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Social Psychology, Consumer Culture and Neoliberal Political Economy<sup>1</sup>

Abstract

Consumer culture and neoliberal political economy are often viewed by social psychologists as topics reserved for anthropologists, economists, political scientists and sociologists. This paper takes an alternative view arguing that social psychology needs to better understand these two intertwined institutions as they can both challenge and provide a number of important insights into social psychological theories of self-identity and their related concepts. These include personality traits, self-esteem, social comparisons, self-enhancement, impression management, self-regulation and social identity. To illustrate, we examine how elements of consumer culture and neoliberal political economy intersect with social psychological concepts of self-identity through three main topics: ‘the commodification of self-identity’, ‘social categories, culture and power relations’ and the ‘governing of self-regulating consumers’. In conclusion, we recommend a decommodified approach to research with the aim of producing social psychological knowledge that avoids becoming enmeshed with consumer culture and neoliberalism.

Key Words: consumer culture, decommodification, neoliberalism, political economy, self-identity.

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<sup>1</sup> The following analysis draws on material from the authors’ book on social psychology and consumer culture (McDonald & Wearing, 2013).

### Introduction

Consumer culture has become a significant phenomenon in Western societies. Consumer items are viewed as “important and valuable in their own right” so that many people’s lives revolve around the consumption of products, services and experiences that are mediated by the market (Ritzer, 2007, p. 164). As societal institutions, consumer culture and neoliberalism set many of the rules that both constrain and empower social behaviour (Binkley, 2014; Campbell, 2001; King & Pearce, 2010; Rose, 1996; 1999), they provide society with “patterned, organised, and symbolically-templated ‘ways of doing things’” (Jenkins, 2000, p. 10).

Given the important role that consumer culture and neoliberalism play in people’s lives, it stands to reason that these two institutions be analysed in relation to self-identity as ‘social influence’, broadly defined, is one of social psychology’s main areas of research. Social psychology’s reluctance to engage with societal institutions like consumer culture and neoliberalism is likely due to a perception that these are topics reserved for anthropologists, economists, political scientists and sociologists. In line with Parker (2015), we argue that engaging with insights across the broader social sciences can provide social psychology with a theoretical understanding of contemporary cultural, political and economic trends effecting society.

Research on consumer culture in social psychology has typically taken a *microsocial* perspective, examining consumer behaviours such as product choice and decision making by focusing on individual social cognitions (e.g. Bagozzi, Gurhan-Canli & Priester, 2002; Kardes, Herr & Nantel, 2006; Wänke, 2009). In a departure from this approach we take a *macrosocial* perspective by analysing the intersection between social psychological concepts

of self-identity with consumer culture and neoliberal political economy<sup>2</sup>. The existing literature in social psychology on this topic (Breheny & Stephens, 2009; Kasser & Kanner, 2004; Leve, Rubin & Pusic, 2012; Lunt, 1995; Lunt & Livingston, 1992; Miles, 1996; Murphy, 2000; Nafstad, Blakar, Carlquist, Phelps & Rand-Hendriksen, 2007) is limited in so far as it provides only a separate analysis of either consumer culture or neoliberalism, which this paper seeks to rectify.

By taking a macrosocial perspective this paper also builds on critiques of mainstream or experimental social psychology that argue its individualistic ontology and positivist epistemology constrain its ability to look beyond the individual to understand how psychological processes are influenced by societal institutions and their power relations (Fox, Prilleltensky & Austin, 2009; Hepburn, 2003; Greenwood, 2004, 2014; Oishi, Kesebir & Snyder, 2009; Pancer, 1997; Parker, 1989, 2007; Silverman, 1977). The analysis presented in this paper will further contribute to these critiques in two main ways. (1) Draw on social theories<sup>3</sup> of two specific institutions - consumer culture and neoliberalism - illustrating where these intersect with and challenge experimental social psychology's concepts of self-identity. Complimenting the social theory will be references to 'non-experimental' approaches to social psychology such as the 'critical', 'community' and 'sociological' social psychology literature. (2) Outline an alternative approach to knowledge production in social psychology by employing a decommodified approach to research. Three existing studies will be outlined as examples of this approach in the final section of the paper.

Before proceeding it is important to define what we mean by 'experimental social psychology'. As well as employing an individualistic ontology and positivist epistemology, experimental social psychology sits within the field of 'psychological social psychology' which focuses on "individual's social cognitions", in contrast 'sociological social

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this analysis we take our definition of political economy from Hahnel (2003, p. 1) who defines it as the study of "economics within the broader project of understanding how society functions".

<sup>3</sup> The social theory drawn on in this analysis comes from critical theoretical and post-structural perspectives.

psychology’ locates the individual within their “social structural context” (Stryker, 2001, p. 14409). Experimental social psychology has become the dominant or mainstream approach in psychological social psychology<sup>4</sup>.

Attempting to chart the myriad implications of consumer culture and neoliberalism for experimental social psychological concepts of self-identity is a challenging task within the constraints of a single paper. One reason for this is that concepts of self-identity in experimental social psychology comprise a number of micro-theories, relating to concepts such as self-esteem, social comparison, self-enhancement, impression management and self-regulation, as well as meta-theoretical perspectives such as social identity theory and personality psychology. We realise that casting a wide net in this way we lose the ability to deal with each micro or metatheory in sufficient depth. The reason for undertaking a wide ranging analysis of this nature is that social theories of consumer culture and neoliberalism do not make a distinction between personal and social identity (e.g. Baudrillard, 1970/1998; Bourdieu, 1982; Giddens, 1991) in the same way as experimental social psychology<sup>5</sup>. Focusing our analysis on ‘self-regulation theory’ or ‘social identity theory’ only for example, would fail to illustrate the full impact that social theoretical conceptions of consumer culture and neoliberalism have upon experimental social psychology.

The paper begins by outlining the intimate relationship that exists between consumer culture and neoliberalism, both of which have become integral institutions in Western societies. We then turn to an analysis of three topics where we explore the intersection between consumer culture, neoliberalism and experimental social psychological concepts of

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<sup>4</sup> Augoustinos, Walker and Donaghue (2014, p. 15) write the focus on individual social cognitions is now the “dominant, mainstream approach within social psychology, especially in North America” This is illustrated in prominent social psychology journals such as the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* and *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. For a further discussion on the characteristics of experimental social psychology see Chapter 1 of Stainton-Rogers (2003) *Social Psychology: Experimental and Critical Approaches*.

<sup>5</sup> “Social identity is clearly differentiated from personal identity, which is tied to interpersonal relationships and idiosyncratic personal traits” (Hogg & Abrams, 2007, p. 340).

self-identity. These include: (1) the commodification of self-identity, (2) social categories, culture and power relations, and (3) the governing of self-regulating consumers.

### Consumer Culture & Neoliberal Political Economy

Social theorists have written extensively on consumer culture and neoliberalism, however, less has been written on the relationship between them. The following section discusses elements of this relationship with a focus on self-identity. It provides a conceptual basis for the analysis and discussion in the subsequent sections of the paper.

Consumer culture has become an integral facet of everyday life in Western countries (Lury, 1996; Mackay, 1997; Miles, 1998). Evidence for this can be seen in the way that consumption is invoked by politicians as a means to express citizenship, patriotism and national pride (Cohen, 2003; Trentmann, 2001). A good example of this occurred in the wake of the 9/11 World Trade Centre and Pentagon bombings. In the immediate aftermath the United States economy risked falling into recession. In response, President George W. Bush called on the American people to continue consuming in order to stabilise the nation's economy as well as sending a message to the terrorists that the resolve of the United States would not be broken.

While the consumption of food, water, clothing and shelter are necessary for human survival, many of the consumer items purchased in the West are non-necessary. Nevertheless, these items have come to represent important symbols in modern society that confer elements of self-identity. As well as being a driver of international trade and economic growth, consumer culture plays an important role in meaningful psychological experiences such as the formation of self-identity, impression management and creating links and associations with others in the social milieu (Bourdieu, 1982; Lunt & Livingston, 1992; Lury, 1996).

Given its significance, prominent social theorists have come to agree that modern Western culture is a *consumer culture* (e.g. Baudrillard, 1970/1998; Bauman, 2005; Giddens, 1991; Gorz, 1989; Harvey, 1989; Ritzer, 1998); that is a culture organised around the consumption of goods and leisure, “rather than the production of materials and services” (Marshall, 1998, pp. 112-113). Conceptually, Ritzer, Goodman and Wiedenhof (2001) divide consumer culture into four main areas, these include the ‘objects of consumption’ (televisions, smart phones), the ‘sites of consumption’ (shopping malls, cruise ships, airports), and the ‘process of consumption’ (the manner in which people consume). For the purpose of this paper the focus will be on the fourth area highlighted by Ritzer et al., (2001), the ‘subjects of consumption’, that is the role that consumer culture plays in the experience of life and formation of self-identity. Miles (1998) writes that social theorists study consumer culture by documenting its psycho-social impact. “The consuming experience is psycho-social in the sense that it represents a bridge that links the individual and society” (p. 5). Like Miles (1998) we seek to analyse the link between self-identity, consumer culture and neoliberalism.

The advent of neoliberalism in the early 1980s led to changes in the relationship between the state and its citizens. During the previous period 1945 to the mid-1970s, citizenship was based on a national productivist political economy. Following the transition to greater globalisation (that which followed the breakup of the Soviet Bloc in 1989) and the growth in the service economy, citizenship became increasingly conflated with the consumer who was encouraged to pursue their self-interest through the economic freedoms conferred by the market and consumer choice (Ritzer & Slater, 2001; Smart, 2003, 2010).

Neoliberalism is a philosophy that aims to generate new forms of subjectivity (*qua* self-identity) based on a possessive individualism by introducing policies that enable people to freely participate in capitalist enterprise by removing the restraining powers of society

(Smith, 2012). Essentially neoliberalism “abstracts the individual from society” (Augoustinos, Walker & Donaghue, 2014, p. 276). Attempts by government or other institutions to plan or regulate the economy is viewed as interference that undermines individual freedoms. ‘Free markets’ are viewed as the most efficient mechanism for distributing resources based on individual needs and desires (Snooks, 2000). It assumes that liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and internalising market values such as self-interest, self-reliance and competitive social relations results in prosperity for all (Davies, 2014; Harvey, 2005; Smart, 2010).

Neoliberalism views people as rational economic maximisers (Steger & Roy, 2010; Hahnel, 2003). Deregulation and the increase in marketplace choice and competition through price mechanisms seek to empower the consumer, while producers are forced to respond to their expressed preferences. In the process of economic deregulation in the early 1980s, a new social contract was struck by a number of Western governments with their citizens. In return for reduced governmental regulation and interference citizens, now viewed as consumers, would be required take greater control and responsibility for their lives and to manage their own risks (Lemke, 2001; Teghtsoonian, 2009). This contract has been used as a justification to reduce welfare provision.

Neoliberalism functions through discourses and techniques that shift the regulatory competence of the state onto individual consumers. The advent of neoliberalism and the concomitant policy shift from a focus on external government toward self-government saw collective social provision give way to individualism, competition, enterprise and consumerism (Binkley, 2014; Hall, 2011; McDonald & Wearing, 2013). Neoliberalism governs at the level of the state and the individual. At the individual level it requires people to govern themselves (self-governance) by working upon their self-identity in order to successfully compete in the market (Foucault, 1991; Lemke, 2001; Rose, 1996). Self-



governance or ‘neoliberal governmentality’ is promoted through various discourses, policies and techniques that “figure and produce citizens as individual entrepreneurs and consumers whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for ‘self-care’ – their ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions” (Brown, 2006, p. 694). The commodification of self-identity has become the behavioural response to this market-mediated mode of life (Bauman, 2004). The following section analyses the commodification thesis, outlining where this intersects with and challenges experimental social psychological conceptions of self-identity.

### The Commodification of Self-Identity

People adapt themselves to the conditions of neoliberal consumer cultures by viewing or conceiving of themselves, “as objects or commodities” (Murphy, 2000, p. 637). The commodification of self-identity has become a pervasive feature of Western societies (Bauman, 2007; Williams, 2005). Political and economic discourse transmitted through the mass media, advertising and marketing industries train people to commodify themselves in order to achieve personal success in education, career, romance, parenting, travel, sport etc. (Fromm, 1956/1991; McDonald & Wearing, 2013). The Oxford English Dictionary (online version) (2011) defines commodification as the “action of turning something into, or treating something as, a (mere) commodity; commercialization of an activity, etc., that is not by nature commercial”.

In the labour market there is a preference for certain personality traits that include being flexible, entrepreneurial, enterprising, independent, productive, competitive and extroverted (Binkley, 2014; Cushman, 1995; Fromm, 1956/1991; Hickinbottom-Brawn, 2013; Kelly, 2013; Lasch, 1979; McDonald, Wearing & Ponting, 2008; Sennett, 1998, 2006). Despite the psychological conception of personality as a set of biological and cognitive

dispositions, in the context of consumer culture and neoliberalism, personality has come to mean one's ability to be attractive and unique, to stand out in the crowd, to be distinctive, visible and noticed by others (Schroer, 2014). Business and personal success have become predicated on the ability to sell one's self in the marketplace where self-promotion has become one of the keys to wealth and power (Cushman, 1995; Jackall, 2010).

Experimental social psychology theorises that self-identity is composed of two main elements. The first is personal identity, or personality, which is often linked to biological predispositions (e.g. DeYoung, 2010) and self-schemas (e.g. Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Markus, 1977). The second is social identity which is informed by 'social categories' or 'social groups' that people identify with, providing "a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category – a self-definition that is a part of the self-concept" (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995, p. 259; see also Hogg, 2003, 2006). The latter forms the basis of social identity theory (SIT).

A key finding of Tajfel's (1974) minimal group experiments, from which SIT initially stemmed, is that people display a cognitive propensity to differentiate themselves from others by identifying themselves with particular social groups. Two important aspects of the social categorising process is the motivation to see the groups that one identifies with in a positive light, which influences self-esteem (the self-esteem hypothesis), and the competitive nature of relations that often exists between different groups in society. SIT acknowledges important aspects of social life by pointing to the importance of social groups in the formation of self-identity and the dynamics of intergroup relations. However, Augoustinos et al., (2014, p. 217) contends that SIT "returns to the individual level of analysis by emphasising the role of identification with the group in affecting one's experience of social identity". Secondly, Jenkins (2008, p. 116) in his review of social identity theorising across the social sciences

concluded that one of the “striking aspects” of SIT is its “isolation from scholarship outside social psychology” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 116).

Engaging with social theories of consumer culture and neoliberalism would help to explain the institutional origins of intergroup behaviour. For example, an analysis of consumer culture and neoliberalism can help explain conflict between different groups in circumstances where they “behave so as to gain or maintain an advantage for their own group over other groups in terms of resources, status, prestige” (Hogg & Abrams, 2007, p. 336). Neoliberalism promotes competitive social relations between individuals and groups as a means to pursue economic self-interest, which people respond to by commodifying themselves (Bauman, 2007; Davies, 2014; Madsen, 2014; Sandel, 2013). However, topics of this nature are rarely analysed in the experimental social psychology literature<sup>6</sup>. Social theorists along with critical social psychologists (e.g. Bauman, 2011; Henriques, 1984; Pickering, 2001; Salter & Adams, 2013; Dixon & Levine, 2012) argue that experimental social psychology under-theorises (or either ignores, is uninterested in or fails to countenance) the role played by neoliberalism as a contemporary institutional driver of prejudiced attitudes and behaviour. A good example of this is Breheny and Stephens (2009) study of young mothers on welfare, who as a social category were found to be prejudiced against by health care professionals because they were seen as being unable to self-govern (this study is discussed in more depth in the conclusion and implications section of this paper).

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<sup>6</sup> A word search of ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘consumer culture’ in 5 prominent experimental social psychology journals (*Personality & Social Psychology Review*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*) revealed 4 articles that employed these terms (e.g. Na, McDonough, Chan & Park, 2016; Saucier, 2000). In each case neoliberalism or consumer culture was reduced to an independent variable without analysing them from an institutional perspective.

According to critics of SIT, Tajfel's original ambitions for a socio-psychological theory of social behaviour never eventuated<sup>7</sup> as the majority of experimental social psychologists continued to focus on individual social cognitions in their research (Brown & Lunt, 2002; Condor, 2003; Gergen, 1989, 2012; Parker, 1997; Wetherell, 1996). Brown and Lunt (2002, p. 9) sum up these author's critiques by noting: "What is then problematic in the way that social identity theory relates the individual to society is the artificial separation of individual rational agents from wider processes of power and representation".

Given these limitations, we argue that alternative approaches to knowledge production in social psychology are required. This research would acknowledge the commodification of self-identity and the central role played by neoliberal consumer discourses. For example, the majority of tax funded institutions in Western countries now regard their citizens as consumers as opposed to producers (Bauman, 2005; Cohen, 2003; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Munck, 2005; Smart, 2010). Institutions that deliver health care, education, policing and welfare are now subject to a market logic so that "students, patients and welfare clients have been reconstituted in political discourse and media reporting as consumers or customers" (Smart, 2010, p. 47; see also Loader, 1999). The reconstitution of the citizen into a consumer has been achieved through political discourses that promote self-interest, self-reliance and competitive social relations, which supporters of neoliberalism argue is aligned with human nature (Campbell, 2001). A common response to these conditions is to commodify aspects of self-identity in order to successfully compete with others in the marketplace. Alternative notions of citizenship based on either production, solidarity or community contribution have steadily eroded. Much of this stems from workplace conditions where employees are pitted against one another in a climate

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<sup>7</sup> Tajfel and Turner (1979, p. 46) made reference to "objective determinants" (social, economic, political and historical structures) in their analysis of social conflict. However, these determinants were rarely taken up as topics of research by experimental social psychologists (Brown & Lunt, 2002; Condor, 2003; Dashtipour, 2012; Hepburn, 2003; Huddy, 2001; Parker, 1997; Wetherell, 1996).

characterised by competitive relations, individualism and insecurity (Sennett, 1998; Taylor, 2016). Society and ‘the market’ have become conflated as all aspects of life are subsumed under a market based logic (Baudrillard, 1970/1998; Bauman, 2007; Cohen, 2003; Isaksen & Roper, 2012; Featherstone, 2007; Kelly, 2013; Kotz, 2002; McDonald et al., 2008; Sandel, 2013).

In summary this section has briefly outlined where social theories of consumer culture and neoliberal political economy intersect with experimental social psychological concepts of personality and SIT. Examples of this can be seen in the privileging of certain personality traits in the labour market and the institutional origins of social competition and conflict. The latter topic will now be analysed in more detail by drawing on the work of French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu.

### Social Categories, Culture & Power Relations

Consumer culture has become an important factor in the social categorisation process. Gaining membership to social categories will depend, to a degree, on the level of discretionary spending and the knowledge and ability to manipulate the signs and symbols of consumer products. For example, the clothes that people wear, the type of food they eat, home decorations and travel/holiday destinations they choose signal a person’s knowledge, skills and abilities. The types of choices and the knowledge used to make them has been conceptualised by Bourdieu (1986) as the expression of ‘taste’. Taste confers ‘cultural capital’ by acting as a marker of one’s status and position within a social and cultural hierarchy. Good taste signals one’s knowledge of a ‘field’ that might include the arts such as the visual arts, performing arts, music, literature, dance and cinema, as well as other fields such as sport, food, architecture or interior design (Bocock, 1993), which is one of the ways that “distinctions between social groups” are delineated (Lury, 1996, p. 93).

People also adapt themselves to the social categories they are born into or are ‘ascribed’ to them, such as gender or ethnicity. There are also categories that are assigned to people by other people, groups, government agencies and/or the mass media, which a person may never identify with (Ewen, 1976/2001; Ewen & Ewen, 1992; Jenkins, 2000). These latter institutional categorisations have been “underplayed in most theorisations of social identity. Self-identification is only part of the story (and not necessarily the most important part)” (Jenkins, 2000, p. 10). Bourdieu (1982) argues that external identifications set within the parameters of consumer culture and neoliberalism, are often unconsciously internalised. They can however be observed in people’s habitus - unconscious dispositional tendencies shaped by external factors such as a person’s environment and socio-economic status. These factors include the type of schooling a person was exposed to, peer group, physical surroundings and the external identifications made by others and societal institutions. These identifications are inscribed onto the body and can be observed in posture, gesture, verbal communication such as accent and type of language used, body movement and ease in varying situations. These ‘external’ identifications and inscriptions onto the body can both limit and enhance impression management, which in turn influences self-esteem. Furthermore, they have the potential to form the basis of attitudes, stereotyping and prejudice. In some cases they may stoke frustration, aggression and violence when those excluded from consumer culture make social comparisons with those who have access to it (Bauman, 2005; 2011). For example, the massive disparities in income inequality due to neoliberal economic policies (Ostry, Prakash & Furceri, 2016) have been found to motivate some young people to embrace criminality as they seek to distinguish themselves from their neighbours through conspicuous consumption (Hall, Winlow & Ancrum, 2013). Bourdieu’s (1982) concept of habitus overcomes experimental social psychology’s separation of the individual from their

social context (Parker, 1997; Wetherell, 1996) by theorising how personal dispositions and self-schemas are adapted to the social structures of consumer culture and neoliberalisms.

Social psychological research of this nature has been taken up in some sections of the ‘community’ and ‘political’ psychology literature in relation to multiculturalism. This research begins with the assumption that self-identity and social categorises based on national lines need to be understood within the context of macrosocial structures and processes (House, 1995). Some of this research advocates for an extension of SIT beyond a focus on individual social cognitions by emphasising the politics and practices of identity, however, they tend to fall back on intergroup processes to interpret these (e.g. Chryssochoou, 2000; Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003; Hopkins & Reicher, 2011; O’Doherty & Lecouteur, 2007).

Scuzzarello (2012) however calls for a more radical approach in the way that social psychologists think about social identity, by drawing on theories from political science in order to gain a greater understanding of the “emotional and cognitive consequences of increased diversity” (p. 1). Scuzzarello illustrates her argument by case studying the municipal governments of Bologna, Italy and Malmo, Sweden in their attempts to better integrate migrants. The results indicate that differing governmental discourses and programmes can play a significant role in micro-level social interactions with the potential to facilitate both negative and positive intergroup relations between migrants and the local community. SIT she argues pays insufficient attention to the ways in which political discourses and practices influence both individual and social identity.

Experimental social psychological studies on consumer culture (e.g. Kardes et al., 2006; Kleine, Kleine & Kernan, 1993; Sowden & Grimmer, 2009; Vaisto, 2009) focus predominately on investigating product choice and decision making. Each of these studies provides useful insights into how consumer products are used to make distinctions between

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<sup>8</sup> See Wagner and McLaughlin (2015) for an outline of how Bourdieu’s concept of habitus can be used as a tool to enhance the psychological study of social categorisation.

individuals and social groups, however, they employ individual social cognitive explanations for these behaviours, failing to countenance the role played by the institutional discourses of consumer culture and neoliberalism. In another social psychological study Dittmar (2007) investigated the internalisation of consumer culture values and beliefs providing important empirical evidence of its harmful effects. However, by her own admission she stops short of analysing the cultural, political and economic institutions that underpin consumer culture, thereby eschewing the potential public policy implications of these important findings.

Two further problems arise when experimental social psychology overlooks the relations of power that people are subjected to in neoliberal consumer cultures. The first is that it runs the risk of blaming individuals for problems created by these institutions. As Madsen (2014, p. 58) writes, neoliberal policy makers have come to view social problems in such a way “that their causes are found in psychopathology” as opposed to political and economic institutions. Secondly, experimental social psychology unwittingly colludes with consumer culture by producing research which is used to develop more effective techniques to promote lifestyles based on consumption (e.g. Kardes et al., 2006; Kleine, Kleine & Kernan, 1993; Sowden & Grimmer, 2009; Vaisto, 2009). These issues will now be explored in the next section.

### Governing Self-Regulating Consumers

So far we have argued that experimental social psychology under-theorises consumer culture and neoliberalism in the formation of self-identity. Our view is that these institutions play an important mediating role in self-esteem, social comparisons, impression management, self-enhancement, self-regulation, personality and social identity. In this section we illustrate how self-regulation must contend with the enticements of consumer culture and its impact on



health behaviours and psychopathology as well as analysing how self-regulation theory fits with the neoliberal ethos.

Social psychological studies into health behaviours often use the categories ‘healthy’ and ‘psychopathological’. Healthy behaviours are typically deemed to be aligned with the goals of rational economic self-interest, reflecting the dominant conceptualisation of self-identity in neoliberalism (Aldridge, 2003; Breheny & Stephens, 2009; Sugarman, 2015; Tuffin, Morgan, Frewin & Jardine, 2000). Take for example this quote from a text book on applied social psychology:

health problems are related to unhealthy eating habits and a sense of not being able to control one’s appetite, and environmental problems result in part from growing consumption levels and a tendency to pay attention only to one’s immediate interests. Consequently, solutions and prevention of such problems require changes in attitudes, values, behaviour and lifestyles. (Steg & Rothengatter, 2008, p. 1)

We see in this quote the assumption that the individual consumer is responsible for their unhealthy eating habits and their inability to control their urges and desires. It assumes that such problems would not occur if the individual was able to make rational consumer choices; that is they were better self-regulators. In dealing with the problem of unhealthy eating it recommends changing internal mental states such as attitudes and values. The inability to make correct consumer choices stems from a faulty set of internal states and irrational decision making which require modification. If the offending internal states persist, leading to obesity, addiction or financial debt for example, then they are deemed psychopathological (Dale & Baumeister, 2000; Strauman, McCrudden & Jones, 2010). However, this perspective fails to account for the way in which obesity and addiction are

promoted by consumer culture in the constant exhortations to consumers to buy more products, which is encouraged by the mass media, marketing and advertising industries, who seek to facilitate the bypassing of impulse control (Bocock, 1993; Bordo, 1993; Ewen, 1976/2001; Ewen & Ewen, 1992; Guthman & Du Puis, 2006). When seeking to account for failures in self-regulation, experimental social psychologists tend to overlook the harmful effects of consumer culture with which people may be struggling , “and instead attribute their problems to their own apparent lack of will power, or internal moral resolve” (Moloney & Kelly, 2008, p. 280).

If experimental social psychologists seek to provide effective solutions to problems like disordered eating (obesity, anorexia), addiction and financial debt, then they need to go beyond theories based on personality traits and social cognition, to develop concepts and theories that countenance the power relations that lie at the heart of consumer culture, in particular the psychological manipulation and seduction strategies employed by the mass media, marketing and advertising industries (Davis, Campbell, Hildon, Hobbs & Michie, 2014; Passini, 2013).

Self-regulation and its individualisation in the experimental social psychology literature fits within the ethos of self-identity promoted by neoliberal economic policies (Binkley, 2014; Brown, 2006). These policies seek to institute population wide programmes and techniques of self-governance in a range of spheres, for example, enhanced consumer freedoms come with enhanced responsibilities; “being a free citizen goes hand-in-hand with showing you can govern yourself” (Burkitt, 2008, p. 6). As a consequence social risks such as illness, addiction, debt, unemployment and poverty become the responsibility of the individual as opposed to the state (Dean, 2010; Lemke, 2001; McGregor, 2001; Teghtsoonian, 2009). As Tuffin et al. (2000, p. 35) put it in their analysis of the New Zealand

Government's Code of Social and Family Responsibility, market based economic policies seek to "individualise risk factors".

Neoliberalism seeks to produce self-governing citizens who are responsible, rational and enterprising, as opposed to passive, dependent and irrational (Binkley, 2014; Foucault, 1991; Lemke, 2001; Rose, 1996, 1999). Government promotion of consumer sovereignty has been allied with the promotion of self-governance in order to attenuate overconsumption, while ensuring the problems it produces do not affect consumer confidence and economic growth. The expectation of self-governance is concomitant with the steady erosion of post-World War II welfare policies and social programmes. The British Government's Behavioural Insights Team, set up in 2010 is a case in point. Its remit is to 'nudge' welfare claimants, "towards acceptance of the precepts of neoliberal subjectivities" (Cromby & Willis, 2013, p. 241; see also Thomas, 2016). The problem for government is that deregulation in one sphere of life brings about the need for new forms of governance and control in others (Sulkunen, 1997, 2009; Wickham, 1997). In the West, a degree of governance has been achieved, "less by enforcing obedience than by eliciting consent, a consent, however, which is to a large degree manipulated by the modern devices of psychology" (Fromm, 1962/2009, p. 63; see also Binkley, 2014).

This can be seen in public health campaigns promoting the dangers associated with smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, driving under the influence, food labelling, film classification and censorship, and household hygiene standards (Sulkunen, Holwood, Radner, & Schulze, 1997). Other examples include the discipline of personal health and fitness in which government agencies, the medical profession, health advocates and the private health/fitness industry encourage people to self-regulate their bodies via diet, exercise and avoidance of harmful substances in order to prevent ill health and the economic costs associated with it. The multi-billion dollar fitness industry is one manifestation of this, which

sells the commodification of self-identity through the attainment of a more desirable looking body fit for the visual consumption of others (Sassatelli, 2010). This increases the value of one's self-identity, which in turn has positive benefits for social comparisons, impression management and self-esteem. Our intention here is not to criticise some of the obvious health benefits that flow from these discourses and practices, but to illustrate the ways in which the neoliberal ethos of self-governance influences how people view and treat their bodies, which influences the formation of self-identity.

Self-regulation theory (e.g. Doerr & Baumeister, 2010; Strauman, McCrudden & Jones, 2010) overlooks the ways in which consumer culture, particularly the mass media, marketing and advertising industries, play on people's impulses, urges and desires. Self-regulation theory fits with neoliberal policies of self-governance that view psychopathology as an issue for the individual to negotiate as opposed to a political and economic problem (Binkley, 2014; Smail, 2005; Sugarman, 2015; Tuffin et al., 2000). An acknowledgement of consumer culture and neoliberalism in the theorisation of self-regulation would bring to light the pressures exerted on the individual and the contradictory impulses they produce. On one hand people are encouraged by the mass media and advertising to 'let go', to indulge their impulses, urges and desires for sugar, fat, sex, credit and mindless entertainment. While on the other they are expected to adhere to self-governmental regimes to curb the ill-effects of overconsumption (Guthman & Du Puis, 2006; Bordo, 1993).

### Implications and Conclusion: Toward a Decommodified Approach to Research in Social

### Psychology

In the previous section we argued that experimental social psychology has become enmeshed in the process of neoliberal governmentality, so that the rules for what counts as knowledge about self-identity are structured by its power relations, which individualise political and

economic problems (Binkley, 2014; Madsen, 2014; Parker & Shotter, 1992). One way forward in dealing with the issues this paper raises is to employ a decommodified approach to research<sup>9</sup> with the aim of providing alternative social psychological knowledge that avoids it becoming entangled with consumerism and pro-market values (Bowlby, 1993; Cushman, 1995; Hansen, McHoul & Rapley, 2003; Kasser & Kanner, 2004; Parker, 2007; Smail, 2005; Sugarman, 2015). Despite its well-publicised failure in the wake of the 2007-2008 financial crisis, neoliberalism continues to underpin global economic policy (Couch, 2011), and so the problems associated with it continue to be experienced by many people in their day-to-day lives (Mirowski, 2014).

Decommodification is any historical, social, political, economic or cultural process “that reduces the scope and influence of the market in everyday life” (Vail, 2010, p. 313). Decommodified research would seek to produce knowledge that supports “efforts to undermine the grip of market hegemony by increasing the transparency of the market and revealing its true social costs and consequences” (Vail, 2010 pp. 312-313). When conducting decommodified research it is important to acknowledge the market economy has the potential to function as an effective tool for “organising productive activity” (Sandel, 2015, p. 31). The main problem identified here is when the market economy becomes a ‘market society’, where almost everything is up for sale and where “market values seep into social relations and govern every domain” (Sandel, 2015, p. 31; see also Laxer & Soron, 2006). To provide an illustration of what decommodified research would look like, we briefly consider three studies taken from the non-experimental social psychology literature that present an analysis of self-identity outlining some of the costs and consequences of market values upon it.

Breheny and Stephens (2009) conducted a discourse analysis of health professional’s views of young mothers on welfare in New Zealand. The young mothers were found to be

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<sup>9</sup> See Wearing, McDonald and Ponting (2005).

stereotyped and prejudiced against by health professionals, being viewed as illegitimate citizens based on the neoliberal ethos “that values self-sufficiency and paid labour” (p. 265). The young mothers were seen to be taking from rather than contributing to society because of their inability to self-govern independent of state assistance because of their presumed failure to control their sexual urges and to take measures to avoid pregnancy. Market values promote and celebrate responsible, rational, enterprising individuals. Young mothers on welfare failed to live up to these values because they were neither in employment or education, and were therefore viewed as passive, dependent and irrational. Breheny and Stephen’s (2009) study illustrates how the attitudes, stereotypes and prejudices (internal psychological factors) of health care professionals are influenced by the neoliberalist ethos.

In the second example, Leve et al. (2012) studied women in Britain who undertook cosmetic surgery finding that this was now normalised due to the pressure to construct a more acceptable feminine body in order to maximise one’s value in the marketplace (see also Gill, 2008). Cosmetic surgery was seen by the participant’s as a tool for empowerment, as long as one does not become a cosmetic surgery junkie, which was seen as a mental disorder – a reminder of the contradictory impulses that Guthman and Du Puis (2006) and Bordo (1993) refer to in the previous section. Cosmetic surgery was viewed as an investment into a more marketable self via its visual consumption by others where the body has come to reflect the status and acceptability of its owner. Working on one’s body, whether in the application of make-up, waxing, fitness and diet regimes, and/or cosmetic surgery, was seen as a means of self-enhancement and impression management that raises self-esteem (see also Ouellette and Hay, 2008; Slater, 1997). Cosmetic surgery was viewed as a form of enterprise that “promotes empowerment through consumer choice and the responsibility of self-care” (Leve et al., 2012, p. 131). Leve’s et al., study illustrates how experimental social psychological concepts of self-identity (self-esteem, self-enhancement and impression management) are

shaped by neoliberal governmentality, which is “dependent upon voluntarily applied technologies of self-hood than upon coercion, force or social control engineered from above” (Cruikshank, 1996, p. 248).

Our third example comes from Nafstad’s et al., (2007) longitudinal analysis of media language in Norway, which found there was an increase in word usage associated with ‘individualism’ along with a corresponding decrease in word usage associated with communal values like solidarity. The authors linked this change in public discourse to the institution of neoliberal economic policies and the concomitant erosion of Norway’s welfare system. They argue that the political economic discourse supporting free markets have reconfigured citizens as consumers who are encouraged to compete with other consumers to maximise their economic self-interest.

The three studies presented here illustrate that analysing social psychological concepts of self-identity within the context of consumer culture and neoliberalism by employing ‘non-experimental’ research designs such as discourse analysis (Breheny & Stephens, 2009; Nafstad’s et al., 2007) and interpretative phenomenological analysis (Leve et al., 2012) provides a powerful analytic tool for understanding social behaviour. Breheny and Stephens (2009) findings reveal that prejudice of young single mothers on welfare stems in part from a neoliberal ethos. By linking self-identity with consumer culture and neoliberalism, Leve et al., (2012) provided a multidimensional account of why women are willing to risk the costs, both financially and physically, of undertaking cosmetic surgery. Nafstad’s et al’s (2007) study highlights the influence of neoliberalism on the formation of a more individualistic and self-centred self-identity where previously societal discourses were based on social cohesion and solidarity. These three studies illustrate how neoliberal relations of power are exerted at a distance, often obscuring their social costs and consequences, but their effects on people are felt as proximate and profound (Smail, 2005).

Future research can expand on the topics of these studies and the analysis presented in this paper by developing a decommodified conception of self-identity, one that is less enmeshed in consumerism and market values and more concerned with social harmony and cohesion (Cushman, 1995; Vail, 2010). A decommodified approach to research in social psychology could enhance its fortunes given its declining influence on the social sciences, society and public policy since the 1970s (House, 2008). To counter this decline House (2008) writes that social psychology needs to enter into a more meaningful dialogue with other social science disciplines. As this study has sought to illustrate, researchers can draw on examples of this in the community and critical social psychology literature that employs insights from sociology, cultural studies and political economy in order to challenge the market takeover of social life.



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