiness, as conceptualized by authors such as Diener (1984, 2000, 2012; 2018), Lyubomirsky King and Diener (2005), represents a significant contribution to the scientific understanding of human well-being. However, when appropriated by the market and neoliberal logic, this concept undergoes a process of simplification and standardization that ignores the social and structural determinants of well-being. As Cabanas and Illouz (2019) have shown, ‘happycracy’ transforms the pursuit of happiness into a moral obligation and individual responsibility, obscuring how factors such as economic inequality, discrimination and violence concretely limit the possibilities of well-being for marginalized groups. The happiness industry, with its self-help books, meditation apps and coaching programs, promotes a view of happiness as a psychological competence that can be learned and improved regardless of external circumstances. This approach not only holds individuals responsible for their own well-being, but also establishes normative standards of behaviour

and emotional expression that pathologize negative emotions and naturalize social inequalities.

Vulnerable consumers, as defined by Hill (2001), Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg (2005) and Fineman (2017), face a double exclusion: material, due to their inability to access goods and services, and symbolic, due to their lack of representation in dominant narratives about happiness and consumption. This exclusion is intensified by intersectional factors such as race, gender, sexuality and ableism, which produce specific experiences of vulnerability that cannot be reduced to the sum of isolated categories. The social pressure to 'be happy' despite adversity constitutes a form of symbolic violence that denies the legitimacy of the emotional experiences of vulnerable subjects. When the media, advertising and dominant discourses on well-being systematically ignore the structural conditions that limit the possibilities of happiness for certain groups, they implicitly communicate that their suffering is irrelevant or the result of personal failings rather than social injustices.

Despite this challenging scenario, we have identified various forms of resistance and coping mechanisms developed by vulnerable consumers: solidarity and mutual support networks, spiritual and religious practices, cultural and artistic expressions, minimalism and conscious consumption, humour as a critical tool, reframing negative experiences and building affective communities based on shared experiences of marginalization. These practices reveal alternative conceptions of happiness that escape the logic of the market, based on the construction of meaningful relationships, the affirmation of marginalized identities and the collective struggle for dignity and justice. In light of these reflections, it is imperative to rethink the role of consumption and markets in promoting (or denying) subjective well-being. It is necessary to critically question the implicit equation between consuming and being happy, recognizing how this association serves specific economic interests and contributes to reproducing social inequalities. Furthermore, it is essential to challenge the individualistic and decontextualized conception of happiness promoted by the neoliberal discourse, recovering the social, relational and political dimension of human well-being.

For future research, we suggest three promising directions. Firstly, it is necessary to develop more appropriate methodologies for measuring subjective happiness in contexts of exclusion, recognizing how traditional instruments can reproduce cultural and class biases. Qualitative and participatory studies that value the voices and perspectives of marginalized subjects can offer valuable insights into alternative conceptions of well-being that escape hegemonic models. Secondly, it is crucial to investigate which public policies can effectively promote real well-being for vulnerable consumers, going beyond welfare approaches to address structural causes of exclusion. This includes redistributive policies that reduce economic inequalities, but also initiatives that combat discrimination, promote representativeness and guarantee access to public goods that are essential for well-being, such as health, education, culture and leisure.

Finally, it is crucial to develop strategies to include the voices of vulnerable subjects in research and debates on consumption and happiness. Academia, the market and public policies often talk about marginalized groups without actually listening to them or including them as protagonists in knowledge production and decision-making. Collaborative and participatory methodologies, as well as the valorization of non-hegemonic knowledge, can contribute to a richer and more inclusive understanding of what constitutes well-being in different social and cultural contexts.

We conclude this essay with the conviction that a radical critique of the commodification of

happiness does not imply abandoning the search for well-being, but rather reimagining it in more inclusive, relational and socially just terms. True happiness, in a society marked by profound inequalities, cannot be separated from the struggle for social transformation and the building of communities where all people, regardless of their social position, can flourish in their full humanity.

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