

# **The fool, the hero and the sage: narratives of non-consumption as role distance from an urban consumer-self**

## **Abstract**

One fruitful perspective with which to think differently about the consuming subject in affluent capitalist societies can be found in the field of non-consumption. Whilst ‘choices’ *not* to buy, own and use are often tacit in analyses of social class dynamics, identity expression, and consumer resistance, here we adopt the dramaturgical perspective of Erving Goffman to argue that forms of non-consumption may occur within expressions of role distance. Our interpretive analysis of interview narratives identifies three imagoes - the fool, the hero and the sage - that our informants reproduced to disaffiliate from a virtual self generated by participation in the shopping situations dominating many urban centres. We conclude that buying and consuming less in ‘everyday’ contexts may require the performance of alternative, culturally-available personas, and that role distance can signify alienation from a consumer role or, conversely, constitute a defence against actual attachment to it.

**Keywords:** Goffman, imago, narrative, non-consumption, role distance, shopping.

## Introduction

The question which remains is whether we also require...a theory of what the mechanisms are by which individuals as subjects identify (or do not identify) with the 'positions' to which they are summoned; as well as how they fashion, stylize, produce and 'perform' these positions, and why they never do so completely, for once and all time, and some never do (Hall, 1996, 14)

A central theme within sociological scholarship on consumer culture focuses on the various ways in which individuals are discursively constructed as consumers. Informed by post-structuralism, the consumer subject is conceptualised not as a natural, durable entity but as a product of a network of discourses, institutions and relations, never fully captured in the metaphors that emerge from the constant interplay of academics, industry consultants, journalists, and marketing practitioners (Cova and Cova, 2012; Gabriel and Lang, 2015; Kennedy and Lacznia, 2016). Individuals themselves may reject the social expectations inherent in a priori categorizations ascribed to them by others (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), including even that most all-embracing of categories, the individual as consumer. Though cultural consumer research has tended to work with an extremely inclusive conceptualization of consumption, recently scholars have pointed to the ideological effects of academic accounts in which an increasing number of arenas of social life – including civic action – are analysed within a discourse of market-shaped consumption (Hackley, 2009; Slater and Miller, 2007; Williams, 2004). Such discourses thus readily align with those of the corporate world and incline us to theorise all productive social practices outside those of paid labour as some kind of consumption experience (Graeber, 2011). As such, a pre-understood and prefigured notion of the consumer (and its only apparent counterpart, the anti-consumer), effectively casts individuals in neoliberal terminology at the same time as loading them with different, often conflicting social meanings (Fitchett, Patsiaouras and Davies, 2014). In this way, a prevailing construction of the individual as an always and inescapably *consuming* subject has come to be seen as a political signifier of a distinctly neoliberal flavour.

It is also now well-known that the bulk of sociological theory on consumption has tended to focus on the contours of consumer *engagement* in the social landscape – even if this ‘engagement’ is abstinence – in which less extreme, socially neutral behaviours, attitudes, identities and environments have resided in a disciplinary blind spot (Shove and Warde, 2002; also Brekhus, 1998). In contrast to the rich consumer research literature that focuses on intentional consumer resistance and empirical contexts of *anti-consumerist* activity (going to an anti-consumerism festival, product and brand avoidance, voluntary simplicity), other scholars (Gronow and Warde, 2002; Nixon and Gabriel, 2015) have called for a shift in analytic emphasis, positing the importance of investigating *choices not to buy, own or use* (non-consumption) as the omnipresent but neglected ‘shadow’ of consumption (Wilk, 1997, p181). Such a theoretical space offers fresh insight beyond a reiteration of debates on autonomy and conformity, or empowerment or resistance. Granting non-consumption sustained attention is also important if we seek a fuller understanding of the dynamics of affluent consumer societies and consider the potential for lives ‘lived less materially’ (Miller, 2010, 71).

The notion that people seek to distance themselves from some Other through the deliberate rejection of the consumer choices of other people is not new, but this ‘non-consumption’ has tended to be theorised as class-based distaste (Bourdieu, 1985; Douglas, 1997). The act of voluntary non-purchase itself can of course be a form of social distinction: the feelings of superiority to be enjoyed from inverted snobbery or merely a characteristically middle class reluctance to express consumer delight (Salecl, 2010; Shove and Warde, 2002). Consumers often draw distinctions to enhance their identity by stereotyping so-called mainstream consumers, often as ‘self-centered materialists and/or mesmerized dupes of the corporate system’ (Luedicke, Thompson and Giesler, 2010, 1017). However, one limitation with simply leaving analyses of non-consumption at the level of (often gendered as well as classed) distaste, or framed within narratives of consumer resistance, is that other presentations of self that might enact non-consumption are overlooked. Greater sensitivity to a range of forms of non-consumption may expose commonality rather than distinction and the possibility that (non)consumption can reaffirm narratives of

the self (Longhurst and Savage, 1996; Woodward, 2006). Here we use *non-consumption* to serve as an umbrella term for the range of social phenomena that includes forms of inaction, non-participation or withdrawal from the full gamut of cultural practices under consumerism.

Setting aside rational economic factors underpinning non-consumption such as saving behaviours (see for example Stammerjohan and Webster, 2002), others have primarily examined non-consumption of certain products, services or brands in relation to questions of consumer resistance, anti-consumption or activism (e.g. Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Portwood-Stacer, 2012; also Kozinets, Handelman and Lee 2015). For example, Cherrier, Black and Lee (2011, 1757) classify the ‘broad phenomenon’ of non-consumption in three ways: as intentional (a decision to not consume something), incidental (where non-consumption results from the choice of an alternative) and ineligible (when consumption is prohibited e.g. age restrictions on products). However, their empirical focus remains on intentional forms as described by ideologically-motivated individuals and thus find that non-consumption can ‘manifest as a form of protest against other careless consumers (normally consumer resistance), and as self-interested concerns (normally anti-consumption)’ (Cherrier et al. 2011, 1765). We too see non-consumption as a broad phenomenon – inclusive of anti-consumption and consumer resistance behaviours – but one that is especially useful in studying a much wider range of actions where consumption has not taken place. As such, non-consumption also serves as a theoretical space that alleviates the interpretive presumption that resistance is consciously intended, which itself requires actors to be endowed with the psychological capacities to oppose coercive institutions (Seymour, 2006). Other forms of non-consumption, different to those that result from the oppositional stance of *anti-consumption*, deserve greater analytic attention.

In this respect, Nixon and Gabriel (2015) have built on Wilk’s (1997) broadened conceptualisation of non-consumption in everyday contexts, to detail how some individuals can be driven by private prohibitions and obsessive compulsions to cleanse oneself from the symbolic contamination of consumerism, in which structural features of the urban marketplace setting (city centre high streets,

department stores, supermarkets) appear as particularly potent sources. Indeed, these authors reassert both the moral ambiguity of consumerism that seems to characterise contemporary consumers' profoundly ambivalent experiences of some consuming activities (Szmigin and Canning, 2014) and the well-known importance of foundational, mythic dualisms, cultural archetypes and normative socio-cultural dichotomies (e.g. Holbrook and Hirschman, 1993; Luedicke, Thompson and Giesler, 2010; Thompson, 1997) consumers enlist to help categorise and navigate their interactions with the physical and social world.

Here we seek to enrich empirical investigations of non-consumption by offering an interpretation of excerpts from narratives supplied by interviewees who self-designated as consistently buying and owning less than they can afford. Whilst cultural consumer research has long been interested in resistance, rejection or 'escapes' from the market, developing interest in a cultural dynamic of non-consumption inspires us to ask why and how some people – under what may be seen as considerable cultural mechanisms and pressures – consume less than their resources (financial means, physical capabilities, cultural capital) allow. Indeed, extant scholarship that involves individuals' accounts of their own consumption practices consistently identify their efforts to balance a demonstration of skill and competence in matters of aesthetic consumption whilst avoiding the presentation of a self in which it is seen to matter to them *too much* (see for example Jarness, 2015; Woodward, 2006). Though consuming less by not engaging in market interactions or disengaging from consumerist pressures whilst remaining within mainstream society remains a viable option (Ritson and Dobscha, 1999; Gabriel and Lang, 2006), this has received little scholarly attention in a field that is drawn towards more palpable depictions and activities of the consumer.

Using the dramaturgical perspective of Erving Goffman we construe the 'consumer' as one of many roles that an individual might embrace (or not) in daily life. Our account shares Nixon and Gabriel's (2015) contention that non-consumption has an important symbolic dimension beyond rational economic imperatives. However, we wish to offer a different account that considers the consumer as a

socially-defined role imbued with a normative framework and thus one that - when reflexively applied to the 'self' - creates internalised expectations for the individual in certain social and spatial contexts. In our interpretation of our informants' narratives we seek to emphasise how 'ordinary' consuming activities – usually understood in everyday speech as referring to shopping and purchasing (Warde, 2005) – can be usefully interpreted as performances that commonly occur in public and semi-public urban settings. We therefore illustrate how our informants described their non-consumption through stories in which they discursively distanced, negotiated and held off a 'virtual self' (Goffman, 1961, 107) generated for them by virtue of their participation in shopping activity within urban scenes dominated by retail outlets and marketing. Goffman's dialectical conceptualisation of self is especially apt here in being 'neither heroically autonomous nor hopelessly crushed by contemporary capitalism' (Hancock and Garner, 2015, 164). With the idea of a virtual self, Goffman refers to expectations about the character possessed by a person in a certain role (Manning, 1992); it refers to the image from which an actor apparently withdraws in order to separate him or herself and the role being played (Goffman, 1961). We thus draw on Goffman's concept of role distance to begin to theorise more subtle and interactive types of disengagement in locales where other actors and the generalised audience do not necessarily share the same ideological goal (as in anti-consumerism contexts). Drawing on interview data, we suggest that an individual's performance of role distance not only holds off the definition of self in charge of the situated activity arenas of many contemporary urban marketplaces, but that its verbal expressions and attendant practices may yield opportunities to forego purchasing and material acquisition.

In the sections that follow we first return to classics of European cultural theory that remind us of a scholarly tradition of analysing distancing and disengagement through historically-situated 'characters' in the urban milieu, and consider debates on shopping and consumption to suggest that the extensive trappings of the consumer role in many affluent societies provides much room for individual expressions of disaffiliation. We then outline the application of Goffman's insights in consumer research and sketch out our theoretical apparatus: Goffman's (1961) notion of role distance. We report the findings of our

interpretive analysis structured around three key imagoes, the fool, the hero and the sage, where each expresses distance from an ‘officially available self’ (Goffman, 1961, 118). In this way, we illustrate how buying and consuming less in everyday contexts can be achieved through the performance of alternative, culturally-available roles (beyond those of activist or rebel), and that expressions of role distance can constitute alienation from a consumer role or, conversely, a defence against actual attachment to consumerism.

### **Disengagement in the consuming city**

The unexpected sensory onslaught of the modern metropolis was seen by some European cultural theorists as engendering various historically-situated modes of disengagement and coping among the citizenry. Simmel’s ([1905] 1950, 14) ‘blasé outlook’ represented a typical adaptive psychic phenomenon: a ‘protective organ’ originating both in the city-goer’s physiological exhaustion from the bombardment of violent stimuli in a rapidly changing social environment, and from the indifference towards commodities experienced as undifferentiated and meaningless. Iconic characters in explanations of modernity, such as the close-but-distant stranger, the nonchalant dandy, and the contemplative *flâneur/flâneuse* in juxtaposition to the gaping *badaud* or bystander have served to personify ambivalent stances towards urban life in modernity (Shaya, 2004) and, for Walter Benjamin (1983, 36) at least, the possibility of transcending oppressive aspects of the city such as consumerism (Jacobs, 2002).

Though Benjamin saw consumer capitalism as turning the investigative gaze of strolling into window-shopping (Benjamin 1983, 54-55), the sense that individuals seek to cope by holding the city at bay remains in analyses of the postmodern city too. Though the market has a remarkable capacity to absorb and aestheticise acts of resistance, Baudrillard (1998, 194) argues that ‘the totalitarian ethic of affluence’ in consumer society has at its heart a deep malaise, and that one dysfunction of prosperity is a collective, irrepressible fatigue on the part of its citizens. For Baudrillard (1998, 200), this anomic fatigue constitutes a form of ‘passive refusal’ that ‘is in fact *latent violence*’. Thus, what can be mistaken for

‘lifelessness, disaffection’ is actually a form of concealed protest, ‘an activity, a latent, endemic revolt, unconscious of itself’ because ‘*[T]rue passivity is to be found in the joyful conformity to the system*’ (Baudrillard 1998, 201, emphasis in original). This fatigue is distinct from discourses of anti-consumption (Clarke, 2003) in which the sole ‘alternative’ to a consumer identity has tended to be the active, reflexive, politically-motivated ‘anti-consumer’ (see for example Bossy, 2014; Humphrey, 2011; Portwood-Stacer, 2012; Zamwel, Sasson-Levy and Ben-Porat, 2014). Instead, Baudrillard’s fatigue constitutes a form of rejection that, for Clarke (2003, 162) is not negative but expressed in the sensibility of *a preference to not*. Certainly shopper typologies have repeatedly identified a reluctant or apathetic segment of affluent consumers within the metropolitan milieu of consumer cultures (Stone, 1954; Lunt and Livingstone, 1992; Reid and Brown, 1996) but these have tended to be abstracted from socio-cultural contexts of consumption (Miller, 2008 is an exception).

The rise of so-called cities of consumption – a metropolis reshaped as a (market)place where the affluent can access highly symbolic resources with which to create a self through personal choice – has not dissolved long-standing versions of the ‘jeremiad against consumerism’ (Luedicke, Thompson and Giesler, 2010, 1016) in popular culture that represents consumption as ultimately unfulfilling and the root cause of much ecological and social damage (Sassatelli, 2007; Schor and Holt, 2000; Soper, 2007). No doubt a source of great pleasure, enjoyment and freedom for many – even a citizen’s ‘duty’ (Smart 2017, 9) – shopping activities too are popularly lambasted as symptomatic of the superficiality and vulgarity of mass consumption especially when compared to more ‘serious’ or worthy pursuits (Campbell, 1997; Miller, 1997). As such, whilst sociologists have exposed the logic of consumption running through urban development (Christopherson, 1994; Clarke, 2003; Miles and Miles, 2004; Worpole, 1992; Zukin, 1995), consuming activities and the positional designation of ‘consumer’ can be seen as an ambiguous situation of conflicting normative expectations for some individuals in marketplace contexts.

### **Role distance in everyday life**



Considering the profound influence and legacy of Goffman's dramaturgical perspective across the social sciences, there is surprisingly little cultural consumer research that applies his theoretical insights as a central explanatory framework. Perhaps his most directly applicable book, *Gender Advertisements* (1979) has been leveraged in several works by Schroeder (2005; Schroeder and Borgerson, 1998; 2003; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004) to expose the scripted nature of gender performance and sexist stereotypes inscribed in the subtle detail of visual conventions, and by Hancock and Garner (2015) in their historical analysis of self-construction. The highly symbolic nature of elaborated contemporary marketplaces has been known since the broadening of the concept of marketing (Levy 1959; Kotler and Levy 1969), and in this regard Goffman's insights on the social origins of identity primarily from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) have been applied to analyses of status-seeking consumption (Eastman, Goldsmith and Flynn, 1999), product choice and purchase (Dahl, Manchanda and Argo, 2001; McCracken 1986), impression management in services marketing (e.g. Grove and Fisk 2013), and consumer research on the self-concept (Lee, 1990; Reed, 2002; Schouten, 1991). His theory of stigma (Goffman, 1963) has been widely cited to understand the consumption of minority groups (Adkins and Ozanne, 2005; Henry and Caldwell, 2006; Sandikci and Ger, 2010). Role distance has received scant attention, even where consumption is construed as a situated practice, but has been applied in analyses of leisure travellers' attempts to shirk the role of the ordinary tourist (Jacobsen, 2000).

Goffman was well aware of the communicative power of distancing oneself from the social expectations linked to particular roles. In his book *Encounters* (1961), Goffman introduces the notion of role distance to describe individuals' ability to wrest some autonomy from predefined social roles. Taking a merry-go-round in an amusement park as an example of a 'situated activity system' (1961, 84) which provides an arena for certain conduct, Goffman considers the role formation and differentiation that emerges among the members: the children of different ages who ride the horses (or refuse to), the parents who watch, the operator. Whilst young children can be seen to fully *embrace* their situated activity role astraddle the wooden horses, Goffman observes how older boys lark about, hold on only to the pole

whilst leaning back to stare at the sky, ride backwards or attempt to change horses during the ride. The message is clear, “‘Whatever I am, I’m not just someone who can barely manage to stay on a wooden horse” ’ (Goffman, 1961, 95). This is not an obligatory expression for the *situation* but for the boys’ *manhood*. Through active manipulation of the situation, the boys withdraw not from the role of rider (or shopper) but from a self implied in the role for all accepting performers (i.e. consumer). For Goffman (1961, 117), the individual,

‘must be seen as someone who organizes his expressive situational behaviour *in relation to* situated activity roles, but in doing this he uses whatever means are at hand to introduce a margin of freedom and manoeuvrability, of pointed disidentification, between himself and the self virtually available for him in the situation’ (emphasis in original).

*Embracing* a role, such as police officer, parent or consumer, involves three features: an expressed attachment to the role, the demonstration of the qualifications or capacities for performing it, and active engagement in the role as in the visible investment of attention or muscular effort. Role distance, on the other hand, refers to the wedge driven by the individual between her self and the image or virtual self generated for her by virtue of her mere participation in a situated activity, such as shopping. Disaffection or ‘disdainful detachment’ (Goffman, 1961, 98) can be expressed through jokes, mutterings, irony, sullenness, sarcasm, gestures, facial expressions and various other forms of skittish behaviour and ‘clowning around’. Goffman also notes that role distance can be achieved through an alternative identification – one that directly opposes or is simply different to the official one and that these various identificatory demands are not created by the individual but drawn from roles bestowed by society.

Goffman makes one further point of relevance to our particular arguments. Role distance is not an outright rebellion or total rejection of a role. Indeed, it communicates special facts about the self – in going along with the activity but yet holding the role off in various ways – that cannot be conveyed by an outright refusal. For example, participation in an activity can be an attempt to fit in, or can be styled to

show the opposite; that one is somewhat out of place, entering the situation ‘only to the degree that one can demonstrate that one does not belong’ (Goffman, 1961, 97). In the analysis that follows, we use Goffman’s scheme to illustrate the ways our informants verbalised expressions of role distance from implicit, different virtual ‘consumer’ selves, making use of the leeway they find in the social structure to cut an alternative figure that constitutes neither complete conformity nor outright opposition or resistance (Coser, 1966).

## **Method**

The data we present here is from a phenomenological inquiry investigating non-consumption conducted in Southern England during 2013-2014. Since inactivity or ‘not-doing’ (Mullaney, 2006) is not necessarily easy to verbalise, the overarching objective was to examine how consumerism was experienced and discursively reproduced for those individuals disinclined to shopping, buying and owning commodities. We used two sampling criteria to select a purposive sample of adults who infrequently shop, desire or acquire material items but have sufficient resources to do so: 1) individuals who experience shopping, buying or owning material objects as largely uninteresting or unappealing i.e. they are not actively engaging or wishing to engage in consumer activities regularly and 2) adults who consume less voluntarily i.e. they are not entirely excluded from engaging in the marketplace, for example, through perceived lack of financial resources. These criteria formed the basis of the call for volunteers in the recruiting materials as well as serving as an entry point into the topic in quotidian contexts. Participants were recruited through local community magazine advertising (free circulars), researchers’ contacts, flyer drops in residential areas of cities, and posters at non-commercial venues including community centres, religious centres and libraries. Prior to interviewing, we asked informants to confirm that shopping was not engaged in as a leisure activity and that non-essential levels of financial expenditure were self-defined as low. The sample included twenty-eight individuals (16 men, 12 women) of different employment status (23 full-time employed/self-employed, three retired, one unemployed, one in full-time study) and formal education level (22 had college diplomas, undergraduate degrees or above,

five had secondary school qualifications, one primary school education only) all of whom lived in cities or city suburbs. As such, and due to our interest in *voluntary* non-participation, our sample consisted mainly of middle-class informants, though does include five informants who had fewer qualifications and were, at the time of the data collection, employed in manual labour or service work. We gleaned approximately 55 hours of data with interviews ranging from one hour to three and half hours in length, averaging just under two hours.

Consistent with the rich detail required for high quality interpretive analysis, we conducted in-depth interviews in which informants were initially asked for a biography of themselves and their lives at that time, with which we planned to analyse the extent to which each informant understood themselves and their lives within a consumer discourse, compared to the influence of alternative sociocultural institutions such as work, family, religion, education, community etc. We found the description we used in recruiting materials resonated with the felt experience of the informants, allowing access to a range of experiences of consumption in mundane rather than spectacular contexts. We further prompted informants to describe specific consumption activities such as recent purchases as a way to understand these informants' lived experiences. Though we asked for specific stories to illustrate their preference not to engage in various micro- or macro-level aspects of consumerism (e.g. frustrations with clutter, or pressures to upscale), we did not anticipate the consistent use of three particular images across the dataset.

Viewing individual participants' spoken words in an in-depth interview as a narrative reflects the influence of phenomenology on understanding lived experience and hermeneutic philosophy's emphasis on interpretation and context. For forms of phenomenology that are social, individuals use a stock of knowledge to create meaning from a 'pool' of experiences, applying common-sense constructs and categories that are revealed through their use of images and metaphors, which play a significant role in the ways individuals construct and develop personal meanings of the world around them (Thompson, Pollio and Locander, 1994). Seeing interview texts as narratives thus infuses our analytic procedure with a sensitivity to particular literary features of the stories told, such as metaphors, images, characters,

plotlines and narrative tone. In describing experiences, individuals often become a character that mediates between the individual and his or her experience; in narrative analysis this character is called an imago (McAdams, 1985).

For McAdams (1985, 178), imagoes are highly personalised yet culturally shaped personifications of self-hood that 'specify recurrent behavioural plans.' The imago is an interpretive construct or framework to understand the personal myths individuals create to make sense of experiences. Identifying imagoes entails consideration of the narrative tone of the data as well as imagery reproduced when recounting an experience (McAdams, 1993, 48). Though imagoes are unique they frequently draw on shared cultural resources. Indeed, McAdams (1993, 50) uses the basic story forms of comedy, romance, tragedy and irony to help understand optimistic or pessimistic narrative tone and common imago types. Often imagoes are personalisations that contain many good and desirable attributes but imagoes can also be negative: the opposite of our ideal, or conflicting. Though personal narratives cannot be reduced to characterisation alone, the imago does constitute an especially revealing narrative component of identity (McAdams, 1985).

Informed by hermeneutics, figurative language is considered to reveal something in addition to mere description; it attests to a deeper significance. Though not all the narratives included the clear use of imagoes or consistent use of one imago throughout, we identified three dominant imagoes – the fool, the hero and the sage – populating the majority of the narratives (n=7, 7, 6) that yield insights for non-consumption. This is in line with previous consumer research that has alluded to the use of myths and collective archetypes in consumer narratives that can serve as 'windows on culture' (Veen, 1994, 334; Hirschman, 2000). In the following section, we offer an interpretive analysis of four lengthy extracts in order to illustrate the disavowal and disidentification from expectations and obligations of an implicit imagined consumer, that we interpret as expressions of role distance from the definitions of self generated by the 'expressive features' of situated activity (Goffman, 1961, 93). The names and identifying details of the participants have been changed to preserve anonymity.

### **Role distance from the urban consumer**

Since all our informants were ‘ordinary consumers’ in the sense that they lived and/or worked in the mainstream consumer culture of the UK, as opposed to being residents of intentional communities for example, participation in consumption activity is unavoidable. The inevitability of the need to shop, purchase and use commodities means the socially-created role of consumer as a situated virtual self regularly awaits the individual in consumer cultures, and most prominently in city settings dominated by market rather than civic opportunities. Though there is no official definition of consumer – or parent or surgeon and so on – a shared understanding of ‘a consumer’ was implicit in our empirical data: the dominant imagined urban character was one who, in Goffman’s terms, fully embraced a role of shopper and was thus embraced by it. However, we observed how our informants’ use of imagoes denoted performances that sought to accomplish distance from different versions of this virtual self: the apparently idiotic fool holds off a definition of the savvy consumer in descriptions of incompetent consumption, 2) the moral or intellectual hero quests to overcome consumer temptation in opposition to the manipulated dupe, and 3) the wise figure of the sage serves to isolate the individual from the frivolity of enchanted hedonists in spectacular arenas of mass consumption.

#### *The incompetence of the fool in a complex marketplace*

Distinct from the marketplace as a site glittering with attractive symbolic resources with which to create a self through personal choice, several informants experienced the marketplace as highly complex and emphasised their incompetence within it. For example, shopping and purchasing were narrated as involving considerable confusion and frustration, where informants became easily lost and disorientated, struggled in car parks and retail spaces of ‘absolute mayhem’ in which our informants described how they bought the ‘wrong’ thing at the ‘wrong’ price, failed to purchase what was needed, waited for 20 minutes in the wrong queue only to be told to join another, or felt ‘constantly in the way’ of other people. In a physical and social context where the act of non-consumption is deemed to be deviant (Miles and Miles, 2004, 13), the lack of consumer desire many of our informants described also became a problem. To best illustrate this performance of ineptitude, we quote a story from our interview with 52 year old accountant,

Sarah. At this point in the interview, Sarah is explaining the chore of choosing gifts – an occasion where shopping is seen as unavoidable – and we have asked her if she writes her own Christmas ‘wish list’ for others:

No I’m awful. Everyone despairs of me. And then- ‘cause I don’t want anything, at the last minute I’ll be bullied into something and therefore gave my brother and sister exactly the same suggestion, and I’ve got two of them now [laughs]. I wanted some err, I bought some- oh ah [raises pitch] Sorry, I bought a load of shirts- I did exactly the same with some blouses, I thought my blouses were old and somebody at work was wearing some nice blouses and I said to her ‘where did you get them from?’ and she said - is it ‘*Lewins*’? Which is in London - so she gave me the website, so I went on there and I ordered five. And I’ve got five and I’ve worn them all but they’re all obviously all the wrong size...But I didn’t take enough time, this was even on the website. There are five of them ...but they need cufflinks. So I ordered these, I’ve obviously got a size too big...So now I’ve got five shirts that are all the wrong size, so I’ll probably have to buy another five. Because I’ve worn them all, it’s stupid, I couldn’t bring myself to send them back [scoffs]. I know that sounds stupid, it was easier just to wear them too big than...[laughs] So they’re not massive, but they’re obviously too big, they don’t look as good on me as they do on this other girl...It suddenly occurred to me that I need some cufflinks so I asked my brother and my sister for some cufflinks. They each bought me two pairs so I’ve now got four cufflinks but two of them are exactly the same and I don’t need four cufflinks, I mean they’re very nice ones but I don’t need them! And my sister spotted it, my brother didn’t, and she said ‘ugh Sarah, you’re just completely useless aren’t you’. So I said ‘yes I know, [and] I’m going to have to go back up to London with these [shirts] now’ and she looked at me as if I had two heads. ‘Why London?’ and I said ‘well I’m getting these from London’ and she said ‘there’s a *Lewins* on the high street in town!’ [laughs] So, again, there we go...these shirts that I couldn’t bring myself to take back, I could have just taken to a shop in town, and I didn’t need to do it online, I could have tried them on and seen the full range. I do do that quite a bit though. My sister’ll say- I’ll say I need something, shall I go to this shop, and my sister will say, ‘Sarah, that shop shut four years ago’.

In her story, Sarah narrates herself as the hapless fool, distancing herself from a virtual consumer self

generated by her mere participation in the activity of shopping. Her narrative implies the presence of a typical or obligatory consumer performance where constant consumer desire is expected, and as one which expresses attachment, demonstrates competence and invests visible attention or effort. Sarah expresses pointed disidentification to such a role: she says she is ‘bullied’ into suggesting an item she would like to receive as a gift; she describes her *lack* of attention and effort, and emphasises her poor judgement and skill. In her story of the shirts, Sarah uses the imago of the fool to hold off the prevailing situated role of a capable consumer empowered to make informed decisions, presenting herself as absurdly incompetent on several counts with her improper conduct rousing comic frustration among her family (‘everyone despairs of me... “you’re completely useless aren’t you”’). Even her description of her appearance has elements of the ludicrous, wearing not just one but all five of the shirts despite the fact they are ‘obviously too big’. In doing so, she also positions herself as outdone by the lesser rival of her younger, better-dressed employee and out of touch with the retail opportunities available in the urban marketplace.

The use of the imago of the fool in our dataset is surprising in that it does not afford a display of competence to others and the social world, and appears to clash with scholarly depictions of increasingly capable and proficient consumers and prosumers (Campbell, 2005; Cova and Cova, 2012; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Rather, this dramatic technique appears as counter-activity to the prevailing definition of a consumer role conceived as a shopper skilled in aesthetic consumption. The incompetence of the fool serves to communicate the apparently involuntary nature of an individual’s failure to fulfil the obligations of such a consumer role. Like the excuse (Toby, 1952), it functions to legitimate non-compliance through self-abasement and as a way to express just how much these individuals do not belong to the situation in which they participate. The use of the fool also corroborates the overall tone of these narratives as ironic. Rather than the optimistic tone and happy endings of the basic story forms comedy and romance, or the downfall or death of tragedy, irony includes stories of the triumph of chaos or pessimistic tales of failed attempts in which the protagonist is commonly a rogue, antihero or fool, never able to comprehend the puzzle that the world represents (McAdams, 1993). Like the medieval jester mocking the follies of the



ruling monarch, the interviewees' use of the fool imago also appeared to us as functioning to highlight the farcicalities of social conventions around market-based consumption as providing the means with which to construct identity or as a predominant way to spend one's leisure time. For example, in a manner that does not openly threaten her siblings' embracement of the consumer role (her role-partners), Sarah's apparent foolishness in the domain of consumption but not in the professional realm, suggests it also serves to mock social conventions to engage fully in the enjoyment of consumption as an end in its own right (she rushes the purchase online, is ignorant of available retailers), to challenge others' apparent commitment to monetary exchange in the marketplace. The expectation of role-partners is that these individuals demand the full rights of a consumer subject position that is shaped within, and by, consumerism. Narrating oneself as a fool is not an outright refusal formulated in terms of moral or class superiority nor does it directly oppose the apparent authority of those fully embracing the consumer role (while garnering some negative sanction at times). Though hardly 'anti-consumption', we saw how these informants appeared to use the fool's exaggerated deficiencies and failures to offend propriety, poking fun at implicit social obligations to forge and express identity with the symbolic resources of the market.

### *The warring hero in a site of deception*

For some of our participants, the marketplace was narrated primarily as a physical environment that exerts a powerful but unwelcome influence on individuals' emotional experience, including both sensory excitations and feelings of extreme boredom. These informants narrated the urban marketplace as a site of enticement and intoxication, describing commodities as 'lined up in windows like tutti-frutti' and spectacular retail spaces like malls as 'overstimulating'. These informants described the marketplace as a seductive but ultimately deceptive dreamworld of desire, pleasure and abundance, one in which homogeneity was presented as heterogeneity and whose temptations were attempts to manipulate. Residing in this urban imaginary were, again, those Others who fully embrace the role of consumer, but rather than skilful consumers here they are implicitly constructed as victims of marketing-inflamed desire,

from which our informants sought to distance themselves, and we saw this primarily in their use of the imago of the hero.

Like the fool, in both mythology and popular culture the hero departs in important ways from group norms. Whilst the fool's pranks are 'too stupid to be taken seriously' (Klapp, 1949, 158), the hero in social life is essentially 'more than a person; he is an ideal image, a legend, a symbol' (Klapp, 1948, 135). In the following extract, environmental consultant Daniel (30) describes a battle of rational self-control over powerful sensations of consumer desire evoked in urban spaces:

Products are thrust in front of you, you're walking down the street and you're looking at the billboards or the latest marketing campaign...and you look at it and actually you realise that it doesn't generate that instant desire, that craving for that product straightaway. I really don't - I feel like maybe this is my ego wanting to say "ahh I'm a very noble person" umm - I don't buy a huge amount of things...My partner is a researcher for wildlife films, we were thinking about doing our own films. So it would be very useful to have a product, a Mac, it's good for that...I started looking around and looking at their different abilities, I felt all of that excitement and all of that desire starting to well up inside me...I felt "oh ok yeah, I know, I know what's going on, I'm just gonna let that part of your mind do what it needs to do, it's gonna wanna get excited about things"... And I instantly went for the most expensive one and because of that I started to think "I could get more RAM and a new processor" - I could feel my emotions running away with me - "Hang on mate, hold on a minute, I know you're very excited, but this excitement isn't what you should be basing your experience on."...You recognise that you're getting carried away and the feelings and emotions coming up, and you just kind of recognise and think "at the end of the day, it's gonna break in three years, and it's just made of metal and it's going to get melted down at some point...Is anyone really gonna like me more for having a Mac? No, not really." And then it just goes away, it just kind of melts. Your desire, your clinging or your drive or whatever's pushing you to buy something, just melts away...These are not processes that change overnight. The process of trying to disengage takes time...It's a slow process.'

Daniel recounts a battle with temptation; a progressive story of self-control over an inner 'instant

craving'. Whilst not the anti-consumerist protest of an activist, he experiences the urban environment as seductive ('I could feel my emotions running away with me'): a disempowering and manipulative space in which he seeks to neutralise the desire and dependency stimulated by consumer culture's fetishization of commodities that makes them both psychologically and socially attractive ('Is anyone really gonna like me more for having a Mac?'). He enacts the self-criticism and reflexivity of a romantic hero (Klapp, 1948), refusing to surrender to desire, embodying virtues of truth, intelligence and strength, eventually liberating himself from (his conception of) an oppressive symbolic environment. Daniel's account illustrates a struggle to realise autonomous control from a position of weakness, similar to how other interviewees presented themselves as gradually gaining agency within a space dominated by consumption in a personal quest of emancipation, not from the market, but from the danger of a definition of himself as victim.

In addition, there is a romantic, moral tone to Daniel's story. His heroism – marginalising himself from norms and conventions of consumer engagement and undergoing trials so that he may live more freely – rests on the assumption that less engagement in consumption is virtuous in that it constitutes the greater good of authentic contentment rather than the fleeting gratifications of individual pleasure or social esteem; a principle espoused by the teachings of several of the major world religions (Belk, 1985). Where several informants narrated themselves as moral heroes, role distance was also achieved by identifying with the image of a primarily intellectual one. We saw this in our informants' descriptions of shopping as an activity they 'despised', often contrasted with activities in private or rural spaces that they considered 'edifying' such as gardening, reading and walking in the countryside. In the excerpt below, community organiser Ben (24) distances himself by stylising negative reactions reminiscent of the 'glazed eye expressions of boredom in response to highly controlled and managed urban spaces' speculated by Christopherson (1994, 417), in performing an utter boredom with the banality of consumption:

Like going into shops, trying on clothes, fuck-ing hell [groans and holds his head in his hands]. It's just hell to me. It's like, take off your trousers put on new trousers, put your

shoes back on, go walk around, look in the mirror, “oh, oh, they’re trousers”, go back in, take off the trousers, put on a different pair of trousers, put on the shoes, ugh it’s so tedious. It’s horrible, horrible... Um, I suppose I find it incredibly trivial. Generally I’m not someone who puts a lot of value in possessions so seeing a hundred different types of essentially the same thing that I don’t particularly want to begin with, it’s like, who gives a fuck? I’ve got many many better things to do than that.

Ben’s description readily evokes a picture of him embodying a sarcastic sullenness, slouching and dragging his feet from cubicle to mirror, as he participates in the situated activity system of a clothes shop’s fitting rooms. In the interview itself, he affects an exaggerated disdain of an implicit definition of a committed and enchanted clothes shopper by dropping his face into his hands, and his imagery of hell and use of swear words leave us in little doubt as to the apparent horror of this experience. Yet as Goffman (1961, 107) explains, disdain for a situated role is a result of respect for another basis of identification. Rather than embrace such a consumer role, Ben acts in the name of another socially-created identity, an intellectual who is not distracted by ‘incredibly trivial’ matters of possessions and shopping but remains committed to a seemingly higher landscape of meaning. Driven to do ‘far better things’ than pursue materialistic pleasures, the imago of the hero allows Ben to distance himself from a cultural imaginary of an urban consumer who is deluded into believing they can gain spiritual nourishment from the resources of the marketplace.

#### *The indifference of the sage in a marketplace devoid of meaning*

Our narrative analysis revealed a third main imago that served to distance the individual from the situated role of shopper in many urban contexts: the figure of the sage. Also known as *senex* and *Sophos*, the imago of the wise old man or woman possesses an invulnerability to external sources, as if unaffected by life’s circumstances, that we saw in some informants’ lack of interest in consumer activity. Instead of the pranks of the fool and the visible disdain of the hero, the imago of the sage personifies wisdom and equanimity (McAdams, 1985). In line with Goffman, the use of this imago suggested attendant role-irrelevant acts which were less ‘counter-oriented’ than the disidentification of expressions of role

distance we have detailed so far. This manifestation of role distance seemed to be borne of heterogeneous commitments and attachments to the normative values and prescribed roles of another belief system (such as religious faith) or lifestyle in which the pursuit of enlightenment and the desire to learn was prominent. For example, working mother Sally-Ann (42) told us of the Buddhist notion of the middle way between extremes of ascetism and luxurious self-indulgence, whilst Agnes' (55) occupation as a yoga teacher obliges her to conform to the non-materialistic values and norms of simple living attributed to this role. In narrating the story of his life to us, 63 year old retiree Robert adopts a philosophical tone in which he seeks to disavow his prior participation in mainstream work-and-spend culture and his activity in the marketplace icon of a shopping mall:

I applied myself to what I call 'normal' life, 9-5 work, steady income, property, relationships. It somehow never worked. I could never find my place in it...Like when I worked as a designer, working for a really well known company, really well paid, there was a tremendous amount of kudos. But there's a huge gap between what somebody else assumes of you and actually who you are. I've never engaged in the thing of doing what's expected of me. Something dispels it, I won't wear it. [...] I found I was very much more comfortable on the margins. Part of me was always like this, I liked things actually rather shabby and ordinary. It's grounding. There's something real about it...This is a housing association flat and I've always preferred renting. I *have* owned property. I owned a small flat for £1500 cash in a blighted part of Edinburgh. I often used to do that. I bought a house when Brixton was the cheapest area in London. Just before the riots. It had so much character...but it was scruffy and had a lot of poverty and problems. But somehow I really like that. Even when the riots happened, it wasn't a problem, it was amazing, absolutely fascinating, something really happening, some real change happening. [...] They built the shopping centre here for several million pounds. It just seems to me to be completely bonkers [laughs]. I walk through there of course and I go to the Apple store because I get free servicing on my computer...but it's just weird. I cannot relate to it; clothes shops, it's just another world [...] I think in a way when you remove yourself from the clamour of life, life gets quite mundane and it takes quite a bit of time to understand that a mundane life is actually very good...very feeding. And, yes, it's where I definitely belong now. In the mundane life. Certainly the world of commerce and retail does not fit into it. It offers no solace at all.

Robert presents himself, as did other participants, as something of a misfit, a foreigner within his own (consumer) culture. His past participation in corporate commerce and consuming activity generates a self for Robert that he is, as Goffman (1961, 102) puts it, 'apparently loathe to accept openly for himself'. Consistent with the imago of the sage, Robert's narrative revealed his interest in attaining a deep knowledge of the self and the world, a pursuit of understanding and wisdom from experience ('I found I was very much more comfortable on the margins. Part of me was always like this'). He narrates his story in a tone of calm detachment in which he is seemingly immune to harm or misfortune ('the riots were absolutely fascinating') and expresses the belief that virtue alone is sufficient for happiness ('the mundane life is actually very good'). His narrative is also infused with a romantic ideology in which he identifies with the persona of a tragic artist, a preference to live in run-down neighbourhoods, affecting the appearance pattern of the 'true' creative, rejecting bourgeois sensibilities and eschewing materialistic values characteristic of a middle-class consumer role (Bradshaw and Holbrook, 2007; Featherstone, 1991; Goffman, 1961, 130). In doing so, Robert dismisses the past appeal of a hedonistic consumer lifestyle as of little consequence or meaning ('it offers no solace at all'), and prioritises the different identificatory demands of his role as (retired) graphic designer and normative values of a bohemian lifestyle. Whilst these norms of conduct are not necessarily coherent, the imago of the sage is used to free himself from a definition of self generated from his participation in the marketplace ('I go in there of course because I get free servicing...').

### **Role distance in cultures of consumption**

Cultural practices of consumption are entwined with the moral doctrine of the consumerist good life that denotes market-based consumption as the main vehicle by which to achieve a life of happiness, freedom and power (Bauman, 2007; Campbell, 1987; Poster, 1992; Slater, 1997). Our analysis suggests that shrugging off, turning away, or disengaging from escalating consumption in affluent societies - where consumer capitalism naturalises the pleasure and enjoyment of the choice, acquisition and usage of commodities - requires the performance of other culturally-available roles. The archetypes of fool, hero

and sage represent three socially legitimate means with which our informants introduced a margin of reservation between their selves and the expectations and obligations bestowed upon individual participants of a consumer culture. As such, these discursive distancing mechanisms potentially afford opportunities *not* to buy own and use material commodities as part of the performance of role distance, in socio-cultural contexts where this may be far from easy.

However, it would be to miss a key point of Goffman's (1961) analysis to interpret the role distance revealed by these imagoes as constituting emancipation from a consumer-role. Quite the opposite. To express role distance is to claim that despite participation in an activity, one is not fully contained in the state of affairs *whilst continuing to go along with* the prevailing definition of the situation. For example, Sarah's self-mockery may indeed suggest that she is alienated from the role. But we argue rather that perhaps it is her secure attachment – for she has the financial capabilities and intellectual competencies to fully embrace the role – that allows her to risk the expression of distance; 'an acted lack of poise has none of the dysfunctions of real flustering' (Goffman, 1961, 117). The attendant performance of the hero also makes sure to display a lack of complete commitment to a particular standard of consumer achievement, defending oneself against actual attachment to possessions and the pleasures of shopping. The sage also affords the narrator some isolation from material acquisitiveness through a display of indifference but seems to us as closest to suggesting genuine alienation (Goffman, 1961, 115) from a consumer role, in the description of a 'weird' and meaningless 'world' far removed as a potential source of identification or personal fulfilment. The final irony is that such attempts to wriggle away from a consumer role reveal, to differing extent, a commitment to consumption as an important ontological domain; the consumer-roles from which they disaffiliate are of central importance, but without requiring engagement in the minutiae of political arguments required of those who carry an anti-consumerism banner.

Why then is embracement of a consumer-role shirked in favour of these particular alternative identifications? Thinking alongside Coser (1966), we postulate that distance from a consumer role is

called forth by the sociological ambivalence caused by the contradictory expectations inherent in consuming activity. Like other social roles, no outright rejection of the role of consumer is feasible in many situated activity systems and so the individual remains subject to rules as to how seriously or lightly the role can be taken. The inseparability of social relations with material culture oblige an individual to take the role seriously whilst negative sanctions loom for those who disappear too far into this compartmentalization. We find that the performances of culturally-available characters can be drawn on to avoid peers' ridicule at poor execution or accusations of fanaticism in the domain of consumption; each imago serves a defensive function in seeking to shatter the impression that they embrace a role in which consumption matters to the individual *too much*.

We note of course, that our interpretation of role distance here is limited in our use of informants' verbalised narratives from the interaction of the interview as the unit of analysis. We also recognise that the interviews were conducted in the UK during an austere period in which individuals – and particularly those middle-class informants – may have been especially keen to present themselves as 'non-consumers'. Without observation we cannot claim, and do not wish to suggest, that our informants never fully embrace the variety of role activities available in the consumption domain. Indeed, Goffman's thesis rests on the assumption that individuals have a multiplicity of selves and that society understands the individual as a multiple-role-performer. And yet, as Goffman (1961, 127) observes, even within very narrow parameters of a single situated role in a single situated activity system, 'one ends up by watching a dance of identification'.

In this regard, our arguments resonate with Hall's (1996, 14) observations in our epigraph. The imagoes and their attendant performances appear to us as part of the constant process of subject constitution between a situational/discursive imperative (to be a consumer) and the question of identification (assuming that identity). We thus see our informants' use of these imagoes as a way to hold off consumer discourses and practices which hail them into place as consumer-subjects, to twist and turn away from the attachment or interpellation of the positions situated practices of consumption construct.



Rather than market-based consumption as a site rich with meaning and brimming with resources with which to create a self through personal choice, we have shown that some people use various means to protect a selfhood from the institution of the market. It seems to us that although consumer research has long since recognized that consumption rather than production has become a central feature of contemporary societies, it is helpful to resist the unreflective adoption of an etic conceptualization of people as always and inevitably consumers – and the politics embedded in this signifier. In this spirit, we have shown here that it can be productive to suspend loyalty to a ‘consumption’ narrative and by doing so we have sought to attend to subtle forms of non-participation. Our work stimulates new questions: how muscular or prevalent are forms of role distance in situated consumer activity arenas? Does consumer research equip us sufficiently with the theories and conceptual tools to analyse the inaction of a shadow-realm of non-consumption? If we take seriously the possibility that less conspicuous attitudes and behaviours in everyday contexts can result in fewer market interactions – i.e. that there is the potential for forms of non-political non-participation (Hay, 2007) or agnosticism in the domain of consumption – further empirical investigation of non-consumption may reveal new practical possibilities for less consumption and thus more sustainable living. We see non-consumption not as a marketing problem to be overcome but as an area ripe for further investigation by sociological and cultural theorists interested in exploring potential forerunners to a larger decline in consumer pleasures.

Taking a symbolic interactionist perspective emphasises that humans’ definition of a situation is important in understanding human behaviour and that these meanings – themselves derived from social interaction – are encountered in particular settings. Since the socially-defined role of consumer as a situated virtual self is well-developed in city settings, our participants’ expressions of role distance also appear as ways of coping with the situational imperatives of an urban environment colonised by the needs of large shopping malls, chain stores, multiplexes and market niches. The majority of our informants are, in many ways, the middle-class consumers that cities in consumer cultures are supposed to be for. Yet across the dataset the fatigue, lethargy and boredom our informants described in settings and situations

designed to stimulate and satisfy (if only temporarily) indicate both a sensibility of *a preference to not*, and a shared latent discontent with a self constructed and expressed primarily through participation in consumerist activity. As such, the modes of distancing we have exposed in our analysis suggest some disaffection with urban settings in consumer societies, hinting, perhaps, at a longing for alternative kinds of urban experience less geared towards viewing consumption as an end in itself and the subsequent ‘naturalisation’ of consumer capitalism. Producing such an environment requires far more than the individualised distancing strategies of middle-class citizens but it also requires a more subtle theoretical vocabulary beyond that of hedonism or anti-consumerism. For the present, the distancing strategies we have identified indicate a space of possibility, more common perhaps than the radical protest of activists, that could provide alternatives to the roles and activities prevailing in urban environments currently dominated by neoliberal social policies.

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