



Consumer Identity Projects

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In late capitalism, consumption is the arena where personal and group identities are fought over, contested, precariously put together and licked into shape. The Western consumer readily transfigures into an identity seeker. Whether choosing goods, exploring them, buying them, displaying them, disfiguring them or giving them away, consumers are, above all, frequently presented as thirsting for identity and using commodities to quench this thirst. (Gabriel and Lang 2006: 79)

INTRODUCTION

The use of goods in the service of identity projects is widely acknowledged as a central concern within contemporary consumer culture (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Belk 1988; Bocoock 1993). Indeed, it has become something of a truism within studies of consumers to suggest that consumption is the core arena within which personal and collective identities are constructed, performed and contested. It must be recognized, however, that such a suggestion may also be an effect of the theoretical and analytical focus within the field of research on consumer culture (Shankar et al. 2009) in combination with a hermeneutic research approach that 'focuses on the symbolic meanings and processes by which individuals construct a coherent sense of self-identity (i.e. a life narrative)' (Thompson 1996: 389).

To sustain and fuel the consumer demand underpinning economic growth, the market encourages and lionizes individualization and individuality (Jafari and Goulding 2008), qualities made manifest through freedom of choice, the 'core value and emblem' (Gabriel and Lang 2006) of contemporary consumer culture. Through choice, *consumers* are able to pursue fulfillment, autonomy and freedom (Bauman 1988) and, ultimately, endeavor to 'become' (Giddens 1991). In this regard, consumers have long been understood as identity-seekers (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Gabriel

and Lang 2006). As a result, the *identity project* takes center stage in depictions of contemporary consumption and under these circumstances all consumer choices impact upon identity and come to represent it to the outside world (Miles 1999).

Fundamentally, the notion of the identity project suggests that people are actively concerned about the creation, enhancement, transformation and maintenance of a sense of identity (Bardhi et al. 2012; Belk 1988). Consumption is argued to perform a vital service in this regard by anchoring and buttressing identity (Bardhi et al. 2012; McCracken 1986), facilitating on-going negotiations across time (Syrjälä 2016) that bolster past lives and pre-empt future opportunities for self-making (Epp and Price 2008; Hill 1991). Further, the cultural imperative to work upon identity has become inescapable, demanding symbolic work of consumers at unprecedented levels such that they process 'an ever-expanding supply of fashions, cultural texts, tourist experiences, cuisines, mass cultural icons, and the like' (Holt 2002: 87). This cultural imperative is underscored by the waning influence of long-established social categories such as class, gender and occupation (Bocock 1993) and by the dilemmas of the self (Giddens 1991) that include 'fragmentation, powerlessness, uncertainty and a struggle against commodification' (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998: 131).

Identity work, then, necessitates the shrewd deployment of products and brands, their meanings, and the discourses surrounding them, such that a person is seen to be consuming the right *stuff* in the right ways (Belk et al. 1989; Bengtsson et al. 2005; Cronin et al. 2014; Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998; Gabriel and Lang 2006; Lury 1996; McCracken 1990). What is more, this negotiation of identity is influenced not only by embracing particular kinds of consumption but also by efforts to resist, abandon and avoid particular consumption artifacts, patterns and meanings (Hogg et al. 2009; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Wattanasuwan 2005). Moreover, achieving distinction and difference through these means relies increasingly on an ability to individuate and re-elaborate the material and symbolic offerings of the market (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Holt 1998).

Meanwhile, and despite the urge towards individuality, we continue to deploy consumption to help us connect to collective identities; that is, we also pursue sameness in either its objective or subjective forms (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). As Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) contend, identity work is not only directed inward in respect of the self-symbolism of consumption, it is also directed outward in the urge towards collective identities through social symbolism because 'even sovereign identities require the interpretive support of others to give them ballast' (Holt 2002: 83). These collective identities have been variously referred to as subcultures of consumption (Kozinets 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), consumer tribes (Cova 1997; Cova et al. 2007; Goulding et al. 2009; Goulding, Shankar and Canniford 2013) and brand communities (McAlexander et al. 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Schau et al. 2009).

The declining influence of traditional cultural institutions (McAlexander et al. 2014), the devolution of responsibility to the individual, and the sheer volume of choices open to consumers have conspired to make identity projects ever more complex (Seregina and Schouten 2017). Further compounding matters are a marketing culture that actively promotes a veritable production line of potential, though increasingly unstable identity positions from which to choose (Goulding et al. 2002; Kellner 1992). Part of such complexity includes the multiplicity of identities that consumers

are called upon to negotiate. According to Carrington et al. (2015), consumers may deal with such multiplicity by embracing it (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Goulding et al. 2009), managing it by pursuing a coherent identity narrative (Murray 2002; Thompson 1996; Thompson and Haytko 1997), or by deploying a range of coping strategies (Ahuvia 2005; Schau and Gilly 2003).

We continue the discussion of consumer identity projects in this chapter by first outlining a number of perspectives on identity in consumer culture. Next we take up the nature of consumer identity projects as drawing from the internal-external dialectic of identification (Jenkins 2014), and trace the outline of their emancipatory potential. Following consideration of the very real limits imposed on at least some consumers in terms of their ability to engage in identity play, we begin a process of rethinking the connections between consumption and identity against the backdrop of processes of stigmatization.

PERSPECTIVES ON IDENTITY IN CONSUMER CULTURE

The notion of identity is ubiquitous and pervasive, applying to all living creatures including humans, as well as to things and substances. As such, identity is a concept that many of us feel we intuitively understand – it is, at its most basic, ‘the human capacity – rooted in language – to know who’s who (and hence what’s what). This involves knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are and so on’ (Jenkins 2014: 6). Given the importance of identity projects in consumer culture, and thus in contemporary life, it would be easy to assume that identity is a fundamentally modern concern. In fact, research and theory development on identity has a long history both within studies of consumption (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Joy and Li 2012) and across the broader social sciences. This broad foundation has led, inevitably, to a multitude of definitions and conceptualizations, a full summary of which is beyond the scope of this chapter. It remains important, however, to position the identity project amongst the various perspectives on identity within consumer culture research. Specifically, two further perspectives can be observed (see Gabriel and Lang 2006), both of which are rooted in different ontological positions: ascribed identity and achieved/acquired identity. The prevalence of each perspective across the history of consumer research broadly aligns with the development of the discipline from its psychological origins to a more recent understanding embedded in cultural perspectives (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 2007; Holbrook 1995).

Ascribed identity is an outcome of family lineage and a function of social roles defined by the contingencies of birth (Jenkins 2014) and is therefore unitary, stable and solid (Kellner 1992). It is a fairly essentialist position in that one is born, for example, a woman, a prince, a member of a particular class and/or religion, and that defines one’s place in the world and provides an orientation to social life. The duality of the criteria for identifying a thing or person – similarity and difference – is evident in this perspective. These criteria derive from the Latin root of the term *identity* – late Latin *identitas* from *idem* same (*Oxford Dictionary of English*) and which stands

for sameness, continuity and distinctiveness (Gabriel and Lang 2006). Thus ascribed identity simultaneously specifies with whom a person is the same and from whom they are different, and it is fixed. As noted by Gabriel and Lang (2006: 80):

no matter what transformations are undertaken by the individual, his or her identity cannot change. Nor is identity a matter of choice, will or desire; identity is the outcome of family lineage. In this case, confusion over identity, amounts to confusion over parenthood – i.e. this is confusion over facts and not meanings.

From the point of view of an advanced industrialized society, it would be all too easy to write this perspective off as historical and anachronistic. However, there are millions of people globally who do not live in such conditions, and for whom ascribed identities are still of utmost centrality (Shankar et al. 2009). For example, Üstüner and Holt (2007: 46) investigate the identities of poor migrant women living in a Turkish squatter and find that ‘women’s identities constructed within this milieu – as brides, wives, and mothers – were relatively stable, rarely understood reflexively as identities, and never questioned ... The concept of identity project was not applicable’.

The second main perspective on identity in consumer culture, is captured in the notion of achieved/acquired identity, which is a subjective, changing identity achieved with the aid of others throughout the life course (Jenkins 2014). Embedded in the disciplines of psychology and sociology, achieved/acquired identity revises the qualities of ascribed identity and introduces new features (Gabriel and Lang 2006). Through his work with traumatized World War II soldiers who had lost their sense of self, the psychologist Erikson recognized that identity is not something ascribed or fixed, but rather is achieved through interaction with others. Subsequently, the *identity crisis* is a normal stage of ego development in late adolescence and early adulthood from which the ideal and happiest outcome is the achievement of an integrated coherent identity in which the individual is conscious of both their similarity and difference (Erikson 1950/1995). The sociological perspective highlights that achieved/acquired identity is forged in the social sphere and temporally located: a sense of past, present and future infuses achieved/acquired identity. Jenkins (2014) argues that identity, then, is not so much a fixed possession as it is a social process in which the individual and the social are inextricably related. Here, identity is subjective, coherent, sometimes precarious and the result of psychological and social work (Gabriel and Lang 2006). The importance of material objects in the process of identification is key, as encapsulated in the significant body of consumer research arising from Belk’s (1988) seminal work on the extended self.

Jenkins (2014) notes that, in reality, the difference between perspectives on identity (ascribed, achieved/acquired, and worked upon identity projects), is not clear-cut but is more likely to be a matter of emphasis. While the consumer identity project (detailed in the next section) is the prevalent perspective in consumer culture research (Arnould and Thompson 2005), it is important to acknowledge that these perspectives are not easily disentangled theoretically or in lived experience. For example, a person’s gender identity is complex and complicated. Biological sex (determined by physical features such as external genitalia and internal reproductive structures) is ascribed at birth, and therefore used to identify a person as male or female. But this

ascribed identity also intersects with that person's internal sense of gender across a diversity of binary and non-binary positions; their outward expressions and presentations of gender; society's norms and expectations surrounding gender roles; as well as other social roles. Gender identity can thus be understood simultaneously as ascribed, achieved/acquired and as an on-going project, all of which intersect in a multitude of ways with the market and consumer culture (e.g. Hein and O'Donohoe 2014; Thompson and Üstüner 2015).

CONSUMER IDENTITY PROJECTS

Contemporary consumer society has emerged as part of a historical process that has led to advanced, capitalist political-economies, which are dominated by the logic of economic growth and characterized by mass markets and cultural attitudes that ensure that rising incomes are used to purchase an ever-growing output of market offerings (e.g. Chatzidakis et al. 2014). Economic forces push towards commodification; where undifferentiated goods are produced *en masse* at minimal cost. Meanwhile, no (figurative or actual) stone is left unturned as the market penetrates every conceivable aspect of our lives, from nature (Castree 2003; Duffy 2008; Igoe 2010), to culture (Ritzer and Liska 1997; Shepherd 2002; Tzanelli 2008), and even to those aspects connected to commercial intimacy, for example human tissue and organs, corpses, babies, human eggs, surrogacy and sexuality (Fennel 2009; Goulding, Saren and Lindridge 2013; Laufer-Ukeles 2013).

Set against the backdrop of this commodification of life (Bauman 2007; Kellner 1983), consumer identity projects incorporate the productive dimensions of marketplace consumption, mobilized in the service of identity narratives and involving the creative negotiation of cultural contradictions (Arnould and Thompson 2007; Thompson 2014; Thompson and Haytko 1997). Identity work, then, is portrayed as a reflexive (Giddens 1991), continuous (Cherrier and Murray 2007; Elliott 2004), interminable (Gabriel and Lang 2006) symbolic project (Mikkonen et al. 2011; Thompson 1996). Its purpose is to produce a coherent narrative of the self from marketplace resources that connects the past, present and future (Ahuvia 2005; Marion and Nairn 2011; Mikkonen et al. 2011). In this way, identity may be considered 'as ideology cognized through the individual engagement with discourse, made manifest in a personal narrative constructed and reconstructed across the life course and scripted in and through social interaction and social practice' (Hammack 2008: 2).

The identity project is reflexive and continuous in the sense that the narrative is always being revised as early chapters are rewritten 'so that the activity of writing becomes itself part of the story' (Gabriel and Lang 2006: 83). Of course, the constant revision and fluctuation of identity in these ways also suggests that such projects can be troubled and sometimes characterized by ambivalence (Kozinets 2001; Michael 2015), compensation (Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Woodruffe 1997), contradictions (Carrington et al. 2015; Luedicke et al. 2010), complexity (Harrison and Thomas 2013; Holt and Thompson 2004) and dysfunction (Lastovicka and Sirianni 2011; Reith and Dobbie 2012). Further, in charting the life stories of individuals, identity

projects may involve loss (Üstüner and Holt 2007), movement (Ruvio and Belk 2013; Schau et al. 2009) and experimentation with identities over the life course, but particularly during major life transitions (Schau et al. 2009) or *turning points* (Syrjälä 2016). Indeed, identity work has no end and may even continue after death as identities enacted during a person's lifetime are renegotiated post-mortem during consumption-laden funeral rites (Bonsu and Belk 2003).

In all of this the consumption and dispossession (Cherrier and Murray 2007; Türe 2014), of goods, services, ideas and experiences, or even disgust towards them (Morales and Wu 2013), are treated as productive forces because 'the marketplace has become a preeminent source of mythic and symbolic resources through which people, including those who lack resources to participate in the market as full-fledged consumers, construct narratives of identity' (Arnould and Thompson 2005: 871). For their part, marketers have worked tirelessly to connect their offerings to the idea of unique selfhood (Grainge 2000). Epp and Price (2008) detail how the meanings associated with consumption objects, activities and patterns may connect us to a sense of the past (Belk 1991; Brown et al. 2003; Goulding 2001), facilitate identity transition (Hogg et al. 2004; Schouten 1991; VOICE 2010), and generally signal multiple aspects of identity going forward. And yet, while consumption meanings are generally considered to be central to this entire project (Elliott 1997; Holt 1995; Levy 1959; McCracken 1986), Gabriel and Lang (2006) suggest that some consumption objects may rely less on meanings than they do on powerful, if temporary, images. Moreover, recent research (e.g. Bardhi et al. 2012) contends that in an era of liquid modernity (Bauman 2000) some people, such as global nomads, may reject the symbolic, identity-relevant aspects of consumption in favor of a more practical, detached and flexible logic.

Such movements bring to light dialectical tensions between the agency of individual consumers to play with or resist marketplace meanings, and the power of structural processes to colonize such creative experimentation and to dominate meanings (Holt 2002; Kozinets et al. 2004; Murray 2002; see Handelman and Fischer, Chapter 15 this volume). While the pursuit of identity is considered to be the main goal of consumers (Thompson 2014), and the realization of distinction is apparently achieved through the ability to manipulate and play with market-based meanings (Holt 1998), marketplace discourses are nonetheless discourses of power that work to direct consumers' choices and decisions, and, ultimately, guide identities down particular avenues (Thompson 2004). The specter of structure and agency in this regard has long dogged work on consumer culture (Askegaard and Linnet 2011). It may be that we are naturally inclined to favor agentic representations because 'a sharp focus on culture's potentialities is naturally understood as the appropriate course' (Hays 1994: 60) and, in a manner similar to Cultural Studies, consumer research becomes a field of analysis set up to track down resistances (Bennett 1998). Thus, in studying identity projects we need to be mindful of the degree to which individual consumers can forge their own path or are constrained by the discourses of the consumption system. Peñaloza (2001) and Holt and Thompson (2004) underline the importance of considering how marketplace discourses are at one and the same time enabling and constraining, both facilitating consumers' abilities to play with identity while also circumscribing them, entertaining consumers while inculcating them, so that:

'commercial myth making can ... function as an ideological process that merges entertainment, education and indoctrination' (Thompson and Tian 2008: 596). For Parmentier and Fischer (2011) this culture-producing role of marketers is particularly relevant to the work of cultural intermediaries who straddle the production/consumption divide and who may feel more constrained, therefore, by marketplace discourses. The same is true of institutional insiders who may wish to push through institutional change but who are trapped by the fact that they have internalized the myths, discourses and values of the industry (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013). In the end, the outcomes of these negotiations between individual goals and the opportunities afforded by the marketplace may include hegemonic, counter-hegemonic, and hybrid identities (Kates 2002; Üstüner and Holt 2007).

In an effort to deepen our understanding of consumer identity projects in consumer culture, we now explore underlying junctures in the literature. The first of which is the relationship between the individual and the collective.

THE INTERNAL-EXTERNAL DIALECTIC OF IDENTIFICATION

Historically research on identity in consumption has taken the individual as the focal unit of analysis and theorization (Hirschman 1981; Shankar et al. 2009). This is primarily due to the origins of consumer research in psychology (Elliott 2004; Holbrook 1995), the corresponding focus on achieved/acquired identity (Gabriel and Lang 2006), and the emphasis in advanced capitalist markets on the individual and difference (Jafari and Goulding 2008). Much of this literature uses the term *self* (e.g. Belk 1988; Grubb and Grathwohl 1967; Sirgy 1982), which Jenkins (2014: 51) argues is a parallel concept to identity: 'the self [is] an individual's reflexive sense of her or his own particular identity, constituted *vis à vis* others in terms of similarity and difference, without which she or he wouldn't know who they are and hence wouldn't be able to act'. However, a consumer culture perspective on identity aligns with cultural studies and sociology (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 2007) and requires a shift in focus from the individual to the interactions between individuals, the collective, and the socio-cultural context. Jenkins (2014) describes identity as a meta-concept that makes sense both individually and collectively, and which is therefore significant for debates about the individual-collective relationship: 'it brings together C. Wright Mills's public issues and private troubles and makes sense of each in terms of the other' (Jenkins 2014: 17). He describes this as the internal-external dialectic of identification: where the development of individual identity and the determination of collective social identity are inseparable. Identity work is thus embedded in social practice (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998).

Research on consumer culture has specifically sought to 'address the dynamic relationship between consumer actions, the marketplace and cultural meanings' (Arnould and Thompson 2005: 868), and thus elucidates the internal-external dialectic of identification as it plays out in the context of markets and consumption. Consumer identity projects are realized through social interaction and validation (Shankar et al. 2009). For example, individual identity projects in the consumption

space of a rave are oriented towards the Other and are largely dependent on group approval and acceptance (Goulding et al. 2002). In the world of fashion, consumer identity is consistently defined in perceived contrast to others and interpreted through metonymic use of fashion imagery (Thompson and Haytko 1997). The identity positions available are, along with rules and tastes, produced and reproduced collaboratively by its members (Parmentier and Fischer 2011), and hence personal identity in fashion 'does not reflect a stable set of essential features but is negotiated in a dynamic field of social relations' (Thompson and Haytko 1997: 21). Collective identities, such as that of the family, are also co-constructed in social action through shared interactions among relational bundles within the family and communicative practices such as the symbolic consumption of marketplace resources (Epp and Price 2008).

Moving beyond a focus on the construction of identity, Askegaard and Linnet (2011: 396) argue that if research on consumer identity projects seeks to elucidate consumer culture (and thus the external side of the dialectic), then 'it should acknowledge the cultural, historical and societal conditions that make this identity and the means of attaining it attractive and legitimate in the first place'. Once such condition is that of morality, which reflects a collective's standards or principles regarding *proper* conduct. Luedicke et al. (2010) study adversarial consumer narratives relating to the Hummer brand and show that consumers' moralistic identity work begins with a cultural myth of the moral protagonist, which transforms their ideological beliefs into dramatic narratives of identity. The literature on market-based collectives, such as brand communities and subcultures of consumption, underlines how consumer identity projects are socially, historically and culturally constituted and bound (see Cova and Dali, Chapter 14 this volume). Brand communities and subcultures of consumption are distinguished from subcultures by their embeddedness within the market and consumption practices (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). However, while subcultures were once viewed as cells of resistance against dominant orders such as the mass market, 'today, sub-cultural activity is recognized as important for the construction and expression of identity ... As such, this activity involves acts of consumption' (Goulding et al. 2002: 263). It is widely accepted that such collectives, both market-based and counter-cultural, provide influential meanings and practices that structure consumers' identities, actions and relationships (Hebdige 1979; Kozinets 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Inevitably, this raises issues of structure and agency once more, and so this becomes the next juncture in the literature on consumer identity projects to be explored.

EMANCIPATORY POTENTIAL

The notion of choice lies at the very center of the consumer identity project:

Each of the small decisions a person makes every day – what to wear, what to eat, how to conduct himself at work, whom to meet later in the evening – contribute to such routines. All such choices (as well as larger and more consequential ones) are decisions not only about how to act but who to be. (Giddens 1991: 81)

For Giddens (1991) and many others (e.g. Arnould and Thompson 2005; Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998; Gabriel and Lang 2006), contemporary individuals perpetually pursue, create, enhance, transform and maintain their identities through the continuous making of choices, many of which are consumption choices. Naturally, an interesting question emerges here about how much choice consumers really have. Warde (1994) notes that the reality of choice lies at the very center of debates about the sociology of consumption. As noted earlier in this chapter, discussions about the nature of symbolic resources used in consumer identity projects bring to light dialectical tensions between the agency of individual consumers to play with (Holt 1998) and choose from among marketplace offerings, and the structural power of the market and its agents in shaping and directing those choices (Thompson 2004).

Drawing on Libertarian principles of distributive justice, *choice* has become enshrined as the key consumer right (Consumers International 2009) and, thus, it underpins most government policies and legislation that shape markets (Larsen and Lawson 2013). As choice also lies at the very heart of democracy, locating it as the central value of markets ideologically positions them as tools of democracy (Turner, 1995) and routes to citizen (consumer) empowerment and emancipation (Barnes and Prior 1995; Firat and Dholakia 2016; Trentmann 2016). Given the conflation of consumer choice, democracy and empowerment in contemporary consumer societies, it is perhaps not entirely surprising that the consumer identity project is often framed as both emancipatory and agentic (see Schwartzkopf, Chapter 25 this volume).

The agentic and emancipatory view of consumer identity projects is rooted in the work of Firat and Venkatesh (1995) on liberatory postmodernism in consumption. The postmodern sensibility helps break down traditional social categories, such as ethnicity and religion, and paves the way for the fragmentation of culture and society and the emergence of multiple, heterogeneous, pluralistic and individualistic discourses and subjectivities. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) view this fragmentation as a potentially liberating force, freeing the consumer from conformity, offering them the opportunity for creativity in the use of commodities and market-mediated meanings in identity projects (e.g. Holt 2002; Marion and Nairn 2011), and allowing them the latitude to establish their own social ties, communities, social groups and cultures (Ulusoy 2016). While this freedom is not without challenge, obligation and consequence (McAlexander et al. 2014), contexts such as the rave provide opportunities to play with different identities through consumption, and are 'part of what might be termed the trend towards compartmentalized lifestyles whereby one identity (the responsible worker) is shed and another adopted' (Goulding et al. 2002: 263). This kind of fragmented consumption, where the same consumer can show multiple preferences towards the same product category, is not bound only to extraordinary experiences, but is also illustrated in the diversity of practices surrounding such mundane consumption as weekday dinners (Holttinen 2014).

A key critique of the emancipatory potential of the postmodern consumer identity project challenges the assumption of full and unfettered freedom of choice, and argues that consumers' choices, and thus their identity projects, are at least in part structured in and through the market. Taken to the extreme, the structural perspective would argue that choice is an illusion, which acts as a mechanism of control in the service of capital (Gabriel and Lang 2006). However, as argued by Hays (1994: 59),

'when social theorists use structure and agency as contrast terms (agency is what structure is not, and vice versa), they neglect the interconnected nature of the two'. Structuring influences such as narratives of socialization (Shankar et al. 2009) and cultural ideologies (Coulter et al. 2003) have most certainly been identified, but the acknowledgement of at least a small amount of agency is necessary as it reflects a foundational element of the consumer identity project as reflexive (Giddens 1991), continuous (Cherrier and Murray 2007; Elliott 2004) and symbolic (Mikkonen et al. 2011; Thompson 1996).

Arnould and Thompson (2007: 10) argue that a consumer culture approach to consumer identity projects discards what they call the 'stale polemic' between agency and structure, and rather interrogates a 'more complex and ambivalent dynamic in which consumers exert agency and pursue identity goals through a dialogue (both practical and narrative) with the cultural frames imposed by dominant ideologies'. They cite a number of studies in support of their claim: Askegaard et al. (2005); Belk et al. (2003); Crockett and Wallendorf (2004); Holt (2002); Kozinets (2002); Peñaloza (2001); Thompson (2004); to which we would also add more recent publications such as Karababa and Ger (2011); Luedicke et al. (2010); Parmentier and Fischer (2011); Sandikci and Ger (2010); and Ulusoy (2016). However, Askegaard and Linnet (2011: 396) argue that while the consumer culture approach has bought socio-cultural context to consumer research, we still need to go further and provide accounts of the 'context of contexts: societal class divisions, historical and global processes, cultural values and norms' in order to situate consumption beyond the subjectivity of the agent and to better understand the underlying ideological forces producing such subjectivities.

THE LIMITS OF IDENTITY PLAY

In engaging with identity projects consumers are driven by a call to compulsory individuality (Skeggs and Loveday 2012) and an ideology of reflexivity, self-discipline, enterprise and improvement (Allen 2014). The narration of identity reverberates with the constant pressure to make the right decisions because, while the story may ultimately be rewritten, failure to meet with normalized ideals is indicative of the inadequacy of the self and its consumption (Slater 1997). Further, individuals must be enterprising in their efforts, embracing instability and uncertainty, for 'enterprising qualities – such as self-reliance, personal responsibility, boldness and a willingness to take risks in the pursuit of goals – are regarded as human virtues and promoted as such' (Du Gay 1996: 56). The goals for all of these efforts are aspirational (Allen 2014) as individuals are called upon to lift themselves up by their bootstraps and better themselves (Askegaard et al. 2002; Joy and Venkatesh 1994). In these ways consumers are summoned to focus their energies upon their identities, to be successful in those endeavors, and to make the fruits of their labor public.

At a fundamental level such identity work requires individuals to mobilize a set of resources including those that are economic, social, cultural and symbolic (Skeggs 2004). Subsequently, and in light of the commodification of everyday life, identities can

be ascribed exchange-value (Bauman 2007) and function as capital (Bourdieu 1984), which may be subsequently converted to other forms of capital. However, this exchange-value of identities is circumscribed and only operates effectively within particular social fields (Skeggs 2004) and when carried by particular individuals (Allen 2014).

The notion that everybody wants to, or can, engage with identity projects in this way largely ignores class distinctions and the relative access to resources (Skeggs 2014; Smith Maguire and Stanway 2008). 'It is significant that assumptions proliferate about how individuals have equal access to the cultural resources for self-making, as if the self can be entirely divorced from the conditions that make it possible' (Skeggs 2004: 75). Moreover, the signaling of valuable identities to others requires that individuals have the ability to engage effectively with aesthetic performance and public display (Francombe-Webb and Silk 2016) and that others will read those performances in the way in which they were intended (Allen 2014; Patterson and Schroeder 2010; Skeggs 2005). Finally, for those who lack the necessary resources to narrate their identities through consumption, for those who are excluded and for whom such identity work is out of reach, resistance may be possible in the rejection of the neoliberal agenda and in protest against the system, environmental degradation, and such like (Skeggs 2014).

CONCLUSION: RETHINKING CONSUMER IDENTITY PROJECTS

Identity projects are market-mediated, and thus, when investing in the singularity of the self, consumers are fed a mass-marketed, pre-packaged, commodified form of difference (Halnon 2005). What we see, then, is that individualism and commodification are not dichotomous, but operate in dialectical tension where changes in one stimulate changes in the other (Campbell 2005). A major outcome of such contradictions is that, in the matter of identity, consumers operate under tremendous strain as they seek to negotiate both personalized and commodified experiences (Thompson and Haytko 1997). Indeed, individuals are always in danger of getting it wrong (Smith Maguire and Stanway 2008) precisely because identity projects have become a matter of individual choice. While excessive choice produces its own anxieties (Schwartz 2005), making the 'wrong' choices results in individuals suffering the further injustice of having their efforts read back onto them 'as an individualized moral fault, a pathology, a problem of bad-choice, bad culture, a failure to be enterprising or to be reflexive' (Skeggs 2004: 91); that is, they are stigmatized. While we acknowledge that most of the literature on identity projects is positive in the sense of charting the myriad ways consumers forge identities for themselves, we are interested in this section of the chapter in teasing out a more nuanced characterization by working with the question of what happens when identity projects go wrong.

In addressing stigma, consumer researchers have relied heavily on Goffman's (1963: 3) exposition of it as 'an attribute that is deeply discrediting', where, on the basis of perceived 'difference' or 'deviance', the bearer is reduced 'from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one'. According to Parker and Aggleton (2003), the emphasis placed by Goffman on stigma as a discrediting attribute has seen it

treated subsequently as though it were a relatively static characteristic. Further, the focus on the bearer's possession of an 'undesirable difference' has promoted highly individualized analyses. In contrast, in their recent coverage of stigma Sandikci and Ger (2013) urge consumer research to move beyond the socio-cognitive perspective concentrated on individuals, and to recognize stigmatization as a socially embedded process in which both difference and sameness represent important poles in the negotiation of identity. Nowhere are these twin forces of difference and sameness more visible than in the contemporary conditions of production and consumption where the macro level context of commodification and marketization (e.g. Adorno 1991; Attali 1984) intersects with micro-level, everyday consumption logics and practices, at the center of which lies the identity project (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

Recent analyses have evidenced how consumers might respond under these pressures. For example, Thompson and Haytko (1997) point towards a narrative strategy of decommodification, exemplified in the combination of different brands, and that allows consumers of mass-market fashion to carve out a space for uniqueness and personal agency. Harju and Huovinen (2015) identify a range of practices designed to negotiate sameness and difference that they position as similarity-seeking and diversity-asserting tactics. Similarity-seeking essentially amounts to the pursuit of a visible collective difference as a means of establishing social recognition or political legitimization (Thompson 2014). Diversity-asserting, on the other hand, seeks primarily to embrace difference through processes of destigmatization. Sandikci and Ger (2010), in their study of Islamic veiling in urban Turkey, identify how women personalize and aestheticize their veils in an effort to render a stigmatized practice fashionable. Similarly, Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) highlight the work of fashionistas in appealing to institutional logics, publicizing desirable institutional innovations, and aligning themselves with powerful institutional actors in order to gain inclusion. Of course, not all of these practices are restricted to narrative production for, as Thompson and Üstüner (2015: 260) suggest, 'resistant practices are enacted in interpersonal and institutional spheres and can potentially cross the proverbial edge, placing one at tangible risk of social censure'.

While stigma has historically been associated with difference, oftentimes the pursuit of *cool* is 'structured by a restless quest for non-conformity' (Heath and Potter 2004: 191). We argue for consideration of the *stigma of conformity* that may be associated with too close an adherence to social norms as made manifest in popular culture and fashion in an increasingly market-mediated world. The *stigma of conformity* suggests a reverse movement to the one described earlier on destigmatization, a movement where the fashionable and commodified becomes stigmatized. The *stigma of conformity* is attached to that which is impersonal, superficial, the same. Lack of authenticity is a major factor in the attribution of such a stigmatized status, and individuals strive to get 'closer to the self' and reject commodified styles, establishing 'the imagined mainstream, as a straw man against whom one can set oneself off as more authentic' (Michael 2015: 178). Because authenticity is in the eye of the beholder, the attribution of stigma is also determined according to individual rather than social norms. Individual norms are multiple, varied and fluid, and they coagulate around notions of personal, as opposed to commodified meanings, determinations of authenticity and aesthetic judgments. Stigmatizers can, therefore, be people who

also carry the potentially stigmatizing attribute, but in what they believe to be a more authentic or legitimate form. Thus, stigma can originate both within and outside the stigmatized group.

The outcome is a range of micro-level consumption practices that effectively operate as traditional stigma management strategies. For Arsel and Thompson (2011: 803), hipsters use the demythologizing practices of aesthetic discrimination, symbolic demarcation, and proclaiming consumer sovereignty to ‘insulate the field of indie consumption from the stigmatizing encroachments of the hipster myth and, in so doing, protect their field-dependent capital from cultural devaluation’. Mikkonen et al. (2011) bear witness to the use of cynical discursive strategies and cynical identity projects for both therapeutic and political purposes in distancing the self from normalized Christmas consumption. Relatedly, Larsen et al. (2014) evidence a type of displaced abjection (Stallybrass and White 1986) whereby those stigmatized by their association with tattoos can turn what little power they have against those even lower than them, those with commodified tattoos.

The emergence and development of the *stigma of conformity* warrants further discussion in order to gain a fuller understanding of its nature, character and scope and how it challenges current theories of consumption, such as consumer resistance. It carries the potential to provide insight into the interplay between macro-level movements such as commodification and micro-level consumer practices.

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