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European Consumers and their Persistent Resilience in the Face of Austerity

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While much has been written on austerity from political and economic perspectives (e.g. Blyth 2013), there has been limited marketing attention regarding the effects of austerity on consumers. Even less focus has been directed at long-term and proactive responses to austerity which, we argue, can be understood via the concept of persistent resilience (Golubchikov 2011). This study explores the nature of this enduring and dynamic form of resilience manifested by consumers across EU countries affected by austerity. Drawing on recent spatial studies, we contribute to academic literature by advancing our understanding of the concept of persistent resilience and by distinguishing its underlying characteristics within the consumption context of EU austerity.

There is an extensive literature on resilience and its varying definitions are represented from many areas including psychology (e.g. Lazarus 1993), sociology (e.g. Evans and Reid 2013), consumer research (e.g. Ball and Lamberton 2015); disaster studies (e.g. Baker and Baker 2014) and ecology (e.g. Adger 2000). Recent conceptualisations of resilience are premised not upon a one-off event from which individuals bounce back, but rather on their ability to continually re-emerge from on-going adversity, for which one must be continuously prepared and increasingly respond to (Neocleous 2012; Evans and Reid 2013). Thus, the growing importance of a sustained, flexible and dynamic response to the enduring challenges of modern society paves the way for a more relevant form of resilience to explore in our austerity context - *persistent resilience*.

Defined as “a form of engagement with more enduring, lasting challenges and pressures...that underlie everyday life”, persistent resilience allows for a proactive and continuous renegotiation of everyday life practices and relationships (Golubchikov 2011, 4). Persistent resilience was conceived within spatial studies in response to the pressures of modern society but also as a coping strategy over prolonged periods of time. More recent studies have applied persistent resilience to explore how households and communities “develop responses to more long-term processes, such as the changing nature of employment and ... altering state policies” (Andres and Round 2015, 676). The associated restructuring of common, everyday practices and relations may, in turn, form the basis for more significant transformation and even permanent change at both an individual and societal level (De Verteuil and Golubchilov 2016). Building upon this spatial research, we propose that the ongoing phenomenon of austerity in affected EU states necessitates the activation of persistent resilience and we explore its specific nature and characteristics within an austerity consumption context, deliberately including in our study countries that have experienced varying degrees of austerity.

Our cross cultural interpretive study was conducted by a team of European researchers across six countries. A purposive sample (Patton, 1990) of 38 people across a range of demographics e.g. age (ranging from 18 to 65), gender (14 male and 24 female), life-stage, profession and income, including unemployed people, were interviewed from Ireland, UK, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece. Face to face in-depth interviews were chosen as an

appropriate form of social enquiry (Denzin and Lincoln 1994; Miles and Huberman 1994) to explore the effects of austerity over a lengthy period, in terms of changes to everyday consumption practices and experiences, both prior to and during austerity. The interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to 2 hours and reached a deep level of richness and insight. Following transcription and, where necessary, translation, cycles of coding, cross-checking and theoretical review (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Clark and Braun 2013) were followed by all research team members. Using a thematic approach, three distinct themes of *self-efficacy*, *creativity* and *community* relating to persistent resilience were identified (see table 1).

Persistent resilience was demonstrated through an active renegotiation of and continuous adaptation to everyday life challenges as well as in a process of transformation and long-term adjustment, often leading to a renewed sense of wellbeing, sustainable values and reciprocal goals. *Self-efficacy* was identified by participants' ability to persist, adapt and transform, often facilitated through a mind-set change. Manifested through upskilling, working several jobs and enterprise formation, self-efficacy was seen as part of a process of flexible adaptation to the risky austerity context. As part of this transformation, the restructuring of everyday practices was also undertaken through numerous creative means, reflected by the theme *creativity*, involving creative thinking, making and doing, and resourceful budgeting to demonstrate a persistent creative response to the financial challenges of austerity. Captured by the theme *community*, persistent resilience was further enabled through drawing on key relationships with family, friends and colleagues to share the burden of financial uncertainty and, together, increase strength and resilience. Community was also reflected through deep solidarity towards others at a localized level and also broader community and national levels. Collectively, the themes of self-efficacy, creativity and community, underpinning persistent resilience, reflect a wide range of proactive, continuous and sustained responses to the on-going challenges of austerity.

As European consumers continue to navigate long-term austerity, our study presents rich and timely insights into the nature of their persistent resilience and how this differs across culture and historical context. Reflecting the dynamic, enduring and proactive nature of this resilience, our analysis identifies a wide range of self-efficacious, creative and community-based strategies involving adapting to, persisting with and transforming consumers' everyday practices and social relations. Persistent resilience in our austerity context involves an enduring self-belief and positivity to creatively embrace continuous change and social reciprocity at personal, local and societal levels. While the economic and social pressures of austerity may, in some instances, still bring about marginalization, exclusion and displacement, persistent resilience provides the armor to continuously and creatively transform, and, thus, mitigate its effects. Regarding addressing potential limitations of the study, the size of subgroups within the cross-cultural sample could be increased by conducting larger scale multi-country qualitative research comparing differing levels of resilience. Future research should focus on investigating how persistent resilience could be nurtured individually and collectively through collaboration between governments and local community bodies.

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Table 1:		
Themes	Findings	Participant Quotes
Self-Efficacy	<p>For Helena, a working mother of 4 children, persistent resilience demonstrated through self-efficacy involves a re-evaluation of her priorities, an active recognition of what and whom she values and a positive mindset to “filter out a lot of things that aren’t important”.</p> <p>Rosa, a mother of a daughter who has emigrated, shares the nature of her self-efficacy, feeling powerful and independent despite persistent and increasingly difficult working conditions. She stresses how she feels empowered to fight against any further changes to hours and pay and, thus, ultimately, retains “<i>power over her life</i>”.</p>	<p><i>“I think I really appreciate everything more. I appreciate more the value of the material things, because now I cannot buy all that I would want. I also appreciate the people in my life, how important are friends and family in our lives, but I decided that I’m going to be a more positive person and I’m going to input my energy in things that really matter, I decided to filter out a lot of things that aren’t important in my life”</i> (Helena, 39, Portugal, Architect).</p> <p><i>“Yes, I feel powerful, because I have a job, I have to work for a living, I accept some conditions at work but I’m not going to accept everything that they want... if they want to continue to increase hours and pay us less money... I am independent, I can do everything by myself and that makes me powerful...I still have power over my life”</i> (Rosa, 60, Spanish, Gardener).</p>
Creativity	<p>Persistent resilience involves identifying creative ways to maintain practices but in a way that is more affordable. Luciana enjoys making pesto from scratch rather than buying more expensive market alternatives, thus creatively deriving both cost and health benefits.</p> <p>Robert, a public servant and father of two young children who has experienced significant cuts in pay and benefits demonstrates his persistent resilience to his altered situation by creatively continuing to consume and live a similar life to before but with a careful consideration of cost and spending.</p>	<p><i>“I buy all the raw materials myself that cost me one third of the product’s selling price and I make the final product by myself. So instead of buying “pesto” that costs three or four euros for a small jar, now I prepare it myself. It surely costs less and doesn’t have preservatives or colorants that way. The same goes for the fruit juices that I do not buy anymore. I am trying to produce myself what I consume, instead of buying it”</i> (Luciana, 47, Italy, Unemployed).</p> <p><i>“getting back to basics earlier on...and I think that’s transferred to everything, across all the purchases that you make... how you live your life. You’re still working spending and enjoying life, you’re still celebrating and recognising different events that happen over the course of your life but you’re doing it with a conscious eye of cash”</i> (Robert, 37, Irish, Public Servant).</p>
Community	<p>Being part of a network strengthens Emma’s social resilience to austerity. Unable to secure employment as an office worker, the support of her family and partner allow her to avail of other work opportunities and earn money.</p> <p>Elisa demonstrates a strong sense of solidarity not only to her family and personal network but also to the wider community. Her urge to help others find jobs leads to a collective strengthening and facilitates persistent resilience at the community level.</p>	<p><i>“I’m lucky that I have a good relationship with my parents. I have a good relationship with my boyfriend. We’ve been together nearly five years. I think if I wasn’t going out with him and I didn’t have my mum and dad, I don’t know what—I would be stuck. I wouldn’t have been able to do this temporary work that I’m doing. I wouldn’t have been able to get there and back. I would have had to turn that down. So I wouldn’t have had money”</i> (Emma, 22, UK, Unemployed Office Administrator/Kitchen Worker).</p> <p><i>“... I feel really bad amidst the crisis, but on the other hand, it gives me strength to do three things. One is to continue being active and dynamic and to try to do the best I can ... The second is to try to strengthen these emerging values in my behaviour, in my family and in the people around me, and third to try to help as much as I can as many people as I can. I try, for example, on a volunteer basis to give seminars to people who are looking for jobs and to people who are trying to develop start-ups</i> (Elisa, 46, Greek, Part-time Teacher).</p>

