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Canavan, Brendan

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# **Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner at Tiffany's: Existentialism and Consumption in Capote's**

## **Novella**

### **Abstract**

Existentialism has been used within marketing to enrich understanding of consumer motivations and behaviour. Consumption may be used as a means of existential avoidance or facilitator of existential authenticity. However the overlap, mutual support, limitations and nuances of the relationships between existentialism and consumption are underdeveloped. Drawing on the literary tradition of the philosophy, this think piece explores the themes of existentialism and consumption within Truman Capote's classic fiction. Breakfast at Tiffany's provides a succinct, engaging and holistic depiction of existential consumption and demonstrates the value of reading literature in enriching marketing theory.

**Keywords:** Existentialism; Consumption; Truman Capote; Marketing Philosophy; Avoidance; Authenticity; Holly Golightly; Literature; Literature in Marketing; Literary Theory

## Introduction

*“That’s not why I’m mad about Tiffany’s. Listen. You know those days when you’ve got the mean reds?”*

*“Same as the blues?”*

*“No,” she said slowly. “No, the blues are because you’re getting fat or maybe it’s been raining too long. You’re sad, that’s all. But the reds are horrible. You’re afraid and you sweat like hell, but you don’t know what you’re afraid of. Except something bad is going to happen, only you don’t know what it is. You’ve had that feeling?”*

*“Quite often. Some people call it angst.”*

*“All right. Angst. But what do you do about it?”*

*“Well, a drink helps.”*

*“I’ve tried that. I’ve tried aspirin too. Rusty thinks I should smoke marijuana, and I did for a while, but it only makes me giggle. What I’ve found does the most good is just to get into a taxi and go to Tiffany’s. It calms me down right away, the quietness and the proud look of it; nothing very bad could happen to you there, not with those kind men in their nice suits, and that lovely smell of silver and alligator wallets.”*

- Truman Capote, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1958, p. 40)

The above exchange between Holly and Fred in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* underlines how Truman Capote’s novella can be read as an explicitly existentialist text. Through the narrator Fred’s partial glimpses the intense life of Holly Golightly is explored. Her existential angst, something she describes as ‘the mean reds’, is considerable. The story deals moreover with the complex interplay of existentialism and consumption, making this text particularly interesting from a marketing perspective. *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* is an existential escape for

Holly from this angst when it gets too much. This is consumption as an oasis of calm and safety. Yet in her searing self-awareness, honesty and restlessness, Holly faces up to and treads towards existential authenticity also. She looks to someday find her own breakfast at Tiffany's. Consumption is also inspiration in a search for belonging and facilitator of ambition. Yet this search is left unfulfilled, highlighting the elusive nature of existential authenticity as well as the ambiguous role of consumption in striving towards this.

Inspired by Patsiaouras *et al.* (2015) and their reading of narcissistic consumption as depicted in the *Great Gatsby*, this think piece uses *Breakfast at Tiffany's* to illustrate relationships between existentialism and consumption. Like the *Great Gatsby*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is a classic of 20th Century American literature which considers the dark shades of the American Dream and the prominent role of consumption therein. The story is that of Holly Golightly, an ambitious New York socialite-prostitute who seeks to make it by marrying money. She is a richly drawn protagonist; tough and self-assured, but also fragile and unfinished. Accompanying and manipulating several wealthy men as they use her for various services, she inhabits their hedonistic and commercialistic world, but also the downbeat tenement block of the mistress. Holly is eventually forced to flee New York, facing charges for her role couriering information to an imprisoned Mafiosi, Sal. The novella finishes open and unanswered; neither narrator nor reader know what becomes of her after she flies to South America armed with a list of the fifty richest men in Brazil. This uncertain ending captures the darker tone of the original text than the more glossy film portrayal, which Capote was declaredly unhappy with (Gristwood, 2011).

The contribution of this note is twofold. First, it highlights the value of reading literature to stimulate discussion in the realm of marketing theory. Previous authors have similarly studied fiction novels (de Burgh-Woodman, 2014), but also comic books (Belk, 1987), advertisements (Stern, 1989), films and television (Hartman, 2006), to provide insights

into marketing theory. Literature is deeply associated with marketing and consumption (Brown, 2015). The marketing-in-literature and literature-in-marketing sub-genres (Brown, 1999) continue to offer untapped potential for marketing scholars. The collective recognition of masterpieces such as Capote's can make these useful tools for engagement (Brown, 1999). Works of literature can additionally provide rich, interesting and imaginative canvases so as to understand the human condition and consumption in general. Stern (1989) provides a detailed summary of the intersection between literature and consumer research and highlights the insights that can be gained into historic consumption. Re-reading and reflecting on works of literature can moreover offer not just historical context but contemporary insights into consumer landscapes (de Burgh-Woodman, 2014). Breakfast at Tiffany's themes of making it rich, selling oneself, consumer desire, seeking bright lights and escape, frustration and failure, are after all as prominent today in consumer cultures as they ever were.

Second, through reading Capote's work this note highlights the relationship between existentialism and consumption. A fundamentally optimistic philosophy which deals with responsibility and commitment to humankind (Sartre, 1948) existentialism considers what it means to be human, what it means to be happy, and what it means to be oneself (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006), and may be well suited to understanding consumption as an activity which closely interacts with such questions (i.e. Baudrillard, 1988; Belk, 1988; Elliot, 1997). Nevertheless, existentialism remains somewhat overlooked within marketing and consumer studies. Particularly underrepresented is the dynamic between the three states of existentialism: anxiety, avoidance and authenticity. Authenticity is for instance discussed in relation to tourism consumption, whereby travel is highlighted as a catalyst for existential authenticity (see Wang, 1999; Brown, 2013). Avoidance meanwhile has been reviewed in terms of mortality salience leading to increases in consumption (Arndt *et al.*, 2004; Rindfleisch *et al.*, 2009; Das *et al.*, 2014). There is a need for a more holistic representation

of existentialism within marketing which better captures the interrelated nature of existential states, leading to a more complex and nuanced understanding of consumption's existential role. *Breakfast at Tiffany's* provides us with this.

### **Existential Anxiety: The Mean Reds**

*"I'm still stealing turkey eggs and running through a brier patch. Only now I call it having the mean reds" (p. 69).*

What Holly Golightly refers to as the mean reds Fred interprets as angst. From her unpacked apartment, her unpredictable routine, to her vague ambition, self-awareness and an opaque but orphan background, Holly exists in a state of uncanniness. She is self-described as a wild and restless thing, at one point declaring of herself: *"I'll never get used to anything. Anybody that does, they might as well be dead"* (p. 22), with this agitation translating into her pursuit of both avoidance and authenticity. Her existence is a markedly existential one, proximate to the angst that most humans do so well to deny, distract and distance themselves from. It is this immediacy which makes her so compelling to those who come into contact with her, whether protagonists within or readers without Capote's story.

Existential angst or anxiety lies at the heart of existentialist discussion. The human being is considered by existentialist thinkers to be thrown into a world of meaninglessness, chaos, absurdity, inevitable death, unconditional freedom and universal alienation (Tillich, 1952). Arising from this existential predicament is existential anxiety. Kierkegaard (1980) described anxiety as the dizziness of freedom. Heidegger (1962) posited that people live in a state of 'uncanniness'; feeling ill-at-ease, in a state of dread and anxiety, as a natural response to the chaos of life and the inevitability of death. For Sartre (1969), anxiety is provoked by

the multitude of choices facing us and the different life direction carried by each one, as well as by the understanding that we alone are the author of our choices.

### **Existential Avoidance: Breakfast at Tiffany's**

*"It's better to look at the sky than live there. Such an empty place; so vague. Just a country where the thunder goes and things disappear" (p. 70).*

Rather than confront the painful realities of existence, existentialism suggests that many people much of the time choose to distract themselves from this by becoming immersed and lost within the routine, quotidian, group, and inauthentic (Sartre, 1948). Existential avoidance may be simplified as the strategies employed by humans to evade, postpone or flee from existential discomfort through activities associated with social immersion, cultural adherence, self-indulgence and ego-building that provide comforting distractions, reassurances and derogations of responsibility (Fromm, 1942; Grene, 1952; Kierkegaard, 1859).

Breakfast at Tiffany's is what Holly does when the reds get too much. Her socialite lifestyle involves materialism and consumption that could be suggestive of hedonistic avoidance. Fred reflects at one point that Holly *"would walk through life and out of it with the same determined step that took small notice of those cliffs at the left"* (p.56). Research has suggested that consumption can assist existential avoidance in the sense that unconscious consumer fears, such as those relating to mortality, may be alleviated by the urge to buy (Das *et al.*, 2014; Rieger *et al.*, 2015), and because cultural adherence and routine is offered by consumption as one way of participating in social life, cementing social relationships (Baudrillard, 1988), and symbolically locating us in society (Wattanasuwan, 2005).

Holly does use consumption for such purposes, as when enacting the role of hausfrau and furnishing her apartment in a more domestic style meant to fit in with her new suitor José. Yet despite its usefulness Holly does not consistently immerse herself in the realm of consumption. Much like the substances, money, work and loves she describes having occasionally and rather unsuccessfully adopted as means of escape from the mean streets, Tiffany's cannot obscure her restlessness. For Holly sense of belonging comes from something beyond possession. *"I love New York, even though it isn't mine, the way something has to be, a tree or a street or house, something, anyway, that belongs to me because I belong to it"* (p. 78). Possession also requires compromises Holly is not willing to make. When asked by Fred why she doesn't just settle down and marry into wealth she explains: *"I'd like to have my ego tagging along. I want to still be me when I wake up one fine morning and have breakfast at Tiffany's"* (p. 39). Her period of domesticity, with its attendant social routine, cultural adherence, and associated facilitatory consumption, is brief.

In as such Capote is depicting the unsatisfying nature of avoidance in itself. Individuals cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility; those who do are merely disguising their anguish or are in flight from it (Sartre, 1948). Avoidance can furthermore be conformist and stifling, and contribute to a loss of the real self, self-potential and actualisation (Sartre, 1943; Heidegger, 1962). Consumption provides us symbolic meaning to create the self and identity, yet may simultaneously enchain us to the illusive sense of self and the endless realm of consumption (Wattanasuwan, 2005). Under the influence of consumerism, individuals are alienated in the sense that they attempt to fill the internal void with the momentary high of their latest purchase, rather than facing existence directly and making meaning for themselves (Irwin, 2015). Instead Holly goes beyond avoidance and looks towards what the existentialists described as frightening but exciting; authenticity (Bakewell, 2016).



## Existential Authenticity: New York

*“Good? Honest is more what I mean. Not law-type honest – I’d rob a grave, I’d steal two-bits off a dead man’s eyes if I thought it would contribute to the day’s enjoyment – but unto-thyself-type honest. Be anything but a coward, a pretender, an emotional crook, a whore: I’d rather have cancer than a dishonest heart. Which isn’t being pious. Just practical. Cancer may cool you, but the other’s sure to” (p. 77).*

If the intrinsic existence of alienation is linked to anxiety and flight from this to avoidance, then the final state of existentialism, authenticity, relates to confronting and overcoming (Xue *et al.*, 2014). The authentic individual faces something which the inauthentic individual is afraid to face (Greene, 1952). Authenticity has been interpreted as an ideal state of fulfilment in which people can be true to themselves (Wang, 1999). This means shedding culturally accepted and preserving intrinsically meaningful values (Kirillova *et al.*, 2016) in order to be true to one’s own essence (Greene, 1952). “You can way up oral or practical considerations as carefully as you like, but ultimately you must take the plunge and do something, and it’s up to you what that something is” (Bakewell, 2016: 9).

Capote’s protagonist exhibits this bravery. Holly attacks the dishonesty of those who refuse to face up to their own existential angst, such as the closeted Rusty Trawler a wealthy heir she acts as a non-sexual companion for early on. Likewise those who fail to take ownership of their actions, such as her cold contemporary Mag Wildwood who later marries Rusty: *“I haven’t anything against whores. Except this: some of them may have an honest tongue but they all have dishonest hearts. I mean, you can’t bang the guy and cash his checks and at least not try to believe you love him” (p. 76).* She does not fit with prevailing cultural norms where they conflict with self-expression. Holly views her sexuality as intrinsic and

natural in an era when she is negatively characterised by others for such positions. She additionally pursues ambitions in line with her sense of self even when it becomes increasingly difficult to do so. Offered the chance to save herself from a prison sentence if she testifies against Sal, Holly declines and skips bail. This is principled; if a little underhand in using her as such he generally treated her well, but also pragmatic; her line of work already ruined and unable to compromise her aspirations and retreat to her country roots she might as well flee. *“Uh oh, I don’t just fancy a fade-out that finds me belly-bumping around Roseland with a pack of West Side Hillbillies. While the excellent Madame Trawler sashays her twat in and out of Tiffany’s. I couldn’t take it” (p. 94).*

Holly is motivated to satisfy her restlessness in at least partially consumerist tones. Tiffany’s frames her search for belonging and fulfilment. She describes looking for somewhere which recreates the sense of calm and security of the dining room, understanding from hard experience that having money, consumer goods and experiences are important to facilitating an elusive sense of belonging. A holiday with José for example helps to connect her with him and further her ambitions. Some items such as her atmosphere-setting phonograph or well-appointed bed are essential pieces of kit in the maintenance of her lifestyle. Furthermore, for all her enjoyment of nice things Holly places apparently limited emphasis on possessions, living in a sparse and unpacked apartment. Nevertheless in her guitar which she plays on casual evenings unknowingly observed by Fred, or the St Christopher medal he gifts to her and she keeps until and after they part, Holly displays deeper links with certain objects that appear to connect her with her past and with others (Shepherd, 2015). Objects and experiences are referred to by Sartre (1957) as important sources of meaning and they are related by Heidegger (1962) to connectedness. Consumption has henceforth been suggested as a catalyst for existential authenticity in that it can play a

role in the search for individual and collective identity, meaning, fulfilment and freedom that existential authenticity implies (Brown, 2013; Xue *et al.*, 2015).

Nevertheless existential authenticity remains elusive for Holly. Capote's tale finds her getting nowhere really and is left final destination open and unknown. In her last remark to Fred admitting she is scared as she leaves New York, Holly captures the underlying existential angst which we cannot entirely avoid nor confront through *Breakfasts at Tiffany's* or otherwise: *"But what about me? I'm very scared, Buster. Yes, at last. Because it could go on forever. Not knowing what's yours until you've thrown it away. The mean reds, they're nothing. The fat woman, she nothing. This, though: my mouth's so dry, if my life depended on it I couldn't spit"* (p. 99).

## **Conclusion**

*"I wanted to tell her about her cat. I had kept my promise; I had found him... Flanked by potted plants and framed by clean lace curtains, he was seated in the window of a warm-looking room: I wondered what his name was, for I was certain he had one now, certain he'd arrived somewhere he belonged. African hut or whatever, I hope Holly has, too"* (p. 109).

If existentialism is a philosophy of life itself, the difficulties, choices and self-assertion therein (Bakewell, 2016), then Holly Golightly stands as a searing example of this. What makes Capote's story so interesting to marketers is the way that it holistically applies existentialism to consumption. Capote captures the overlapping relationships between existential anxiety, avoidance and authenticity, and demonstrates the role of consumption

within these. Acknowledged is the role consumption can play in facilitating both existential avoidance and authenticity, but also appreciated are the limitations of these parts.

Holly Golightly, in particular the iconic Audrey Hepburn portrayal of her, offers a glamorous and instantly recognisable image that is readily associated with fashion, jewellery and consumerism. A more nuanced interpretation of the role and limitations of consumption arises from reading Capote's original text however that demonstrates how bringing literature into marketing may help to challenge assumptions and enrich theory. It is true that consumption is important to Holly. Finding a sense of belonging may be facilitated by the opportunities consumption brings, as well as in the meaningfulness of important objects. Likewise the relief it provides from disappointments along the way help her to cope with the mean reds. Breakfast at Tiffany's is both catalyst in the search for existential authenticity and respite from existential angst. Consumption is however something which in itself remains unsatisfying in respects of both authenticity and avoidance and Holly Golightly remains restless to the last. Although her ambitions relate to accessing wealth, Holly refuses to either dissipate herself into avoidance routines or build her sense of belonging around materialism. She is unsentimental regards all but her most personal possessions and not particularly interested in or impressed by materialistic marks of success. She has the occasional breakfast at Tiffany's, but she does not lunch or dine there also.

This honest, self-aware, brave existentialist heroine should be an inspiration for consumers. These would do well to learn from her the complexity of existentialism-consumption and perhaps apply a more searching and honest appraisal to their own consumer behaviour. The novella might also be recommended reading for marketers. Highlighted is the value of reading classic literature as a means of contributing to marketing theory. De Burgh-Woodman (2014) describes how consumer research has identified the importance of literary narrative as a way of embodying the metaphoric or symbolic meaning of consumption, giving

rise to continuing interest in a literary approach as an interpretive mode. Literary criticism is an additional way of knowing the consumer, of shedding light on little explored areas of interest that can augment the research stream in progress and stimulate questions for further inquiry (Stern, 1989: 332). In this case *Breakfast at Tiffany's* depicts an existential complexity which is often difficult to relate and is frequently reduced to a somewhat misleading focus on one or another dimension.

If reading Capote reveals such an insightful assessment of existentialism in relation to consumer studies, helping to bring forward and develop representation of the philosophy in marketing, then other literary sources may offer further insights into this and other theories. The interplay between literature, popular culture and marketing theory can be developed by scholars in the future. Hopefully this think piece provides an interesting and thought-provoking example which may motivate others to do similar with their own areas of literary and scholarly interest.

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### **Author Bio**

Dr Brendan Canavan is a senior lecturer in marketing within the department of logistics, operations, hospitality and marketing, Huddersfield Business School, University of Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, UK, HD1 3DH. Contact [B.Canavan@hud.ac.uk](mailto:B.Canavan@hud.ac.uk)