



The falling rate of enjoyment: Consumer capitalism and compulsive buying disorder

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abstract

The article explores the relation between consumer capitalism and Compulsive Buying Disorder. A theoretical approach to the study of consumption and enjoyment is developed using Baudrillard and Lacan, and existing literature on compulsive buying is reviewed using the theory. It is argued that enjoyment plays a crucial role when symbolic identity is created through consumption of commodities with certain sign-values. In order for the consumer to redeem the commodity's sign-value she must be able to enjoy its use-value. The compulsive buyer lacks this ability to enjoy, causing a fundamental disturbance in her identity as consumer. The analysis of Compulsive Buying Disorder is furthermore applied in diagnosing the role of enjoyment in contemporary consumer capitalism.

Introduction

During and after WWII, a number of primitive tribes in the South West Pacific developed so-called 'cargo cults'. They had seen how the skies were filled with Japanese and American airplanes and they had observed how these planes would deliver huge quantities of goods to small and apparently insignificant islands. Seeking to get a share of these seeming gifts from the gods, they would build fake landing-grounds, which they would meticulously try to illuminate at night and they would build sham airplanes out of branches and bushes to make the mock landing-grounds seem invitingly populated. And they would wait patiently for the real thing to arrive. But of course, the gifts from above never came.

As Baudrillard has suggested this is the perfect fable for modern consumer capitalism (Baudrillard, 1970/1999: 31-32). The hunter-gathers populating the urban jungle of today surround themselves with a whole array of sham objects and try to imitate the signs of satisfaction. And they wait patiently for the seemingly divine beneficiary of the market to deliver the consumer miracle. But of course, the satisfaction from consumption never comes. The real thing always eludes them. Baudrillard extends this tragic nature of the relation between consumption and satisfaction to serve as a defining characteristic of contemporary capitalism. On the one hand, the explicit justification for consumer capitalism is the alleged capacity to deliver almost unlimited satisfaction and enjoyment. On the other hand, the delivery of satisfaction and enjoyment seems to be perpetually postponed resulting in widespread dissatisfaction and in expectations always exceeding actual enjoyment. In the condensed style, that has come to be his signature, Baudrillard proposes the following diagnosis:

Enjoyment is radical, value is sublime; so this radical symbolic insistence is sublimated in value. The commodity is the incarnation of the sublime in the economic order. The radical demand of the subject is sublimated there in the ever renewed positivity of his demand for objects. But behind this sublime realization of value, there lies something else. Something other speaks, something irreducible that can take the form of violent destruction, but most frequently assumes the cloaked form of deficit, of the exhaustion and refusal of cathexis, of resistance to satisfaction and refusal of fulfilment. Viewing the contemporary economic situation as a whole, all this begins to look like a tendency we might want to call *the falling rate of enjoyment*. (Baudrillard, 1981: 207)

The object of analysis in this article is the phenomenon of Compulsive Buying Disorder. If we project the tendency of the 'falling rate of enjoyment' proposed by Baudrillard, we arrive at Compulsive Buying Disorder as its logical end point. While the phenomenon of Compulsive Buying Disorder is indeed interesting in itself, it also provides an opportunity to study more general relations between enjoyment, consumption, identity and desire. The article thus revolves around the following two questions:

- What is the role of enjoyment in Compulsive Buying Disorder?
- How may the specific phenomenon of Compulsive Buying Disorder serve as an extreme case of the general relation between enjoyment and consumption in contemporary capitalism?

Our theoretical approach to the study of consumption is developed through Lacan and Žižek, since the hegemony of consumerism today, arguably, cannot be grasped without reference to the axes of enjoyment and desire (Stavrakakis,

2007: 228; Fontenelle, 2013). The application of certain Lacanian insights – particularly into the logic of desire and enjoyment – is, as pointed out by Stavrakakis, a promising perspective in the analysis and critique of consumption (2007: 22). In our engagement with contemporary capitalism, we also draw on Baudrillard's reworking of Marx' analysis of capitalism (Baudrillard, 1970/1999, 1981), since it is argued that an analysis of the contradictions of capitalism can still be utilized to understand the contemporary phenomena such as Compulsive Buying Disorder. Perhaps today, in our age of extreme individualization, even the contradictions of capitalism have become individualized. And perhaps we may understand the flourishing of different kinds of addictive disorders as subjectively manifested local collapses of capitalism.

In a time of economic crisis, rising levels of debt and harsh measures of austerity politics, excessive consumption may not seem to be the most pressing problem. Still, we believe, that in order for us to confront the fundamental causes of our current predicament, we must be able to imagine forms of economic organization and personal self-realization that point beyond the existing form of consumer capitalism. It seems that most solutions to the current challenges merely aim to restore society to a state of affairs immediately prior to the 2007-8 financial crisis. Even in a situation where the economic system has obviously failed, the public imagination is still mesmerized by the fantasies of consumerism. Rather than seeing the crisis as an opportunity to fundamentally reform society, the aim of mainstream politics is merely to restore the economy so that we can get back to previous levels of spending and consumption again.

The following analysis of Compulsive Buying Disorder offers a glimpse into the dark side of consumerism. The purpose of this article is not to refute or replace existing theories of Compulsive Buying Disorder but rather to supplement these theories with a social theoretical understanding of the relation between compulsive buying and contemporary consumer capitalism. There is an essential insight to be obtained from the existing and massively growing psychological research into compulsive buying disorder, namely that the compulsive buyer does not differ qualitatively but only quantitatively from the normal consumer (Dittmar, 2000, 2005). The pathological trait of the compulsive buyer is merely one of exaggeration, not one of transformation. The feature that makes the literature on compulsive buying disorder worth addressing is thus that what is found in the compulsive buyer is merely an exaggerated form of what is already present in the normal consumer to a lesser degree. Consequently, the examination of compulsive buying is also promising in shedding further light upon the nature of consumption more generally. The aim of the analysis is not to provide a sense of comfort for non-compulsive consumers by showing that there are people out there, who are much worse off. Instead, we want to demonstrate

the general dynamics of consumerism and thereby point to the forms of desire and enjoyment that perhaps we need to overcome, if we are to exit the current crisis through a door that does not just lead to even more spending and more consumption.

Commodities, sign-value and the structuring of desire

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, bounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. (Marx, 1867/1973: 85)

The use-value of a commodity represents the potential for satisfying human needs, while exchange-value represents the price for which the commodity is traded on the market (Marx, 1867/1973: 49-55). This is the well-known argument of Marx's classic analysis of the commodity. What is characteristic about capitalism, compared to other ways of organizing production, is the emergence of a market where the exchange-value of the commodity is determined independently of its use-value. The 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' generated by the commodity are for Marx essentially connected to this paradoxical mismatch; how can a commodity take on a value, which is not justified by its use-value?

In Marx's original study of capital, the commodity is analyzed primarily in its relation to the capitalist mode of production. However, a number of subsequent authors have argued that capitalism's centre of gravity has moved away from the process of production and towards to the process of consumption (Baudrillard, 1970/1999; Bauman, 1998; Campbell, 1987). The essence of contemporary capitalism no longer lies in the ability to continuously maximize productivity and profit, as Marx argued, but in the ability to reproduce and expand the capacity for consumption (Kjellberg, 2008). In short, we will argue that this shift in the gravity of capitalism produces a new set of 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' connected to the commodity and that this new set of complexities can be analysed by means of the concept of *sign-value*.

In its original version, Marx' analysis is insufficient for an understanding of contemporary capitalism, since it does not adequately include an analysis of consumption. On the basis of this critique, Baudrillard has developed the classical Marxist analysis of Capital to also include the sphere of consumption (Baudrillard, 1970/1999, 1981). Homologous to the way in which the exchange-value of the commodity in the sphere of production is determined independently from its use-value, Baudrillard shows how the commodity in the sphere of consumption generates a sign-value independent from its use-value (Baudrillard,

1981: 64-87). Aside from its capacity to satisfy needs in the customer, the commodity also constitutes value by functioning as a sign that gains meaning and value in its relation to other signs.

In Marx, exchange-value is conceived as an ideological distortion of the commodity's true essence as use-value. As we know, this distortion is what makes commodity fetishism and alienation possible. But while use-value in Marx functions as an external point of reference, outside the ideological circulation of capital, Baudrillard radicalizes the analysis by also seeing use-value as a matter of ideology. Not only is the exchange-value of the commodity a product of symbolic processes working internally in the capitalist system, but even the use-value of the commodity and the subjective needs to which it refers are socially generated. The consuming subject does not, as in Marx, stand outside of capitalism and therefore cannot serve as an absolute and material point of reference for the determination of the commodity's true value.

[M]an is not simply *there* first, equipped with his needs, and designated by nature to fulfil and finalize himself *qua* Man. This proposition, which smacks of spiritualist teleology, in fact defines the individual function in our society – the functional myth of productivist society ... Far from the individual expressing his needs in the economic system, it is the economic system that induces the individual function and the parallel functionality of objects and needs. (Baudrillard, 1981: 86, 133)

Baudrillard's point is not that needs such as hunger and thirst exist only by virtue of capitalism. The point is rather that capitalism functions in such a way that every need is appropriated and structured in a form that is useful to the system. Our basic thirst cannot be distinguished from our desire to quench this thirst with Coca-Cola or some other capitalist commodity-object.

Baudrillard is here drawing upon Lacan's analysis of the shaping of the shaping of primary needs and desire through the symbolic order. Baudrillard's basic move in innovating Marx's original analysis of the commodity is that of short-circuiting the oppositional relationship between the external, seemingly objective point of reference – 'use-value' – and the whole fluid field of social signifiers – 'capitalist ideology'. In Lacan we find the exact same movement whereby the Real, i.e. the external reference to an objective reality of natural needs, is directly related to the social and symbolic order. In fact, the most basic point for Lacan is that desire and the unconscious are not to be equated with 'the most objective and originary drives' or with 'an inaccessible truth' about the subject or the social. The concepts of desire and unconsciousness have no fixed reference or content. Rather these concepts denote the *variable procedures* by which the subject is enrolled in the symbolic machinery of the social. In the other words, the radicality of Lacan's famous dictums of the unconscious *as* the discourse of the

Other (Lacan, 1955/2006) and of desire *as* the desire of the Other (Lacan, 1964/2004) consist in the fact that they undermine the place which is usually kept intact and reserved for an autonomous subject or a substantial conception of a subject with fixed needs or drives.

By being socialized into a system of language, symbols and signs, the subject loses its immediate and unmediated relationship to itself and reality. As Lacan writes, 'the letter kills the Real' (Lacan, 1964/2006: 848). The subject's desire for different objects is thus always already mediated and shaped by the prevalent symbolic system: 'Man's very desire is constituted ... under the sign of mediation. [M]an has no object that is constituted for his desire without some mediation' (Lacan, 1946/2006: 148). In this regard, capitalism is not primarily a particular way of *satisfying* the subject's desire, but rather a particular way of *structuring* this desire in the first place.

That is not to say that there are no needs or no natural utility, etc. The point is, rather, that consumption, as a concept specific to contemporary society, is not to be defined at that level. For needs and the like are valid for all societies. What is sociologically significant for us, and which marks out our age as an age of consumption, is precisely the generalized reorganization of this primary level into a system of signs which reveals itself to be one of the specific modes, and perhaps *the* specific mode, of transition from nature to culture in our era. (Baudrillard, 1970/1999: 79)

The appropriation of desire by the domain of the symbolic order of capitalism has two consequences. First, there is the obvious social constructivist point that identity is constituted through consumption. The relationship between sign-value and use-value in Baudrillard is comparable to the relationship between the symbolic and the Real in Lacan. The structuring of desire in the symbolic order is also at the same time a construction of the subject's social identity. By consuming different commodity-objects of desire, the consumer positions herself in a symbolic system of signs thereby attaining a particular identity. The sign-value of the commodity signals a particular social meaning of the commodity and the consumer gets a share of this meaning through her consumption. In short, commodities shape the way we think and feel about ourselves (Belk, 1988; Thompson and Hirschman, 1998; Cherrier and Murray, 2007; Venkatesh and Meamber, 2008; Gould, 2010; Lekakis, 2013).

Second, and perhaps less obviously, desire also impose certain 'Real' limits on the plasticity of the symbolic construction of identity through consumption. The subject cannot just take on any possible identity just by acquiring the proper commodity-objects. For the purchase of a commodity to become symbolically effective on a subjective and intersubjective level, a complicated set of conditions

have to be met. These involve a certain engagement with the material dimension of consumption (Borgerson, 2009; Miller, 2009).

'A little piece of the real'

The notion of the Real is the key to seeing how Lacan differs from prevalent forms of social constructivism (e.g. Berger & Luckmann, 1966). On the one hand, it is clear what Lacan shares with such a position, namely, that the human symbolic universes are irreducible to some notion of objective reality. As Lacan states in Seminar II: 'There is no biological reason, and in particular no genetic one, to account for exogamy. In the human order we are dealing with the emergence of a completely new function ... one shouldn't think that symbols have actually come from the real.' (Lacan, 1954/1988: 29, 326; cf. Evans, 1996: 204). On the other hand, the Lacanian notion of the Real points to the fact that the symbolic order is never able to close itself fully around itself and operate in a completely self-reliant way. Symbolization is always incomplete. It always leaves a remainder, a void, a blockade, where symbolic representation is impossible. This remainder is the Real. The Real, accordingly, cannot be understood commonsensical as a totality of facts, but as that which resists complete symbolization. It is exactly by resisting symbolization that the Real comes to signify an objective persistence. Unlike a totality of facts, which can readily be symbolized, 'the Real is the rock upon which every attempt at symbolization stumbles, the hard core which remains the same in all possible worlds (symbolic universes)' (Žižek, 1989: 169). Exactly because it resists complete symbolization, social constructivists tends towards eliminating any references to a substantial notion of reality, but Lacan refrains from any such 'taboo-ing' of the Real (Stavrakakis, 2007: 9; cf. Žižek, 1994: 199). Rather the analytical aim becomes to take stock of this impossibility and to chart how the Real relates to social processes of symbolization.

The Real is thus not to be confused with the reality we speak of when we say that 'reality is socially constructed'. The Real is rather what is in surplus when reality has become socially constructed. Precisely because the Real is not a product of the process of symbolization it may work as a guarantee for this process, as an anchor point (*point de capiton*):

Some accidentally produced 'little piece of the real' ... attests to the success of the communication.... For things to have meaning, this meaning must be confirmed by some contingent piece of the real that can be read as a 'sign.' The very word *sign*, in opposition to the arbitrary mark, pertains to the 'answer of the real': the 'sign' is given by the thing itself, it indicates that at least at a certain point, the

abyss separating the real from the symbolic network has been crossed. (Žižek, 1991: 31-32)

Žižek points here to the ambivalence of the relation between the symbolic and the Real. Symbolization constitutes a form of “social construction” whereby the Real is “cancelled out”. At the same time, the Real retains a crucial and constitutive function for the symbolic order. The symbolic order is not able to sustain itself purely by its own means. In the final instance, it is dependent on a ‘piece of the Real’. This piece of the Real is produced within the symbolic order, but also incarnates a surplus of meaning not entirely reducible to operations within the symbolic order. The Real is highly paradoxical insofar as it is simultaneously inside and outside of the symbolic order. By being dependent on the Real, the symbolic order is in itself also paradoxical. This paradoxical nature is however masked by the “self-evident” force of the symbolic or by what Žižek straightforwardly calls ideology: ‘[I]deology is the “self-evident” surface structure whose function is to conceal the underlying “unbalanced”, “uncanny” structure’ (Žižek, 1997: 82; cf. Fisher, 2009: 16-17). We shall see how this applies in the case of the capitalist ideology of consumption, where the commodity as use-value functions as the ‘little piece of the real’.

This is so me!

In Baudrillard’s terms, use-value functions as ‘the satellite and alibi’ for the sign-value, and use-value functions as the ‘naturalist guarantee’ for the sign-value (Baudrillard, 1981: 148, 156). Baudrillard’s point here is here exactly parallel to Lacan’s thinking about the way the real is first left behind in the process of symbolization and then secondly re-emerges as something, which is beyond symbolization and therefore functions to guarantee the whole operation. In this section, we will expand how this logic exposes the ideological illusion of a predetermined correspondence between consumer and commodity – a ‘theological nicety’ of the commodity if there ever was one.

When a commodity is purchased, the relationship between consumer and commodity is at first purely arbitrary. In a free market, any consumer can, in principle, buy any kind of commodity. When the consumer walks into the record store, she may choose freely between Richard Wagner and Roger Whittaker, and when she wants to go to the movies she may choose freely between Lars von Trier and Jean-Claude Van Damme. Depending on her choice, her consumption will constitute a certain symbolic expression of her identity. But if the relationship between commodity and consumer is arbitrary, how can the sign-value of the commodity say anything about who the consumer is?

When the consumer is out shopping for new commodities, she cannot just buy any kind of commodity and make it work on a symbolic level. It can be hard work to find exactly that particular blouse or that particular pair of jeans, which is the right one. After visiting ten different stores, when the consumer finally emerges from the dressing room with the right blouse, she will say: 'This is the right one. This is so me!' At the foundation of this statement is the notion that some commodities are not right for me. This and that blouse are not me. Conversely, other and perhaps very few, commodities are the right ones. 'It is so me!' So there is allegedly a predetermined correspondence between the individual self and particular commodity-objects, and it is up to the shopping consumer to walk around and try to feel, which commodities are predetermined for her and which are not.

In the ideology of the shopper, she can imagine all sorts of uses for the commodity – this blouse can be used at cocktail-parties or this watch can tell what the time is in Tokyo. But the ideology of the shopper does not include the conviction that when she buys a pair of Prada shoes or Replay jeans that these commodities shall make her sophisticated, feminine and sexy. She cannot automatically transform their sign-value into an intersubjectively effective identity. The process of symbolization works the other way around. The shopper imagines that she is already sophisticated, feminine and sexy, and that the shoes and the jeans only function as the externally visible signs of these inner qualities. I am not getting botox because I want to be somebody else. I am getting botox because I want to be more effectively *me*. It is not that buying L'Oreal will make magically make me successful. It is exactly 'Because I'm (already) worth it!'

Here the use-value functions exactly as 'the satellite and alibi' for the sign-value, as the 'naturalist guarantee' and legitimation for the pursuit of particular social identity (Baudrillard, 1981: *ibid.*). That is to say, the use-value of the commodity functions precisely as 'that little piece of the Real', which is a guarantee of the relationship between the symbolic identity of the subject and the sign-value of the commodity. The consumer experiences her need for a particular commodity as altogether real and external to the process of symbolization. This is how the fantasmatic illusion is created that the correspondence between the consumer and the commodity exists before the purchase, and that the encounter on the market is only the completion of a connection between two entities, which are made for each other. The commodity's use-value serves the ideological function as the material correlate to the subject's true self. We see here how fantasy constitutes a crucial component in the construction of identity through consumption (Bradshaw et al., 2013) as it creates the fiction that the commodity is a sublime object, allegedly holding the truth about the subject (Žižek, 1989).

Capitalist ideology functions by masking its own role in establishing the subjective desire for a particular object. The connection between desire and object is taken for granted, and capitalism presents itself only as a neutral mediator between the two. The consumer experiences her desire for the commodity-object as an existential necessity, expressing who she really is, and this is precisely why the whole operation works. For Lacan and Žižek, the desired object functions as an ‘answer of the real’. For the object to function in this way it must be experienced as something that is *found*.

[I]f an object is to take its place in a libidinal space, its arbitrary character must remain concealed. The subject cannot say to herself, ‘Since the object is arbitrary, I can choose whatever I want as the object of my drive.’ The object must appear to be *found*, to offer itself as support and point of reference for the drive’s circular movement.... [W]hile it is true that any object can occupy the empty place of the Thing, it can do so only by means of the illusion that it was always already there, i.e., that it was not placed there by us but *found there as an ‘answer of the real.’* (Žižek, 1991: 32-33)

What we see here is how enjoyment constitutes the foundation of the symbolic dimension of consumption. Enjoyment is the answer of the real, guaranteeing the correspondence between the commodity as a symbol and the consumer’s identity. The cultivation of taste thus becomes significant for the constitution of identity (Armstrong, 2013). Here it is of crucial importance to note the tragic dimension of enjoyment or *jouissance* that is underlined by Lacan (cf. Evans, 1996: 92-3). On the one hand, the subject is constituted as a desiring subject, a subject missing something, a subject in pursuit of an object, which may fill up its lack and provide the kind of complete enjoyment, that Lacan refers to as *jouissance*. On the other hand, the subject is constituted by lacking the capacity for complete satisfaction, for absolute *jouissance*. Enjoyment, thus, is never quite achieved in consumption, but is rather what sustains our desire in the strife for commodities. Enjoyment always partially fails or as Lacan writes: ‘*jouissance* is suffering’ (Lacan, 1959/1997: 184) in that subject always suffers in the pursuit of satisfaction. As initially pointed out, the seemingly divine market beneficiary never quite delivers the promised enjoyment and satisfaction for consumption. Each commodity only satisfies us for a moment. The real thing always eludes us.

This tragic suffering of *jouissance* is perhaps nowhere clearer exhibited than in the case of the compulsive buyer, who restlessly strives for the objects prescribed by the capitalist symbolic order - hoping for enjoyment while merely and tragically being deferred from one sign-value to the next in a compulsion to repeat. This ‘subjective collapse’ of capitalism in the compulsive buyer is what we will explore next.

Compulsive buying and the creation of social identity

Not only is buying and consuming commodities one of the most basic activities in contemporary capitalism, today an even excessive relation to consumption seems to be the norm rather than the exception. While the current financial and debt crisis may have taken its toll on the spending power of some parts of the middle and lower classes in the Western economies, the very idea of consumerism as the dominant form of life and self-realization seems to be as vivid as ever. And with a growing middle class in China, India, South-America and Africa, consumerism seems to be on the rise as a global phenomenon. In comparison to conventional forms of addiction such as drug addiction and alcoholism, the normalcy of excessive levels of consumption makes it more difficult to diagnose and discriminate the addicted compulsive buyer from the ordinary non-pathological consumer. Within our context, this diagnostic difficulty points to the relevance of the literature on compulsive buying to the broader theme of capitalist consumption, since what if nothing really differentiates the logic of compulsive buying from the logic at play in consumption more generally? What if compulsive buying is merely the excessive illustration of the character of consumption as such?

In therapy and research, a number of different tests have been offered to identify and diagnose compulsive buying (Valence et al., 1988; Faber and O'Guinn, 1992; Frost, et al., 1998; Christo, et al., 2003). However, compulsive buying is not a specified diagnosis in the official classification systems ICD-10 and DSM-IV, but is classified in the category of impulse control disorders. A US prevalence study suggests that 5,8% of the American population may suffer from the disorder (Koran, et al., 2006). A comparable study suggests approximately the same prevalence in Germany (Reisch et al., 2004).

To date, studies of compulsive buying have primarily been conducted from the approach of cognitive psychology (Müller, et al., 2005 for overview). A pioneering study defines the disorder as 'chronic, repetitive purchasing that becomes a primary response to negative events or feelings,' and this definition is later supplemented by, 'which becomes very difficult to stop and ultimately results in harmful consequences' (Faber and O'Guinn, 1989, 1992). Purchasing functions as a form of evasive action from confrontation with underlying psychological problems.

A number of studies have mapped the compulsive buyer's emotions before, during and after the purchase (Christenson, et al., 1994; Miltenberger, et al., 2005). The purchase is often triggered by negative emotions such as sadness, loneliness, anger, anxiety and boredom, and in some instances by positive

emotions such as joy and elatedness. During the purchase, both positive and negative emotions such as joy, power, loss of control and frustration may be experienced, and the purchase is immediately followed by emotions such as satisfaction, joy, pride and relief. These positive emotions are, however, short lived and are quickly replaced by indifference, guilt, anger and sadness. Compulsive buying has been connected with a number of general cognitive distortions such as affective difficulties, compromised self-perceptions and perfectionist expectations, erroneous beliefs about the nature of objects, potential purchases and purchasing opportunities, erroneous beliefs about the psychological benefits of buying and decision-making difficulties (Kyrios et al., 2004).

One of the problems in the approach of mainstream cognitive psychology is that mapping the compulsive buyer's emotions and cognitive constitution says only very little about the symbolic meaning attributed by the compulsive buyer to her purchasing behaviour. Registering how purchasing functions as a momentary relief from emotional tensions is one thing. Understanding why this is the case is quite another thing. Thus Dittmar has elaborated and supplemented the cognitive model by way of a psychodynamic approach. She emphasizes the concept of *self-discrepancy* as central to the understanding of compulsive buying (Dittmar, 2000, 2005; Dittmar and Drury, 2000). Self-discrepancy is the difference between self-image and the way one wishes to be seen by others, i.e. between actual and ideal self. According to Dittmar, the compulsive buyer has a particularly high degree of self-discrepancy and her purchasing behaviour may be understood as an attempt to transform her actual identity, in order for it to correspond better with her ideal identity. The compulsive buyer purchases products which she imagines may change her own, as well as other people's, image of her. In this way, shopping functions as a form of *identity repair* (Dittmar, 2005: 856).

Within both cognitive psychology and Dittmar's psychodynamically oriented approach, compulsive buying is explained by the subject not being in balance with herself. The subject has some fundamental problems, e.g. low self-esteem, depression, trauma or the like, which she erroneously believes she can solve or at least escape through shopping. Dittmar characterizes compulsive buyers as follows:

They believe that consumer goods are an important route toward success, identity, and happiness, and they purchase these goods to bolster their self-image, drawing on the symbolic meanings associated with products in an attempt to bridge gaps between how they see themselves (actual self), how they wish to be (ideal self), and how they wish to be seen (ideal self). (Dittmar, 2000: 106)

While cognitive psychology speaks about downright erroneous beliefs in the compulsive buyer's attitude towards commodities, Dittmar argues that the compulsive buyer's beliefs about goods and purchasing do not differ qualitatively but only by degree from the normal consumer's beliefs. While cognitive psychology is certainly right that from a purely rational perspective, the whole idea that commodities possess the capacity for expressing who the consuming individual really is, must seem like an 'erroneous belief' in itself. What the cognitive approach misses is that this belief is nevertheless at the heart of ideology in consumer society and thus a necessary precondition for the normal participation and functioning of the individual in modern society. We all use things and commodities to signal our identities and the pathological trait of the compulsive buyer is merely an excessive focus on this aspect. This focus on identity is neatly illustrated by a prototypical description of a purchase whereby a commodity magically makes one 'a certain kind of person':

I felt really depressed about myself. And when I've analyzed it now I've thought I think I probably wanted to make myself feel that I was something better than I was. And so to do that I bought expensive clothes, expensive make-up, expensive perfumes and things. Got it all on the [pause] store cards from a big department store. So, you know, by buying those things I felt., 'cos I used to dress up really smart and, you know, I used to think 'Oh the shop assistants probably think I've got loads of money and I'm 'this sort of person', and I enjoyed getting them because of that really. (What kind of person?) I think it was a kind of, sort of, a smartly dressed, young, trendy woman that you see around the places, can afford to wear designer labels and show them off and have Chanel make-up and that kind of thing. (Quoted in Dittmar and Drury, 2000: 135)

If we return to the perspective on consumption developed in this article with reference to Baudrillard and Lacan, we can add further nuance to the interpretation of such experiences and Dittmar's connection between consumption and the consumer's ideal self. With Lacan, we can differentiate between the 'ideal ego' and the 'ego ideal' of a subject (Lacan, 1962; cf. Žižek 1989: 105ff). While the *ideal ego* is the ordinary identification with an attractive picture of oneself, the *ego ideal* is the symbolic identification with the particular socio-normative gaze that makes such a picture attractive at all. Thus, if, say, a young student wishes to be an always well-prepared and ambitious pupil she is identifying with a particular ideal ego, but her deeper symbolic identification is with the *gaze* that makes such attributes attractive at all, e.g. with the abstract and symbolic gaze of professorial authority. In the above case of the young compulsive buyer it is clear that her ideal ego is that of a smartly dressed woman wearing Chanel and Prada, but what symbolic identification makes such attributes attractive at all? It is, of course, none other than the abstract and symbolic gaze of capitalism. It is only within a particularly capitalist symbolic order that Chanel make-up and Prada bags are uniquely attractive. Compulsive

buying thus illustrates that a capitalist market is not only a mere servicing of our natural needs and desires, but rather a constitutive factor in the engendering of such needs and desires.

In fact, compulsive buying makes the connection of social identity to capitalist scales of value hyper-concrete, since the compulsive buyer will literally use such scales as a measure of her personal worth. A recovered compulsive buyer phrases this dynamic perfectly:

Before I left the house I would literally total up how much the clothes and jewellery I was wearing were worth, and sort of 'put that on' as my value for the day. I knew it was crazy, but I couldn't help doing it in my head. Because I had no sense of intrinsic value, I looked to clothes for my sense of worth, because price is a measurable thing. (Quoted in Boundy, 2000: 9)

Uselessness, enjoyment and the ability to fantasize

The research literature on compulsive buying clearly highlights the excessive focus on the identity-creating sign-value of commodities in the compulsive buyer, but the cause of this focus is actually paradoxical. While the ordinary consumer is able to buy and consume in such a way that the commodity retains its symbolic meaning and its capacity for building identity, to the compulsive buyer the commodity has lost this very meaning. Within our perspective, the compulsive buyer's problem is, so to speak, that for her the entire process of symbolization in buying and consuming does not quite work anymore. A compulsive buyer will buy all the things that would make her look like a 'smartly dressed, young, trendy woman' (Dittmar and Drury, 2000: 135) but she is not able to muster the feeling of being such a woman. Despite the acquired commodities having the proper sign-values, the process of symbolization has not succeeded and the woman is unable to identify with the commodities. In the terms developed in this article, the compulsive buyer's problem is that she targets her desire directly at the commodity's sign-value. In her one-sided focus, she neglects to mobilize a need for the use-value of the commodity.

A typical phenomenon in compulsive buying is that, once purchased, goods are used only very few times, if used at all (Christenson, et al. 1994)(Christenson, et al., 1994). Clothes go directly into the bottom of the closet, perhaps even with the price tag still on them, and barely used sports equipment ends up in the back of the garage (Boundy, 2000: 9, 20). A recovered compulsive buyer explains:

The joy was the act of buying itself. Often, I wouldn't bother to try things on – I'd look at the price tag and think, 'I've got to have this,' especially if I thought it was a 'bargain' I might not see again. More often than not, when I got my bounty home,

I'd never even hang it up; it would sit in the carrier bag or the shoebox under the bed. It didn't matter *what* I bought; it still wouldn't have satisfied the continual, gnawing desire for more. (Quoted in Campbell, 2000: 68)

Faber and O'Guinn explain this phenomenon by highlighting that it is the very purchase, not the commodity, which is important to the compulsive buyer. They quote one of their interview subjects: 'I really think it's the spending. It's not that I want it because sometimes, I'll just buy it and I'll think, "Ugh, another sweatshirt"' (1989: 154).

This is a clear instance of the tragic dimension of *jouissance*. As Lacan states: 'That's not it! Is the very cry by which the *jouissance* obtained is distinguished from the *jouissance* expected' (Lacan, 1972/1999: 111). In our approach, the phenomenon may furthermore be explained by saying that it is sign-value not use-value which is important to the compulsive buyer. In the moment of purchase the compulsive buyer experiences an intense but short-lived euphoria, since she has now come very close to the *real* object of her desire. The euphoria is the culmination of her expectations towards the commodity. She is now in possession of the sign-value towards which her desire is directed. But once bought, the commodity must be consumed and enjoyed in order for the sign-value to be redeemed. Sign-value may be compared to sound waves that can only exist in so far as there is a material medium through which they may be transmitted. Sign-value is dependent on use-value in the same way that sound is dependent on air. Precisely because the compulsive buyer is not able to mobilize a need for the commodity's use-value, she is not able to consume it. Therefore euphoria is succeeded by some form of disappointment. Sign-value cannot propagate and hence fades into nothing. What is described in the quote above is a kind of desublimation. The woman is left with an object that she does not need, and without its use-value the commodity loses its sign-value as well and it is reduced to 'just another sweatshirt'.

It is noteworthy how female compulsive buyers typically buy goods such as clothes, jewellery, shoes and makeup (Faber and O'Guinn, 1989; Christenson, et al., 1994; Dittmar, 2000; Müller, et al., 2005). For male compulsive buyers almost identical shopping patterns apply, but they also extends to small pieces of electronic equipment, mobile phones, expansions to television sets, car accessories and hardware (Black, 2001). In short, men buy *gadgets*. What according to Baudrillard (1970/1999) characterizes gadgets as such, despite all their promises to the contrary, is their relative uselessness. Like Prada shoes, gadgets are characterized by having a relatively high sign-value relative to use-value. It seems reasonable to assume that the purchased shoes or car radio do not constitute life necessities, but are just additions to an already well-equipped wardrobe or functioning car, such that the marginal use-value is very limited.

The high sign-value relative to use-value makes the process of buying and consuming very fragile. If the sign-value of the commodity is to function as a marker and creator of identity, the buyer has to be able to muster a need for the use-value of the commodity, and has to be able to retain this need in her relationship to herself as well as to others. The higher the sign-value, the greater the demand on the buyer to be able to expand her needs and her capacity for consumption. In other words, she must be able to convince herself and the world around her that she needs this particular commodity. This conviction must be not only intellectual but also habitual. The acquisition of a commodity must be followed by a sense of enjoyment that functions as evidence of the consumer's urgent need for the commodity. The compulsive buyer suffers from being unable to produce this kind of evidence. This does not mean that the compulsive buyer has no desire for the commodity, but her desire is only directed at the sign-value of the commodity.

A classic study argues that compulsive buyers have a particularly strong ability to fantasize (Faber and O'Guinn, 1989). This corresponds very well with our argument that before the purchase they focus on the commodity's sign-value and imagine what identity the commodity symbolizes. Another study gives the example of a female compulsive buyer who, when making very expensive purchases, imagines herself to be the wife of a rich man able to fulfil all her wishes (Winestine, 1985). In the mind of the compulsive buyer, the commodity is imagined to be a sublime object capable of redeeming a special identity. This fantasy is, of course, entertained by advertising, branding and the ideology of consumption in general (Fitchett, 2004; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004). The fantasies induced by advertising are, as Stavrakakis has rightly pointed out, not only intended to support existing preferences and desire. They effectively teach us *how* to desire (2007: 241).

With regard to the ability to fantasize about the identity creating potential of the commodity there is, as Dittmar rightly argues, only a difference of degree between the compulsive buyer and the ordinary consumer. But once the commodity is purchased, another difference sets in. The compulsive buyer is not able to enjoy the commodity and she is not able to redeem the sign-value that she has been fantasizing about. If the process of identification through buying and consuming is to be effective, the consumer must have some prior notion of who she is. She must at least have the illusion that the commodity expresses something that she already is. Instead, the compulsive buyer's approach to the commodity seems to bear the expectation that the commodity will make her into something, which she is not beforehand. What is in question here is a 'theological nicety' of the modern commodity, so the question is not whether it is philosophically or theoretically tenable to speak of an essential identity before the

purchase or not. The question is rather whether the buying subject has an *illusion* about such an essential identity.

Epistemologically speaking, ordinary consumers are performative essentialists, as their very illusion of having an essential identity functions to produce exactly this kind of identity. Compulsive buyers, in turn, are enlightened constructivists as their failure to maintain the illusion of an essential identity prevents them from attaining such an identity through consumption. One compulsive buyer puts it this way: 'So I never really knew who I was or how people really liked me because I've never been fully represented' (Quoted in Faber, 2000: 39). Apparently she has no a priori notion about who she is, but waits instead for the commodity to tell her. Along the same lines, a male compulsive buyer says: 'I always refer to myself as being very shallow and superficial. I don't feel there's much more behind me than what you see' (Quoted in Faber, 2000: 39). So there is no illusionary inside for which the commodity may work as an outer expression, and there is no need which may connect to the commodity's use-value.

Empirical research has demonstrated significant comorbidity between compulsive buying and the eating disorder bulimia (Faber et al., 1995). On a theoretical level, the two disorders also show an interesting homology. While compulsive buying is 'buying without consuming'; bulimia, where an orgiastic ingestion of food is immediately followed by throwing up, is 'eating without digesting'. The bulimic is also driven by a fantasy of satisfaction provided by the food, as the eating spree is initiated, and yet she is unable to redeem the satisfaction when the food is to be digested. Similar to commodities, food has both use-value in the form of nutrition, taste, etc. and sign-value as a symbol of love, care, affection, recognition, comfort, prosperity, etc. The bulimic may be excessively fantasizing about redeeming these symbolic values by eating but she neglects the balancing of her desire for the symbolic with her capacity to digest and enjoy the food as use-value. She forces the process, resulting in her throwing up the food again. As vomit, the food is very concretely desublimated and it appears very obviously stripped of any sign-value. The bulimic's vomit is the theoretical equivalent to the compulsive buyer's shoes, sitting unused under the bed.

A vicious circle

It is perhaps fairly easy to understand why the compulsive buyer begins to shop. It is a lot more difficult to understand, why she does not stop. Homologous to the bulimic, the compulsive buyer's desire for commodities seems to increase and

not decrease as she repeatedly has experiences of desublimation. Paradoxically, the compulsive buyer seems to have no grasp of the decreasing marginal utility of yet another gadget or yet another dress. An inverse proportional relationship between her ability to consume and redeem sign-value, and her desire for and fantasies about commodities, seems to develop. The weaker her capacity for consumption and enjoyment, the stronger her desire for yet another commodity, and the more she fantasizes about the commodity, the less she is able to realize the fantasies after the purchase.

Satisfaction from a purchase never lasts long. Shortly after buying the cross-country skis, the compulsive shopper's interest shifts to motorcycles, or video cameras. Perhaps that is because much of his spending feeds fantasies he has about himself. He harbors some vague hope that the next purchase is going to change his life, make him more interesting, fulfilled, but it never does. As soon as the high wears off, another craving sets in. (Boundy, 2000: 20)

The compulsive buyer's relationship to the commodity collapses since she is not able to consume and hereby redeem its sign-value. The collapse does not only concern the particular commodity, but is gradually generalized to any commodity with a certain sign-value. This process constitutes the development from ordinary consumption to compulsive buying. The compulsive buyer becomes unable to enjoy and find confirmation through shopping and the consumption of goods. The compulsive buyer has lost touch with the commodity objects which otherwise function as important navigation points in the capitalist consumption society.

The desublimation of the commodity in compulsive buying is comparable to the desublimation of money, we may find in compulsive gambling. As demonstrated in a Lacanian analysis of compulsive gambling, gambling games provide the gambler with an experience of random and groundless circulation of money (Bjerg, 2009). In some cases, this experience may have the traumatizing effect of permanently desublimating the gambler's relation to money. Money is stripped of the metaphysical properties otherwise vested in it by capitalism. This desublimation constitutes the development of Compulsive Gambling Disorder.

As we have seen in reference to Lacan, every process of symbolization presupposes an interaction with the Real in order to become effective. The compulsive buyer is not able to activate this interaction, and is therefore unable to stabilize her symbolic identity. She oscillates between a state in which she ascribes to the commodity the potential for realizing a fantasized identity, and a state in which this realization has failed and she is left with almost nothing. As Stavrakakis notes, an encounter with the Real has the potential effect of making objects oscillate between seeming like magical substances and nightmares of

contamination and guilt (2007: 7). The turning point is the moment of purchase. After this moment, the fantasy has to be realized through the act of consumption, which the compulsive buyer is not able to complete. Up to this point the compulsive buyer experiences a feeling of elatedness and perhaps even euphoria (Faber and O'Guinn, 1989; Lejoyeux, et al., 1996). Hereafter some form of trip downwards sets in.

While in the act, the compulsive shopper often feels a sense of well-being, excitement, and control. But after the spree, as this woman drives home or puts away the goods, she begins to feel anxious and guilty about how much she's spent, confused about her loss of control, vaguely let down that the new items aren't magically transforming her moods or life, and ashamed that she can't seem to get her spending under control. In short, she emerges from her experience 'spent.' Her cravings to shop are then fanned by this complex of uncomfortable feelings, and thus the cycle perpetuates itself. (Boundy, 2000: 8)

Every time the compulsive buyer experiences her hopes and expectations of the commodity being shattered, she becomes more insecure in her own identity. This makes it more and more difficult to mobilize the pre-purchase notion of identity required for the symbolic operation of purchase and consumption to work. The compulsive buyer's shopping behaviour is out of touch with any sense of her own needs or the use-value of the commodity. She may buy goods that are obviously useless to her, or she may buy several identical articles making the marginal use-value almost zero. The erratic shopping behaviour of the compulsive buyer reflects her inability to make the symbolic order interact with the Real in a way that will fix her identity. She is completely at a loss as to which commodity contains the answer to who she is. The effect of her confusion is that no commodity is capable of delivering this answer. The compulsive buyer is caught in a vicious circle, where it becomes more and more difficult to produce the minimal amount of enjoyment necessary to confirm the symbolic construction of identity.

The compulsive buyer's problem with enjoyment is comparable to the problem of enjoyment, we find in drug addiction, although the two seems to function as diametrical opposites. In a Lacanian perspective, the drug addict's problem is the experience of enjoyment radically detached from any meaningful external object (Bjerg, 2008). The experience of this kind of *real jouissance* erodes the drug addict's ability to generate meaning from the more moderate and incomplete enjoyment in the consumption of commodity objects. The problem of drug addiction is thus a problem of 'enjoyment without object', while the problem of compulsive buying is a problem of 'object without enjoyment'. In between the drug addict and the compulsive buyer, we find the ordinary capitalist consumer, who is able to consume and enjoy the commodity to a degree sufficiently low for her to never become fully satisfied thus reproducing her desire for more, but still

to a degree sufficiently high enough for her to identify with the sign-value of the commodity.

Conclusion

The high prevalence of compulsive buying disorder attests to the increasing shift of gravity from production to consumption within capitalism. The mediating link between the two is the ability of modern capitalism to directly shape and appropriate desires and needs towards an increased capacity for consumption. Capitalism is thus not merely a market beneficiary that satisfies our needs; rather modern consumer capitalism also implies a symbolic structuring of our needs and our capacity for enjoyment. In order to explain his apparent indifference to clothes, Žižek once told a magazine reporter that 'for me shopping is like masturbating in public' (in Boynton, 1998). A main contention in this article may be phrased as saying that this joke also inadvertently expresses a more general truth, namely, that shopping is intimately connected with enjoyment and desire. Within modern consumer capitalism, shopping is the public form of enjoyment.

There are indeed biographical, psychological, genetic, or otherwise individual explanations as to why some people manage to function properly in contemporary consumer capitalism whereas others develop a detrimental Compulsive Buying Disorder. Yet, in this article we have argued that there is also a specific relation between compulsive buying and consumer capitalism and that the functioning of commodities in contemporary capitalism constitutes a societal disposition for the development of Compulsive Buying Disorder. As capitalism's center of gravity shifts from production to consumption, the importance of consumption of commodities as medium for the creation of identity also increases. In this sense, compulsive buying exhibits the structure of modern commodities more clearly than ordinary consumption in that the identity-creating trait of many commodities is more plainly exhibited in the compulsive buyer's excessive relation to this trait. In order to create identity through consumption by redeeming the sign-value of the commodity, the consumer must mobilize a certain element of enjoyment in the engagement with use-value of the commodity. The compulsive buyer is characterized by failing to make this process of consumption work. This failure does not quench desire, but rather sends it into vicious cycle where each commodity only yields satisfaction for a moment. At this point compulsive buying is however merely an excessive illustration of consumption as such. The incessant deferral of satisfaction is not unique to compulsive buying; it is rather a quite formal trait of consumption.

If we venture to read the phenomenon of Compulsive Buying Disorder as a symptom of the current state of consumer capitalism, we may see the failure of the compulsive buyer in the attempt to make ends meet in the intricate interplay between desire, enjoyment and the constitution of identity, as the subjective expression of the societal tendency, which Baudrillard refers to as the falling rate of enjoyment. The incessant pressure on individual consumers to consume more and more in order to provide an outlet for the never ending stream of consumer goods flowing from a globalized production apparatus may be approaching inherent limits of human subjectivity (cf. Soper, 2013). In debates about climate change and ecological devastation it is often suggested that economic growth has reached the natural limits of the global ecosystem. In similar fashion, we may risk the hypothesis that there are also natural limits to the capacity of the subjective 'egosystem' for producing enough enjoyment to facilitate the conversion of the sign-value of commodities into personal meaning and identity. If this hypothesis is true, Compulsive Buying Disorder constitutes the necessary breakdown of subjective egosystems under the pressure of consumer capitalism.

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