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‘So much choice and no choice at all’: A socio-psychoanalytic interpretation of consumerism as a source of pollution

Abstract

Psychoanalytic concepts and theory have long served studies of consumption, from exposing unconscious motives to elucidating contemporary consuming desire. Sharing with psychoanalysis an interest in symbolic meanings, anthropological approaches have also contributed to the study of contemporary consumption and social life. In this paper, we draw on both Freudian psychoanalysis and Douglas's structural anthropology, to examine the field of non-consumption or the 'choice' *not* to buy. Based on detailed interpretations of interview data, we argue that consuming less at the individual level is not always the result of purposeful acts of ideological, anti-consumption protest or the outward expression of counter-cultural sentiments. Rather, forms of non-consumption can have deeper psychological origins that are located in a view of consumerism as a threatening force and a potent source of toxic contamination to mind and body, 'dirt' in Douglas's conceptualization. We argue that this outlook prompts a constant vigilance and the deployment of different defensive measures, prohibitions and purification rituals akin to Freud's conceptualisation of the obsessive-compulsive individual. In this way, our analysis seeks to illuminate the myriad of largely invisible ways in which some people 'choose' not to buy within an ostensibly consumer culture or dismiss the idea of such a choice altogether.

Keywords

Choice, consumerism, Douglas, Freud, marketplace, non-consumption, obsessive-compulsive, pollution.

Introduction

Many of today's narratives of mass consumption, and sociological references to 'consumer culture', place consumer desire, acquisition and use at the heart of contemporary Western societies (Bauman, 2007; Campbell, 1987; Poster, 1992; Slater, 1997). Consumerism or the ideology of the sovereign independent consumer deploying choices as the core principle of social organization has provided the moral legitimization of unrestricted markets; it has also silenced more democratic and humane alternatives to current capitalist regimes (Schwarzkopf, 2011). An alternative narrative to that of mass consumption can be found in discourses of resistance or anti-consumption. This counter-narrative, however, has encountered unrelenting criticism from cultural studies which insist that attempts to rebel against consumerism only feed the fire of the market (Heath and Potter, 2005; Holt, 2002). In both consumerist and anti-consumerist discourses, consuming subjects are assumed to be totally preoccupied with and reflexively conscious of the paraphernalia of consumerism. Whether embracing it or railing against it, consumerism totally consumes them.

Nevertheless, a cultural discourse critical of the damaging social and environmental implications of ever-increasing consumption continues to find a place in marketing theory and empirically-based accounts of consumer culture. Whilst consumer activism and resistance constitutes a common narrative within this body of work, some scholars argue that disenchantment, boredom and disengagement are becoming increasingly important among an affluent consuming public (Saren, 2012; Soper, 2007, 2008; Svendsen, 2005). Choice itself is coming under increasing scrutiny, not only with regard to its social ramifications but also to its desirability and ethical claims (Fotaki et al., 2008; Salecl, 2010; Sassatelli, 2006). As such, this current of consumer scholarship can be seen as entailing a subtle shift in emphasis, from the choices and practices of shopping, buying, using and owning (i.e. consumption), to a serious consideration of the innumerable choices *not* to shop, buy, use or own when one could. Put simply, there is a growing recognition that if we wish to deepen our understanding of contemporary consumer culture, we might begin to develop a sensitivity to the 'shadow' realm of non-consumption.

Conceptualising non-consumption within an academic discipline predicated on the significance of consumption to individuals and in society – namely cultural consumer research – is not totally straightforward. What exactly does 'non-consumption' mean, and how can we describe it? For Stammerjohan and Webster (2002: 126), non-consumption refers to all behaviours that fall into the category of 'failing to try to consume', so that the choice not to buy results from a (notably rational) desire to delay purchase, save money, exert self-

control and ignore alternatives, as well as inertia, satisfaction with current states, self-reliance and habitual behaviour. Salecl (2010: 143) has criticized the non-consumption of voluntary simplifiers as ‘a reaction to overwhelming consumer choice replicating itself in another form of consumer choice’ and ‘a rather hypocritical way for essentially well off people to address class divisions obliquely’. By contrast, in his critique of the centrality of desire in accounts of consumption, Wilk (1997: 181) conceives the theoretical space of non-consumption more broadly, in that it is not simply morality-tinged restraint on pleasure or anti-consumerist protest but as the omnipresent flipside to consumption, that ‘decisions not to consume [may be] more frequent, more obtrusive, and more important...than choices to consume. It is just that our presuppositions and ideology make them less conspicuous’.

Wilk’s observation of a background of choices not to consume that remain off the research agenda in a discipline that has largely focused on visible and spectacular consumption or anti-consumption contexts, is prescient. In marketing theory explorations of dislike or disgust have generally been used to understand the processes involved in changing consumer tastes, promoting different products, or redirecting desire for alternative markets and exchange systems. Rather less attention has been paid to the potential of disgust as underpinning avoidance behaviours and forms of consumer disengagement. Anti-consumption research also tends to privilege outward protest or ideologically motivated, antagonistic alternatives directed *against* the market. Indeed, Soper’s (2007, 2008) work on consumer disenchantment and alternative hedonism, Fitchett’s (2002) forecast of dwindling satisfaction and interest in buying more consumer goods, and emerging work on consumer fatigue, disengagement and boredom (Parmentier and Fischer, 2015; Saren, 2012) can all be seen as gaining some purchase on a different cultural dynamic where the explanatory power of existing narratives of consumer conformity (consumption) and resistance (anti-consumption) fall short.

In this paper we combine insights from Freudian psychoanalysis with the structuralist approach of Mary Douglas to produce a picture of non-consumption that attends to both psychological and socio-cultural influences. Using interview data from a larger study with individuals who have the resources to buy and consume more than they do, we show how less – rather than simply *different* – consumption, can result from a deep fear of physical and spiritual contamination by ‘consumerism’ that is motivated by unconscious processes. In particular, we will delineate the social and psychological dynamics of an aversion not limited to specific products, brands, companies or the consumer choices of others, but targeted at the heart of consumerism, its different manifestations and structural features of marketplaces. In this paper we are particularly interested in

one central question: what does it mean if the market itself is experienced by many people neither as a space of choice nor a space of contest but as a space of pollution, filth and danger to be avoided?

In the following sections, we start with an exposition of Douglas' (1966) seminal ideas on dirt and purity as cultural metaphors. We then consider Freud's conceptualizations of psychodynamic conflict and obsessive-compulsive functioning as an analytic framework for understanding the avoidance behaviours our informants described. We find that our informants' obsessive acts, their ceremonial protective measures and unbending commitment to private prohibitions, reveal the marketplace as a site of anxiety and temptation, rendering consumerism itself profoundly ambiguous, confusing and dangerous. Whilst our portrayal of the (non)consuming subject may seem rather extreme, we conclude that our socio-psychoanalytic analysis offers a compelling explanation of different forms of consumer disengagement and aversion, one that recognizes the interweaving of unconscious personal motivations and cultural beliefs.

The dangers of consumption

Combined with longstanding criticisms of consumerism and more recent objections on the grounds of social inequality, exploitative labour practices and environmental damage, contemporary consumption remains a contentious domain, one permeated with questions of morality. Consumer researchers have not failed to observe the enduring power of dualisms in how individuals make sense of the world around them and in explaining their interactions with different markets. Whether actors are theorised as defying commodity fetishism (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Thompson and Troester 2002), purifying their consumer practices (e.g. Canniford and Shankar, 2013), engaging in rituals of sacralisation (Arnould and Wallendorf 1991; Rook, 1985), or participating in consumer resistance or activism (Kozinets 2002; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004), foundational distinctions of clean/unclean, sacred/profane, nature/culture, safe/dangerous and order/chaos permeate the domain of consumption and echo the same profound and ideological themes, of right versus wrong and good versus evil.

British anthropologist Mary Douglas is no stranger to consumer research of a socio-cultural bent. Faithfully building on sociologist Emile Durkheim's ideas (Fardon, 2001) and with regular ventures into the terrain of psychoanalysis (Douglas, 1975), Douglas has sought to apply insights from pre-modern societies to understanding the contemporary world. Her insights continue to be germane and illuminating within consumer research, in studies of domestic tidiness (Dion et al., 2014), cleanliness and laundering practices (Ger and

Yeniciglu, 2004; Neves 2004), the management of possessions (Hirschman, Ruvio and Belk, 2012) and marketplace metaphors (Hirschman, 2007). Her seminal account of consumption as a 'live information system' (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 10) has been developed by McCracken (1988) in his theory of the non-linguistic symbolism of material culture and has been juxtaposed to Baudrillard's (1998 [1970]) theory of flying signifiers by Gabriel and Lang (2006). In this article, we return to the central arguments of Douglas' classic text *Purity and Danger* (1966) to interpret the experiences and avoidance behaviours described by our informants. In line with previous analyses, we note how people negotiate their consumption practices by drawing on cultural beliefs about what is pure and what is dirty (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, 1989; Hirschman et al., 2012; Neves, 2004), especially in the case of food. Indeed, motivation researcher Ernest Dichter (1947, 1960, 1964) also observed the powerful symbolic appeal of bread that looks 'natural' and 'homemade' in contrast to consumers' dislike of seemingly polluted factory-made bread, and how consumers sought to decontaminate the standardised perfection of the loaves by squeezing and smelling them. However, we argue that the visceral character of emotions articulated by our informants – their descriptions of feeling unwell or nauseous in commercial spaces, and not wanting to come into contact with certain goods as if infected or disgusting – attest to unconscious processes in concert with deeply held pollution beliefs shaped by the wider cultural context.

For Douglas classifying the world around us hinges on ideas of purity and danger. In her structural theory of pollution and purity, she argues that categorising objects or activities as polluting or sacred structures social life. In both 'primitive cultures' and contemporary societies, what is considered unclean or dirty - be it object or idea - corresponds to the problem it poses to a socially-constructed classification system:

Dirt [i]s matter out of place... [it] is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter...*This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism* ...Our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or *idea* likely to *confuse* or contradict cherished classifications' (1966: 36-7, emphasis added).

Illustrating her arguments primarily with reference to Jewish dietary laws, Douglas observes that creatures which defy categorization or fall between classifications lead to ambiguity and confusion, and thus are deemed impure. Dirt then is not an objective fact - never a 'unique isolated event' (Douglas, 1966: 36) - but a cultural label intimately bound up with disorder and chaos. Purity is its opposite; standing for order, pattern and safety. As such, any anomalies or entities that confuse these categories threaten the classification system and the consistency we seek to make of our experiences.

In consumer research, elaborate rituals that cleanse items of the stains of commerce or secure their status as sacred objects are seen as helping consumers create a familiar and safe world of their own against the threats of the marketplace and the pluralities, instabilities and disorder of the contemporary material world (Ger and Yenicioglu, 2004). Douglas's thesis prompts us to consider, not only the individual psyche, but the shared cultural values that shape individuals' classification schemes and pollution beliefs which mediate their experience. Indeed, the crucial point made by Douglas is that dirt always exists in relation to a whole social structure; interpreting ritualistic behaviour cannot be based solely on neuroses of the individual psyche (Douglas, 1966: 127-8).

For our arguments here it is important to note two further distinctions that Douglas makes: that between dirt and pollution, and pollution beliefs and morals. Pollution constitutes a particular kind of dirt/danger. It is likely to occur where the lines of structure are clearly defined, transmitting danger by physical contact; so that food can be polluting if cooked by relatively impure hands (such as those of a lower caste). As a general principle, fear of contagion is heightened if boundaries and lines that order the social experience become permeated or confused. According to Douglas, such ideas of contagion are linked to but are not the same as morals. If there is some doubt about moral rules, ideas of pollution come to simplify matters. Where moral situations are usually complicated and contradictory, pollution rules are unequivocal; 'the only material question is whether a forbidden contact has taken place or not' (Douglas, 1966: 131). Pollution beliefs can therefore reinforce social pressures to uphold a cherished order of society, 'certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion, as when the glance or touch of an adulterer is held to bring illness to his neighbours or his children...' (Douglas, 1966: 3). Douglas' examination shows us that what constitutes 'dirt', whatever entity or idea triggers nausea or disgust, is not universal across humanity but a function of a variety of social classifications.

With an implicit nod to Douglas, W. Miller, in his *Anatomy of Disgust* (1997), reiterates this anthropological association of pollution with the transgression of symbolic categories. Undoubtedly involving the senses and visceral reactions, for Miller (1997: 2) too, feeling disgusted is 'above all...a moral and social sentiment'. Disgust serves to recognize and maintain difference (us and them, you and me) but is also unique among emotions in traversing the physical and moral divide; we can feel sick when we smell a rotting corpse and nauseous at the knowledge of a loved one's betrayal. Importantly, disgust also gives us reasons for withdrawing (Miller, 1997: 204) and furthermore, in complex moral domains, attributing danger places a subject

above dispute (Douglas, 1966). Feeling physically unwell or in danger of defilement, as we will show, suggests an internalised sense of moral disgust that guides daily practices whilst remaining beneath discussion or challenge. In this paper, we use these ideas to show how our informants' descriptions of feeling ill, revolted and even violated as a result of their interactions in the marketplace indicate a deeper sense of abhorrence that, though context-bound and culturally shaped, express unconscious psychological processes.

Non-consumption as psychodynamic conflict

Psychoanalysis, as a discipline that sets its sights on unconscious desire and fantasy, has proven adept at addressing some of the addictive and frustrating qualities of contemporary consumption and explaining the migratory tendencies of the meanings in a consumer culture. Although not directly engaged with the study of consumption, Freud's psychoanalysis has been extensively deployed to explain many different aspects of consumer culture, ranging from the use of commodities for substitute gratification and consumer narcissism (e.g. Cluley and Dunne, 2012; Lasch, 1980), to the sexualization and aestheticization of everyday objects (e.g. Bowlby, 1993; Desmond, 2013). Whilst compulsive behaviour has received considerable attention in consumer research, this has primarily related to forms of 'extreme' engagement in consumption such as various types of addiction (e.g. Elliott, 1994; O'Guinn and Faber 1989). Here we turn to consider the rejection of consumption in our informants' narratives and their non-consuming behaviours in light of Freud's description of the obsessive-compulsive individual. Thus, while psychoanalysis has been frequently deployed as a theory to account for how individuals displace their desires onto material goods as a means of defending themselves against deeper anxieties and conflicts, our use of psychoanalytic theory here seeks to support our explanations for how people defend themselves against the anxiety and danger posed by consumerism, its offerings and its spaces, by resorting to a variety of private ceremonials and rituals.

In his paper *Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices* (1907), Freud identifies certain striking similarities between religious rituals and obsessional symptoms. At a formal level, both religious rituals and obsessional symptoms display an exaggerated attention to detail, they share a compulsive repetitive quality, they exhibit a degree of detachment from rational considerations, and they both seem to be dictated by powerful 'unwritten rules'. They also share similarities at the symbolic level, in that both religious rituals, such as circumcision (symbolic castration) and the Christian Eucharist (symbolic eating of the murdered leader's flesh and drinking of his blood), and obsessional symptoms (like compulsive washing of hands or avoiding certain foods etc.) seem to re-enact deep-seated desires, that are normally prohibited and disavowed. Psychologically,

both religious rituals and obsessional symptoms breed intense dependency and appear to exorcise deep anxieties, acting as defences against perceived dangers. Unless these observances are closely adhered to, subjects feel at risk of a terrible misfortune or divine punishment. When occasionally they fail to observe some of these ceremonials, Freud argues, they feel compelled to practice a variety of penance rituals to expiate their guilt. Freud's link between religiosity and obsession has been subsequently explored and extended by psychologists (for an overview, see Lewis (1994)), psychiatrists (e.g. Tek and Ulug, 2001; Fiske and Haslam, 1997) and anthropologists (Dulaney and Fiske, 1994).

For the obsessive-compulsive, tiny details matter hugely, various compulsions and prohibitions seem senseless yet irresistible and the observance of rituals is used to defend against all kinds of actual and imagined dangers. While the term 'obsessional neurosis' usually only refers to individuals who suffer from extreme forms of obsessive ideas and compulsive actions that result in serious inhibitions in their day-to-day life, obsessional functioning can also be observed in numerous, so-called normal individuals, who manage to incorporate their obsessions into their everyday life. In this regard, psychoanalysis refuses to distinguish between normal and pathological functioning, insisting that the same underlying psychological mechanisms can be found in both, even if the outcomes are different (Freud, 1937). Obsessional functioning then involves certain symptoms, notably prohibitions, fixations, scrupulousness and certain emotions, like guilt, disgust and anxiety that can be found in different extents both in the pathological and 'normal' individual. Here we bring the insights of Freud and Douglas together to suggest that contemporary consumer society prompts various forms of compulsive functioning within the realm of non-consumption.

Method

Our empirical material was collected as part of a wider microsociological study into everyday experiences of non-consumption in which we conducted depth interviews with 29 informants ranging in age, level of education, occupation and family status (see Table 1). Each informant described themselves as disinclined to consuming activities such as shopping, buying and owning 'things', and as spending less than they could afford on a regular basis. The interviews lasted from 1 to 3.5 hours in length, producing 55 hours of recorded data in total. Informants were recruited via advertisements in local magazines, emails to mailing lists, flyer drops in urban and rural residential areas and notices posted at non-commercial venues including community centres, libraries, and a range of religious centres in South-West England.

The interviews were loosely structured and sought to elicit the informant's biography (his or her life so far), followed by questions that prompted for detailed descriptions of direct experiences and personal stories rather than abstract opinions or generalizations. To reach issues not immediately implicit in surface responses a descriptive line of questioning was favoured and 'why' questions were avoided to minimise cause-and-effect rationalizations (Goulding, 2005; Thompson et al., 1994). All the interviews were transcribed in full and commonalities and differences were examined within each interview and then across the dataset to elicit global themes. In seeking to uncover the deeper meanings and patterns within the text, our analysis is informed by the systematic 'exercise of suspicion' traditional to psychoanalytic interpretation (Ricoeur, 1970: 32). This is consistent with a critical management approach to 'over-interpretation' which does not merely seek to elucidate the meanings in various texts, but, transgressing the conventions of positive observations, seeks to identify those meanings and silences that result from what is referred to as 'soft power' (Svensson, 2014: 175). In so doing, the critical interpreter, with the assistance of various conceptual instruments like psychoanalysis or poststructuralism, ventures into interpretations and meanings that may be inaccessible to the subjects themselves. All names and identifying details have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Commercial spaces as contaminated places

The marketplace as a threat to health

Across the dataset, our informants constructed salient features of consumer culture as powerful sources of physiological ill-health and spiritual pollution. Commercial retail sites were generally taken as emblematic of the market and experienced as polluted and toxic places. The common language the informants used revealed a sense of an ethereal contagious contamination that drained one of perceived vital energy (Gould, 1991) and posed a real threat to psychological health. This is an excerpt from Gemma's narrative:

I do find it very draining, going into normal shops; the energy in there is awful. The supermarket, the normal shops. That energy drains people, maybe it's the people in there - it just drains me and makes me mental. [Going into a 'normal shop' is] like all of my energy and life has been sucked out of me, and I'm just a shell...I don't really understand...So I try to get out...I don't kind of just wander, if I start wandering I get zapped... [Yawns] Even the thought of it tires me out.

Informants also described physiological ailments of discomfort and pain; they told us how they would hold their breath if they had to go shopping, as if the air was replete with pathogens, whilst others described feeling too hot, too cold, heavy, panicky, frustrated, drained, overexcited, suffering from backaches, headaches, eye-watering, earaches and so forth. As consumer researchers have repeatedly noted (Belk et al., 1989; Kozinets, 2008; Luedicke et al., 2010), a dominant contemporary view on consumerism is critical, synthesising a whole host of anxieties and complaints about consumerism so that it is seen as 'bad', even sinful. But while several of the informants were aware of this view, this does not in itself explain why they somatised their malaise and, as we shall see, enacted an array of elaborate private rituals that display a distinctly obsessive quality. Here Kay describes her experience of being in a supermarket, a site that engenders conflicted feelings of temptation, guilt and moral disgust:

I hated being inside it, it's horrible being inside it, it's not comfortable. The lighting makes your eyes water. They keep moving things around. They have so much choice but they've always sold out of the thing that you want. Literally, always sold out of the thing that you want. So much choice, but no choice at all, you know? The vegetables, they all look lovely but they're all really highly packaged which I think is really bad...Just so...just feels like it's so wrong in so many ways, you know, it's so un-green. All the things have come such a long way, you just feel- food miles, plastic bags all these things that make me feel guilty. I don't like it. And having grown your own vegetables you see the other side of the coin. Yeah. But then they've got the things that you need, like washing powder, the big big things of washing powder which are so much cheaper than buying the little things from the local shop. You kind of feel um a bit like a whore when you go there. You're buying into a value system that you don't really believe in but it's so necessary for your existence, but you hate yourself for doing it.

The image of a prostitute captures both Kay's own sense of purity and the need to protect it and her feelings of uncleanness, even self-loathing. Yet the image also alludes to a sense of desperation, of having no alternative but to relinquish her values, for the sake of money. For Kay, the act of shopping in this polluted environment is understood as one of defilement and moral violation.

Anxiety and temptation

In addition to sickness and disgust, the belief in marketplaces as polluted and polluting engendered a great deal of anxiety. Psychoanalytic theory identifies different types of anxiety (Freud, 1926/1959); our respondents' anxiety was at times realistic, caused by actual dangers, like congestion, delays, parking tickets, losing things and so forth. More often, however, we encounter two other types of anxiety, moral anxiety, caused by the fear of being compromised or tempted to act contrary to their values, and neurotic, an anxiety that arises from being overwhelmed by their own unconscious desires, emotions and fantasies. In the next excerpt, Nora acknowledges but also fights back the temptation presented by items for sale in the polluting environment of a crowded clothing store; this temptation unleashes a powerful set of anxieties that trigger off several psychological defences:

I picked up about four things [in the January sales]...probably for three quarters of an hour, and I looked at these things and thought 'what am I doing?' and I actually hung them on a rail and walked out the shop!...It's that time of year and you feel you ought to go in, you feel you ought to. What I'd be far better thinking is when I actually need something I'll go and look for that whether it's the sales or not, rather than this very depressing wandering around shops, with all these frantic women. [What was it like going round the shops?] I don't know [small sigh]. Nothing. I mean I just can't see the pleasure in it, at all. It's just not my bag. I mean that's why I just put everything back on the rail, coz I just thought 'this is completely pointless and stupid'...
I don't want them at home with me.

This statement is suggestive of defence mechanisms prompted by an anxiety of being overwhelmed by desire. These include denial ("I can't see the pleasure in it at all"), disidentification ("all these frantic women"), reaction formation ("It's just not my bag") and rationalization ("I'd be far better ..."). At the same time, the statement highlights the temptation that turns ordinary items of clothing into toxic materials that must be kept outside the protected environment of 'the home'.

In accordance with previous consumer research, we found that the profane realm of commerce can be seen as contaminating commodities, against which barriers must be erected lest they should cross the line that keeps them outside the home. As a result, our respondents sought not only to avoid venturing to such dangerous territories and engage in purification rituals (such as customizing commodities or combining them with homemade elements), but also to avoid actual physical contact with the infected goods. As such, some of our

informants deployed protective measures to prevent physical contact between polluting objects and the purity of the body and the *sanctum sanctorum* of the home (Hirschman et al., 2012). For Kristen, even watching a movie at home poses a threat to her health, risking importing excessive consumerist ‘excitement’ and ‘stimulation’ that she believes causes damaging, artificial and short-lived ‘highs’:

I’ve been able to pinpoint what it feels like to want something I don’t need, like a rush of excitement, but then I know that if I buy it, then the next day it doesn’t really have any meaning, so I...just feel a lot happier and more content to not...Yeah we do watch films but something specifically chosen...thinking about why you wanna watch it...Just so I’m not taking in stuff that’s gonna deplete me, I like to take in or consume something that’s gonna make me feel happier or benefit my life or my wellbeing, something that’ll be like healthy to take in. Yeah I think of it in the same way as food...it’s the same thing with watching something or listening to something. I’m also just very sensitive, like I said, with like going into supermarkets, it’s really over-stimulating. So for films I really have to be able to enjoy the aesthetic of it as well, like if it’s too colourful or violent or loud in some way, I really don’t enjoy it. So it has to be quite calm. It might be very emotionally intense but I think, um yeah for me it’s very depleting, if it’s too stimulating.

The view of material possessions as tarnished and polluting even when very attractive comes across in a powerful recollection reported by Brian. Unlike the two earlier statements, anxiety here has a distinctly moral quality, as Brian explicitly refers to feeling guilty when he receives Christmas presents:

I remember actually at Christmas when I was a child, and having presents and not enjoying it, because it was...Yeah I remember that. [Pause] I do remember that, it’s a weird feeling because I’m not sure it was a very healthy feeling really, I can actually remember where I was in the house we were in and everything, it was just a kind of feeling that I’ve got all these things but I feel like it’s left me a bit empty, I’m not sure ‘what’s it all for?’ sort of thing, it was kinda a weird feeling. It wasn’t a nice feeling, it was a horrible feeling. Coz I felt kind of alienated from how I felt I was supposed to feel [chuckles]. I never feel guilty like that, coz I remember feeling really quite guilty and quite sorrowful and it is connected to consumerism, yeah, it’s connected with the fact that I had been given all these lovely things. [I was] about six [years old] something like that.

In this passage, Brian repeats the word 'feeling' seven times in quick succession, qualifying it twice as 'weird' and twice as accompanied by 'guilt', a feeling closely related to moral anxiety. Brian's childhood guilt may be entirely a result of not experiencing the joy that his parents had anticipated, but his description suggests to us that his guilt results from a sense that he feels he does not deserve 'all these lovely things', worsened, conceivably, by a moral anxiety of having more gifts than other children. The moral anxiety triggered by owning desirable commodities stays with him, an anxiety he seeks to allay through restricting his own consumption to acceptable (pure) items and avoiding purchasing from large corporations (dirt/danger).

Obsessive-compulsive protection from the dirt of consumerism

Since commercial sites and the objects sold within them were experienced as dangerous sources of pollution, many of our respondents sought to defend themselves against them. These defences resulted in behaviours that are associated with obsessive-compulsive functioning. Several of our respondents paid extraordinary attention to every detail of their consumption, displaying a fastidiousness that verged on the irrational, and a complete adherence to private, unwritten rules. They described going shopping as an unpleasant immersion, while others kept their eyes firmly on the task at hand lest they be led into unwanted temptations. As an activity permitted rather than absolutely forbidden, for several of our informants, 'going shopping' required the obsessive following of careful routines that appear to afford a kind of protection. Several of our informants described pre- and post-shopping trip procedures, of having to 'steel yourself to venture into town', or having a walk afterwards to 'calm down', as well as insisting on rules if shopping with someone else such as limiting the time spent in one shop. Now seen as inside the polluting territory of the marketplace, as Douglas has argued, the fear of pollution is heightened.

Our informants' list-making, rule-setting and deployment of regulations and restrictions as well as their detailed descriptions of their execution appear to us as ritualistic practices that serve as protective measures. We saw how the repetition of small actions in daily life were believed to protect them from dangerous exposure to contamination or some other ill set to befall them. In the following extract, Karen describes how she is unable to enter the marketplace without following a seemingly foolish set of actions, a pre-shopping ritual motivated by rules unknown to Karen herself.

I'm not going out just looking which I'd never do in a million years because I'd always get it wrong. I know exactly what I've got to buy, I'm not browsing, never do that, I have done it before, but I will do - it's stupid, I drive [my daughter] bananas - I will do a list of everything, I will put the shops I've got to

go into and I will put them in the order of where they are in town. So I start at the top of High Road and end up down in Broadgate, but if I miss something out of the order on the way down, I can't bring myself to go back to it. It sounds bizarre - if it's close by I will, but then I think 'well that takes me out of the order for that...' So I won't go back to it and then that distresses me because then I've got to go back down and to that shop again. [What is it that's off-putting about that?] I don't know, I can't articulate it. I don't know.

Freud (1907) contends that protective measures such as ceremonials and obsessive acts can be displaced by outright prohibitions. Just as Douglas observed, the danger of pollution was great when it came to food, since it crosses the most critical inner-outer boundary. This extract from Rich's interview illustrates how the belief in the polluting power of mass-produced grain upholds his moral abhorrence of consumerism and his non-consumption:

What I eat is very challenging to people. To my parents and their friends and a couple of people I've met. They don't understand why I would do that to my body, they think I'm doing harm to myself. It's nothing really that extreme at all, for instance I've eliminated wheat and corn. And wheat and corn are like the staple, kind of, things that people eat in the Western culture. It's in most products in the supermarket, it's why certain items in the economy range are just so cheap, it's because they're stuffed with corn and wheat, there's an oversupply of it. And it's an empty food for me, it doesn't really contain anything nutritious, and it gives me tummy ache. So I don't want to have it. *I don't want it anywhere near me.* Similarly with most um packaged processed wheat and vegetables from supermarkets. I only eat things that are 100% organic and if possible meet the person who grew or reared the livestock, which is why I go directly to the farmers market and buy direct from growers.

For Rich, wheat and corn represent a danger of contamination against which he must be constantly vigilant. Interpreting non-consumption as sustained by pollution beliefs goes beyond the mere rehearsal of narratives that condemn consumerism. Indeed, as Douglas has argued, it appears that Rich's culturally-informed moral values are upheld by danger-beliefs that any contact will cause him to suffer physiological symptoms. Clearly at odds with public beliefs and general norms, Rich's privately-decided classification of these staple grains as polluting

– and therefore impermissible – also serves an interpersonal function in placing the subject above dispute in day-to-day living (Douglas, 1966: 41).

Whilst some items were so noxious as to be absolutely prohibited, and some spaces so dangerous as to demand protective measures, our respondents also deemed a seemingly idiosyncratic range of items and activities as pure. Many acknowledged certain exceptions for which buying, using and owning was a source of joy or ‘meaningfulness’. These included objects and food that were seen as part of a healthy lifestyle, such as organic and home-grown vegetables, products that were sourced locally, food bought in farmers’ markets, and goods that would be useful as raw materials for what were seen as nourishing, wholesome creations, such as wool for knitting.

Though the classification systems may seem to follow a quite unique individual logic, we noticed that permissible items tended to bear their essential connections with nature. Six of our participants constructed mess, mud and dirt as healthy and nourishing in their narratives, whilst cellophane-wrapped food or brand-new items, by contrast, were treated as filthy and harmful. Charlie told us about an *objet trouvé* displayed on his mantelpiece, a “rustic-y” bottle with the soil, moss and spiderwebs still inside, though he refuses to keep DVDs in his home. Wooden toys were permissible for Casey’s baby to play with but plastic ones were not; she tells us that “plastic is awful...it retain[s] a memory...even if you pour on antibacterial spray, even if you try to disinfect [plastic toys], they don’t come clean”. In the extract below, Rich reflects this schism between a standardised, artificial world of consumerism that is damaging to one’s health, and the enrichment and purity offered by ‘non-consumerist’ activities and spaces.

Most experiences now aren’t very...pleasing to the senses. You go to the supermarket and because of some ridiculous EU health regulation they have to be a certain temperature and you just can’t really get a sense of this as a real place. You pick up something and it’s like, it’s ice cold. Or ‘this is wrapped in plastic’. And you go into the farmer’s market, and the first thing that hits you is the smell, you can smell lots of different kinds of...produce. You can smell the meat, you can handle the meat, then you’re using your other sense of touch, you can touch the actual vegetables, and they’re full of dirt and really messy. Um, I love the fact how it’s sometimes slightly disorganised and unpredictable. You pick up some of the vegetables and they’re just totally out of shape and a totally different size. So for me it’s like a celebration of inconsistency and er, eccentricity.

At first look, this extract might seem to contradict Douglas's metaphorical distinction. Rich presents the supermarket as a space of consumerism that poses a danger to people's health and wellbeing (pollution-disorder), whilst at the same time disparaging EU bureaucracy for over-regulated sanitisation (cleanliness-order). In contrast, produce sold in the shambolic farmers' market is positioned as wholesome because it is "full of dirt". But Douglas' sociological view emphasises the presence of a culturally-shaped classification system in which dirt is 'matter out of place', dirt is that which does not conform to culturally-cherished categories. The cleanliness and standardization our informants associated with large-scale commercial processes and consumerism is therefore deemed alien, a threat to the abstract constitution of the purity of 'nature'. As such, encasing food in plastic packaging does not protect the contents but contaminates them. Like the farmers' market, the private space of the home was presented as a sacred and safe place to be cleansed and protected at all costs, and here we see further evidence of obsessive-compulsive functioning. Unlike the home celebrated by consumerist discourses - the home as an aesthetic museum, or the home as storage for exhausted and unwanted material possessions - many of our respondents were fastidious in their attention to their home and its contents. Since our participants believed consumerism to be a source of pollution, this meant that, in general, abstract notions of purity were produced not through more consumption but through less. This was particularly clear in Charlie's testimony who, two years prior to the interview, had been forced to declare himself bankrupt.

Every time I moved house, I cleared out. Constantly whittling it all down. 100% honest I did it to an exceptional level of detail, under the sink, like everyone - like my parents' house is usually full of stuff that doesn't get used for decades and under my sink there is one bottle of detergent that does everything in the whole house. It exemplifies my determination to really live freely, by being free on the outside it's matching my desire to be free on the inside and they can't be separated. So yeah, [I do] immense clear-outs. My bathroom is very very simple, just one or two products that I still buy from *Forever* [a health food brand] with a few plants. Chemical-free, I'm keen on keeping myself nice and pure if you like... There's a very very small clothes rack in the corner, people are shocked at the amount of clothes I don't have. Simple clothes, enough clothes so I can just get by with... All nice and clean and tidy and organised, perhaps to an anal level many people would say, but it gives me massive amounts of clarity and headspace.

Charlie's systematic material dispossession, the purification of his home and the detoxification of his mind and body can be seen as symptoms directly analogous to those of the obsessional neurosis known as ablutomania, the compulsive washing and removal of dirt. The diligence with which he pursued his objective and the patent narcissistic satisfaction he derived from reducing his possessions to a minimum directly match Freud's (1926/1959: 99) observation that 'the systems which the obsessional neurotic constructs flatter his self-love by making him feel that he is better than other people because he is specially clean or specially conscientious'. And directly as Freud described the neurotic symptom as 'a compromise between warring forces of the mind', Charlie's compulsive obsessive dispossession and purification can be seen directly as an attempt to meet his desire to 'live freely... to be free on the inside' through the act of freeing himself of possessions, an act that could possibly be seen as relieving the guilt he experienced for his previous consumption frenzy – washing being a well-recognized guilt relieving ritual. In being a slave to his obsessive routines, Charlie discovers freedom and freedom from guilt. Thus, obsessive ritualistic actions, as we see both in his scrupulous level of dispossession and also in the exceptions he admits into the home, reproduce something of the pleasure which they are designed to prevent (Freud, 1907).

A socio-psychoanalytic account of non-consumption

Though our socio-psychoanalytic reading, we have shown how our respondents' avoidance of marketplaces, in the belief that consumerism is polluting, acts to reinforce social pressures to avoid or at least limit their consumption in order to protect their physical and spiritual health and purity. In this light, the objects and experiences of consumerism (foodstuffs, excessive material ownership, spectacular forms of entertainment) are constant threats to their concept of cleanliness, control and order. Unavoidable exposures to such objects and experiences and even permissible forms of shopping and consumption, as with organic food and raw materials, call for symbolic rituals aimed at cleansing the self of the impurities of consumerism that fill the air of commercial marketplaces and poison the commodities within them.

While many respondents could be viewed as phobic of contamination, they could not be viewed as suffering either from blanket fears of microbes or open spaces (microbiophobia or agoraphobia). Instead, they erected and defended mental barriers that were meant to protect them, devising various rituals to preserve their purity and wholesomeness. While occasionally amplified by ideological or political convictions, this aversion had a 'primitive' and emotional character. Our respondents acknowledged the need to venture into the world of

consumerism, but entering it was accompanied by feelings of anxiety, guilt and disgust, even self-loathing. By contrast, they juxtaposed what they viewed as the compromising and tarnished experiences of consumerism to non-market alternatives. In all these ways, they are highly reminiscent of religious people who observe dietary or other laws (like Kosher) to minuscule detail. Just as Freud and Douglas recognise, these laws also stipulate numerous and highly specific exceptions as well as penance and purification rituals when they are broken. Using Douglas, we have proposed that feelings of nausea and disgust accompanying exposure to spaces, objects, even bodily sensations associated with consumerism, mark the transgression of symbolic categories. Forms of non-consumption can therefore be symbolic acts that relate to a particular kind of danger, that of pollution. Furthermore, we have shown how the compulsive repetitive quality of our respondents' private rituals, their exaggerated attention to detail, ceremonials of avoidance or careful preparations before exposure to marketplaces act to reinforce these beliefs, to defend against fear of contamination but also to allow individuals to better negotiate types of market exchanges and products that would otherwise have been off-limits.¹

Attending to some unconscious meanings of our respondents' narratives, our analysis also reveals some of the dynamic of a conflict between repressed desire and its expression. The wish to exorcise temptation and anxiety is present throughout our findings. But there is one apparent difference between the profile of our respondents and that of usual obsessional neurotics. Freud argued that the connection between that which arouses anxiety in neurotics and the danger that it imposes is always hidden. As a result, the neurotic 'submits to [a compulsion] without understanding its meaning – or at any rate its chief meaning' (Freud, 1907: 22). Most of our respondents, by contrast, understood the meaning of their compulsions, or at least they believed that they understood it. They acted in the belief that commercial marketplaces and the entire cornucopia of consumer society are tainted and dirty, that they pose a real threat to physical and spiritual health and are to be avoided at all costs. Unlike militant, evangelical anti-consumers driven by political and ideological convictions, our informants struggled to articulate intellectualised arguments. Few offered explanations as to why consumerism might be considered morally abhorrent yet several acted in the belief that contact was capable of directly causing personal harm. They often could not explain their actions, reactions or feelings of discomfort or aversion; their non-consumption was sustained by a visceral, quasi-neurotic avoidance, a vigilant ritualistic

¹ A defence mechanism, like the ones we have outlined in this paper, can also function as an attachment mechanism. Shortly after the dismantling and discrediting of socialism, many Eastern Europeans sought to defend themselves against the onslaught of capitalist markets through purification mechanisms similar to those discussed in this article (see for example Berdahl (1999) and Caldwell (2002)). These functioned as defences but also as adaptive mechanisms, helping them negotiate new and hitherto proscribed social practices. We are indebted to one of our reviewers for this observation.

eschewal that defended them against the lurking threat of temptation. In our reading, their enduring effort to protect themselves reveals a broader and deeper form of response to consumerism, one that is deeply personal, often covert and profoundly symbolic.

By bringing social theory to bear on non-consumption, our analysis begins to conceptualize the contemporary marketplace in a more nuanced way than as the uncontested hegemonic institution of our times. Combining the insights from Freud and Douglas enables us to consider how the market can be viewed as polluted terrain, where psychodynamic conflicts and shared cultural anxieties about consumerism are acted out. We have sought to avoid reductive dualisms that privilege acts of consumption and anti-consumption, but attempted to sustain an analytic gaze on previously invisible ways people 'choose' not to buy, use and own. We have suggested that the private, internalised abhorrence of our respondents signals a different dynamic operating in contemporary consumer society, one that reproduces the marketplace as an institution that triggers primal fears and anxieties against which individuals seek to defend themselves through avoidance or ritualized ceremonials.

As a result, consumerism appears through our analysis as a profoundly confusing and ambiguous entity. In the everyday understandings operating for our informants, consumerism is a site of individual temptation and of condemnation (both seductive and abhorrent), and emancipatory and manipulative (offering an abundance of freedoms and yet 'no choice at all'). We therefore see how the inherent contradictions of the market, the problem it poses to neat social classification, account for our informants' beliefs in its danger. It taints, it sickens, it disgusts because it confounds basic categories of experience. Forms of non-consumption then can be understood as an attempt to restore or maintain order in social experience, to put the matter of the market – both physical and moral – into its proper place.

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Table 1: Participant details

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Occupation	Education	Family status	Religious affiliation (self-defined)
Brian	56	M	Horticultural officer/college lecturer	University	Married, 2 children	Leans to Buddhism
Jeff	36	M	Care-worker/photographer	High-school	Single	Atheist
Phil	56	M	HGV driver/landscape gardener	College diploma	Married, 2 children	C of E (non-practising)
Gemma	33	F	Care-worker	High-school	Single	Spiritual
David	55	M	Shop assistant	High-school	Single	Ordained Buddhist
Karolina	50	F	Teacher, interpreter/translator	University	In a relationship	Spiritual
Charlie	32	M	Chef	High-school	Single	None
James	24	M	PhD student	University	In a relationship	None
Harry	24	M	Community organiser	University	In a relationship	Atheist
Chris	30	M	Environmental consultant	University	Cohabiting	None
Graham	62	M	Retired	University	Single	(Buddhism)
Rich	29	M	Unemployed	University	Cohabiting	Leans to Buddhism
Ethan	30	M	Environmental consultant	University	In a relationship	None
Rowan	49	M	Antiques and clock repairer	University	In a relationship	None
Sarah-Jane	43	F	Housing Association Officer	High-school	Single, 2 children	Likes Buddhism
Kristen	23	F	Shop assistant/events organiser	College	Cohabiting	None
Casey	36	F	Lecturer	University	Cohabiting, 1 child	None
Marina	51	F	Housewife	University	Married, 6 children	Charismatic Christian
June	61	F	Retired	University	Married, 3 children	Christian, Baptist
Jenny	65	F	Careers advisor, PhD student	University	Single, 2 children	None
Kay	52	F	Part time magazine editor	University	Married	Atheist
Matty	43	M	Self-employed stone mason	Primary-school	Single, 4 children	None
Nina	78	F	Retired	College diploma	Married, 3 children	Roman Catholic
Colin	55	M	Self-employed electronics engineer	College diploma	Single	Lapsed C of E
Kevin	53	M	Retired	University	Married, 3 children	High Anglican
Nora	47	F	Retired	University	Married	Presbyterian
Karen	52	F	Partner in accountancy firm	University	Married, 1 child	C of E (non-practising)
Barry	52	M	Environmental engineer	University	Cohabiting	None
Nick	59	M	IT technician	High-school	Married, 3 children	None