

# Psychotic, acritical and precarious? A Lacanian exploration of the neoliberal consumer subject

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## Abstract

Extending the critical project of interrogating the consumer subject form, in this study, the consumer subject is read as potentially acritical, precarious and psychotic through Dufour's Lacanian-inspired analysis of neoliberal subjectivity. Reflecting on two case studies from an ethnographic-type study of young women, identity and consumer culture, I demonstrate how participants attempt to fulfil neoliberal ideals related to agency, productivity and creativity. Relying on commodities for symbolic anchoring in doing so, a 'psychotic' and precarious subject position is evidenced. While the findings could certainly be interpreted as productive, tendencies toward materialism, uncertainty and anxiety, along with pervasive mental health issues, provided the impetus to further problematise dominant understandings of the consumer. Neoliberal consumer culture is evidenced as a harmful, dehumanising ideology that fosters competitiveness, individuality and meritocratic tendencies, encouraging a reliance on ever-changing, transient commodities to (in)form the self. This occurs at the expense of compromise, communality and social welfare, through which subjects may find more stable and emancipatory symbolic anchors. Only by recognising critical theorisations of the consumer as dominant subject positions of neoliberalism can cultural consumer researchers begin to imagine opportunities for resistance and emancipatory change.

## Keywords

Dufour, identity, Lacan, neoliberalism, psychoanalysis, subjectivity, young women

## Introduction

In its heyday, neoliberal consumer culture was argued to be a potentially emancipatory development for (western) subjects long trapped by the binds of tradition. This is reflected by consumer

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culture theory's (CCT) exploration of how marketplace resources 'enable consumers to proactively transform their identities and to constitute meaningful social bonds' (Arnould and Thompson, 2018: 7). It has, however, become clear that neoliberal capitalism has failed to deliver its promise of progress and liberation, instead increasingly evidenced as a harmful, dehumanising ideology that fosters competitiveness, individuality and meritocratic tendencies at the expense of compromise, communality and social welfare (Fitchett et al., 2014; Harvey, 2005). Rejection of neoliberalism is reflected in public discourse, illustrated perhaps most markedly by the Trump election and Brexit vote. As Fraser (2016: 281) describes:

these electoral mutinies share a common target: all are rejections of 'globalization', 'neoliberalism', and the political establishments that have promoted them. In every case, voters are saying 'No!' to the lethal combination of austerity, 'free trade', predatory debt and precarious ill-paid work that characterize present-day financialized capitalism.

As cracks in a neoliberal foundation form, so too have critiques of a sovereign consumer subject. In short, neoliberal assumptions underpinning the consumer subject form – that 'human well-being can be best advanced by *liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills*' (Harvey, 2005: 3, emphasis added) – seem more optimistic than realistic (Fitchett et al., 2014). Cluley and Dunne (2012: 260) instead note the embeddedness of the consumer in a commodity narcissism whereby the subject position is predicated on 'other-abasing self-love' or 'wilfully engaging in the elevation of ourselves at the cost of the destruction of others'. Cluley (2015) also observes the consumer subject position predicated on an imperative to repress the immoral, unethical nature of marketplace resources drawn on to 'define' the self. Moreover, Saren (2015) argues with Graeber (2011) that the tendency of extant consumer research to produce a productive account of the consumer subject by reading every act as one of consumption is not only harmful but acts to align all human activity with a market logic, typical of reification (Honneth, 2008).

As researchers of consumption, we are in a unique position to rethink the consumer subject by analysing forms it does and may take (Cluley and Dunne, 2012), as well as possibilities for emancipation (Earley, 2014). In this pursuit, psychoanalytic theory stands to offer not only methodological innovation but also a 'rich theoretical arsenal' (Cluley and Desmond, 2015: 4) that might help us begin to (re)imagine and critique our own theories (Gabriel, 2015). However, there remains a lack not only of Lacanian-inspired analyses of consumption practices (Desmond, 2009, 2012; Reyes et al., 2015) but also of cultural psychoanalytic readings of neoliberalism's impact on the (post-)postmodern consumer subject. This is despite, as Brennan (1993) points out, Lacan's deeply cultural critique of the (post)modern subject form embedded in what she calls the 'ego's era'. Contemporary French philosopher Dany-Robert Dufour's theory is particularly pertinent here as a theoretical lens given that he continues Lacan's project of cultural critique, situating Lacanian theory in what he terms a postmodern neoliberal culture. Although his key text predates neoliberalism's discernible disintegration, it offers a prescient account of what the consumer subject might be given not only the limitations of neoliberalism, but also a pervasive consumer culture. As such, Dufour offers a useful theoretical framework in reflecting on the findings of an 18-month study on young women, identity and consumer culture. I first outline this framework before discussing the study and presenting two case studies. I conclude by reflecting on the implications of both Dufour's theory and the findings of the study for cultural consumer research.

## Theoretical framework: Dufour's 'Psychotic' consumer subject

Neoliberalism wishes to replace this doubly determined subject [Kant's critical subject and Freud's neurotic subject] with an *acritical* subject with, insofar as is possible, *psychotic* tendencies. This is, in other words, a subject who can be plugged into anything, a floating subject who is always receptive to commodity flows and communication flows, and permanently in search of commodities to consume. It is basically a precarious subject. Its very precariousness is auctioned off by the Market, which finds new outlets by becoming a major supplier of identity kits and images for the subject to identify with.

-Dany-Robert Dufour (2003; 2008 translation: 93)

In his book *The Art of Shrinking Heads (L'Art de réduire les têtes)*, Dufour (2008: 92) asks 'What subject-form is now coming into being?' He argues that in a (post-)postmodern, neoliberal setting, the dominant subject form is acritical with psychotic tendencies – that is, susceptible to fluctuating identities – and therefore precarious given an unstable and commodity-dominated symbolic field. This he contrasts with a modern subject form, multi-referential in nature given metanarratives (Lyotard, 1984) such as religion, nation-state and so forth. Compared to the fixed symbolic space of tradition, the modern subject is *critical* – from a Kantian perspective – given a complex and contradictory symbolic field: 'The modern subject is critical to the extent that she can no longer be anything but a subject who plays on references that constantly compete, or even come into conflict with one another' (Dufour, 2008: 38). In this setting, symbolic Subjects represented by metanarratives legitimate symbolic Subject forms that subjects draw on to *found* themselves (i.e. come into being). As such, the modern subject is symbolically multi-referential, brought into being by Others external to her/himself.

This version of the Subject is fast disappearing in a neoliberal setting in which the market is increasingly integrated into all aspects of life with a goal of maximum economic productivity (Lemke, 2001). As reflected by the opening quotation, the market aspires to dissolve symbolic boundedness to create a desymbolised subject perpetually vulnerable to commodity flows. Given a lack of symbolic boundedness, the neoliberal version of the subject is 'neither subject to guilt nor able to rely upon critical free will' (Dufour, 2008: 167), searching for symbolic anchoring in a dynamic (i.e. unstable) marketplace. The disintegration of metanarratives in what was quickly termed 'post' (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) or late modernity (Giddens, 1991), among other neologisms, is the basis upon which CCT emerged (Cova et al., 2013). This is not surprising given that the study of consumption/consumers is symptomatic of a neoliberal ideology (Fitchett et al., 2014): without the marketplace infusing all aspects of life (McAlexander et al., 2014), we would not study consumption as a cultural phenomenon; there would be no such construct as 'consumer' (Graeber, 2011; Saren, 2015). The associated concept of consumer identity acts as 'mantra from heaven' for consumer researchers seeking to interpret consumers' actions or desires as part and parcel of identity construction (Gabriel, 2015: 26–7). But as Gabriel notes, 'identity' is illusory and unable to be 'constructed' (Fuss, 1995), largely sustained through desires to fulfil cultural ideals; a defence against anxiety. The neoliberal 'reflexive self', underpinning theorisations of the consumer subject and consumer identity, could also be read as illusory, obscuring a *desymbolised* subject given the impossibility of marketplace symbols (e.g. brands) replacing metanarratives as symbolic anchors.

What does Dufour mean by desymbolisation? Scepticism toward metanarratives, characteristic of the postmodern period (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Lyotard, 1984), renders the

subject without firm symbolic anchors, as *self-referential* or *hysterological* rather than symbolically multi-referential. Dufour (2008: 70) invokes the concept of *hysteron proteron* to diagnose the (post-)postmodern self, a rhetorical device meaning 'latter before' in which the conventional order of phrasing is reversed:

To employ hystero-logy is basically to postulate something that does not yet exist in order to derive authority for engaging in action. This is the situation in which the democratic subject finds herself, placed as she is under the constraint 'Be yourself'. She postulates something that does not yet exist (herself) in order to trigger the action through which she must produce herself as a subject.

Unanchored from metanarratives and thus self-referential or hysterological, the marketplace becomes the provider of 'identity kits' and 'symbolic markers' that the subject must look toward in search of her/himself. Whereas some consumer research literature interprets this as an opportunity for freedom (through reflexivity and identity projects) in the marketplace (Fitchett et al., 2014; Gabriel, 2015), Dufour argues the contrary. Caught in a perpetual present (Jameson, 1985) in trying to *found* the self, the individual is constrained by the impossibility of doing just that, feeling her/himself 'an imposter'. This process is inherently desymbolising as the pervasion of a market (read: profit) logic, which pursues ideals of 'fluidity, transparency, circulation and renewal', disintegrates historical, cultural values such as 'moral principles, aesthetic canons, models of truth' (Dufour, 2008: 160).

It is these cultural values to which a subject can symbolically anchor, whereas marketplace symbols are frenetic, ever-changing, inherently unstable and empty. As such, the subject is argued to experience *psychotic tendencies* of unboundedness to symbolic moorings. By psychotic tendencies, Lacan means the inability of the individual to access the universe of language (the symbolic) given a disavowal of the 'primordial' signifier (Name of the Father) that acts to structure the symbolic realm. While the neurotic tends towards (submission to and eventually) repression of the Name of the Father, the psychotic 'forecloses (*Vewerfung*) it by denying it and casting it out from the self' (Desmond, 2012: 102). Though the psychotic child might assimilate into language, without this fundamental symbolic anchor, all other signifiers are 'condemned' to float adrift (Fink, 1995), resulting in an inability to unite the past, present and future to (in)form a biographical or psychic narrative (Jameson, 1985). Ultimately, the individual is unable to assume the place of 'I' that requires seeking to understand self through other (Brennan, 1993). Instead, others are reduced to or conflated with the self, echoing Sennett's observation of the narcissistic character disorder whereby boundaries between the self and external world become blurred, resulting in a self only concerned with 'what this person, that event means to me' (Sennett, 1992: 8).

On a social level, which is the level of analysis in this article, psychosis manifests through the domination of the ego (on the imaginary plane) over historical time: individual over generation (Brennan, 1993). Though Brennan sees destruction as the inevitable consequence of (social) psychosis, other symptoms include the inability to focus, temporally sequence memories, or follow an argument. This mirrors Jameson (1985) and Baudrillard's (1985) observations of a schizophrenic subject form in a postmodern society living in a perpetual present, unable to retain its own past. Thus, as Jameson (1985: 119) describes: 'schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence'. The schizo/psychotic subject who is unable to biographically unify through the symbolic is also *acritical* in the sense that she/he is *not* the Kantian critical subject. This is characterised by Kant's ([1784] 1991: 55) imperative for the individual to have 'freedom to make

public use of one's reason' – that is, freedom to think, compelling individuals to use their 'critical faculties', eventually for stimulating scientific/philosophical progress (Dufour, 2008: 9). But, in a neoliberal setting guided by economic principles, the subject is not encouraged to foster critical thought (which is said by Kant to have no price, but dignity), instead encouraged to preoccupy him/herself with the buying (and selling) of commodities (which all have a price). As such, a psychotic (unanchored) and acritical (searching for commodities) subject experiences precariousness, marked by a sense of instability and dependence on chance.

## Empirical case studies

Critiques of the consumer subject form (Cluley and Dunne, 2012; Cova et al., 2013; Earley, 2014; Fitchett et al., 2014), as well as Dufour's account (2008: 7), are often grounded in conceptual, philosophical thought rather than empirical investigation. Here, I reflect on an 18-month study about the role of consumer culture in the identity trajectories of young women. Findings from this study – and indeed from personal reflection – do not resonate with extant agentic, productive theories of identity (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, 2018). Instead, participants seem to experience anxieties around postfeminist pressures to 'have it all', aligned with claims of young women as ideal neoliberal consumer subjects (Gill and Scharff, 2011). This is, therefore, an important context from which to critique a (patriarchal) consumer subject form, paying closer attention to concerns and experiences of women (Catterall et al., 2005).

The study consisted of 15 participants ages 20 to 34 (see Table 1) who engaged multiple interviews over approximately 6 months to a year. In some ways, this is a heterogeneous sample (e.g. age, nationality, and career). This was on the one hand due to issues around access (further discussed in the following) but on the other, a methodological decision. It became clear in early phases of data generation (and reflected by my own social experiences) that regardless of demographics, these young women shared many common experiences. Therefore, I was open to whomever was keen to participate. I predominately sampled for participants through word-of-mouth in my social networks, resulting in 13 of the 15 participants. Given demands of participation (i.e. multiple interviews over time), sampling through social networks was the most successful strategy as participants were often colleagues and/or friends of friends and therefore had a connection to me, though I did not know them prior to the study. This in some ways limited the sample, particularly in terms of education and socio-economic status, but also diversified the sample in terms of a wide age range and multiple nationalities. To further diversify the sample, I advertised on social media and handed out flyers, recruiting two participants (Jade and Alicja) from a Facebook feminist network.

Ethnographic interviews broadly followed the following topics: life history; in-home show-and-tell of material possessions; a show-and-tell of digital 'stuff' using the participant's laptop or tablet, covering social media and digital technology use and general reflection on technology in daily life; and a semi-structured interview designed from emerging findings. Each interview lasted a minimum of one and a half to a maximum of four hours, about two hours on average, and all were digitally recorded. The transcription text amounted to nearly 900,000 words. Because interviews had ethnographic elements such as written communication, in-home visits and social media engagement, there was also data generated from observation. Ethical approval was gained from the University of Edinburgh ethics committee. In each interview, informed consent was obtained, and participants were reminded of the study's aims and scope. Furthermore, all identifying information has been removed or anonymised given sensitive and personal information shared throughout the interview process.

**Table 1.** Study participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Occupation	Education	Relationship status	Data collection method
Charlotte	24	French	Marketer	Master's degree (law)	Single	Four interviews; photos; social media sites
Emily	23	American	Social worker	Master's degree (social work)	Single	Four interviews; photos; social media sites
Tiffany	28	American	Student; business development	Master's degree (management)	Divorced; in a relationship	Four interviews; photos; social media sites
Catriona	25	Scottish	Law clerk	Master's degree (marketing)	Single	Four interviews; photos; social media sites
Sophie	34	Scottish	University administrator	Undergraduate degree (history)	Single	Four interviews; photos
Alicja	25	Polish	Unemployed/ part-time salesperson	Undergraduate degree (anthropology)	Living with boyfriend	Four interviews; photos
Sierra	25	American	Student; mission work	Master's degree (management)	Single	Four interviews; photos; social media sites
Madison	27	American	Student; marketing and PR	Master's degree (marketing)	Single	Four interviews; photos; social media sites
Simone	26	New Zealand	Student; marketing and PR	Master's degree (marketing)	Single/in a relationship	Four interviews; photos; social media sites
Katie	25	Scottish	Ad hoc nurse	Nursing degree	Long-term relationship	Three interviews; photos; social media sites
Elizabeth	25	Scottish	Student	Pursuing degree in speech therapy	Long-term relationship	Three interviews; photos; social media sites
Jade	20	Scottish	Unemployed/ freelance	Secondary school	Engaged	Two interviews; written response; photos
Emma	27	Scottish	University administrator	Undergraduate degree (history)	Married	Two interviews
Abeni	29	Nigerian	Postdoctorate	Doctorate degree	Single	Two interviews
Gretchen	28	German	Student	Undergraduate degree in accounting	Living with boyfriend	Two interviews

Note: PR: public relations.

The data analysis process was ongoing as study design developed organically from emergent findings. It occurred in four stages. First, I began transcribing and note-taking as soon as the interview process began which allowed me to reflect on study design, for example, writing the final semi-structured interview questions based on themes from previous interviews. This also facilitated reflection on data from each participant between interviews. The second phase began once I completed four interviews with eight participants. I then wrote case studies of participants who seemed the most distinct (in terms of age, nationality, experiences, ambitions etc.), searching for contradictory (rather than affirmatory) cases. Upon completing five case studies, I returned to the literature, at this point resonating with Dufour's theory as well as critical marketing theories of consumer subjectivity. Concerning findings around materialism, anxiety and gendered pressures to 'have it all' demanded a focus on how marketplace resources enforced particular subject positions and ideological underpinnings therein.

In a third phase of analysis that began as I completed the data generation process, I started a critical thematic analysis of the first five case studies and remaining data, which had been professionally transcribed, using NVivo 10. This process generated abstracted codes (narrowing 121 codes to 15) by which to analyse the data (Richards and Morse, 2012). In this process, I paid careful attention to what was taken for granted both in terms of participant accounts and my interpretation, attending particularly to power relations that might not be otherwise scrutinised; interrogating what *was* being said and what was *not* being said. As Harvey (1990: 13) describes: 'the probing of the subjects' meanings is not the end of the story. The role of the critical ethnographer is to keep alert to the structural factors while probing meanings: to explore, where possible, the inconsistencies between action and words'. This led to a final stage of analysis in which I applied a psychoanalytic reading to the case studies, reading not for identity but identifications (Fuss, 1995), after which I turned to Dufour's theory to explicate emergent findings, also asking his question: 'What subject-form is now coming into being?'

I now present two excerpts of cases studies of perhaps two of the most distinct participants: Jade, a 20-year-old Scottish woman without a university degree who got married and fell pregnant during the study, and Tiffany, a 28-year-old American divorcee undertaking a master's degree in management in Edinburgh. Themes in these case studies are representative of key themes across the study. While not necessarily generalisable, the data act as an empirical reflection of the theoretical framework and problematisation of the neoliberal consumer subject form.

### *Case study: Jade*

I met with Jade twice, once when she was living in Edinburgh and once after she moved back to her hometown in the north of Scotland, and connected with her about a year and a half after the last interview in which she provided a written response to a condensed version of the semi-structured interview guide. Compared to most of the participants of the study, Jade is from a less privileged background, indicated by family background (e.g. neither she nor her parents have undergraduate degrees), financial situation (quite tenuous at times including bouts of unemployment), social expectations (marrying young – engaged at 19 and falling pregnant at 20) and living situation (living in a low-income area). Early on, Jade mentioned that she struggles with mental illness (depression and anxiety) and later explained that she has a sleep disorder which makes keeping a regular job difficult. Jade is also politically active on issues related to feminism and animal welfare. In fact, I recruited her for the study through a feminist network on Facebook. Something she notes with pride in her written response is that she and her husband have become vegans.

Jade describes her parents as self-made, driven and career-oriented. Her mother works as an account manager in marketing and her father in the oil and gas industry. Both Jade and her brother attempted to gain a university degree, encouraged by their parents, but both dropped out for various reasons. Upon leaving university, Jade moved back home, living away from her boyfriend (now husband) for a time while he attended university in Edinburgh. She eventually moved back to Edinburgh, supporting herself through a part-time job at a chain restaurant. By the time of the second interview, she and her boyfriend (at this point fiancé) moved back to her hometown so she could work at her mother's marketing firm after losing her job in Edinburgh and after her fiancé also decided to leave university. When I received her written response a year and half later, Jade was married and five months pregnant. She had quit her job at her mother's firm, though still worked on a freelance basis. After bouts of temporary employment, her (now) husband acquired a steady administrative job to support their family.

For Jade, the transition from the structure of childhood/adolescence to the flux of adulthood was difficult, particularly given a sense of personal responsibility and lack of communal support. She describes:

... Adjusting from when you're younger, everything you do has a direction and a purpose and you know when you're supposed to do things, why you're supposed to do things, to when you become an adult. It's like literally like: think of something, then do it and then that's... The lack of purpose. That's surprised me the most. The lack of direction. Like the lack of guidance and knowing what you're supposed to do is sort of... going from school where everything is completely mapped out for you to the real world, so... *just how everyone is so in their own life and like the world is less of a community than in school and stuff when you're younger. It's all like, 'do it yourself, think of it yourself, live for yourself'*. The lack of um, any deep and spiritual meaning to life it's just like, 'nope, you were just born, just get on with it'.

In this instance, 'freedom' and 'possibilities' of adulthood are burdensome tasks compared to the anchored stability of childhood. For Jade, there is a lack of purpose and direction in the task of finding her adult self. She senses an inherent desymbolisation, lamenting the lack of 'spiritual' meaning in the 'real world', as well as the inherent narcissism (echoing Christopher Lasch's observation: 'To live for the moment is the prevailing passion – to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity' (1979: 5)). In this world that lacks deeper spiritual meaning, Jade finds herself having to do just that: find herself, or as Dufour writes 'found herself'. Unable to 'speak in the first person' (i.e. to be the self that is made by the self), she oscillates between fantasies of omnipotence, toying with 'false selves' available in the marketplace, and feelings of depression. Relaying a sense of omnipotence, despite being unable to manage university life, Jade describes her career ideas after dropping out:

I've had like a *billion* different career ideas. Just like: makeup artist and then drama roles, because I was in drama school from age seven to sixteen... I did behind the scenes stuff in the last few years, like lighting, sound, directing. I love writing. I got poetry awards and stuff like that.

However, she finds herself in a precarious financial position in which 'I just want to be able to pay rent, afford a holiday, afford anything', a position which does not square with initial (naïve?) expectations of her life and career, about which she had gained inspiration through depictions of media-as-'other':



I've always thought I had to do something spectacularly unusual. Like my life is a movie or something and I'm just like . . . mmm, it doesn't really work that way! I've tried that and you've sort of got to make money and pay rent, council tax, but you don't see that in movies really.

Despite the realisation that she might just be 'ordinary', Jade dreams of possibilities of expressing her creative self through fantasies linked to fame:

I bumped in to someone from my stage school – I went to stage school for nine and a half years – bumped into him the other day walking home from work. And he is still involved in it and he works for the headquarters of Vodafone in London. . . . And he does lighting for shows and all that. [ . . . ] And did lots of shows with them and stuff and he, he works for like, like the production company and does like lighting and all that for shows. Like he has done Rihanna world tour and da da da.

In the midst of precarious employment, Jade fantasises about founding herself through the entertainment industry as her friend has done. In fact, she started a YouTube channel and mulls over the idea of putting on a show at an abandoned theatre as a creative outlet, hoping to be able to pursue her creative side full-time once her then fiancé (now husband) finds a stable career. Importantly, this is only one of many career fantasies Jade has (e.g. she also mentions becoming a burlesque dancer or a maternity ward nurse, to name a few).

Not only does Jade imagine the endless possibilities of founding herself through fantasies of grandiose success (e.g. fame), but she also refers to the marketplace to test out various 'false selves'. Dufour (2008) comments that the neoliberal subject is one that 'can be plugged into anything, a floating subject who is always receptive to commodity flows'. This is reflected in Jade's attempts to found herself through the marketplace through appearance and style, despite financial issues. Jade feels a constraint on her appearance – and therefore the ability to found herself – both because she must conform for a job (at the time of the first interview she was working part-time at a chain restaurant with a strict employee dress code) and because she doesn't have enough money. In the following passage, she imagines what a full expression of herself might look like:

Jade: I'm quite impulsive. Sometimes, like in some ways. Most of the time I overthink everything. I'm really self-deprecating, over thinking, anxious. But on the other hand, I'm just like . . . take all my clothes off and jump off a bridge into a river because I feel like that kind of person so. I just like to be different and risky. Even the way I look and stuff. Not right now particularly because I had to tone it down to get a normal job, but if I had my ideal money and freedom to look how I want, it would be like . . . I would have loads more tattoos. I've got one, but I can't afford any more, so.

Interviewer: They're expensive!

Jade: Yeah. And I want to get the middle of my lip done. I would dye my hair lilac if it didn't damage it so much so red is the next best thing. Um, clothes would be pretty out there. I'm wearing a really normal outfit today sort of, but sometimes . . . my friends always used to have a joke, 'I wonder what she's going to turn up in tonight'. So just, like I feel less embarrassed about myself the more . . . wacky . . . or the more me I look. Like if my hair is really . . . like normally it's really curly, if it's huge and I have got no makeup on, that's when I feel most confident . . . it feels like just me.

The passage illustrates Jade's envisioning of an ideal self (impulsive, different and risky) that she could found through the marketplace. But she tends toward self-deprecation, over-thinking and anxiety, dreaming of how she could live out her ideal self through the material if she

wasn't constrained, both financially and emotionally. Perhaps indicative of her feeling unable as such to found herself as she fantasises as she is confronted with a plethora of advertising messages in the midst of a precarious financial situation, Jade notes that she feels most comfortable when she is concurrently dressed in a 'wacky' way that begets attention and rejects feminine beauty ideals – when she doesn't wear any makeup or style her hair, which was how she appeared during both interviews.

However, the importance of the marketplace is further reflected in the second meeting with Jade in which she had begun working at her mother's firm. Unsatisfied with her appearance, Jade turned to YouTube for inspiration and to discover her 'true' self. During this in-home interview, she describes the relief of gaining an income in order to shop with a friend at Primark,<sup>1</sup> evidenced by two oversized bags of new clothes sitting on her bedroom floor, yet to be unpacked. To know what to buy during the outing, she turned to YouTube:

The other day, because I have loads of stuff in there [wardrobe] that was really nice but I've had it for two years and I never wore it. Because I was like, I had the habit of because when you've got a negative body image, a lot of time you buy clothes that you think they look nice off you. But it wasn't really my style or didn't, well no they flattered me but it just wasn't my style. I was just buying things because I thought they were nice. So I was watching videos on YouTube and all that like how to identify exactly your style. And exactly what you like. And it was like 'well you should narrow it down to your favourite colours and your favourite like cuts or what sort of feel you go for. What personality type you have'. So I cleared out my whole wardrobe and then I sort of rebuilt it yesterday, went shopping with [my friend] for few hours.

On YouTube, Jade finds style inspiration and what she really likes, a style she displays on Facebook through countless mirror selfies ('I take a lot of selfies') depicting various outfits, hairstyles and makeup styles ('I like the fact that I can take an attractive picture of me').

This example shows that, perhaps in contrast to feeling empowered or agentic, Jade experiences the founding of herself as precarious as she is stuck in 'perpetual presents' while she attempts to answer existential questions by way of founding herself through fantasy (career) and the marketplace (style). By the time of her written response, five months pregnant, she seemed to resolve these issues by founding herself through motherhood ('as if it is what I was made to do'). Importantly, these themes are reflected across many participant cases as participants struggle to separate reality from idealistic fantasy, often turning to the marketplace and commodities for a (false) sense of comfort and control, which they can then display for affirmation on social media. It is furthermore not surprising that Jade (and six other participants) suffers from depression and anxiety. Dufour (2008: 71) repeatedly comments on the pervasiveness of anxiety and depression in the 'new subject form' of neoliberal consumer culture stemming from difficulties in founding the self. He observes:

The subject is increasingly trapped between a latent melancholy (the depression we hear so much about), impossibility of speaking in the first person, the illusion of omnipotence, and the temptation to adopt a false self, a borrowed personality or even the multiple personalities that are made so widely available by the market.

### *Case study: Tiffany*

Tiffany is a 28-year-old American living in Edinburgh who I met through a work colleague. At the time, Tiffany was pursuing a master's degree in management. Tiffany felt that her life

was in a bit of a rut before she left for Europe – she was in a job in corporate America for 5 years that she did not like much (‘I was just like “I’m miserable! I hate getting out of bed everyday”’). Concurrently, she decided to leave her husband who, nine years her senior, wanted her to conform to his way of life. Growing up as an only child with a single mother and then moving in directly with her (ex-)husband, she felt she did not have much of a chance to be independent, so she decided to pursue a master’s degree abroad:

I really felt like I’d gone from like being in my mom’s little cocoon to then being with my husband and like I’d never been on my own so I really thought you know if there’s a time when I can walk away from my financial responsibilities and stand on my own two feet, this is the perfect time.

Whereas Tiffany is not very close with her father, a carpenter/musician from the Philippines who left her mother when she was four years old, her mother, who works in HR, is her best friend and confidant. She describes her closeness with her mother as more than making up for her father’s absence throughout her childhood.

Tiffany is not religious. She doesn’t fancy herself the scholarly type: what she dislikes most about her time abroad is studying (‘I went home and everyone’s like “how’s school going?” and I said, “Oh it’s great, I just realised I don’t really like to read, well I don’t like to read that stuff, and I don’t like to write papers”’). Tiffany frequently mentions friends from home and has many photos of them (and her pets) in her university flat. In the United Kingdom, over the course of the interviews, she switches friend groups multiple times, first close with her housemates but then developing friendships with some of her course mates. She also began a romantic relationship early on with a British student studying for a master’s in the humanities. The relationship grew quite serious over the course of the interview process, but as evidenced by social media, ended a few months after Tiffany returned home upon travelling and finishing her degree.

Tiffany is a self-confessed ‘product junkie’. A strong theme across her four interviews is a focus on appearance and material consumption. She relies heavily on online beauty forums to keep abreast of the market, continually striving to find the best products: ‘I just have a ton of products. I’m always that person that’s like looking for the miracle product’. She describes: ‘I rely on other people like online. I rely on like people’s reviews and then try them out’. Her favourite website is ‘Beauty Department’, run by US reality-TV star turned beauty guru Lauren Conrad:

Tiffany: So, I love it um so Beauty Department. So, they have like what you should drink to like get like better skin or how to whiten your teeth or

Interviewer: So how often would you go on this, oh [reading] ‘keeping your waves overnight’

Tiffany: About once a week. So, they don’t post super often so I don’t need to keep up on it but it’ll tell me like what’s the newest in like the hair trends, nail trends, make up, and it will give you like product suggestions, so. I really love this website.

It is very important for Tiffany to keep up-to-date on fashion trends. In her five years of working in corporate America, Tiffany shopped frequently at the upscale department store Nordstrom, confessing during the in-home interview that she spent around USD\$700 a month on clothes and over \$2000 a year on beauty products. She describes:

I've always been one of those people, like I'm very like manicured so I'd like get my nails done all the time. Have my hair done all the time and have, you know, like facials. I mean I'd spend a lot of money on things that like most people would definitely consider like a luxury but for me were just like those were average things: that's what I spent my money on.

This is indeed reflected in her room in which she has at least 15 pairs of shoes, an overflowing closet and a bathroom swarming with makeup, moisturisers, hair products, nail varnish and the like.

Not only does Tiffany express materialistic values that inform the hysterological process of founding the self, but also appearance is equated with *being*. That is – like Jade – she experiences a sense of responsibility for crafting an image through the marketplace that others will judge as a reflection of the self. Tiffany also judges others by their appearance: 'Like I'll see girls that have like chipped nails, I'm like why don't you just take that off? It just looks trashy'. It is as though she equates how someone looks with their worth as a person. She comments after the previous assertion: 'I like looking put together'. I ask her to explain:

I think for me it is very much I like to be confident in the way I look and the way I feel so that's also a reason I do tend to be like dressier cos it . . . I like, I like it. I like being dressy. Um and I think as much as people don't like it, or maybe try to fight it, like people judge you on your appearance. You walk into somewhere like if I go somewhere, people are probably going to be nicer to me if I'm dressed in like jeans and blazer than if I like go in in sweatpants. Like people make assumptions based on how you look and love it, hate it, that's the way of the world so why not care how you look?

Tiffany places significant importance on commodities to found herself and her sense of self-worth in relation to others. This is far from a one-off, extreme example; it is rather an overarching theme across participant cases. Participants indeed draw on the marketplace to *found* the self and do so in ways that seem materialistic and overly focussed on being-through-appearance, aligning with Dufour's contention that the postmodern subject is susceptible to commodity flows. They devote time, effort and money crafting appearance, experiencing appearance as paramount to self-worth and the worth of others. A commodity and appearance orientation is symptomatic not of self-expression or identity 'construction' but of the desymbolisation of the neoliberal subject: 'The triumph of neoliberalism will lead to the debasement of the symbolic' (2008: 5). In this claim, Dufour ties a distinct market logic to symbolic debasement, based on goals of profit maximisation:

The advertisers have already realized that they can exploit the debacle of the superego and attempt to make brands our new symbolic markers. The market (and especially the market in images) has become a major supplier of new and volatile ego-ideals which are constantly being reshaped. (2003: 84)

In this vein, it is not surprising how appearance-focussed the participants of this study seem *to be* and how they feel pressure to continuously adapt to ever-changing market trends.

While Tiffany is assertive and self-assured, expressing agency throughout her interview through pride in the 'choices' that she has made along the way ('very, very happy with my choices'), she is cautious, though idealistic, about her ability to be agentic ('I would like to think that if I put my mind to something that I will eventually achieve it'). Her focus on appearance and commodities could be linked with uncertainty and a difficulty in symbolically anchoring to anything other than commodity flows. Despite frequently describing life course events through a discourse of choice, she repeatedly refers to events in her life as random or lucky (e.g. 'it kind of happened randomly;')

'I came here randomly;' 'I'm really lucky;' 'if you would have asked me a year ago what my life was going to be like, I had no clue this is what I was going to be doing'). This presents a contradiction between speaking as if she is in control of her 'choices' and uncertainty implicit in her life course. This is reflected in other contradictions throughout her interviews: that she first asserts love for her job, while later describing how difficult it was for her to get up in the morning; asserting a need for independence, but quickly engaging in a serious relationship, discussing the possibility for engagement by the third interview. Moreover, Tiffany's manner of speaking indicates that she similarly experiences difficulty speaking in the first person, often describing not herself, but herself in relation to a third-person subject type through her oft-used phrase: 'I'm just one of those people who . . .'. This difficulty is also reflected by frustration – rather than enjoyment – that Tiffany feels with a consumption-oriented lifestyle, feeling unable to avoid it: 'just the amount of advertisements, marketing out there I feel like I always consume, like literally consuming something'. Far from enjoying the 'productive' and 'creative' means of consumption, she instead reflects that the constant consuming she describes is 'really tiring. But I mean I guess the only time I'm probably not consuming is like when I'm asleep, you know'. Of course, sleep is also implicated in a logic of consumption (Valtonen and Närvänen, 2016).

Contradictions, and a desire to escape commodity flows and instead focus on communal goals outside of the realm of consumption, depict the struggle Tiffany faces between desiring symbolic anchoring derived from being versus having (Fromm, 1976). As mentioned, in Tiffany's university room, she had a bulletin board with pictures of her mum, dogs and best girlfriends. We spent some time discussing each picture and her best friends at home. But along with this sense of community, Tiffany often expressed judgment at the actions of others and frequently compared herself to others. In her interviews, she often discussed classmates and friends whom she met in Edinburgh. In these discussions, she positioned herself as superior for knowing, for example, how to handle the 'real' world in terms of schoolwork or for not behaving irresponsibly like her hall mates who sometimes stayed up drinking all night in the common area. Moreover, Tiffany's focus on appearance and feelings about needing to work on herself involve extensive self-monitoring, comparing herself to others both in real life (e.g. her peers) and online (on fashion, beauty and celebrity gossip websites and social media). Thus, Tiffany expressed individualistic tendencies, fostering an anxiety-provoking sense of competition rather than a (desired?) sense of communality.

## Discussion and conclusion

The case studies presented earlier reflect a subject of neoliberal consumer culture that experiences a sense of precariousness in daily life given the unboundedness of the symbolic field and an increased focus on commodities as the symbolic markers of the self. Rather than find an empowered, liberated consumer subject, we instead confront a consumer who, in attempting to found the self hysterologically, experiences self-doubt and anxiety, thus receptive to commodity flows in the symbolic anchoring of the self. Is this subject psychotic and acritical? In one sense, *yes*. That is, we could conceive of the extreme of this subject position evidenced in the data as somewhat 'psychotic', trapped in a perpetual present, increasingly unanchored and defined by constantly updating commodity flows rather than founded by metanarratives. We could also conceive of this subject form as, in a Marxist sense, experiencing the relationship to the self as reified 'in which we experience our feelings and desires as thing-like entities' (Honneth, 2008: 73) to be 'observed or manipulated' through the marketplace. The desire for control over the self and

for agency, in concert with commodity-oriented identity references and consumerist values, indicates the potential for a reified relationship to the self.

Particularly in the context of the psychoanalytic framing of desymbolisation, risks of reification seem likely given that it is 'a process designed to rid symbolic exchanges of that which is in excess of them and which at the same time institutes them: their foundations' (Dufour, 2008: 160). In this sense, desymbolisation seeks to eradicate cultural values in favour of consumerist values which are short-term given the market's constant regeneration in line with a profit logic. Thus, products, brands and other commodities *cannot* act as long-term symbolic anchors to frame identity. Instead, they are reified symbolic markers potentially devoid of cultural value. Not only do these findings show the possibility of self-reification, but the reification of others also becomes a prospect. As Honneth (2008: 75) notes:

as soon as subjects are compelled to conduct their social interactions primarily in the form of commodity exchange, they will necessarily perceive their partners in interaction, the goods to be exchanged, and finally themselves as thing-like objects; correspondingly they will relate to their surroundings in a merely contemplative fashion.

This relates to a distrust of others and competitiveness reflected in the data, treating others, as Dufour warns, as rational, calculating human beings driven only by self-interest.

This is one extreme. In another sense, we can answer the question 'Is this subject psychotic or acritical?' with a decided *no*. This is the extreme that neoliberalism desires, given its profit-maximisation intent at all costs (Lemke, 2001). The participants of this study, however, paint a more complicated picture. Although the data resonate with the tenets of Dufour's theory and importantly scrutinise extant consumer research assumptions, there is a marked desire among participants to cultivate and treasure non-consumerist, cultural values such as family, friendship, helping others and community. Also, there are many examples of a sense of shame regarding consumerist values (Cluley, 2015); for example, participants feeling ashamed when they invite me into their homes and recognise the extent of their 'stuff' or when they realise the importance they place on appearance (Tiffany on her appearance: 'Very much like concerned... yeah I guess completely vain'). This may indicate that participants are fundamentally uncomfortable with a neoliberal, consumerist way-of-being.

In this vein, the data present multiple points that problematise the neoliberal consumer subject position, given a psychoanalytic interpretation. First, far from feeling empowered by the market, these young women seem to feel trapped in the hamster wheel of consumption (e.g. a participant's feeling that 'I could always be better'). This suggests that freedom is not found in the marketplace (Gabriel, 2015). Rather, participants are proverbial slaves of the commodities to which they must refer in order to attempt to found themselves, echoing Lacan who observed: "'The slaves of the ancient world" have become replaced by men [*sic*] who have been reduced to the status of "products": "products [ . . . ] that can be consumed like other products"' (Dufour, 2008: 1). Second, the feeling that they are *responsible* for their own sense of self is somehow experienced as an anxiety-provoking burden. Indeed, Dufour expects symptoms of anxiety and depression to emanate from this plight given its hysterological paradox. Finally, participants feel as though they *should* have agency, thus feeling responsible for their self and life course, although when reflecting on their life they do not feel that occurrences were necessarily under their control or their choice.

These observations are made in the spirit of continuing the line of inquiry generated by colleagues (Cova et al., 2013; Earley, 2015; Fitchett et al., 2014; among many others) who

imaginatively and critically question the status-quo, both in theoretical and practical terms, as well as wondering about alternative ways-of-being and how these could be encouraged in a neoliberal setting. This article contributes to this imperative by: first, illustrating the potential of psychoanalytic theory for analysing ethnographic-type data related to consumption from a critical perspective (Cluley and Desmond, 2015; Gabriel, 2015); and second, demonstrating an alternative view – based on this psychoanalytic reading – of the subject of neoliberal consumer culture as potentially acritical, precarious and psychotic. While it is beyond the scope of this article to resolve normative questions around modes of resistance and alternatives, as a conclusion I offer some nascent suggestions, aiming to do what I can, as Dufour notes in his *dénouement*, to ‘resist the consolidation of total capitalism’.

Like Dufour, I am pessimistic about the consumer subject form, particularly its covert subjugation which renders power (i.e. economic domination) implicit in creating a new subject form ‘encouraged to enjoy without desire’ (Dufour, 2008: 169). First, agreeing with Saren (2015), despite that consumption brings us into being as ‘consumer’ researchers, we must resist the temptation to see every social act as one of consumption. To read social acts – such as playing the guitar, as Saren explains – as acts of consumption reinforces an economic logic rather than emphasising communal and intrinsic benefits. Arguably, under-emphasising consumption might spark imaginative, emancipatory perspectives and ideas, providing alternatives to neoliberal capitalism (Graeber, 2011). Second, less emphasis should be placed on individual agency (Askegaard and Linnett, 2011; Cluley and Dunne, 2012; Moisander et al., 2009). An emphasis on agency begets an individualistic focus that works against communal action. To instead investigate power and control, as well as means of resistance through reinstating communal symbolic anchors (community efforts, cooperative movements) seems more productive in advancing emancipatory aims (Earley, 2014) that indeed begin to imagine new forms of agency through resistance.

From a feminist perspective, we tread a fine line between seeking communal symbolic anchors and moving towards a patriarchal tradition. As in this article and Dufour’s book, there is more often theory around the consumer subject, rather than development around what the (consumer) subject – or its symbolic anchors related to cultural rather than consumerist values – might be. Reflection as such is important to critical studies given that, as suggested by Dufour, it is difficult to imagine symbolic anchors not related to traditional ones (e.g. family, nation-state) that are potentially exploitative. As political events indicate (Fraser, 2016), the rejection of neoliberal capitalism is evidenced to be supportive of these traditional symbolic anchors: the Brexit vote indicative of revived nationalism and the Trump election an attempt to restore traditional values in order to ‘make America great again’. Indeed, from Dufour’s perspective, the move towards oppressive forms of ‘tradition’ is not surprising, reflective of seeking to reinstate the (Name of the) Father (e.g. authoritarian, masculine, domineering figures such as Donald Trump) given a lack of symbolic anchors in neoliberal consumer culture.

It is imperative that future studies imagine emancipatory symbolic anchors. Here is where reviving psychoanalytic inquiry may help. Of course, psychoanalysis both clinically and methodologically is often mired in controversy – both from within the discipline and outside (for more on Lacan’s own expulsion from mainstream psychoanalytic circles, see Bailly, 2012). However, this does not detract from the potential for psychoanalysis to enhance critical inquiry in fighting the ‘good’ fight and working towards reversing the psychosis of the late modern consumer subject. Indeed, critical theorists were quick to note the emancipatory potential of psychoanalytic techniques and methods. Habermas (1987) was a methodological advocate for (Freudian) psychoanalysis given its foundation as methodically incorporating self-reflection as part and parcel of

analysis. However, he noted its emancipatory potential in this way has been under-realised – something which in the field of marketing and consumer research has unfortunately persisted (Reyes et al., 2015). Marcuse (1955) similarly noted the emancipatory potential (and under-development as such) of psychoanalysis as he strived, drawing on psychoanalytic theory, to both show the malleable social and historical construction of human instincts/drives and demonstrate how a repressive society has the potential to rid itself of repression. Fromm's (1976; Shankar and Fitchett, 2002) humanistic psychological approach draws on psychoanalytic principles to outline ways of being alternative to 'market values' of narcissistic having, possession and greed. These values of relational being (vs. having) are not necessarily related to tradition but to values not encouraged in a neoliberal environment (sharing, being present, not being ambitious etc.).

Psychoanalytic theory and methods therefore can contribute to the emancipatory project not only through rigorous self-reflection in the data analysis process, but also through theory that focusses on symbolic structures and connections that reside in our unconscious. As a methodological tool, it forces us to go beyond a descriptive level of analysis and facilitates the critical project of interrogating power relations and making connections that might at first glance seem unrelated. This was aptly demonstrated by Reyes et al. (2015) in their Lacanian analysis of the mobile phone, focussing not on the myriad of apps and content encapsulated in the phones themselves, but on the physical object and its role in intrapersonal communication. A psychoanalytic lens, as in this study, enabled the authors to go beyond assumptions of rational actors engaging in identity work in the marketplace to show that people do not simply interact with one another but enact themselves through the mobile phone, 'making the device part of a routine, erotic attachment to one's own identity' (2015: 124). As demonstrated by this study, psychoanalytically informed analysis moves beyond describing participants' productive identity work, instead illustrating potentially detrimental effects of the commodity form on identity constitution given unboundedness of the symbolic field. These and similar studies (e.g. Cluley and Dunne, 2012) demonstrate the efficacy of psychoanalytic theory in problematising the consumer subject form. In this vein, as noted earlier, future research can draw on psychoanalytic thought to further theorise alternatives to the consumer subject form, perhaps by, for example, focussing on developing Fromm's theory of relational being. If we study this relational being from a psychoanalytic perspective, along with underemphasising agency and indeed consumption, as consumer researchers we are better poised than ever, armed with a vast corpus of philosophical texts and a deep understanding of the means by which we have ended up in a culture of consumption, to fight this 'good' fight and provide antidotes to the psychosis of the consumer subject.

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**Note**

1. Primark is an Irish fast-fashion chain that offers a wide variety of clothing and accessories at very low prices.

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