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Consumption and identity

A review of literature which is relevant to the question: ‘what is a better foundation for people’s identity than consumption?’

This is a synthesis of literature^a that is relevant to the research question ‘what is a better foundation for people’s identity than consumption’. In posing this question we start from the well-founded premise that the environmental pressures from rising material consumption are degrading the stability of ecosystems and the ability to provide humans and other species with healthy environments within which to live¹. Yet for many people living in developing countries, and some in developed countries, levels of material consumption remain too low to underpin basic capabilities. Arguably a global convergence of consumption levels is essential, with significant reductions in richer countries. Yet in modern consumerist cultures, high consumption appears to be central to most people’s identities.

This paper does not aim to cover the evidence linking environmental degradation to consumption, rather to explore the relationships between consumption and identity, and to identify possible interventions which could help reverse unsustainable trends in consumption. These will be explored further by commissioning subsequent think-pieces. The audience for this paper is therefore primarily project stakeholders, although it will be made available online for those interested in this topic.

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The review briefly sets out evidence why neither eco-efficiency, nor behaviour change by consumers to choose more sustainable patterns and levels of consumption in rich countries can be expected to lead to absolute global reductions in the overall impacts of consumption, especially given rising and justified aspirations for greater material consumption by most of those living in the developing world. It also briefly summarises evidence that over-consumption in the rich world is not adding to wellbeing^b, and indeed may actively undermine it.

The review focuses on material which demonstrates the significance of consumption^c in psychological and cultural terms, and its importance to the ways in which we understand human identity in an economic system characterised by a cycle of creation and fulfilment of consumer demands. It particularly highlights the role of consumption in identity, based on the hypothesis that this is the most intractable part of the problems of consumerism and overconsumption. 'Consumerism' is understood as a preoccupation with, and an inclination toward, the buying of consumer goods and services, and the view that increasing purchases of goods and services is advantageous to the economy. It is best interpreted as a 'cultural obsession with (material) goods as the way to a good life' and not as an immutable label for particular behaviours, individuals or groups. In the context of this paper consumerism and materialism are closely related, although consumerism clearly extends beyond material goods into services such as travel and tourism.

The rest of the paper is laid out in the following structure:

Section 1 offers a partial review of ***the historical development of consumption and consumerism***, with particular attention to wealthy Northern societies such as the USA where consumerism is a central part of the economic model which increasingly dominates

^b Wellbeing can be a confusing concept. It may refer to both physical and mental health, and to positive mental attitudes (or happiness). We use it in a more social sense to refer to the suite of functionings that people have reason to value (good physical and mental health amongst them, but also including material pleasure and our ability to make sacrifices for others – which any parent will recognise as potentially more fulfilling than selfish consumption. In these respects we encompass both hedonic and eudaimonic concepts of wellbeing, and our understanding of wellbeing owes much to the idea of human capabilities developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum: wellbeing consists of enjoying the capabilities (to be or do) that one values (individually, or collectively).

^c Consumption is understood in a broad sense, encompassing a range of goods and services, both necessities and luxuries, housing, vehicles, branded and unbranded goods, and leisure and personal services.

globally. It suggests that the development of consumerism has been bound up with the development and expression of more individual identities, with corporate marketing and often, government interventions playing key roles in the process. The growth of consumerism was tightly linked to the industrialisation of the economy, creating the larger markets necessary to sustain high employment. Today, in many consumerist societies, consumerism is equated with individual freedom, a cultural connection both created by, and played upon, by marketing, and particularly advertising.

Section 2 looks at ***how identities form and change***. It highlights the malleability of identity, and its responsiveness to both individual psychological and group cultural or social influences. This means that identity construction can be seen as an ongoing project, but also one vulnerable to the complexities and high pace of modern life, and susceptible (as a project) to displacement by consumerism or materialism. The section suggests that identity politics and identity movements might be valuable in constructing less individualistic, less consumer oriented identities, and that there are prospects for the emergence of broader group identities rooted in global human affiliation. From a brief consideration of some examples of past efforts to deliberately shift identities at a large scale (such as the European project) it suggests that deliberate interventions in this direction will not be easy.

Section 3 examines ***consumerism and identity***. It addresses the key roles played by consumption (and material possessions) in the construction of identity. A wide range of goods and consumption practices provide tools for the construction of individualistic identities, and expression of group identities and status. Strong self-identities contribute significantly to personal mental health and wellbeing, yet the individualism bound into modern consumerist identity projects has wider implications, notably in the undermining of the collective political and social realm. This, alongside the economic implications of the consumer treadmill, can cause significant damage to wellbeing.

Section 4 asks ***could eco-efficiency or behaviour change solve the problems of consumerism?*** It explores these two approaches, widely deployed by Governments alert to the downsides of consumerism, but reticent to challenge it directly. Reducing the use of energy and materials required for each unit of production and consumption can clearly help reduce the scale of the environmental challenges laid out by earth systems scientists and others, but both theoretical and empirical work suggests it can only reduce the rate of growth

of impacts, and not deliver absolute global reductions (especially in the face of global aspirations for consumption). Behaviour change approaches have been dominated by a particular school of 'liberal paternalism' which has sought to justify certain limited interventions that 'nudge' behaviour, utilising learning from behavioural psychology, and (in some cases) social segmentation techniques from marketing. The evidence suggests these methods may help, but also risk reinforcing identities and values that are counterproductive.

Section 5 section explores some of the key obstacles and opportunities that arise from humans' nature as ***social animals with social norms and habits***. It finds that social norms both restrict our identity choices, and encourage consumption (much of it undertaken habitually without consideration of its wider impacts). The establishment of habitual behaviours in a social and cultural context is an essential part of normal life in a complex world, but also a key obstacle to changing consumption. Marketing plays a key role in maintaining existing consumption habits, in promoting individualistic consumer identities and in undermining collective politics, and is set to become even more insidious with the continued greater penetration of individualised online data gathering for marketing purposes. Education plays a similar role in the inculcation of social norms and habituation, and in many countries, modern education notably normalises acceptance of inequality, devalues creativity and exposure to nature. Reforms will be required in both areas if consumerist identities are to be challenged.

Section 6 summarises briefly the rich and diverse literature on ***wellbeing***, with a focus on the ways in which consumption (measured in financial or material terms) delivers or fails to deliver wellbeing. It appears that increased consumption is important for wellbeing when basic needs are unmet, but at higher levels its benefits seem to decline substantially and may become negative. It highlights three reasons: psychological adaptation, material side effects and psycho-social impacts on health. It notes the importance of alternative measures of wellbeing, rather than relying on economic measures; along with regulatory or tax based responses such as progressive consumption taxes or limits on working hours.

Section 7 section explores selected relevant literature on ***the interface of values, identity and consumerism***. It suggests that the dominance of individualist values – rooted in both mind-body and human-nature dualisms – is damaging to sustainability interests, but that individuals can hold conflicting materialistic individualistic and pro-environmental values

simultaneously. Which of these are dominant depends to some extent on the cultural context and habitus, but in most contemporary societies the individualistic, materialistic and affluent identities typically win out. We can conclude that neither values nor behaviours will be automatically transmitted from pioneers of sustainable consumption to a wider population. It therefore appears necessary to intervene directly both in the identity drivers of consumerism and in the structural mechanisms that constrain and pattern it.

Section 8 discusses the domains in which interlinked **interventions** might be designed (world views, identity construction, consumption behaviours), and the political and social context in which they need to operate. It suggests government intervention will be essential, and outlines some of the possible tools. It further suggests that interventions in values, identity and drivers for consumption (such as status) will also be required. These could include interventions in education and marketing/advertising to change processes of socialisation and build cognitive empathy or reduce the human-nature dualism; and programmes to build collaborative activity in the sharing economy, co-production, sports or creative enterprises such as music or theatre; while also seeking to redefine aspirations in consumption, for example through digital dematerialisation.

Section 9 draws brief **conclusions** and recommends interventions for further exploration.

1. A brief history of consumerism

This section offers a partial review of the historical development of consumption and consumerism, with particular attention to wealthy Northern societies such as the USA where consumerism is a central part of the economic model which increasingly dominates globally. It suggests that the development of consumerism has been bound up with the development and expression of more individual identities, with corporate marketing and often, government interventions playing key roles in the process. The growth of consumerism was tightly linked to the industrialisation of the economy, creating the larger markets necessary to sustain high employment. Today, in many consumerist societies, consumerism is equated with individual freedom, a cultural connection both created by, and played upon, by marketing, and particularly advertising.

Jackson² notes that the "*historical and contemporary literature suggests a huge variety of different roles for consumption in modern society. These include its functional role in satisfying needs for food, housing, transport, recreation, leisure, and so on. But consumption is also implicated in processes of identity formation, social distinction and identification, meaning creation and hedonic 'dreaming'. Some authors argue that these processes are driven by evolutionary imperatives of status and sexual selection.*" (p7) Such evolutionary imperatives are arguably exacerbated by the levels of inequality in contemporary societies.

Stearns³ describes three phases of growth in consumerism (and the co-evolution of marketing).

The first was in the 18th century, prior to which there were only pockets of consumerism amongst the very wealthy. He says there was an "explosion" of shops at this time together with marketing methods such as loss-leaders, consumer credit and adverts in weekly newspapers circulating in cities. Even at this early phase of consumerism it was clear that status and identity were important. Stearns quotes a critic of the time who stated "*It is the curse of this nation [Britain] that the labourer and the mechanic will ape the lord...*" Also Stearns notes how the definition of "necessity" changed, with Parisian workers identifying sugar, candles, soap and coffee as necessities whereas in previous times only candles out of these would have been identified as necessities. Such a process continues to the present day, with 'necessities' always defined culturally and comparatively, rather than in any absolute sense.

Stearns suggests that 18th century consumerism arose partly to enable individuals to make a mark in a deeply hierarchical social context, aided by more money, but also as a result of the Enlightenment with its more secular thinking, and the Romantics praising individualism and beauty. During this period there was also rapid social change that disrupted identities, including migration to cities, greater urbanisation, and rapid population growth leading to young people needing to find employment other than the land. This same set of influences or factors can be seen present or emerging today in much of the global South. Previous to this period, religions – which had a dislike of worldly goods - held a stronger sway over practices, and identities - often shared identities - were much more stable.

This first phase of consumerism was still however far from available for all, with poverty preventing many from participation. In addition, some who could choose increased consumption instead chose to reduce working hours due to dreadful working conditions.

A second phase of the consumer market emerged from 1850 with the emergence of the Department store, mass production, and the development of mail-order catalogues for distribution, including to rural areas. By 1900 adverts had changed from describing utility and price to adopting language such as "alluring" "bewitching" and "to feel young and carefree, buy our silk". Radio also emerged extending the reach of marketing. During this period the Church also began to warm to some consumerism stressing the need for good dress.

The third phase, from 1950 onwards, saw the advent of television and further advances in mass production during a post-war period with rapidly changing identities, as consumerism penetrated deep into the middle- and working classes. McIntosh⁴ describes how advertisers - who learnt from the successful propaganda efforts during World War 2 – skilfully and determinedly drove forward consumerism based upon augmented products, or products that had more than utility. He quotes Dichter, who said "*To ladies, don't sell shoes. Sell them sexy feet.*" It was necessary in the eyes of retailers and manufacturers, he says, because there was recognition of the diminishing returns of utility of more products. Psychological tools had to be used to drive consumption. The Government during this period were fully behind the consumerism push, McIntosh says. Gabriel⁵ agrees, citing Tungate, who attributes the origins of modern marketing/advertising to the needs of mass production to drive increased consumption.

Gabriel, primarily considering the US, identifies similar phases, but also suggests that since 1980 US consumerism has moved into a fourth and more hedonistic phase marked by roll-

back and privatisation of remaining public services, growth of celebrity culture, undermining of political community by individualism, with the 'liberty to consume' directly equated with political freedom. Schor⁶ highlights the tripling of personal consumption (in the US) from 1960-2008, growing as a share of the overall economy from around 60% at the end of the 1960s to 70% by 2007. A particular feature of this, Schor argues, has been the shortening lifetime of consumer goods, with ever earlier obsolescence^d. In this period narrowcast media (cable and satellite TV, and especially web media) have increasingly supplemented and supplanted mass-media. The implications for marketing and fashion are unclear, but this will have changed the nature of the networks through which 'copying behaviour' spreads, while likely accelerating the rate of spread⁷. In the same period corporate control of the media has concentrated rapidly, with just six companies reportedly controlling 90% of US media in 2012, compared with 50 companies in 1983. .

Stearns' three phases all correlated with the need for many people to change their identity as a response to population growth, urbanisation, and changes in employment. Weakening of religious and other social constraints, increased incomes, aided and abetted by marketing and the proliferation of choice also drove this. Wallop⁸ suggests more leisure time has been an important driver in the continued growth in consumerism, although others, such as Schor⁹ and Jackson¹⁰ argue rather that shorter working weeks might offer a key intervention to temper the growth of consumerism.

Belk¹¹ describes the historical shift from shared or group identities to more individualistic identity. He states: "*Within contemporary Western cultures we are most accustomed to assessing the identity of self and others based on individual characteristics such as age, occupation, behaviour, and various material symbols of individual status. To a substantially lesser degree we also base inferences about identity on group characteristic such as family background, national historical achievement and public symbols of cultural status (e.g., museums). Just the opposite is true in certain cultures and time periods which shared bases for identity dominate individual bases. Individuals in such cultures are aware of themselves as individual experiencing persons, but their theories of self are shaped more by the view that they are part of a cohesive whole, whether it be a family, clan, or nation*" (p754).

^d Schor argues that this is occurring in many categories of consumer goods, but in the absence of official statistical tracking, can only cite indicative data, such as a 4 fold increase in 'exports of worn garments' from the USA in just 13 years to 2004. It is therefore impossible to determine the extent to which short product lifespans are a deliberate strategy by manufacturers, or a function of accelerating trends in fashion.

The shift from group identities to individualistic identities is recognised as an important change with profound influences. Jackson¹² states that of the four social categories identified in Cultural Theory – fatalist, hierarchical, individualistic/entrepreneurial, and egalitarian – the individualistic is now dominant in the 21st century and this has a crucial bearing on how people see the world and respond to it. It has created the space for greater differentiation, including through the use of consumerism (although typically differentiation is still manifest at group level rather than individual, with conformity to group norms demonstrating relative status).

Stearns¹³ reviews historical consumer trends across the world and concludes that "*consumerism will continue to gain ground*" (p155) and suggests that consumerism has, at least in part, been a good thing as "*It often stands...for an attack on rigid social or gender hierarchy*" (p158). However, enthusiasm for it may be tempered, he suggests, by the re-growth of religion and economic hardship.

As can be seen from the foregoing, the development of consumerism closely matches the spread and predominance of capitalist economic models with a central cycle of profit driven economic growth which stimulates and is stimulated by increased consumption. The rise of individualism, the importance of advertising in pressurising people into ever greater consumption, the fostering of consumption as a status symbol, etc. can all be seen as aspects of the expansionary dynamic of the capitalist system of wealth production. Soper (pers comm) argues that "*without this dynamic, it is impossible, for example, to explain the emergence of built-in obsolescence as a way of making goods, or the ever greater reliance on brand marketing, or the importance attached to recruiting new constituencies (children, teenagers) for consumption*".

The prospect for different economic models will be considered in greater depth in another of Friends of the Earth's 'Big Ideas' topics. Here, though, it is essential to recognise the linkages between consumer culture, the underlying economic model and the political support provided to both. Consumerism has become a problem in several ways. It drives environmentally unsustainable levels of consumption and resource use. It is fetishized by policy makers yet often fails to deliver the positive benefits intended: increased wellbeing, sustained employment etc. In part this is because the consumerist model privileges selfish forms of individualism. These shortcomings are considered in more depth later, but first we need to explore how identities form and change.

2. Identity: how identities form and change

Identity is a massively complex topic, and only some dimensions of this complexity are outlined here. This section highlights the malleability of identity, and its responsiveness to both individual psychological and group cultural or social influences. This means that identity construction can be seen as an ongoing project, but also one vulnerable to the complex heterogeneity and high pace of modern life, and one which (as a project) is susceptible to displacement by consumerism or materialism. The section suggests that identity politics and identity movements might be valuable in constructing less individualistic, less consumer oriented identities, and that there are prospects for the emergence of broader group identities rooted in global human affiliation. From a brief consideration of some examples of past efforts to deliberately shift identities at a large scale (such as the European project) it suggests that deliberate interventions in this direction will not be easy.

Contemporary thinking no longer sees identity as fixed and unitary, but as malleable and multiple, and in many respects as the product of a self-constructed narrative with varying relationships to multiple in- and out-groups, with behavioural tendencies towards intra-group solidarity and inter-group competition or distinction (Taifel and Turner¹⁴, Ellemers *et al*¹⁵, Bergami and Bagozzi¹⁶, Thompson *et al*¹⁷, Douglas and Isherwood¹⁸, Ricoeur¹⁹, Bourdieu²⁰). In social identity theory, as Strannegård and Dobers note: “*identity is a matter of negotiation ... different social roles are learned in relations with others ... [and] individuals are engaged in identity-creating interactions every day*” (p119). Others see the construction or attempted ‘completion’ of identity as a primarily individual project albeit one that typically requires social validation, but psychological, social and cultural schools tend to agree that identities are both multiple and malleable. And whether individual or group oriented, the processes by which identities are defined often employ narrative and storytelling^e. However it is not unreasonable to suggest that the very complexity and malleability of modern identity owes a lot to the complexities and rapid changeability^f of modern life which impose new stresses and new risks on people (Bauman^{21,g}, Giddens²², Beck²³, Hanlon and Carlisle²⁴). Historically more dominant elements of identity based in factors such as kin group, place or land, nationality, religion, occupation and class have been weakened by things such as increased

^e Which may make identity construction projects particularly vulnerable to effective advertising.

^f Faster rates of change are at least partly a product of high web connectivity.

^g To Bauman 'liquid life' is a state in which the conditions of action change more quickly than actions can consolidate into habits or norms. Thus it is a “*precarious life, lived under ... constant uncertainty*” (2005:2).

physical mobility and reduced security of employment. Studies of indigenous peoples suggest that in such groups, place and land remain strong factors in identity (e.g. Belote and Belote²⁵), and that threats to such groups' ways of life, or territorial integrity (such as climate change) should be seen as cultural injustices as well as direct harms, because of the importance of group identity (for example for Inuit communities)²⁶.

While religion and economic status still have a role to play, group affiliations and identities are potentially much more fragmented in the modern world (with more multiple affiliations expressed)^h. But the predominant factor is consumption. Hanlon and Carlisle put it this way *"No longer anchored in tradition, religion or law etc, identity in the modern world can only emerge from choice. A sense of self and purpose in life are no longer ascribed or obvious in such societies, so their development becomes a key task ... consumption practices provide us with meaning, purpose and a way of constructing appropriate personal and social identities"* (p5) And they argue that *"our consumerist way of life certainly serves the modern capitalist economy but also meets specific, historically unprecedented psychological needs that flow from that way of life.... The conditions of modernity constitute our social realities, rather than just reflecting them, in ways that plausibly do considerable damage to our mental health and emotional well-being. Put simply, modernity is a recipe for identity crisis on a mass scale"* (p4).

Nonetheless a strong, positive and largely stable self-identity (one established and controlled by the person concerned, rather than one imposed on themⁱ remains critical to psychological wellbeing and happiness (Breakwell²⁷, Layard²⁸, Henwood and Pidgeon²⁹)^j. We can see a close link here with the capabilities approach which evaluates progress and development in terms of the substantive freedoms (or capabilities to be and to do) that people enjoy. Breakwell suggests the goals (or 'guidance principles') of identity processes in contemporary Western cultures are desire for continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. These are culturally specific and vary in their relative and absolute salience over time and across situations, including across the lifespan.

^h Ormerod's (op cit) analysis of the popularity of names in the US finds high turnover and a rise in heterogeneity over the last 30 years or so. This suggests a process of fragmentation of reference groups, possibly also facilitated by the fragmentation of media channels noted earlier.

ⁱ Such as 'skiver'; 'ex-offender', 'teen mum' or 'chav'.

^j Among others, Max-Neef argues that this need is stronger in the modern world where more traditional bases of identity have been weakened, and threats to identity from complexity and rapid change have become stronger (Hurth pers comm).

The very malleability of identity makes it something that can be threatened by cultural instability (Bauman's 'liquid life') or by domination by different more powerful cultural or ethnic groups. At a personal level this results in resistance or coping strategies (Breakwell³⁰). Crompton and Kasser³¹ note that such coping strategies in the face of cultural instability typically include mal-adaptations such as elevated materialism (including shopping, or 'retail therapy'), and blame transference (to out groups, such as immigrants). At a social level, the emergence of 'identity politics' in the forms of demands for equal recognition and rights for women, ethnic, cultural and sexual minorities can be at least partly seen as a reaction to these problems. In many places even apparently fixed elements of identity – such as ethnicity – have been deliberately challenged (such as in the American 'melting pot' myth).

As we will see below (section 4) consumption has become a critical factor in personal and collective identity projects in many parts of the world – more prominently so in individualist cultures (Ruvio and Belk³²). In the USA at least, the right to consume has even become part of campaigns by minority groups for inclusion and recognition.

Castells³³ argues, however, that identity based social movements which may be sexual, religious, ethnic, territorial or national in focus (reflecting both cultural diversity and people's desire for control over their own lives) challenge (and are challenged by) modern, flexible global capitalism. He describes this as '*the bipolar opposition of the Net and the Self*' (Castells³⁴, p. 3), where the Net stands for the new organizational economic formations, while the Self "*symbolizes the activities through which people try to reaffirm their identities under the conditions of structural change and instability that go along with the organization of core social and economic activities into dynamic networks*" (Stalder³⁵).

Castells is concerned about power: "*who[ever] constructs collective identity, and for what, largely determines the symbolic content of this identity, and its meaning for those identifying with it or placing themselves outside of it*" (op cit 1997, p. 7). Stalder summarises three types of identity outlined by Castells:

1. *Legitimizing identities*: introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize their domination over social actors (and in modern democracies, to induce tolerance of those relations of dominance by the electorate). National identities and deliberate efforts to reconstruct them, such as the melting pot myth and the European

project fit most obviously here, but so do identities structured around consumption. However, with technological globalisation the nature of national power (and identity) is changing^k.

2. *Resistance identities*: produced by actors excluded from the mainstream, as a way of coping with otherwise unbearable conditions of oppression. Castells cites examples such as the Zapatistas, and US militias as well as fundamentalist religious identities. Resistance identities can however contribute to wider system change, such as the impact of resurgent ethnic nationalism within the USSR.

3. *Project identities*: proactive movements which aim at transforming society as a whole, rather than merely establishing the conditions for their own survival in opposition to the dominant actors. Gay pride, feminism and environmentalism fall under this category. Interventions to help establish such identities can potentially be rooted in Friirian popular education techniques which are responsive to the needs and interests of participants, and explicitly recognise the inequalities involved³⁶.

Most accounts of identity emphasise the tension between differentiation (from others and other groups) and association (with others). For some, a key question is whether the associative dimension can extend globally. Castells finds hope in the global dimensions of civil society in the face of processes of networked globalisation which are weakening the powers of nation states and reducing political solidarity within them^l. Rifkin³⁷ argues that our empathy for others has broadened towards the global as our technology has extended our reach (albeit at the same time as it has multiplied our energy consumption). He sees the emergence of identities rooted in global consciousness as essential to avoid the collapse of civilisation. There is also some intriguing research hinting that aging increases altruism³⁸, which implies potentially interesting future dynamics for global empathy and redistribution arising from the rapid demographic aging of the global population and particularly wealthy societies in Europe and Japan. However we cannot suggest that such processes will naturally generate global altruism in the face of countervailing trends such as the pressures of climate change on available land and resources. Increasing numbers of environmental

^k In this context, Simon Curtis (pers comm) notes: "*Cities are the place where post-national, cosmopolitan or diasporic identities can form, and if, as some of the literature suggests, changes to cities are reflective of an unravelling of the national space, the types of identities that form here may well be very important to the future of global politics.*"

^l This contrasts with his darker suggestion that international "*criminal networks are probably in advance of multinational corporations in their decisive ability to combine cultural identity and global business*" (Castells *The End of the Millennium, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol. III. 1998, p. 204).

refugees could well stimulate greater resistance from narrower local group identities (often racist or nationalist in nature).

Historical evidence suggests population shifts in urbanisation, commercialisation of markets (with introduction of modern marketing/advertising), and the standardisation of education have been critical aspects in large-scale shifts in identity in Northern societies (and these trends are being reproduced now in much of the Global South). Despite the overall fluidity of modern identities, the social and cultural context experienced by people in their formative years may well be disproportionately influential. Kasser *et al*³⁹ find a strong relationship between parental style and relevant values in adulthood (those with warm and supportive parents were more likely to exhibit security and self-direction (indicative of strong self-identities)). Heckman (cited by Nussbaum⁴⁰) highlights the importance of early environmental influences (from pre-natal to early schooling) on the development of basic human capabilities. Sociologist Karl Mannheim argues that people are disproportionately affected by events that occur between their late teens and mid-twenties. During that period—between the time they leave their parents' home and the time they create a stable home of their own—individuals are most prone to change cities, religions, political parties, brand loyalties etc.

While there is a massive literature on identity, little of it appears to directly address questions of deliberate large-scale identity change. That which does exist suggests it may be very challenging but not impossible.

In Europe Risse⁴¹ assesses efforts over the last half century to construct a 'European identity' as relatively successful, more so amongst elite groups. Symbols such as the European flag and rituals, such as the Eurovision song contest, have been important here. Risse argues that a European *demos* has been constructed, in which European and national identities coexist – and exclusive attachment to national identities has declined. Risse suggests the causal pathways are a combination of persuasion and socialisation, acting iteratively with the emerging European identity. He finds little evidence for functional institutionalisation responding to newly vested interests, but that the new institutions and leaders do act to persuade, establishing new discourses and narratives.

Many countries faced with large scale immigration have sought to integrate immigrants and encourage them to adopt a new national (and even ethnic) identity. A detailed review of these is beyond our scope here, but a cursory review suggests such projects have had a

best varying success. Ford et al⁴² suggest (perhaps optimistically) that British efforts have, over a generational time period, resulted in a country 'more relaxed about race' with increasing numbers identifying themselves as of mixed race and much reduced proportions expressing opposition to mixed marriages. In the US, on the other hand, the 'melting pot' idea is widely challenged as a rhetorical myth, with persistent inequality and discrimination between ethnic groups (Taylor, undated)⁴³. In both countries 'multi-culturalism' has largely replaced the 'melting pot' as a policy objective, suggesting that ethnic identities have proved resilient. This is perhaps unsurprising: in the face of continued racism and structural ethnic disadvantage, we might expect strong resistance identities to be maintained.

A more positive interpretation would suggest that increasingly people successfully maintain multiple identities, including identities related to of ethnic, gender, class, sexuality and other statuses, as well as an affiliation to the relevant nation state. For our purposes the idea that one might aim to supplement current identities rather than replace them may be helpful. We might also want to explore the different roles of consumption behaviour as a means to construct and demonstrate other identities rather than in constructing a 'consumer' identity *per se*. The possibility of supplanting consumerism in the latter frame would appear more plausible, even given the substantial current efforts of businesses and states to legitimise consumer identities *per se*. And modification of dominant identities is also possible: literature on anti-racism in education suggests that at both school age and adult education it is possible to shift dominant white identities to more ethnically sensitive and multicultural ones (Chavez and Guido-Debrito⁴⁴; Dass-Brailsford⁴⁵).

Moreover, Krznaric identifies significant shifts in the underlying empathy needed to shift (and particularly widen) group identity. He gives several examples, attributing the increased community solidarity evidenced in the creation of the UK welfare state after 1945, in part to the enhanced awareness of and empathy for different circumstances in the UK which was brought about by forced evacuations and relocations during the war. More deliberately, he documents how campaigners against slavery deliberately and successfully sought to build empathy with tactics including "*the use of posters and other campaign materials and reports that educated people about the lives of slaves; and talks by former slaves themselves, some of whom toured the country telling of their experiences, which provided unforgettable and shocking firsthand accounts of suffering.*" (2008, p20)

3. Consumerism and identity – why people consume and some of the implications

This section addresses the key roles played by consumption (and material possessions) in the construction of identity. A wide range of goods and consumption practices provide tools for the construction of individualistic identities, and expression of group identities and status. Strong self-identities contribute significantly to personal mental health and wellbeing, yet the individualism bound into modern consumerist identity projects has wider implications, notably in the undermining of the collective political and social realm (and features thereof, such as commitment to collective institutions and payment for them through tax). This, alongside the economic implications of the consumer treadmill, can cause significant damage to wellbeing.

In a world of malleable yet constantly threatened identity, our personal and relational identity narratives are constantly being rewritten in response to changing circumstances (e.g. job loss, divorce etc), political interventions (e.g. national and group identity campaigns), and commercial pressures (especially marketing and advertising) which play on both our group identities and personal identity projects. In such a world it appears unsurprising that consumption provides us with the tools to develop and express our identity, and confirm and exhibit our status. “*Successful brands*” says Gabriel⁴⁶ “*create narratives for one’s self; they help us make sense of ourselves in the inchoate flux of society and culture by anchoring our personalities in consumer goods*” (pp77-8). Beck similarly suggests consumption filled a gap created when traditional identity structures – such as a stable occupation - disintegrated in the face of modernity. This is not to claim that all consumption is related to identity or status^m, but that a significant share is a direct response to our need for a secure identity reflecting our social status, and much more is influenced by that need.

Nor is it to claim that the breaking down and reforming of identities is always negative. The realisation of the benefits of liberation from conventional and hereditary identities (such as constraining gender identities) can be seen as – in part – a desirable product of the scope to redefine our identities in a modern consumer society.

A number of writers identify the role of consumerism in forming identity, building on Belk’s notion of “extended self” which sees consumer goods or activities as tools in creating identity

^m Clearly a significant level of consumption is related to the meeting of basic needs, and the capacities to live in dignity and avoid shame, and it can be unclear where this form of consumption ends and consumption for identity or status purposes begins: the same products – and even specific brands may serve both ends.

(e.g. Ahuvia⁴⁷, Holt⁴⁸, and Shankar et al⁴⁹). Soron⁵⁰ cites sociologist Anthony Giddens arguing that “*everyday consumption choices in today’s world are increasingly ‘decisions not only about how to act but who to be’*” (p173). Henwood and Pidgeon⁵¹ argue that: “*Challenging identities that are currently anchored in unsustainable consumption practices, and an economic growth ideology, sets one of the most intractable challenges in the ... sustainability area for government*”ⁿ.

The ways in which consumption behaviours are linked with identity are many and complex.

Ahuvia describes the love and attachment to material goods as people build narratives for their self-identity from their past, present and the future. Smith⁵² describes how products that are not for display (for example, underwear, religious garments) are still important to building self-identity and how in public one may not necessarily be displaying one’s true self. Dilly⁵³ describes how local food - which is not most obviously a product involved in identity formation compared to, for example cars, houses and clothes - can be important for self-identity. Phillips⁵⁴ suggests the same, for example the importance of cheese to the French identity. Reimer and Leslie⁵⁵ highlight the importance of home furnishing for individual and household identity projects.

O’Cass and McEwan⁵⁶ show that even status consumption need not be conspicuous (confirming status as a part of self-identity, rather than as a publically distinguishing mark). And for some, as Kate Theobald (pers comm) points out, it may be the very act of buying – particularly of products which involve personal attention and service (such as expensive cosmetics or made to measure clothes) – that is constitutive of identity (and status), rather than the products themselves. Victoria Hurth⁵⁷ highlights the human desire for novelty as a driver of consumption and of repeated acts of purchasing. These possibilities however also imply intriguing prospects for the changes in, and possible dematerialisation of, markers of status and identity, and of the fulfilment of desires for novelty. Bostrom and Sandberg suggest, for example, that advances in health technology will make the consumption of

ⁿ Kate Soper (pers comm) suggests that this challenge is on a collision course with continued economic growth: non-commercial ways of providing for personal identity and status distinction are unlikely to be good for business – so any government that really feels challenged by this would have to re-think its commitment to the growth economy.

elective procedures a significant element in how people conduct their identity projects in the near future^o.

Consumption practices can form an important part of almost any identity. Andorfer and Liebe⁵⁸ identify how ethical shopping can be important to reinforce self-identity for those with a 'moral person identity' and that by shopping ethically it ensures congruence with the personal and political norm. Cherrier *et al*⁵⁹ likewise describes how brand avoidance can be part of the same strategy. Jackson⁶⁰ notes how Mary Douglas describes consumption as 'the means by which we create and identify roles and groups' both through association and distinction, including the idea of 'shopping as protest'. Garcia-Bardidia *et al*⁶¹ describe how illegal musical downloads are an attempt to redefine consumerism but also important to self- and group-identity and a form of collective resistance (echoing Castells).

More generally, Arsel and Thompson⁶² suggest that people make investments – of time, money and identity – in consumer goods and therefore subsequently fight to maintain the status, differentiation and group loyalty the products bring. For example long-term Harley-Davidson motorbike owners deploy 'rituals' to distinguish themselves from more recent adopters of the same product, or owners of Hummers (and probably SUV drivers in general) who create and deploy narratives about 'protection by their vehicles' to reject accusations of environmentally destructive behaviour.

And Schor⁶³ argues – from a cultural rather than psychological perspective - that in wealthy countries consumption's purpose as 'symbolic communicator' now outweighs its significance as fulfilling basic needs. Ruvio and Belk⁶⁴ highlight the extent to which such consumption signalling has moved online in recent years, again hinting at possibilities for dematerialisation: for example in the way that status can be demonstrated by the number of Twitter followers a person has – and in the modern world this may be significantly more conspicuous than a sports car or mansion.

Soron⁶⁵ highlights the risk, however, that too great a focus on consumption as an identity project can both endorse consumption for such purposes (in a world where individual freedom is valued) and overlook the significance of other factors which drive consumption (such as the political, commercial and institutional pressures which underpin and promulgate

^o They also note that increasing knowledge of genomics will have significant impacts on people's self-identities, as well as threatening genetic (and identity) privacy.

consumerism, and structural factors such as suburbanisation which generates new needs for car ownership and petrol consumption for example).

These papers collectively suggest the importance of consuming to self-identity and group social status. Others, such as Agyeman⁶⁶ also restate the importance of self-identity and self-esteem for health and wellbeing. Clearly a rejection of consumption in totality could have negative consequences for wellbeing. However, as section 6 below describes in more detail, there appear to be wellbeing downsides to consumerism as well. Hanlon and Carlisle note that the consumption-identity link is a driver of debt for those who lack the money for it. More widely, there are many now who are beginning to object to their dominance by a work and spend culture, given the ways it has increased stress and other forms of ill-health and led to time-scarcity with all its negative impact on personal well-being. Rejecting 'consumerism' is not the same as rejecting the role of consumption. The latter is essential, but a consumerist system of provision is not, even for the production of visible indicators of social status.

As we saw earlier, urbanisation is associated with disintegration and re-formation of identities. Cities are also locations where, despite close physical association, individualism is facilitated by relative anonymity. Strannegård and Dobers⁶⁷ further suggest that urbanisation has a particular role in consumerism's influence on identities with cities' highly commercialised environments and consumption cues outnumbering others several times over. Particularly in the developing world, cities stand out as centres of marketing and consumerism.

The processes by which consumption, identity and cultural individualism have been inextricably interlinked have wider consequences, which we consider briefly below.

Gabriel⁶⁸ sees individualism (as a cultural stance and political doctrine underpinning the economic model) as one of three foundations for modern consumerism in the USA. For Gabriel individualism encompasses four elements: dignity, autonomy, privacy and self-development. It is expressed both politically and economically (while also taking an abstract form in which individuals – rather than families or other groups – are seen as the primary unit of analysis). Collective societies differ from individualistic societies in all these respects (political, economic and analytic). The contrasts between individualistic and collective cultures do not imply that people in the latter cannot enjoy individual identities, nor that a strong self-identity is unimportant to such people, rather that in a more collective culture,

such self-identities are defined much more in the context of, and through reference to other people and the encompassing groups of which individuals are members.

Gabriel's argument rather is that in individualistic cultures, self-identity is much more susceptible to capture by consumerism. And although Gabriel finds differences in how advertising appeals to different models of the self in France and Egypt, there is evidence to suggest that the American model and individualism in particular is spreading globally. Notably, Michael Griffiths⁶⁹ presents evidence based on ethnographic and discourse studies to suggest that Chinese consumers are equally individualistic as Western ones, which implies that they are also susceptible to the downsides of consumption based identity^p. It may be, as Edmonds^q suggests, that the spread of individualism is a positive response to perceived security in a world with less inter-group conflict. Nonetheless, its vulnerability to the dark side of consumerism remains a serious concern, and the desirability of greater empathy between people(s) in a world of environmental insecurity suggests it is worthwhile exploring interventions that engage with individualism as well as those targeted at consumerism.

Individualism is one of three elements Gabriel sees in the 'default model of the self' expressed by Americans – the others being mind-body *dualism* and *expressivism*. Gabriel cites McCracken's definition of a consumer as "*one engaged in a cultural project ... to complete the self*" (p51), and identifies expressivism as a doctrine in which the self seeks to express its own authenticity, implying strongly that consumption delivers wellbeing primarily insofar as it helps express the self^r. Yet because the self is malleable through – amongst other things – marketing and advertising, the quest for authenticity through consumption is doomed to fail.

Cushman⁷⁰ describes the modern post World War Two person as an "empty-self". The loss of historical identities associated with place, group, community or tradition creates the need for new identities. He says "*the empty self is soothed and made cohesive by becoming "filled up" with food, consumer products, and celebrities*"(p603). "*One can see evidence of the empty self in current psychological discourse about narcissism and borderline states, the popular culture's emphasis on consuming, political advertising strategies that emphasize*

^p However, it must be recognised that only a minority of Chinese have yet been strongly integrated into a consumer economy.

^q Bruce Edmonds, pers comm

^r This applies whether that expression is one of differentiation or of conformity.

soothing and charisma instead of critical thought, and a nationwide difficulty in maintaining personal relationships” (p600). With an empty-self, he says, “*people always need.*” (p 604)

Williamson (cited by Gabriel⁷¹), argues that consumerism, through advertising, ‘sells us ourselves’: “*We recreate ourselves every day, in accordance with an ideology based on property – where we are defined by our relationship to things, (to) possessions, rather than to each other*” (p81). Of course these ‘things’ are not ends in themselves, but means of communication with others. Schor⁷² highlights the way in which this is an assertion of status, citing Lipovetsky’s argument that fashion shows that ‘*we can afford to be wasteful!*’ (p30)^s. From this perspective, high status identity comes not from association with specific products, but from the demonstrated capacity to have the newest, most fashionable products at any given time. Even though the ‘value’ we derive from this is itself not material, it leads inevitably to a massive increase in material consumption. On the other hand it hints at the potential for alternative non-material sources of status demonstration.

Gabriel further cites Potter and Heath’s view that “*consumerism stems from the belief that goods both express and define our individual identities*” and argues that contemporary consumerism is focused on expressions of taste that are positional goods^t: by definition, what everyone has is not ‘cool’, only some can be ‘cool’, thus ‘taste’ (at least partly) displaces class as a social position marker. People identify with brands because of the distinctions they confer, rather than from an intention or explicit desire to conform. In this way the counter-culture movement of the 60s and 70s has been effectively co-opted into the service of consumer culture (using social symbols of consumption to demonstrate non-conformity with wider conventional culture).

Gabriel argues that this has supported a political and cultural critique of ‘shared governance’ from the libertarian right – further damaging the scope of government to pursue investments and interventions in the social interest. In summary, he says, “*consumer society engages our central political and personal needs – autonomy, democracy and self-expression – in a way that is accessible, personalised and immediately gratifying*” (p65) but at massive cost to a shared political culture. Consumption becomes an assertion of power over social structures

^s Status is also demonstrated in the purchase of so-called ‘Veblen’ goods – goods where a higher price raises the demand because of the associated status.

^t As categorised by Hirsh.

– in a way that is particularly important for social groups who lack access to other sources of power.

In effect, says Gabriel, consumerism substitutes a political right to public discourse with self-expression through consumption. In this model, consumer culture can become a foundation for a vacuous form of politics of identity. Arguably, though, more recent expressions of identity politics based in gender, ethnicity and sexuality are expressions of resistance or project identities⁷³ rather than purely a form of complicity in the consumer identity model. Although unsustainable modes of consumption have helped to advance gender and sexual emancipation, it has helped subvert the goals of many campaigners. Soper (pers comm) comments "*The 'cultural revolution' achieved by Western feminism, for example, has been remarkable, but it has coincided with the huge expansion of the shopping-mall culture. It has not unsettled the presiding structures and institutions of economic power, nor led – as many feminists of my generation had hoped it would – to greener and fairer ways of thinking about human prosperity. On the contrary, movements for sexual emancipation have been co-opted by the market, with 'Third Wave' feminism and 'girl power' providing the springboard for all sorts of consumer oriented media interventions, brand development and advertising spin*". Nancy Fraser argues in similar terms that feminist activism has been captured by neo-liberalism⁷⁴, as for example, the feminist critique of unfair pay (in the form of a 'family wage paid to men) has helped enable the spread of low-wage flexible working practices to both men and women.

The impacts of consumerism on politics are taken up by Sandel⁷⁵ who notes that the use of markets to allocate health, education, public safety, national security, criminal justice, environmental protection, recreation, procreation, and other social goods is a novel tendency of recent decades which raises serious concerns both for equality and because of the risks of moral corruption in which the some of the good things in life could be degraded by exposure to markets. A topical emanation of this trend is a focus on the economic value – and prospective marketization - of ecosystem services.

Reeth⁷⁶ argues that in the pursuit of freedom, autonomy and choice there has been a reduction in the regulating role of the state, as well as societal regulation. This has led to an increased need for individual self-regulation. Self-regulation is challenging she states. During the same period there has been a growth in addiction, although she warns that correlation does not necessarily equate to causation. Bartels and Urminsky⁷⁷ describe how uncertainty about the long-term stability of one's self-identity can lead to high discounting in choices

made, thereby consuming with little regard to the future. Although they did not speculate on the matter, in today's fast-moving and fast changing work this uncertainty must be significant for very many people.

Soron⁷⁸ likewise sees problems with the state leaving the space of market regulation, not least because much consumerism is influenced by structural conditions such as the provision or lack of quality and affordable public transport. Individuals don't have the power, resources or information for sustainable consumption he says.

Schor⁷⁹ also blames 'competitive' consumption -as people seek to maintain status and/or climb the social ladder – for falling wellbeing. The pervasive role of the media in showcasing affluent lifestyles in programmes and advertising has created a consumer treadmill she suggests. She says that this, together with loss of other identities such as neighbourhood and growing inequalities, means "*The average American now finds it harder to achieve a satisfying standard of living than 25 years ago*" (p1). Jackson⁸⁰ states that in the UK consumer-spending has more than doubled in the last 30 years but life satisfaction has barely changed. Layard⁸¹ finds a similar pattern for the (non)relationship between happiness and consumer spending.

Before we turn to a fuller discussion of evidence on consumption's implications for wellbeing, we ask whether eco-efficiency or behaviour change could deliver sustainable consumption, and explore the role of social norms and social pressures in consumption.

4. Could eco-efficiency or behaviour change solve the problems of consumerism?

This section explores two approaches widely deployed by governments alert to the environmental and wellbeing downsides of consumerism, but reticent to challenge it directly: firstly, eco-efficiency and second, behaviour change. Reducing the use of energy and materials required for each unit of production and consumption can clearly help reduce the scale of the environmental challenge, but both theoretical and empirical work suggests it can only reduce the rate of growth of impacts, and not deliver absolute reductions (especially in the face of global aspirations for consumption). Nor can it have much impact on the other downsides of consumerism noted earlier. Behaviour change approaches have been suggested as a contribution to tackling both sets of problems. They have, however, been dominated by a particular school of 'liberal paternalism' which has sought to justify certain limited interventions that 'nudge' behaviour, utilising learning from behavioural psychology, and (in some cases) social segmentation techniques from marketing. The evidence suggests these methods may help, but also risk reinforcing identities and values that are counterproductive.

Schor⁸² marshals evidence to suggest that eco-efficiency and dematerialisation have failed, being "*unable to outstrip the rising material volume of accelerated acquisition*". According to Schor, even in Europe, where fossil fuel use has been reduced between 1980 and 2005, materials use expanded 9%: in the US and Canada it grew by at least 54%. She further argues that future eco-efficiency measures, however innovative, will be limited by problems of diffusion, uptake and rebounds; and that the UK policies of ecological modernisation advocated in the early 2000s have already run up against such limits. Evidence that the environmental impacts associated with consumption have been relocated rather than reduced also comes from carbon emissions analyses that suggest in countries like the UK, the carbon emissions embodied in growing material imports from China outweigh the reductions achieved domestically – which in part arise from the closure of significant amounts of carbon-intensive heavy industry⁸³. The problem may not be so severe for material inputs to consumption which may be plateauing in countries like the UK⁸⁴, although it remains unclear whether the data on material use in overseas production is as robust as that in the UK. The opportunities for enhanced eco-efficiency in developing economies are typically much greater than in rich countries, but absolute material consumption continues to rise as poverty alleviation proceeds in countries like China.

Overall, Jackson⁸⁵ reports that the carbon intensity of every dollar came down by a third in the preceding 30 years, but total carbon emissions increased by 40% since 1990. For everyone to have a chance of western European living standards by 2050, technological efficiency would have to improve 130 fold, 10 times faster than anything that's happened in the past, and much higher than any plausible models have so far proposed. The very high levels of recovery and reuse, and conversion of goods to services advocated by the MacArthur foundation in their models for a circular economy⁸⁶, might be able to achieve higher levels of efficiency improvement than in the past, but even with mainstream adoption of these tools, Factor 130 improvements seem implausible in the timescales involved.

So if eco-efficiency alone can't deliver the changes needed, might it be possible if we also achieve 'behaviour change' in consumer choices? Theoretically, this could reduce demand for products through sharing rather than ownership, or replacing it with greater demand for dematerialised experiences. Behavioural change might also enhance recycling and recovery rates for end-of-life products, contributing to eco-efficiency. Schor⁸⁷ for example, argues for 'careful consumption' and 'slow spending' choosing products that exhibit longevity/durability; multi-functionality and customisation (which facilitate (re-)use in collective consumption markets. This section explores the application of behavioural psychology to sustainable consumption.

The difficulties of persuading people to adopt pro-environmental behaviour through information and advertising (which is incongruent with the values and messages of the majority of marketing and advertising) are well known. Jackson⁸⁸ cites one extreme case, in which "*a California utility spent more money on advertising the benefits of home insulation than it would have cost to install the insulation itself in the targeted homes.*" (p13)

Evidence from health prevention suggests that even where the disbenefits or risks of current behaviour are acknowledged, behaviour change is often resisted. This reflects a least three factors which need to be considered. First the behaviour may be constitutive of identity (a possibility which is explored in depth in this review). Second, in modern liberal societies, people often resent being told what to do (the belief that it is their right to determine what constitutes a good life for them has taken strong hold), and the behaviour might even represent one of the few areas where they feel they enjoy any control over their own lives^u.

^u Richard Wilkinson has shown this to apply for smoking amongst low income groups. Perversely the sense of control retained may have health benefits that outweigh the effects of smoking in some cases!

And third structural factors might make the behaviour hard or expensive to change – so even if people ‘want to change’ (and there is often evidence that they do, collectively) there are major obstacles from the massed effects of government policy (much of which is not coherent with the behaviour changes advocated), corporate marketing, and habit.

In the last decade or so, a broad approach to ‘behaviour change’ has entered political discourse and the world of the Government in the UK (Cabinet Office⁸⁹; COI⁹⁰) as well as the popular science literature^{91, 92, 93, 94}. Much of this has involved sound research – based in cognitive and behavioural science - and provided useful insights, which inform subsequent sections of this review^v. Unfortunately recent thinking on behaviour change has, all too often, been adopted and presented politically in ways that chime rather too nicely with a centre-right politics that seeks to minimise state intervention in favour of voluntary, individualised action. Moreover, when faced with the conundrum of making modern consumerist society ecologically sustainable, there are searching questions to be asked about how far current approaches to behaviour change can meet the challenge. Soron⁹⁵ criticises the sustainable consumption literature for focusing on behaviour change, and ignoring the underlying motivations of consumption, particularly its role in identity formation. This does not preclude learning from behavioural psychology but rather argues for considering it within a whole-systems understanding of the social, economic and political context in which it might be applied. Meanwhile, widespread enthusiasm for behaviour change suggests it merits a deeper consideration. Much advocacy of behaviour change interventions relies on recent developments in behavioural economics, which highlights the apparently irrational biases and framing effects which influence decisions, and the heuristics (or rules of thumb) people apply (Cabinet Office, Holmes *et al*⁹⁶). Although this is valuable, such a focus is neither complete (humans certainly appear capable of rationality in much of what we do) nor does the recognition of irrationality alone imply that over consuming behaviour can be reduced to sustainable levels.

^v Although we should acknowledge that many of the findings of behavioural psychology have generally proven hard to replicate and very few of them have been subject to replication efforts outside of rich western societies, which raises some questions as to their wider applicability. For instance, Henrich *et al* find significant psychological and behavioural differences between Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) societies and their non-WEIRD counterparts across a spectrum of key areas, including visual perception, fairness, spatial and moral reasoning, memory and conformity, and argue that findings from the former should not be assumed to be universally applicable (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X0999152X>).

The adoption of largely voluntaristic approaches to behaviour change is coherent with a conceptualisation of governments as agents for continued over-consumption as a condition of economic growth. Insofar as this conceptualisation holds, with its rather monolithic view of governments, it demands that we consider questions of system governance and politics, and the underlying economic models. These are topics that will be considered in more depth elsewhere in the Big Ideas series. A milder interpretation might suggest that rather than government advocacy for behaviour change being hypocritical, it is simply over-ambitious. Here we continue to explore how behavioural psychology and behavioural economics might help tackle the problems of consumerism.

Psychologists in the behaviour change field characterise the brain as having two ‘systems’ of thinking⁹⁷. The subconscious, instinctive, emotional way in which we process most information is contrasted with ‘thinking slow’, ‘reflective’, deductive and more rational – a system employed by the brain only through conscious effort. This suggests – for instance - that new behaviours requiring great conscious effort to take on board (e.g., measuring your own carbon footprint) are unlikely to be easily adopted by many, whilst old consumerist habits may be hard to break. There appears broad consensus that the majority of our decisions and actions are taken instinctively, rather than through deliberation, although the extent to which those instincts are influenced by individual or group factors is debateable^w.

The framing of a debate or conversation is crucial to how people understand it. For example, in the US, Republicans call for ‘tax relief’ rather than ‘tax cuts’ - implying that all taxes are a burden and whoever imposed that burden was wrong. Laykoff⁹⁸ explains that framing is crucial because words and phrases carry far more than their literal weight; they can also touch off a host of other concepts, images and meanings in people’s minds. Darnton *et al*⁹⁹ argue that development is still seen by much of the public through a frame of ‘charity’ rather than ‘justice’, with people in developing countries inevitably cast as the thankful recipients of generous donors in the West. Without turning this framing around, they suggest, development bodies will continue to struggle to tackle the underlying injustices causing global poverty, and will fail to tackle fundamental questions such as the nature of development and the meaning of prosperity.

^w Johnathan Haidt (2012, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided By Politics and Religion*. New York: Pantheon Books) argues strongly for the domination of instinct, and an evolved self which is strongly, but not wholly individualistic. Kahneman emphasises the predominance of ‘fast’ (instinctive) thinking. Others suggest a strong evolutionary role for fairness, sharing and group-related identities in such instinctive thinking.

Some organisations are taking this thinking into the consumption space: for example UK Dream is a web start-up aiming to create a populist agenda for more sustainable living as a 'new aspiration' for a new kind of *intuitive, desirable and conscious living* for 'everyday people, in everyday language and in everyday ways'. They are currently testing framing around the ideas of 'Experience rather than things' and 'Entertainment rather than stuff'^x.

But in contemporary society, Shrubsole¹⁰⁰ identifies a dominant trend of framing people as 'consumers' – even in political discourse - more than as other forms of identity, such as 'citizen'. Referring to people as consumers rather than citizens has a detrimental impact on their willingness to cooperate, and Bauer *et al*¹⁰¹ find they become more competitive, individualistic and short-termist in tests.

Reliance on heuristics, or 'rules of thumb', to make decisions can also introduce obstacles. For example the 'commitment heuristic' explained by Kahneman¹⁰² means that people become increasingly committed to a decision based on prior investment, even if new evidence suggests that the costs now outweigh the benefits. Understanding such heuristics - and the habits Wood and Neal¹⁰³ discuss, based on heuristics, frames and biases - can help explain apparently irrational decisions that raise consumption levels, but offer no guarantees that we could reverse them.

Ormerod¹⁰⁴ highlights that the increasingly common heuristic of social 'copying' may be perfectly rational in a strongly networked yet highly complex world (and thus more common and indeed dominant in the modern web-connected world), but that its implications for policy are also complex, as differently structured networks react differently to the same intervention, and indeed even the same network might react differently to similar interventions: networks can be simultaneously robust (absorbing shocks without changing) and fragile (magnifying shocks into transformative change). He argues that most behaviour change theory is poorly informed by an understanding of networks and their role in promulgating or stifling attempted change.

Further biases introduce informal discounting. For example, people are both strongly loss averse, and tend to value short-term reward over longer-term gain. Similarly, people are highly averse to experiencing shame, and much consumption reflects this motivation. Heavy discounting is clearly a major issue for environmental sustainability – we tend to want to keep getting jam today and worry less about conserving jam for tomorrow. However, people

^x See <http://www.ukdream.org/>

may adopt a more short- or long-termist approach to discounting depending on what situation they are placed in (see below, framing). Public policy can help to embed longer-term thinking into the way we behave – but no amount of behavioural insights can make up for a poorly-designed policy. For example, the UK Government’s ‘Green Deal’ – supposedly inspired by such insights - has resulted in high-interest loans and much lower uptake than under the previous system of publicly-subsidised, state-mandated insulation measures.

The idea of a ‘value-action’ gap, described by Darnton¹⁰⁵ as the “*difference between what people say and what they do*” can help highlight obstacles. Darnton argues that the gap is not a void, but “*is filled with barriers blocking the progress from values to action. In this model, inaction is not down to information deficit or a lack of rationality; instead, the presupposed decisional flow is blocked by other factors intruding into the process*” (p10). In other words, one may feel strongly about environmental problems, but find it difficult to act on those feelings, because of an economic system addicted to fossil fuels, with restricted transport choices, landlord-tenant problems that disincentivise building energy improvement and so on.

Clearly one will struggle to change behaviour without removing barriers to action, but this does not mean that values and motivations should be ignored. As the social psychologist Greg Maio¹⁰⁶ writes: “*researchers often find strong correspondence between attitudes and behaviour – it’s not perfect correspondence, but it is much higher than many critics seem to suggest.*” Maio cites a recent long-term study of New England residents in which stated environmental concern predicted 36% of environmentally friendly action – “*a very strong relation according to conventional wisdom for social science research (i.e., not many variables do better than this).*” The extent to which values are a necessary but not sufficient condition for change is unclear. In the absence of relevant values, pro-environmental behaviour might be incentivised financially or stimulated by social norms, although it seems either mechanism would still rely on a political or social majority sharing pro-environmental values.

Box: Social segmentation

Some behaviour change advocates suggest that social segmentation can help with targeted behaviour change. Marketers were first to explore dividing up potential audiences for their products into segments, and then tailoring advertising to each grouping. In more recent decades the practice has been taken up by political campaigners and other groups seeking

to drive behaviour change. Two examples of segmentation models in use in the UK are Defra's pro-environmental behaviours segmentation¹⁰⁷, and Chris Rose and Pat Dade's Values Modes approach¹⁰⁸.

Defra's segmentation is based on willingness and ability to act – focusing on end behaviours, though trying to combine a sense of underlying motivations with barriers in the way to action. It segments the UK population into 7 groups, from 'Stalled starters' (not doing anything green) up to 'positive greens' (the most eco of the lot). It draws on a quantitative survey and a series of qualitative focus groups. It highlights a range of different motivations for acting environmentally – some groups are more frugal in their consumption because they want to save money, other groups have more spare income but want to spend it on greener products or profess less concern about money in the first place. So far, however, it has had limited appreciable impact on UK policy in this area.

Rose and Dade's model is based on a broad range of values and attitudes, rather than just environmental behaviours, and divides populations into 3 broad (sub-divided) groups – Settlers (more conservative, traditionalist and security-driven); Prospectors (more ambition-driven, aspirational, status-conscious, consumerist); and Pioneers (more 'ethically'-driven, less concerned by material aspiration, interested in 'self-actualisation'). The Values Modes model draws on Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs' and reflects Charles Inglehart's theory of how society has shifted from a 'traditional' worldview to a 'materialist' outlook and since the 1960s has been transitioning to a 'post-materialist' worldview¹⁰⁹. This has led Rose and Dade to propose, in a nutshell, that to change their behaviour, different segments need to be spoken to in ways that help satisfy their dominant needs.

This need not imply that a 'lower' level need has to be satisfied for a 'higher' one to be pursued, and might remain compatible with Manfred Max-Neef's work¹¹⁰ that suggest a matrix of needs is more realistic than a hierarchy. Max-Neef's work on 'false satisfiers' highlights the challenge that different needs can be met in different ways, and ways rooted in consumerism often risk merely masking the underlying needs, rather than satisfying them. Along with Shalom Schwartz's work on values¹¹¹ this research suggests that further efforts to understand and market different satisfiers based on the ways in which they affect underlying

needs and values would be worthwhile^y. Townsend's work exploring the sexual signalling purposes of consumption indicates possible ways forward here¹¹².

This might allow advocates of such social segmentation to avoid the risk that appealing to people using, for example, materialistic, 'extrinsic' values (or nudging them to adopt related behaviours) might reinforce those values, rather than making people care more about environment and society. Tim Kasser¹¹³ argues that ongoing materialistic appeals by modern consumer society may be creating a 'hedonistic treadmill'. On the other hand using (or even manipulating) extrinsic values to trigger adoption of less materialistic behaviour might even have the beneficial effect of reducing the future salience of materialistic values, if it is true that opinions and values can follow behaviour (rather than vice versa) (an argument cited by Jackson (2005) and Rose and Dade (2007) amongst others).

There is, therefore, no evidence that 'behaviour change' alone could achieve sustainable levels and patterns of consumption. The interventions typically suggested seem unlikely to change behaviours significantly and the change achieved falls short of the scale of that needed. Behaviour change is both hard to stimulate –at least with the tools explored so far - and limited in scope. Advocacy for behaviour change based in a behavioural psychology approach tends to individualise big social problems, and underplay the potential roles of government, legislation, and collective action to frame and guide the way people behave. It is typically short-term in its focus – with little to say about why human cultures change deeply over longer periods of time. It highlights the subconscious, instinctive ways in which we behave, but at the risk of rejecting the prospect of public reasoning as a means of change. Similarly it appears to fetishize 'uncoordinated' behaviour over political organizing.

In terms of tackling consumption and identity, it seems that most behaviour change thinking is content to stay within a consumerist, individualistic paradigm¹¹⁴ – taking the view that people are unlikely to change from this and that the best we can do is remove social barriers to action, nudge the choice architecture and hope we can start some fashionable trends for greener living^z. The unwillingness of governments to shift paradigms and attempt to make

^y This holds, even though Dade's initial attempts to map Values Modes on to Shalom Schwartz's values wheel (or 'circumplex') have reportedly been dismissed by Schwartz (according to Tim Kasser and Tom Crompton, Limitations of Environmental Campaigning Based on Values for Money, Image and Status. Common Cause Briefing, August 2011. <http://valuesandframes.org/download/briefings/Value%20Modes%20%7C%20Common%20Cause%20Briefing.pdf>).

^z Soron, 2010 op cit echoes this critique

new markets for greener products through public procurement, for example – rather negotiating constraints to such approaches through free trade rules and investor-state dispute mechanisms – is indicative of the low priority they actually give to behaviour change.

Some argue even that ‘behaviour change’ approaches, especially if conducted without regard for underlying values, can do more harm than good¹¹⁵. Henwood and Pidgeon¹¹⁶ conclude: “*Overreliance on individually or choice-based behaviour change initiatives ... may be counterproductive if they fail to address people’s more deep seated, valued identity concerns*” (p4). However, integrating understanding of behavioural psychology in interventions designed to reduce the negative effects of advertising, or otherwise shift cultural norms and values (whether directly or via behavioural incentives) remains valid and important.

Before we turn to the role of values, we review some other obstacles to desirable behaviours with respect to consumption. Such behaviours are deterred by a wide range of factors. The next section turns to explore some of the more influential factors such as social norms, habits and marketing.

5. Social animals: social pressures, habits and marketing

This section explores some of the key obstacles and opportunities that arise from humans' nature as social animals. It finds that social norms both restrict our identity choices, and encourage consumption (much of it 'careless' both in terms of its habitual practice and its lack of concern for wider impacts). The establishment of habitual behaviours in a social and cultural context is an essential part of normal life in a complex world, but also a key obstacle to changing consumption. Advertising plays a key role in maintaining existing consumption habits, in promoting individualistic consumer identities and in undermining collective politics, and is set to become even more insidious with the continued greater penetration of individualised online data gathering for marketing purposes. Education plays a similar role in the inculcation of social norms and habituation, and in many countries, modern education notably normalises acceptance of inequality, devalues creativity and limits exposure to nature, despite the introduction of some empathy education in many countries. Reforms will be required in both areas if consumerist identities are to be challenged. Despite the growth of individualism, humans remain social animals. The growth of individualism is itself a social process in which norms are replicated and spread. More generally we follow norms, and our identity projects are guided by socialisation. As Jackson¹¹⁷ points out, we are all guided by what others say and do. He makes reference to social learning theory, to suggest that: "*we learn most effectively from models who are attractive to us or influential for us, or from people we simply 'like us'. Sometimes we learn by counter-example. And we learn not to trust people who tell us one thing and do another.*" (p13)

The influence of social norms and expectations on people is recognised in many papers and can strongly influence identity and well-being. Hogg and Wilson¹¹⁸, for example, identify how societal views of disability can inhibit the ability of disabled people to develop a strong self-identity. Zayer *et al*¹¹⁹ look at the significant influence the media can have on women's ability (or not) to create strong self-identities. Piff *et al*¹²⁰ – working with class identities find that upper-class groups exhibit more unethical behaviour than lower classes, proposing that this arises from values that normalise 'greed'. Clearly, such group values would similarly justify high consumption regardless of its external impacts.

Shankar *et al*¹²¹ state that whilst identity is no longer a given - unlike in the distant past - and instead is a project to work on, socialisation has a major influence on chosen identities, for example working class children becoming working class parents. They argue that the apparent freedoms to invent one's own identity - represented in much of the literature – may

be exaggerated. North and Fisk¹²² identify how societal pressures can restrict the freedoms of people in old age living fulfilling lives as they are pressured – particularly by the young – to ‘act their age’. In contrast Schau *et al*¹²³ say that retirement brings great opportunities – or ‘change points’ - to change one’s identity and pursue previous or new identities, including through privileging consumption above work.

It would be overly simplistic to assume that all consumerism (beyond needs) is driven by a self-identity project. Warde¹²⁴ argues that consumption can also be an enjoyable experience and that it is over-playing it to suggest that consumerism is solely or even largely driven by identity. Others identify the role of norms and habits in consumption practice, and gift-giving is also a significant form of consumption (see box). But despite this identity clearly has a role in consumerism, and probably on the balance of evidence a significant role.

Box: Gifts and consumption

Gifts are a powerful example of norm-based consumption. Much gift-giving follows social norms in the nature, value and purpose of the gift (e.g. at particular celebrations and festivals). Gifts can demonstrate status (the more lavish the gift, the higher the status of the giver), and often serve purposes of sexual or romantic positioning. Gifts also serve cultural purposes in establishing ‘habitus’ norms – for example through the conventional assemblage of wedding gifts which serve to ‘*authorize and even institutionalize domestic consumption practices*’¹²⁵ Goodwin et al¹²⁶ (citing Poe, 1977) suggest that “*gifts may convey a wide range of symbolic messages such as ‘the status of a relationship, a promise of future interaction, or a statement of love, concern or domination’*”.

Goodwin et al also argue that through gift giving acts, individuals communicate affirmation of their relationships, but there is a spectrum of motivation for giving, from social obligation to autonomous voluntarism. Although even voluntary gift giving can be manipulative or threatening rather than purely altruistic, it largely communicates solidarity or affection, and social obligations can equally well generate gifts which build community solidarity. In terms of identity, gifts have significance both through their content and the relationships they affirm.

There are also notable counter-cultural forces in gift-giving. For instance the view that excessive consumerism has undermined the authenticity of Christmas has stimulated resistance to material gift giving¹²⁷ and helped boost the popularity of charity gifts made on

behalf of another. Charitable traditions also strengthen the growing gift element of collaborative consumption, via charity shops or online platforms such as freecycle¹²⁸.

The modern concept of the 'gift economy' may be a helpful label, focusing attention on giving as a mechanism for rebuilding community, particularly through gifts of services and assistance, or sharing of resources and skills¹²⁹. The gift economy also appears in the form of 'paying forward' with the significant psychological difference that this constitutes a gift to some unknown person, and relies on a generic sense of reciprocity within a broad community, rather than the specific expectation of reciprocity involved in an exchange economy or in the forms of personal gift giving discussed above. Such giving clearly reinforces collective identities over individualistic ones.

Behavioural economics agrees that social imitation is significant. We can all exhibit herd mentality, suffer groupthink, or respond to peer pressure. When a behaviour is seen to be practised by social peers, it is 'socially proven' and more readily adopted. It can become a social norm, regardless of rationality. This is one mechanism whereby groups strongly influence consumption patterns, and it highlights how difficult new, sustainable consumption behaviours can be to establish. Despite the prospects for social media to transmit evidence of such behaviours, in both real and virtual worlds there remains both persistent advertising to the contrary and physical social proof of continued material consumption. The Sustainable Consumption Roundtable¹³⁰ agrees that reciprocity is key to uptake – that for someone to take on a new pro-environmental (potentially burdensome) behaviour requires them to see others doing it, and argues that even those willing to change are much more likely to do so within a regulatory framework within which others are also required to comply. In spreading new ideas or practices certain social actors and groups appear to be disproportionately influential due to their reach, reputation and trustworthiness¹³¹. But once behaviours become routinized as habits, even social proof will struggle to obtain traction.

Yet habits are very necessary shortcuts to enable individuals to navigate their lives¹³². Habits are learned and developed from positive rewards in a stable context and prompted by cues. They are very powerful; although they can be broken through significant and repeated effort (they can persist beyond an intention not to follow them). Changing contexts also enable habits to be broken if the habit cues are missing. Habits, they say, playing a significant role in our consumerism. A reality which, says Jackson¹³³, makes achieving sustainable

consumption extremely difficult. He notes that “*the process of ‘routinization’ of everyday behaviours makes them less visible to rational deliberation, less obvious to understand, and less accessible to policy intervention. Habitual behaviours ... are an important structural feature of behavioural ‘lock-in’*” (p11). He explains the milieu within which habitual behaviour occurs in terms of structuration theory: “*Giddens work has provided the basis for a view of consumption as a set of social practices, influenced on the one hand by social norms and lifestyle choices and on the other by the institutions and structures of society.*” (p12).

Elizabeth Shove¹³⁴ maintains that habits change in ways that imply escalating and standardizing patterns of consumption, while acquisition of new habits can transform practices and roles and reshape identities. Like memes, habits can be seen as social practices reproduced by their practitioners. This implies it is not just a matter of surfacing the unconscious, or identifying the barriers, to change habits, but also a need to understand the milieu or habitus^{aa} in which they flourish. In this way, habitual consumption is not only a matter of the day to day, and basic: identity building consumption of almost any type (such as flying to exotic holiday destinations, wearing of fashionable brands, or the purchase of organic foods) can also be habituated.

Marketing and particularly advertising are important mechanisms in both habituation and in the promotion of conscious identity-building consumption. Arguably, advertising plays into the narrative mode in which we construct identity, through the creation and telling of stories. Several authors in this space highlight the negative effects of advertising and urge controls over it.

Strannegård and Dobers¹³⁵ note the significance of advertising within a social identity framework where commercial messages predominate and other relational cues for identity are drowned out. Alexander *et al* (2011) argue that modern advertising is detrimental to wellbeing. They conclude that advertising increases overall consumption; that it promotes and normalises a whole host of behaviours, attitudes and values, many of which are socially and environmentally damaging; that it manipulates individuals on a subconscious level, both

^{aa} Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ (or socialised norms or tendencies that guide behaviour and thinking) is essentially one of power. Habitus constantly operates to re-legitimise power in cultural and symbolic forms. Cultural capital – in part expressed through consumption patterns - plays a central role in societal power relations. It ‘provides the means for a non-economic form of domination and hierarchy, as classes distinguish themselves through taste’. The shift from material to cultural and symbolic forms of capital hides the causes of inequality. <http://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/bourdieu-and-habitus/>

children and adults; and that it is so pervasive in modern society as to make the choice of opting-out from exposure virtually impossible. McIntosh¹³⁶ is even harsher in his judgement. He suggests society has fallen prey to a numbing culture of violence, and combined with the motivational manipulation of advertising and marketing, this has established an addictive consumer mentality. He illustrates his argument with reference to the harmful marketing practices of the tobacco industry, subsequently adopted by the fossil fuel industry and others.

For Gabriel¹³⁷, in individualistic societies advertising exploits the myths inherent in the default model of the self (dualism, individualism and expressivism) to create and recreate personas dependent on consumption. Gabriel also raises serious concerns about marketing practices in general. He connects the growth of the consumer identity with the privatisation and enclosure of both media spaces and the urban public commons (streets and market-places), threatening the 'shared public sphere' on which democracy depends and giving big corporates the loudest voice in politics. Participation as consumers replaces participation as citizens. Moreover, market segmentation extended into politics undermines the pursuit of genuinely common interests and a shared political agenda. Gabriel cites Jhally's claim that "*advertising is the most influential form of contemporary socialisation*" (p71).

By implication this suggests advertising/marketing is more potent than education. Its effectiveness is not because it nudges people to buy products they already want, but because in aggregate it shifts culture, normalises selfish behaviour and restructures identities. The extent to which those outcomes are a product, rather than a cause of behaviour change, remains debateable, but to confuse the deep cultural damage of advertising with a purely behavioural impact would be to miss the point.

Nor should we overlook the role of education in identity formation, and in particular its role in establishing and justifying an unequal individualistic society¹³⁸ yet simultaneously stifling creativity in favour of conformity¹³⁹. Interestingly, critiques of education's negative role often suggest that rather than completing an incomplete identity (in the way consumption projects are often presented) education undermines pre-existing creative and non-conformist identities through repeated ranking and sorting of children.

Pedagogic experiments with student-led learning suggest that, especially with access to web-based resources, children learn more widely and more quickly, with greater creativity,

than in normal curriculum based, teacher directed learning^{bb}. Lifelong learning and popular education apply similar approaches to achieve more collaborative and inclusive outcomes – at least in terms of the ‘students’ participatively directing the educational processes¹⁴⁰. Rather than educating people to be workers and consumers, such techniques offer the possibility of educating citizens and members of communities who can and do co-create their lives and environments.

Krznaric has reviewed the development of social and emotional learning in contemporary schooling. He sees great possibilities for the extension of empathy here, but criticises typical applications as too narrow in scope and ambition¹⁴¹. In particular he bemoans a focus on empathy as an individual skill with benefits in reducing classroom conflict and enhanced productivity; and on empathy within limited local communities, rather than with strangers in our global society.

There are many critiques of educational systems from a wide range of perspectives, and we have neither space nor resources to examine them all here. However our concern that education is a powerful mechanism of socialisation into individualistic consumerist society, in places where damaging forms of status are learned and ingrained, extends to both school level and higher education, and resonates with proposals to learn from Scandinavian educational systems in things like of later starting ages for formal schooling, greater levels of sport and other physical activity, including regular exposure to nature (weekly forest days are common in Swedish kindergartens and primary schools). These have no negative impact on educational outcomes, but appear to produce more balanced and rounded graduates. The exclusion of advertising from schools and educational programmes is also an obvious opportunity.

Skidelsky and Skidelsky¹⁴² and Layard¹⁴³ are among those who call for generally stricter curbs on advertising, especially to children, Layard citing Swedish rules that limits advertising targeted at under twelve’s. The Skidelskys also suggest ‘steeply progressive’ consumption taxation.

It is reasonable to predict that in the future marketing/advertising will be ever more individually targeted and more insidious in its influence on consumption. The gathering of masses of behavioural and attitudinal data from our on-line activities on search engines and social networks where unknowingly ‘we are the product’ allows, as Jaron Lanier¹⁴⁴ explains,

^{bb} See, for example <http://www.wired.com/business/2013/10/free-thinkers/2/>

the development of more “*effective behavioural models of people. These models are far from perfect, but are good enough to predict and manipulate people gradually, over time, shaping tastes and consumption in more effective and insidious ways than even subliminal advertisements do*” and the subsequent placement of manipulative content. Lanier’s prescription is to institute a system of micro-payments for the data gathered from us. But given the understanding of the negative effects of consumerism surveyed here, one might rather argue for enhanced internet privacy, and as Paul Bernal¹⁴⁵ suggests for other reasons too, rights to a secure online identity^{cc}.

^{cc} Bostrom and Sandberg (2013, op cit) highlight the growing complexities of online identity, with many people having multiple identities – formally mediated by multiple platforms or providers, and the risks these new technologies bring for identity damage.

6. Consumption and wellbeing

This section summarises briefly the rich and diverse literature on wellbeing, with a focus on the ways in which consumption (measured in financial or material terms) delivers or fails to deliver wellbeing. It appears that increased consumption is important for wellbeing when basic needs are unmet, but at higher levels its benefits seem to decline substantially and may become negative. It highlights three reasons: psychological adaptation, material side effects and psycho-social impacts on health. It notes the importance of alternative measures of wellbeing, rather than relying on economic measures; along with regulatory or tax based responses such as progressive consumption taxes or limits on working hours.

It is necessary briefly to note that wellbeing is understood in various overlapping ways. In particular, conventional economics tends to assume a 'hedonic' interpretation in which the wellbeing equates directly to the pleasure obtained from consumption. Advocates of a 'happiness' approach to wellbeing, such as Richard Layard retain a utilitarian perspective, in which different contributions to happiness can be aggregated with a meaningful measure of pleasure, which can be derived as easily by doing good for others (eudaemonic wellbeing) as by consuming selfishly. Other scholars see wellbeing as more complex and multi-dimensional, such that it cannot be reduced into a single utilitarian calculus, but must be assessed in terms of (for example) the substantive freedoms a person enjoys to function in society¹⁴⁶. For our purposes it is not necessary to resolve these differences, rather to note that they make the potential relationships between consumption and wellbeing even more complex.

The analysis presented so far is strongly suggestive that personal consumption is undertaken to increase both material and psychological wellbeing, but also implies that in consumerist cultures, much of the psychological benefit might be eliminated by the creation of new demands and needs by marketing, or else overwhelmed by the negative effects of insecurity generated by the associated economic model. There is particularly strong evidence that wellbeing does not increase linearly with rising income and consumption, and indeed, plateaus for at least three reasons: psychological effects such as adaption, material side-effects (such as growing pollution or environmental damage), and psycho-social effects which worsen mental and physical health¹⁴⁷.

Problems of adaptation to higher incomes and continued social comparison are important mechanisms which diminish the subjective wellbeing obtained from higher consumption¹⁴⁸.

Cognitive biases also play a role. Loss aversion means we are happier to avoid losses, than to make new gains, and ‘projection bias’ means that we tend to overestimate the wellbeing value of future income increases in comparison to the benefit we experience upon receiving them. Kahneman and Kruger¹⁴⁹ even report growing life dissatisfaction in China as incomes and consumption have risen. Many commentators have used such analysis to call for the supplementing or even replacement of GDP as a measure of social wellbeing or progress (see for example Stiglitz *et al*¹⁵⁰, Jackson¹⁵¹ or the Social Progress Imperative¹⁵²)

Typically such approaches recognise that wellbeing is a multi-dimensional concept, which cannot simply be reduced to income or the consumption opportunities income purchases. Rather it also includes physical and mental health, individual and group social contacts, fulfilling opportunities to work and participate in society and experience of nature. The work of economists such as Manfred Max Neef¹⁵³ and Amartya Sen¹⁵⁴ bears out such a view. Max Neef suggests we need to understand a range of needs and different potential satisfiers (while avoiding false satisfiers^{dd}) to deliver well-being. Consumerism however, offers many false satisfiers. Sen suggests consideration of a range of human capabilities and functionings as the desired outcomes of our economic and social arrangements.

Like many economists, Skidelsky and Skidelsky¹⁵⁵ argue that economic growth is not increasing quality of life. They make suggestions for how the good life could be attained including a basic citizen’s income, an expenditure tax and curbs on advertising to rein in consumerism; and a Tobin tax on financial transactions^{ee}.

Sandel¹⁵⁶ highlights also that the extension of markets into public goods and services (resulting from the triumph of individualistic consumerism) can harm wellbeing in at least two ways – by degrading the things we value, and by exacerbating the impacts of inequality and poverty.

^{dd} Max Neef distinguishes singular and synergistic satisfiers (ways of beneficially meeting one or more needs) from destructive satisfiers (which undermine their own effectiveness – such as gun ownership for security), pseudo-satisfiers (such as fashion as a satisfier for identity), and inhibiting satisfiers (which while meeting a singular need, can suppress ways of meeting other needs – watching TV for leisure for example).

^{ee} Their work explicitly rejects claims of environmental limits to growth, focusing on the other ways in which consumption growth has harmed wellbeing. It has however been criticised by Larry Elliot (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/jun/29/how-much-is-enough-skidelsky-review>) as having fairly elitist views of culture, and failing to recognise important improvements in social inclusion (on grounds of race, gender and sexuality).

Louv¹⁵⁷ directly links some of the most disturbing childhood trends in wellbeing, such as the rises in obesity, balance and muscular problems, attention disorders, and depression to the lack of exposure to nature in the lives of today's wired generation—he calls this nature-deficit disorder.

Wilkinson and Pickett¹⁵⁸ highlight worrying correlations between inequality and many undesirable social trends, including obesity. They suggest that inequality is both driven by consumerist individualism, and a driver of damaging consumer behaviour, in a vicious circle.

Kasser et al¹⁵⁹ argue that when materialistic values (material consumption, status and image) take a relatively central place in a person's system of values, personal well-being declines because of a decreased likelihood of having experiences that satisfy other psychological needs. They further suggest that a materialistic orientation encourages behaviours that damage interpersonal and community relations, as well as the wider environment.

Sheldon and Kasser¹⁶⁰ further suggest that materialistic, extrinsic values come to the fore when people face existential, interpersonal and economic threats. The last suggests that those in material poverty and insecurity may be more vulnerable to the negative effects of materialism.

Trebeck¹⁶¹ also connects consumerism with deepened economic and health inequalities. She suggests the prioritisation of consumerism, image and superficial relationships in the pursuit of economic growth has “*narrowed social, economic and participatory ‘space’, crowding out room (both physical and emotional) for other activities, goals, values and relationships [with] deleterious implications for our relationships, life chances and mental and physical health*”(p1). She further hypothesises that multiply disadvantaged areas such as parts of Glasgow might be more vulnerable to the “*worst effects of consumerist materialism*” in the same way that individuals “*who have experienced trauma, socio-economic deprivation or insecurity are more vulnerable to taking on materialistic goals, and using materialistic benchmarks to judge themselves*”(p1).

On a more hopeful note, Schor¹⁶² highlights research that suggests - unlike growing income or consumption - increasing time affluence (e.g. by shorter working hours) enhances wellbeing independent of income levels, in ways that are less subject to adaptation effects, and non-positional – i.e. we value free time for itself, not because we have more or less of it than our social comparators. Sheldon and Kasser¹⁶³ also emphasise the importance of time

affluence while Coote et al¹⁶⁴ argue that standard working weeks of 21 hours would bring economic and environmental benefits as well as challenging materialistic culture and identities. They particularly note the potential for men to develop more genuinely family oriented identities.

Overall it is fair to conclude that except where increased consumption meets basic needs and contributes directly to poverty alleviation, it is of ambiguous benefit, and unmanaged consumerism appears to contribute to a range of social ills in high consumption societies.

7. Values, identity and consumerism

We now return to the argument briefly set out at the end of section 4, that changes in values are a critical part of a shift in identities, and an essential enabler of effective behaviour change interventions. This section explores selected relevant literature on the interface of values, identity and consumerism. It suggests that the dominance of individualist values – rooted in both mind-body and human-nature dualisms – is damaging to sustainability interests, but that individuals can hold conflicting materialistic individualistic and pro-environmental values simultaneously. Which of these are dominant depends to some extent on the cultural context and habitus, but in most contemporary societies the individualistic, materialistic and affluent identities typically win out. We can conclude that neither values nor behaviours will be automatically transmitted from pioneers of sustainable consumption to a wider population. It therefore appears necessary to intervene directly both in the identity drivers of consumerism and in the structural mechanisms that constrain and pattern it. Although such approaches might emerge through collaborative or third sector activity, in the face of vested interests, this probably implies a more pro-active state.

Gabriel¹⁶⁵ notes that modern individual identities are in some respects dependent on a psychologically based mind-body dualism which lies at the root of most religious beliefs (survival of some form of soul after death requires such a dualism). However he also notes the emergence of secular dualism in the 18th century with the concept of the 'spectatorial man' for whom self-refinement and self-fashioning constitute progress. In this we see already a linkage between identity and consumption.

Equally fundamental is the dualism between humans and nature which underlies both concepts of domination and conservation. Jackson¹⁶⁶ cites cultural theory and the dominant individualistic group which typically sees nature as robust (unlike egalitarians who typically see nature as fragile). Crompton and Kasser¹⁶⁷ suggest that those who see themselves above nature are less likely to value and protect it.

However the dominance of individualism does not mean there is no practical expression of environmental values. Gatersleben *et al*¹⁶⁸ and Jackson both cite research by Stern and others identifying – and placing in the Schwartz values inventory - three values that underlie environmental concern. These are altruism, biosphereism and egoism. Both suggest the first two are closely related. Jackson notes strong empirical evidence for the correlation of altruism and pro-environmental behaviours (especially where the behaviours involve

personal costs). Gatersleben *et al* cite subsequent research finding an even stronger correlation for biosphereism. They find that materialism is negatively related to biosphereism but positively with egoism. However, they suggest that people with environmental values hold materialistic values, simultaneously, even though they are in conflict.

Hurth¹⁶⁹ also suggests that such conflicting values can be simultaneously held within individuals, as an affluent identity and environmental identity. She suggests that the affluent identity – which is very salient and socially valued as well as materialistic – typically wins out over the environmental identity, which is poorly viewed in society. In addition, control of the environment is seen to be a key attribute to the affluent identity. Holt¹⁷⁰ similarly identifies that materialism wins out over environmental values for what he calls the Bourgeois Bohemians.

Carfagna *et al*¹⁷¹ see the High Cultural Capital group - largely highly educated, white and female in the study – as seeing eco-actions becoming normative in their group although they typically have higher environmental footprints than those with Lower Cultural Capital (simply because of their higher incomes and total consumption). They suggest – applying Bourdieu's concept - that this signals the emergence of a new 'eco-habitus'^{ff} with *“strong signs of altered preferences ... across three main dimensions. First, participants infuse new meaning into the term materialism. They focus on the physicality of goods and their connection to the earth. Second, they articulate a preference for the local though local consumption patterns which are marked by cosmopolitan taste patterns. Third, they express reverence for manual labour and a strong desire to gain competences traditionally marked as “unskilled.”*” (p37).

Carfagna *et al* further suggest indications that these behaviours and preferences, in contrast to Bourdieu's concept of habitus, are not necessarily being adopted as signals of class distinction, and could trickle-down to influence others who may mimic their eco-actions.

Rose and Dade¹⁷² identify prospectors – probably with a similar profile to the affluent identity – as a key group that likewise would not find an 'environmental' identity attractive, although they may mimic the behaviour of those with higher social status. Schor¹⁷³ has also highlighted the growth of new fashionable consumption behaviours, such as 'minimalist' living, self-provisioning and collective consumption amongst relatively affluent groups.

^{ff} Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' refers to the set of socialised norms or tendencies that guide behaviour and thinking in a given cultural group.

However, it is arguable that many of these behaviours are exclusive in that they are only affordable to a 'downshifting' affluent group. And others question the idea that such activities can be expected to be transmitted as new fashions in consumption behaviour. Holt¹⁷⁴ argues that focusing sustainable consumption interventions – especially advocacy for voluntary behaviour change - on such groups will not lead to the adoption of similar practices by 'fashion' – partly because others may not even enjoy the capabilities to take such choices, but particularly because of the incongruent values and aspirations displayed. He argues rather, that if 'mainstreet America' is to adopt more sustainable lifestyles, it needs interventions that target its needs for basic services and economic stability through shared services and resources.

Moreover, even if a new eco-habitus emerges amongst affluent groups, the underlying recognition that this enhances wellbeing in comparison to consumerism, is not widely understood – and more importantly such a message is easily rejected as paternalistic (especially if those communicating it do not display congruence between it and all their behaviours). Providing routes to escape consumerism that chime with the opportunities⁹⁹ and values of different groups will be important. This also argues for values change interventions which by definition engage with questions of desire, where behaviour change interventions do so only indirectly, insofar as they subsequently shift values back into coherence with the new, convenient behaviours.

This suggests that – contrary to simplistic models of norm-building - we can expect neither values nor behaviours to be *automatically* transmitted from pioneers of sustainable consumption to a wider population^{hh}. In general in current society the affluent and individualisticⁱⁱ largely trumps the environmental and egalitarian. Rather than simply seeking

⁹⁹ Delivering 'opportunities' relies to some extent on the widespread introduction of eco-efficiency interventions towards a sharing and service economy, rather than a material one.

^{hh} Unfortunately, Ormerod shows that such network effects are very hard to predict, as the same network might prove resilient to repeated impacts (efforts to change behaviours), and then swiftly transmit a change in behaviour from a similar impact. So exceptions, such as the rapid uptake of solar PV in response to feed-in-tariff incentives, do not prove that new norms can be consistently triggered through such interventions. And arguably the decline in pave installations with the reduction of the incentive implies that norms may not have changed even in this apparently fashionable case.

ⁱⁱ We recognise that everyone's values are a blend of the individualist and collectivist, and that these are expressed differently in terms of consumption. While not seeking to pass moral judgement, we assume here that in the face of contemporary environmental constraints, if it preferable that our collective values – such as sharing – are more predominantly enabled and displayed. Insofar as

to strengthen environmental identities in ways that change our consumption behaviour, it would appear necessary to intervene directly both in the identity drivers of consumerism and in the structural mechanisms, such as marketing, working hours and other economic practices, that constrain and pattern it.

people with strong individualist values often display more consumerist behaviour, we see this as a problem, but believe that both behaviours and values can be shifted in ways that respect those individuals.

8. Possible interventions

This section discusses the domains in which interlinked interventions might be designed (world views/values, identity construction, consumption behaviours), and the political and social context in which they need to operate. It suggests government intervention will be essential, and outlines some of the possible tools. It further suggests that interventions in values, identity and drivers for consumption (such as status) will also be required. These could include interventions in education and marketing to change processes of socialisation and build cognitive empathy or reduce the human-nature dualism; and programmes to build collaborative activity in the sharing economy, co-production, sports or creative enterprises such as music or theatre; while also seeking to redefine aspirations in consumption, for example through digital dematerialisation.

There is significant scientific support for the premise that the environmental pressures from consumption are threatening the ability of ecosystems to provide humans and other species with healthy environments, for example in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, the IPCC reports on climate change, and in the UK the Royal Society's People and the Planet report. There is little evidence that these pressures can be fully alleviated effectively through the adoption of eco-efficiency measures or voluntary consumption-related behaviour change alone. On the other hand there is substantial evidence that consumption has come to occupy a very important place in psychological wellbeing through its role in personal identity. This is particularly true amongst those people and cultures that exhibit more individualist world views.

It is important to recognise that the distinctive world view of individualists favours market-based responses^{175,ji}. So active resistance to many of the approaches suggested below might be expected in individualist societies. Resistance might also be expected as a result of the persistence of habits and norms. This suggests that Soron¹⁷⁶ is correct when he states that what is needed is more than levers, knobs and dials, more fundamental action is required to shift from the individualistic, nature domineering values and increase the salience of less materialistic identities. This is obviously no small task.

Jackson argues that policy must seek to influence four dimensions: the social and institutional frameworks and both individual behaviours and the underlying drivers for those

^{ji} Egalitarians on the other hand, tend to prefer community-based management policies; while hierarchists favour rule-based responses.

behaviours. He makes clear that “*Governments are not just innocent bystanders in the negotiation of consumer choice. They influence and co-create the culture of consumption in a variety of ways ... in which Government intervenes and the ways in which it chooses not to*” (p14-15). In this light, levers, knobs and dials have a significant role in incentivising, and delivering structural changes. These could range from regulation of public transport, to make it affordable and accessible, licensing of advertising, regulation of corporate sponsorship (e.g. in schools, sport etc) to the role government plays in ensuring people have secure incomes through the design of the welfare system, minimum wages and employment law.. Jackson advocates “*A concerted strategy ... to make behaviour change easy: ensuring that incentive structures and institutional rules favour pro-environmental behaviour, enabling access to pro-environmental choice, engaging people in initiatives to help themselves, and exemplifying the desired changes within Government’s own policies and practices.*” (p14).

Agyeman¹⁷⁷ also identifies the need for choice-editing. And Schor¹⁷⁸ calls for a range of government interventions from tax to working hours. Layard¹⁷⁹ also highlights tax based interventions and the banning of advertising to children. Holt¹⁸⁰ identifies the need to equip people to be critical consumers, tooled to see through the psychological ploys of advertisers and marketers; although such training would be of limited use for people who are not also able to be secure in their own identities,

So whilst government intervention in for example taxes, choice editing, product standards, advertising bans, and structural changes in education and economic arenas (such as shorter working weeks) is not enough on its own, it is necessary. We recognise that such recommendations for sustainable consumption may be unpalatable to governments heavily influenced by corporate power and committed to a growth economy. Where less consumption is seen as bad for business, government is unlikely to adopt, wholesale, policies that reduce our reliance on the market. These issues relating to economic models (and indeed to the role of corporations in politics) will be addressed in greater detail in forthcoming reviews in the Big Ideas project. However, experience in other countries suggests that some progress can be made on this front without overturning the entire economic model, and such interventions can be strategically pursued so as to facilitate values shifts that will open current economic models to greater questioning.

Within the literature there are a range of views on what else is necessary beyond this. Some argue for targeting values change, and building empathy or pro-environmental values; others focus more directly on transforming some of the key drivers for consumption such as status.

Crompton and Kasser¹⁸¹ argue that ‘identity campaigning’ should become a third broad strategy for the environmental movement, alongside ‘engaging organisations’ (both government and businesses) and ‘behaviour change’. They suggest tackling three potentially significant factors in ‘anti-sustainable’ identities: values and life goals (notably materialism); group identification (in and out groups); and coping mechanisms in the face of threats to identity.

Crompton and Kasser¹⁸² particularly suggest that it is important to promote the idea that humans are part of nature not separate from it^{kk} and propose interventions based in experience reducing discrimination and prejudice against ‘out-groups’ in human history (race, gender and sexuality non-discrimination campaigns). Schechtman¹⁸³ suggests that the division between the self and the environment is not healthy, and nor is a lack of understanding of the continuous nature of humans (our past, present and future). The idea here is that if we see ourselves as part of nature - with a past and a responsibility to the future - we are more likely to look after the planet and ourselves. Whilst such a shift in identity for many, and perhaps the majority, may be commendable, there are only limited proposals so far on how such a change might be delivered. Also the charge could be levied that the strategy is environmentalists urging others to ‘be like us’ or paternalist and unjust^{ll}.

Miller¹⁸⁴ describes Krznaric’s project of ‘outrospection’¹⁸⁵, based on an analysis of empathy deficits (both international and intergenerational). This suggests active interventions to build cognitive empathy are possible, such as experiential and conversational ‘empathy museums’, empathy education in schools, and more generally through use of the web as a platform for sharing perspectives and providing many more opportunities for people to ‘put

^{kk} Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher of deep ecology, suggests that we are at last moving beyond individualism to a ‘larger sense of self’, a self which includes the planet. Even if few have achieved such a broad extension of their self-identity, this helpfully highlights the significance of identity, rather than just empathy with others.

^{ll} Although one might also note that it is proposed in order to counter the impacts of a programme put in place by corporate interests to spread and reinforce individualist values through advertising and marketing (to help grow the economy, ostensibly also in the wider interests of the public).

themselves in the shoes' of others)^{mm}. Krznicar suggests building genuine empathy can be transformational, such as through the campaigns that built empathy between the beneficiaries of slavery in Britain and slaves, using oral histories and illustrationsⁿⁿ. Such measures are clearly more possible in the age of the internet, albeit hampered by the digital divide. They might also include active forms of 'political consuming' such as 'fair-trade', although such strategies (like wider green consumption campaigns) also have a downside in potentially continuing to normalise high consumption.

Crompton and Kasser¹⁸⁶ suggest also that techniques to reduce prejudicial communications (especially damaging myths and narratives promulgated in education) can be applied to our relations with nature, as can psychotherapeutic approaches of confronting values, and more simplistic 'increasing contact' methods that help with increasing empathy between groups. Exposure to nature in education and development at all life-stages is arguably also beneficial to creativity and openness.

Gabriel¹⁸⁷ suggests several measures that overlap values and drivers. He explores spaces in which the ties of consumption and identity could be weakened, including: fostering community organisations based in shared public facilities and public infrastructure; deinstitutionalising religion (and other manifestations of mind-body dualism) as a basis for us psychologically taking responsibility within this world and life^{oo}; and the prospects for 'inspiring art', not as 'therapeutic catharsis' but as articulating 'universal visions of meaning'. Schor¹⁸⁸ similarly seeks solutions in a mix of personal and institutional shifts: shorter working hours, co-production (which she explains as self-provisioning), collaborative and 'careful' consumption, and rebuilding social capital.

^{mm} Psychological research on trust-building would appear to support this possibility. While research suggests that we are normally more likely to trust people that 'look like us', we are also likely to suggest that those with whom we have undertaken trust-building exercises subsequently 'look like us' (in a virtuous circle). <http://machineslikeus.com/news/trustworthy-people-look-ourselves>

ⁿⁿ Such approaches suggest a cosmopolitan, rather than communitarian approach to justice.

^{oo} Gabriel's proposals here are directed primarily at Christianity in the US and while more widely applicable, there are exceptions such as Taoism or Buddhism which encourage monist (as opposed to dualist) conceptions of humans and the natural world that they encourage

Box: Collaborative consumption

There is a burgeoning literature on collaborative consumption and the so-called ‘sharing economy’^{189,190,191,192}, which sees substantial prospect for the conversion of a significant element of conventional consumption to collaborative modes^{PP}. Collaborative consumption tends to reduce environmental impact, for example through a shift to business models that deliver services rather than products) (e.g. Botsman and Rogers, 2010). There is some evidence from the US that millennials (the generation born in the 1980 and 90s) are adopting sharing behaviours more readily than older people, partly in response to the economic downturn – and ‘age of austerity’ - in which they have entered the job market, and partly through the transference of on-line norms which encourage trust and sharing with a wider circle of contacts. The sharing economy – in the form of shared ownership as well as shared use - also offers a broader chance to reinvent economic models and thus to reshape our identities – moving away from forms of identity that rely on possessions and consumption, and towards those which are based in relationships and experiences.

In most parts of the world, traditional informal types of collaborative consumption are in decline (at different rates and extents) as a result of the globalisation of consumerist markets. But at the same time there is evidence that new forms of collaborative consumption are emerging in many countries underpinned by digital connectivity. This might take distinctive forms in different societies depending on the initial reserves of collective culture: new emanations of collaborative consumption seem unlikely to be identical in the USA, Colombia and Korea for example. But in an internet age, with common economic and resource pressures, the similarities may well be greater than the differences. Measures that might stimulate collaborative consumption are outlined and discussed by Agyeman et al¹⁹³ in a companion Big Ideas paper.

Townsend¹⁹⁴ and Jenkins¹⁹⁵ suggest that it is necessary to make forms of green consumption / reduced material consumption attractive for those with and aspiring to the affluent identity (or ‘prospectors’ in Rose and Dade’s categorisation). Hurth¹⁹⁶ emphasises

^{PP} Botsman and Rogers (2010) include bartering, lending, renting, gifting, and swapping under the generic term ‘collaborative consumption’, which they divide into three categories; ‘product service systems’, ‘redistribution markets’, and ‘collaborative lifestyles’. Product service systems offer the utility of a product – such as a car - as a service without the need for ownership. Redistribution markets direct pre-owned and unused goods to places where they are needed. Collaborative lifestyles are those where people with similar needs band together to share less-tangible assets such as time, space, skills, and money.

the importance of symbolically connecting 'environmental' and 'affluent' identities together within relevant market offerings, so that consistently low impact consumption is connected with desirable identities and with helpful values (as represented by the environmentalist identity). This implies also that companies need to consider underlying (basic) needs and use this as platform for innovation (rather than getting stuck at the level of (potentially false) need-satisfiers). For example, if we understand what needs and need satisfiers are provided by energy profligate products and then create market offerings (which may be services rather than products, or very different experiences) that meet these needs in low impact ways, this can transcend the shortcomings of 'green' consumerism. Schor and others promoting downshifting as a lifestyle choice are suggesting something very similar, though Schor goes further, attempting to entirely reposition 'consuming' with the idea that truly passionate consumption is 'careful' - focused on the qualities of product (both innate, and those consequential on its use and production). Simms and Potts¹⁹⁷ explore the same territory, calling for a 'New Materialism' in which design, durability, care and repair feature centrally in our relationship with the material world.

Such approaches accept that 'status' in some form might be one of those underlying needs (rather than a false satisfier). Edmonds highlights that status drivers are almost universal although expressed very differently in different cultures. Whether dematerialised or careful in form, ways that status can be demonstrated (such as the example given earlier of large numbers of Twitter followers) are likely to remain important. The analysis gathered here suggests only that when high material consumption is a primary way of demonstrating status, it contributes to an environmentally, socially and culturally damaging level of consumerism.

Wilkinson and Pickett¹⁹⁸ urge reducing inequalities - which they suggest drive consumption in the pursuit of higher status identities - for example through interventions in taxes, pay rules, working hours and so forth. Such interventions would obviously also benefit the materially disadvantaged, and in line with evidence presented earlier, reduce their vulnerability to (short-term) consumerism. Townsend particularly focuses on the evolutionary imperative to be attractive to potential mates and is dismissive of the potential, at least in the short-term, to turn the currently affluent group away from extrinsically focused values. She sees the potential for the digital world to open-up possibilities for dematerialising 'sexiness'. Thompson and Goskuner¹⁹⁹ warn however, of the dangers of more timid green

consumerism, citing research showing how organic food is being co-opted by the mainstream, resulting in no substantial real world change.

Several authors suggest tackling consumption through work. Not only is work central to the availability of income for consumption, but patterns of work – notably long hours, and households with multiple earners – contribute to the escalation of demand for a range of time-saving products, and the development of high-consumption lifestyles. Reducing working hours (or increasing time affluence) has already been mentioned. A citizen's income scheme might have similar effects. Kate Soper (pers comm) notes that challenging the centrality of work is essential to engaging with the economic model and alternate conceptions of prosperity. Others examine the ways in which alternatives to paid work, or other uses of time, might prove more fulfilling and beneficial to wellbeing. In these ways interventions might engage with the downsides of 'consumerism' and the emerging feelings of dissatisfaction with it felt and expressed by consumers themselves.

Agyeman²⁰⁰ identifies coproduction as a possible focus for efforts to shift identity from consumption to creative participation in production. Jackson²⁰¹ also favours community level activities, such as community resource management (for example, with community quotas) as well as community based social marketing, social learning, participatory problem-solving and the discursive unfreezing of embedded routine behaviours. Soron²⁰² also suggests collective community action as a promising path to pursue.

Other creative leisure activities (drama, music, arts) may be particularly promising. And sports too may play a role. Wheaton²⁰³ suggests growth in the popularity of 'lifestyle sports' activities like skateboarding, snowboarding, adventure racing, surfing and ultimate frisbee (not all of which obviously spur consumption); tend to offer new identities embodying 'alternative' sporting values such as anti-competitiveness, anti-regulation, high risk and personal freedom. They appeal to a wider group than young men, and indeed may challenge the male hegemony still found in many conventional participative sports. But conventional sport may also still have a role, providing shared identity and activity which could be divorced from consumerism. Ashton²⁰⁴ highlights the importance of sport in forging national identities. Posten²⁰⁵ applies social identity theory to explain sports fanaticism, which may also apply to the growth of on-line sports communication communities.

There are potential benefits and challenges in utilising sports in identity shifts: sports are increasingly commercialised and linked to material consumption (not least in the vast sums

earned by professional players, and ostentatiously materialistic lifestyles many lead), yet they are also increasingly multi-cultural, and offer participative opportunities for empathy building and collaboration. On the other hand, in some societies sports have become part of damaging racial stereotyping. Smedley²⁰⁶ notes that *“Sports is a cultural arena that has been highly and publicly racialized. So powerful is the stereotype of black athletic prowess that it has spread around the world ... [and] damaged the outlook of black youth while preserving the stereotypes and myths of race ... The even more tragic fact is that black boys who cannot excel in sports tend to have a diminished sense of who they are and seem unaware of the other options for excelling that might be available to them.”* It’s clear that professional, publicly-played modern sport is problematically part and parcel of consumer society, but sports as played by everyone outside the Premier League may yet offer one way to get beyond consumerism.

9. Conclusions and suggested interventions

The problems of over-consumption are not merely environmental, but in the form of modern consumerist cultures they undermine human wellbeing and hamper human development in two principal ways:

- The use of consumption as a false satisfier for fundamental human needs such as identity and affiliation results in harm to consumers' own wellbeing.
- The institutionalisation of relations of domination between 'sovereign consumers' and increasingly remote producers who are devalued and mis-recognised.

The latter has not been discussed in depth here as we anticipate it will be a focus of subsequent work on economic models. Taken together, however, these problems mean that even perfect measures to eliminate the environmental impacts of consumption would not deliver wellbeing for all. On the other hand, even if the two wellbeing problems of consumerism were solved, the environmental impact of remaining consumption might still be excessive – eco-efficiency measures would still be required.

Our reading of the literature leads us to conclude that if we (as human society) address the problems of consumerism, then tackling the environmental impacts of consumption can become a much more manageable challenge.

Consumption has become a false satisfier as a result of economic, social and cultural processes that have destabilised previous sources of human identity. Such disruption has had incredible benefits for human wellbeing, not just downsides, notably in facilitating struggles against discrimination by women, and significant minorities, most recently seen in the strong assertion of gay and lesbian identities and rights in many countries. Not all conventional forms of identity are restrictive and harmful, but we should not overlook the importance of disruption in enabling human development and progress in these respects. Rather than looking backwards, we see more value in looking forwards to new forms of identity affirmation that are not subject to the downsides of consumerism. However, some of the sources of disruption to conventional identities are themselves directly harmful to human wellbeing, as well as creating stresses which increase the risk that people will be seduced by addictive consumerism. Interventions to address issues such as insecurity of employment and welfare systems will be necessary also.

Approached from this perspective, helpful interventions might arise at multiple levels, addressing the following:

- The underlying structural processes that generate insecurity and destabilise identities
- The underlying economic and commercial processes that generate and sustain consumerism
- The cultural values and world views that underpin and justify these structural and economic processes and arrangements
- The cultural values that increase susceptibility to consumption as a source of identity
- The availability, accessibility and relative attractiveness of alternative sources of identity affirmation
- The availability, accessibility and attractiveness of alternative sources of status
- The values embedded in consumer decisions and behaviours (stimulating pro-environmental values by making low-impact products and collaborative consumption desirable and fashionable)
- The environmental impact of remaining consumption (whether undertaken for basic material needs or for purposes of identity or status demonstration).

Making lower-impact consumption attractive, fashionable or even 'sexy', and stimulating behavioural shifts towards such products, can contribute to the desired transition, but will not drive it, and without careful design, may even inhibit it. But using the tools of marketing and advertising, and its connections with identity and status to redefine what is desirable about consuming – making low environmental and social impact, durability, high quality, repairability, customisability etc sought-after features – would effectively reinforce other interventions designed to shift values and world-views. Collaborative consumption appears a particularly helpful tool here, as it offers conventional benefits (such as convenience and breadth of choice) alongside new values-related benefits, such as building community and solidarity.

Leaving aside the measures more likely to be addressed in consideration of economic models, we can summarise desirable interventions in three broad groups:

- Those that build empathy between people, and between people and our world, thus shifting world views from the individualist towards the egalitarian and cultural values towards the collective– examples might include measures such as controls over marketing and advertising, and reforms in education

- Those that provide alternative sources for identity affirmation (both group and individual, and including expressions of status, ideally in forms that do not strengthen further individualist values) – examples might include support for co-production, or participation in sport or creative endeavours; and
- Those that reduce the impacts of consumption behaviours, including those that affirm identity, through measures such as tax regimes that enable wider adoption of sustainable consumption behaviours like collaborative consumption; or regulations to enhance eco-efficiency and durability

The widespread adoption of consumerism and individualistic consumerist identities has taken 300 years (and, globally, can still be seen as a far from complete process, although it is rapidly spreading in the global South with urbanisation and the spread of capitalist marketing). It is clear that much of the past growth in consumption provided a higher quality of life, and that associated social disruptions were useful in breaking rigid and inequitable societal distinctions. It is clear therefore that interventions to address the downsides of consumerism should not prevent those benefits being realised in the global South too.

While some consumption may simply be a result of people enjoying consuming and not part of an identity project²⁰⁷, it is clear that consumerism is central to identity formation in today's more individualistic and unequal world and that societal and institutional pressure to consume is significant and habituated. It is also clear that there are negative wellbeing impacts for people and the planet from this consumerist economic model. As well as personal impacts, there are major social costs arising from the consumerisation of the political realm.

Where damaging features of a system appear to be locked in (in this case, reinforced by commercial and political vested interests) it is important to examine the potential for transformative change. Transformation might be achieved through three broad strategies: reform, subversion and reinvention (following McLaren²⁰⁸), and typically a combination of the three is most effective.

Reform measures are those which might appear attractive to the 'powers that be' in current circumstances. Measures such as further dematerialising consumption by utilising the potential of the digital world, or supporting the development of 'circular economy' practices in business do not obviously threaten existing political and economic ideologies. Collective consumption, enabling efficient sharing of high impact goods like cars; and enhanced

produced responsibility standards to promote durability and repair, might also seem essentially reformist, but taken together such measures encourage businesses and marketers to promote low impact consumption and make it socially normal and aspirational.

Implicitly, however, such marketing is subverted to promote pro-social and pro-environmental values in consumer behaviours (such as greater care and awareness of production impacts and waste, more collective empathy, greater care and love for cherished material objects instead of the rapid churn of modern throwaway objects) rather than reinforcing consumerist norms and values.

Similarly economic reform measures such as working hours (and minimum wage) regulation; tax measures designed to reducing inequalities; controls on advertising to children; and new wellbeing indicators might be justified within the current system, but open spaces in which habits can be challenged and alternatives to the system invented and trialled.

Such reinvention can be emergent, led by the third sector, or by progressive national or local authorities. It might include support for community facing collective actions, including co-production, community management of resources (sharing), and much greater participation in sport and creative activities. This would provide a longer-term focus for a shift in the central aspects of people's identity construction. Interventions in education (both formal and informal) could also stimulate reinvention by building empathy for the wider global population and for nature, which over time should assist a shift from individualistic world views and values to a more egalitarian world view.

Here we suggest four specific interventions that would appear to particularly merit further exploration:

- 'dematerialising consumption' through measures to promote a circular economy, collaborative consumption, durability etc;
- regulating and remaking marketing and advertising through reform and subversion so it promotes pro-social and pro-environmental values;
- transforming education to build empathy with the global population and natural world;
- reconstructing secure identities (and delivering wellbeing) in creative community activity (co-production of leisure, public services, arts etc)

We believe these suggestions are not only applicable in currently rich Northern consumerist societies, but are equally valid in the global South, especially where consumerist aspirations are rapidly growing. However it is reasonable to suggest that good examples need to be demonstrated in the North first, while there may be merit in exploring different models of social aspiration in cultures outside of the rich North to find new approaches.

In addition it will be desirable to empower citizens to be critical thinkers (and popular education is already identified as a key intervention for our cities topic).

Shifting identities so that they recognise our place within nature, and not above nature, and as part of a series of generations, is inevitably a long-term, generational project given the dominant and embedded views of nature (individualistic, religions, etc). But without it, the other interventions considered here, and elsewhere in the Big Ideas project, may well prove of limited value^{qq}.

Duncan McLaren and Mike Childs with contributions from Guy Shrubsole.

^{qq} Moreover, the challenges of environmental sustainability and climate change may well provide the best opportunity to broaden human empathy beyond the current generation and even beyond the human species.

Annex: Identity campaigning and liberalism

It might appear at first glance that any effort to deliberately modify identity is politically illiberal, elevating one way of life or set of beliefs above others, equivalent, for instance, to establishing a state religion (or an explicitly atheist state) and thus denying choice and dignity to followers of all or other religions. This is a challenge that must be taken seriously in considering potential interventions.

There are several potential defences against such a challenge however. First we do not endorse means of changing values that are not exposed to public debate and reasoning. However, political liberalism also guards against the imposition of the values of a majority on a minority (with respect to issues such as religious freedom, and freedom of conscience). Our advocacy must take place within a framework in which rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of association are protected (as in political conceptions of the capabilities approach).

Second, we are primarily advocating interventions designed to shift how people construct their identities and to provide building blocks that are compatible with continued dignity and freedoms for others, including future generations: we are not suggesting that people cannot continue to self-identify according to religion, ethnicity or sexuality for example. However, this defence might not cover a challenge to specifically 'consumer' identities. Here Schor's concept of 'careful' consumption might help illustrate again that the challenge is not even to the idea of a 'consumer' identity forming part (even a primary part) of the multiple identities of a modern individual, but to the way such a component of identity might be constructed.

Thirdly, we might appeal to an understanding that the substitution of consumerism for other relationships is somehow an undesirable, and unwanted, subversion of 'normal, healthy' identity formation processes. The work of psychologists such as Tim Kasser certainly suggests as much. However this has echoes of the idea of false consciousness, and a paternalist approach of 'we know best'. To avoid such risks, participative, deliberative processes such as popular education should be utilised to ensure that such views are not imposed, but rather that the effects of consumerist marketing can be unpacked and considered deliberatively, and alternatives considered collectively.

Overall, it seems to us that interventions of the sort suggested here fall rather into the category of defending values that protect all citizens' ability to make choices - or as Nussbaum puts it, liberal respect for pluralism requires society to take a stand on those overarching values that protect all citizens in their choices.

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