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The cultural intelligibility of anxiety:

Young women, consumer culture, and the 'project' of the self

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2016

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis was composed by me and is the record of my work for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. It has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree or publication, unless otherwise acknowledged.

_____	May 13, 2016 _____
Aliette V. Lambert	Date

For Ula

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am fortunate that there are so many people in my life who have supported my academic journey both intellectually and personally. I would particularly like to thank my research participants, without whom this research would not have been possible. Thank you for your openness, honesty and for sharing your lives with me if even for a moment. It was a privilege – and good fun! – getting to know each and every one of you.

Without support and engagement from the academic community, this research would also not have been possible. Most importantly, I could not have persevered with this study if not for the unwavering support from my supervisors. Thank you, Stephanie O'Donohoe, for putting up with me, for being a pillar of support and for teaching me the craft of research. Without your guidance, honest advice and feedback, both academic and personal, I would not have been able to produce this piece of work or make it through the process. Thank you Kate Orton-Johnson for joining us on the journey, adding a sociological perspective and providing support and invaluable insight into both the PhD process and research methods. Also, I am very grateful to my mentor John Desmond for encouraging my academic journey in the first place. Thank you for always believing in me, pushing my intellectual boundaries, and cultivating within me the spirit of critique.

Thank you to my friends for bearing with me through these tough few years when I was perpetually short on time (and cash). You were always there to cheer me up and to make me laugh, especially during my lowest lows. And to those on the PhD journey with me: I would not have survived the process without your advice and commiseration. Thank you all for the ridiculousness, debauchery and hilarity that balanced the stress of the PhD.

Thank you to my family. Most importantly, thank you to my parents, Mari and Bob. You are my guiding stars who have always supported me and encouraged my intellectual curiosity; you instilled in me a work ethic that enabled me to make it this far. Thank you to my grandparents, Pito and Ula. I hope this thesis would have made you proud and in some way contributes to your legacy. Thank you to my mother- and father-in-law, Annemarie and Pieter, for always supporting me and my academic pursuits.

Most of all, thank you to my little family: to my partner George and my kitties Charlie and Lilly. You are my kindred spirits who are always there for me in the darkest of hours but who make the brightest possible.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis critically explores the role of consumer culture in young women's understanding of self. Drawing on media and cultural studies literature as well as post-structuralist and critical perspectives, this study asks: how does consumer culture guide or influence a young woman's way-of-being in everyday life? Despite arguments that consumer culture, underpinned by neoliberal principles of personal responsibility and individualism, has become *the* institution of reference for young women, consumer research on the experiences of women, and from feminist perspectives, is generally sparse. Moreover, claims that consumer culture may covertly subjugate young women by encouraging practices of self regulation are in contention with consumer research that emphasises consumption as a means of self-expression and agency. Therefore, a qualitative, feminist study was conducted in which, over 18 months, fifteen women, aged 20 to 34, engaged in multiple in-depth interviews. The data generation process typically consisted of four interviews over a nine-month period: the first interview covering life history and background was followed by an in-home 'show-and-tell' interview about the participant's 'stuff'. The third interview addressed participants' engagement with digital technologies also through a 'show-and-tell' approach and the final interview was semi-structured, addressing themes emerging from previous interviews. This generated 50 interviews lasting two hours on average, as well as data from observation, photographs and engagement with social network sites.

From a critical thematic analysis, four significant findings emerged. Firstly, in relation to being a woman, participants felt pressure to 'have it all' in terms of both traditional (e.g., getting married, raising children, being attractive) and progressive (e.g., achieving career success) ideals. Whilst some disagreed that women continue to be subjugated, most participants experienced a sense of mounting pressure and expectations compared to men and subscribed to neoliberal principles of personal responsibility in combatting gender inequality. Secondly, participants reflexively experienced being a consumer as an unavoidable, often burdensome and anxiety-provoking position that encouraged the making of the self through appearance, as well as adherence to hegemonic feminine ideals. A consumer orientation was further reinforced by increasingly pervasive digital spaces, particularly social media, infused with advertising and consumption. From this, a third finding emerged related to the understanding of self: participants often experienced or expressed a sense of self as a task, an individualistic project for which they felt responsible. Constantly comparing themselves to others to benchmark the project of the self, participants worked to continually craft a story of success and agency despite unpredictability of the life course and contradictory events sometimes conspiring. Moreover, participants who did not feel they had achieved career goals placed greater emphasis on crafting an ideal appearance. The fourth finding addresses the importance of others in understanding the self. Rather than experiencing an 'identity' as formed individually, participants looked to others (e.g., family, peers, media, ideologies) to understand the self. Focusing on the opinions of others was associated with anxiety, which varied in degree but was part of all participant accounts.

This study suggests that consumer culture is indeed an institution of reference for young women as they experience a sense of self through consumption practices, increasingly digitally mediated. In this sense, the findings align with theorisations in consumer research. However, for the participants of this study, the experience of living the subject position 'consumer' is anxiety provoking, particularly in light of postfeminist, neoliberal discourses that encourage experiencing the self as a 'project' for which the individual is responsible. As reflected in the data, a self-as-project orientation triggered anxiety given disjointedness between the desire to manage or control the self fostered by dominant discourses, and the impossibility of doing so as reflected by lived experience. This positioning engendered alienation from the self and therefore anxiety that was further sparked by increasing individualism and competition with others; feelings of shame and envy; and a forward-

looking temporal positioning. Therefore, findings suggest that consumer research's conceptualisations of 'identity' as a 'project' in which individuals can express themselves through marketplace resources is problematic, if not further perpetuating the subjugation of women by rendering them as 'free' to consume their way into being. This calls into question individual agency and the role of cultural influences in the making of subjects. Therefore, findings suggest that, from an emancipatory perspective, consumer research examining processes of subject constitution might be more productive to understandings 'identity' and the 'self' in a particular space and time, with attention to implicit power relations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women, historically implicated in the construction of the subject position of 'consumer', are argued through postfeminist, neoliberal discourse to be able to attain freedom – thanks to the 'success' of second-wave feminism – through personal choice and entrepreneurial values (Rottenberg 2014). Thus, there is increasing pressure on young women in particular, raised in a neoliberal setting, to attain some version of the 'good life' as represented in consumer culture through self-monitoring and self-maintenance practices (McRobbie 2015; Gill and Orgad 2015). Such accounts of young women and consumer culture are often drawn from media analysis, but what are the experiences of young women themselves? Consumer research provides more questions than answers given the discipline's lack of research on (young) women and from feminist perspectives that seek to illuminate often overlooked experiences of women (Maclaran 2015; Catterall et al. 2000, 2005), as well as its tendency to assume that consumers are agentic, empowered and productive (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Shankar et al. 2006; Fitchett et al. 2014). From this base, this study explores consumer subjectivity as experienced by young women living in the UK.

As with most research, personal experiences and observations from my 'ethnography of life' (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009) inspired this study. Thinking back, I certainly learned how to be(come) a woman through gendered acts of consumption. Some of my fondest memories, for example, were in my grandmother's closet, trying on her shoes and her 'joyas' (Spanish for jewellery). If I was lucky, she bestowed upon me the privilege of spritzing her Chanel No5 on my wrists, instructing me to quickly dab behind my ears whilst I puckered my lips as she painted them with her signature ruby red lipstick. I also particularly enjoyed afternoons lunching and shopping with my mother and grandmother, whilst my father, grandfather and brother were anywhere else, repulsed by the prospect of spending an afternoon in a shopping mall. Growing up along these gendered lines, it occurred to me in writing this thesis that I was taught – by family activities, friends and media – to focus on my appearance and to engage in consumption as a form of pleasure *as a woman*, either through shopping or putting on makeup and so forth. These formative experiences of girlhood are unlikely surprising to scholars of consumption and/or gender.

Perhaps more striking is the inner struggle I experienced as I grew older in being pressured to express a sense of self through consumption. Admittedly, I derived pleasure from shopping in the moment. I enjoyed the rush of materialistic desire upon stepping foot inside my favourite store, not content until every corner was explored. But far from experiencing consumption as freeing or self expressive, the focus on appearance sparked by consumption

activities felt like a project in conformity: a demand to keep up with trends and to fit in, compared to other women in particular. Although my experiences could be read as cultivating familial relationships and friendships, or contributing to identity formation, keeping up with my appearance and style was a judgment-riddled and stress-provoking experience that prompted existential insecurities of self worth throughout formative life experiences. An extremely salient memory of the starkness of materialism in the making of my feminine identity was when I worked at a local bath and beauty boutique. At 16, I was the youngest member of staff – most other employees were in their twenties. One day after work, I changed out of my all-black work wear into no-name jeans and a t-shirt. My co-workers laughed, commenting that when I grew up, I would realise the importance of the brand of my jeans and the type of handbag I owned, almost as a rite-of-passage. Sure enough, I began to worry about handbags and jeans, striving to buy a Coach purse every season. And I remember searching eBay for 7 for All Mankind jeans because I couldn't afford them otherwise. These materialistic pressures were unrelenting. After university, for example, when I worked in an investment firm, there was a pressure from other women to dress well, keep trim and engage in the 'right' activities (e.g., a rigorous gym schedule, shopping during lunch). I remember how my married female colleagues were obsessed with comparing their diamond rings, one quite ashamed of her 'tiny' one-carat ring in comparison to the others. In another instance, one of my friends asserted that she wouldn't accept an engagement ring less than a carat and a half and dragged her husband-to-be to the jeweller to ensure he fulfilled her desire. These are just a few of the examples of what I can't call anything but materialism that infused my own socialisation and understanding of self, particularly before I engaged in academic pursuits. These experiences inspire this study.

A second inspiration for this study is the existential angst I experienced as a young 'emerging adult' woman (Arnett 2004). In August 2010, when working my last month in banking and preparing to begin a master's degree in the UK in September, I stumbled upon a *New York Times* magazine article (Henig 2010) asking: 'Why are so many people in their 20s taking so long to grow up?' This struck a major chord and, upon a careful reading, I emailed the article family and friends to provide as an explanation of sorts for the sense of ambivalence I felt towards the unanchored, independent journey into adulthood. In particular, I struggled to come to terms with my existential purpose *as a woman*. For my friends and me – clearly in a privileged position, with the prospect of choice given financial stability and education – there seemed a contradiction in our desire for independence and career, underpinned by the persistence of implicit prioritisation of traditional feminine ideals of attention to appearance and a desire for marriage. Many of my friends sometimes ashamedly confessed to wanting to quit their career pursuits upon having children. After a few glasses of wine, one of my more

privileged friends declared, 'I don't know what's so wrong with wanting to be a country club soccer mom. All I want is to wake up, play tennis and lay by the pool while the kids are at school!' Part of the tendency to pursue the role of wife and mother was driven by lack of meaning in careers: many of my friends, including myself at the time, found enjoyment in the intellectual aspect of university life that was not often translated to the mundane reality working life. And when, in the midst of a pivotal life change, I came across this article based on Arnett's work on a new life-stage of emerging adulthood characterised by ambivalence, instability and testing options in terms of career and love, I felt relieved at the explanation for my experience, and the experience of my female friends, most of whom suffer from pressures of materialism, existential anxieties, and very often clinical anxiety and/or depression.

These observations and personal experiences inspired this study. From an academic perspective, this study's origins also lie in my work on narcissism and brand relationships (Lambert and Desmond 2013; Lambert et al. 2014; Lambert and Desmond 2015) that began as a Master's dissertation and continued alongside my doctoral research, exploring the relationship between narcissistic tendencies argued to germinate in neoliberal, consumer culture (Twenge and Campbell 2009) and the engagement of emerging adults (Arnett 2004) with brands (Lambert and Desmond 2013) and wider consumer culture (Lambert et al. 2014). At first, we focused on men given claims that they are more narcissistic than women (Foster et al. 2003), but also because the link between 'women' and 'consumer' seemed more established (De Grazia and Furlough 1996; Fournier 1998). When we broadened the study to include women (Lambert et al. 2014), it became apparent that the young women involved in the study *seemed* materialistic, seeking to answer existential questions through consumerist and gendered materialistic fantasies more so than young men. Troubled accounts of existential confusion and anxiety, bolstered by materialistic ideals and habits (e.g., a focus on perfecting appearance; shopping as stress relief) seemed pervasive across the experiences of these young women. This echoed my personal experience and prompted more questions than answers regarding consumption and young women. Thus, I wondered: what is the role of consumer culture in the evolving identity trajectories of young women?

Turning to the literature, I was surprised at the paucity of consumer research on the experiences of women (Catterall et al. 2005; Maclaran 2015), given my experiences, observation from empirical work and longstanding reflection on the role of consumption in the making of female subjects (De Grazia and Furlough 1996; Sandlin and Maudlin 2012). Moreover, I was surprised by the accounts of consumption and identity that were often celebratory and productive. When lived experience accounts of women are discussed (e.g.,

Ahuvia 2005; Fournier 1998; Thompson 1996; Jantzen et al. 2006), they tend to be in terms of an object's contribution to producing a self rather than any deleterious or dark-side consequences of an identity grounded in consumption. For example, Fournier observes of her youngest participant, Vicki, that her generation 'is a product of a postmodern society that encourages construction of highly individuated identities through eclectic borrowing of the fragments available in consumer culture.' (1998: 360). But given the focus of the article on brand relationships, Vicki's confused and volatile sense of self, and the role of consumer culture in forming her sense of self, is not explored. Ahuvia (2005, 174) also draws on experiences of young women in his study on brand love. Again, though there are accounts in his participant stories of identity conflicts, these are apparently resolved by loved objects: 'Within this identity conflict, Pam's loved objects all played a partisan role, serving to buttress her artistic persona and distance her from the business-woman persona'.

When turning to the literature in cultural and media studies as well as feminist consumer research, there is a decidedly different tone. Theories of the marketization of identity and the commercialisation of feminism contend that age-old conceptions of women-as-object propagated through advertising and the construction of woman-as-consumer have been destabilised by second-wave feminism (Maclaran 2015). However, theorists contend that a third (and now digital fourth) wave of feminism sparked a commodity feminism (Goldman 1992) in which women are encouraged – through technologies of the self (Foucault 1988; Evans et al. 2010) – to self-regulate through consumer culture thereby objectifying themselves (Gill 2003). Therefore, women continue to engage in 'traditionally feminine' tasks, such as a focus on perfecting (McRobbie 2015) a hegemonically feminine appearance (Schippers 2007), through their own volition. A good example of the divergent perspectives between fields is two articles published in the *Journal of Consumer Culture* in 2006 on lingerie. One article (Amy-Chinn 2006) contends, from an analysis of advertising regulation, that lingerie advertising continues to render women-as-object whilst another, from the perspective of consumer culture theory and interview data, views lingerie as 'serving identity functions' (Jantzen et al. 2006). These distinctive conceptualisations are reminiscent of agency debates within consumer research in which critical scholars contend that the conceptualisation of consumers in charge of their projects of identity, argued to manifest from the dominance of existential phenomenological methods that emphasise an individual perspective (Moisander et al. 2009; Askegaard and Linnet 2011), neglect to consider cultural and structural influences. This, they contend, reinforces the discipline's neoliberal ideological positioning that celebrates a productive, empowered subject (Fitchett et al. 2014; Shankar et al. 2006).

Given both my life experiences and academic observation, I designed this study to contribute to understandings of women's experiences in consumer culture from a feminist perspective. Early stages of data generation were particularly focused on the role of person-object relationships in the lived experiences of young women. My questions were similar to Jantzen et al. (2006) who wondered about the role of lingerie in the identity projects of women, but from a broader perspective. The study revolved around an extended interview process including four interviews, allowing me to engage in the lives of these young women over time given the initial focus on identity in transition, posited by the theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett 2004). Over the course of 18 months, I conducted 50 interviews with fifteen women, aged 20 to 34. The data generation process typically consisted of four interviews over a nine-month period: the first interview covering life history and background was followed by an in-home 'show and tell' interview about the participant's 'stuff'. The third interview took the form of a 'show-and-tell' about the participant's 'digital stuff'; and the final interview was semi-structured, addressing themes emerging from previous interviews. This further generated data from observation, photographs and engagement with social media. Analysing the data as I went along, the study took a decidedly critical turn as I began to realise the shortcomings of an existential-phenomenological type approach given the focus on the individual and lack of attention to context, as discussed (Askegaard and Linnet 2011). Therefore, I analysed the data from a critical feminist perspective focusing not on micro-experiences or phenomenological accounts, but on discourses and ideological effects informing participant experiences.

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 examines literature that addresses the role of consumer culture in the lives of young women. First, I detail historical associations between women and the subject position consumer. I then discuss cultural and media research arguing that consumer culture acts as a regime of truth for young women in giving an account of themselves. This is argued to encourage entrepreneurial, neoliberal values that, through technologies of the self, continue to subjugate young women. Next, I highlight the lack of research on (young) women within consumer research and discuss the discipline's conceptualisation of the consumer subject, from the perspective of identity. Finally, I outline debates that contend a focus on the individual and lived experience fosters a neoliberal view of an entrepreneurial subject in consumer research. With this in mind, the research question of this study is: how and to what extent does consumer culture guide or influence young women's way-of-being in everyday life?

Chapter 3 gives an overview of the methodological approach of the study. First, I detail the research questions and the feminist, critical philosophical underpinnings of the research

approach concerned with critique and interrogating power relations. Next, I describe the 18-month data generation process, including four interviews with each participant over the span of six to nine months. I discuss the research design process including sampling methods and participant details, the interviews, other means of data generation, ethics and the relationship between the researcher and researched. Next, I detail the three-stage data analysis process in which the first stage involved analysis for research design; the second stage initial depth analysis through the voice-centred relational method; and the third a critical thematic analysis. Finally, I reflect on the limitations of the research methodology.

Chapters four through seven present the findings of this thesis. Chapter Four introduces the findings by discussing the experiences of participants living the cultural category 'woman', experiences that generate themes addressed in subsequent chapters. Chapter Five illustrates how participants feel they are always consumers, a feeling particularly exacerbated by a digital sphere that, in many cases, reinforces hegemonic ideals of femininity. Chapter Six illustrates participants' experience of the self as a project for which they feel personally responsible. The lived experience of the project of the self encourages practices of benchmarking and comparison to others to assess the success (or failure) of the project of the self. Moreover, I discuss how participants, particularly those who do not find existential purpose in other pursuits (e.g., career), emphasise the importance of their appearance. In Chapter 7, the construct 'identity' is interrogated from the perspective of the psychoanalytic theory of identification in order to illustrate how identity is not something to be constructed; rather, it is spontaneously experienced and rationalised to fit norms and expectations.

Chapter 8 draws together the findings through a discussion of the cultural intelligibility of anxiety as prompted by the tendency toward reification of the self that occurs when experiencing the self as a project. Four drivers of anxiety are outlined, including: social comparison; narcissistic tendencies; shame and envy; and a forward-looking temporal positioning. Thus, the implications of this study suggests that consumer researchers should rethink conceptualisations of identity from the perspective of subject constitution, and also should consider the dark-side consequences of identification with ideals stemming from a neoliberal, postfeminist consumer culture.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.

- *Simone de Beauvoir*

We might say…that the old social institutions of family, education, medicine and law, which have historically been charged with the responsibility of producing and reproducing the category of girl as a certain kind of subject, and thus with ensuring that appropriate processes of sexual differentiation take place, have seen their responsibility eroded in recent years. One normalizing process is being replaced now by another. Consumer culture, riding the wave of UK governmental off-loading of social responsibility through de-regulationist policies, has grabbed hold of this terrain, turning it into the most profitable of opportunities.

- *Angela McRobbie*

In a paper urging scholars to critically investigate the role of consumer culture in the lives of young women, McRobbie (2008, 532) laments her focus during the 1990s on the seemingly positive feminist changes sweeping the landscape of girls' magazines. At the time, she embraced changes that *seemed* to address feminist issues by offering young women a means to challenge patriarchal double standards in terms of sexuality, incorporating feminist advocacy of safe sex and stimulating conversation on feminist issues such as racism, sexual violence, workplace harassment and so forth through editorial content. Similarly, in the handful of studies on women in consumer research during that time, material objects and brands were viewed as productive and helpful, if not necessary, to the making of identity and the understanding of the female self in a post second-wave feminist setting (e.g., Thompson et al. 1990; Thompson 1996; Fournier 1998). Upon reflection, McRobbie (2008, 537) came to believe that in celebrating seemingly productive changes in girls' magazines, she overlooked 'the capacity within such media forms for transforming progressive principles into new forms of constraints'. That is, she did not perceive a commercially driven ideology veiled by celebrations of feminist progressive thought. Correspondingly, Gill (2008) highlights the rejection of Marxist, Foucauldian and feminist critiques of the subject as a 'victim' of ideological obfuscation or a 'cultural dupe' in favour of a productive and empowered subject whose autonomy and 'freedom of choice' is celebrated. This vein of critique is similar to recent arguments in consumer culture theory that the interpretation of consumer subjectivity as agentic is detrimental to culturally situated critiques of structures of domination and continued oppression not only of women but of all consumer subjects (Fitchett et al. 2014; Earley 2014, 2015; Maclaran 2015; Moisander et al. 2009; Bradshaw and Holbrook 2008; Cova et al. 2013).

Such concerns, in conjunction with the lack of consumer research on female experiences of consumer culture (Catterall et al. 2005; Maclaran 2015) form the basis of this study. Claims of postfeminist, neoliberal ideological influences subjugating young women particularly in increasingly covert ways stemming from cultural studies (Gill 2003, 2007; McRobbie 2008; 2009; Rottenberg 2014) do not chime with the few accounts of the lived experiences of women in consumer research which *tend* to assume individual agency (Catterall et al. 2005) in subverting dominant ideologies (Thompson and Üstüner 2015) and productive relationships with objects and brands (Ahuvia 2005). Therefore, in this literature review, first I briefly discuss the socio-historic relationship between women and consumption. Second, I address the postfeminist, neoliberal setting in which consumer culture is argued to be a regime of truth (Butler 2005) to which young women refer in coming to know themselves. Then, I reflect on consumer research on young women, noting the lack of research and the theorisation of female subjects as empowered and agentic rather than engaging more critical perspectives. In this vein, through a discussion of identity, I illustrate a general tendency within cultural turn consumer research, often situated within the 'sub-discipline' consumer culture theory (CCT), to favour acritical (in the sense of critical theory) accounts of the consumer subject as agentic and able to construct an identity through autonomous choice, a tendency that aligns with a (largely unaddressed) neoliberal ideological positioning (Fitchett et al. 2014). To conclude, I highlight the need to explore, in Gill's words (2008, 433) 'how culture relates to subjectivity, identity or lived embodied experiences of selfhood', of young women and through critical perspectives that consider discourses and ideological effects in the making of female consuming subjects.

2.1. Woman as consumer?

> *…in westernized capitalist societies, consumption is an inescapable part of being a woman and a context in which female roles are performed, challenged and legitimized. The inescapability of consumption is perpetuated by pervasive forms of commercial media such as television, print ads, popular music and social media, which are pedagogical sites that offer important insights into the ways that race, class and gender operate to define women as shoppers in popular cultural contexts.*

> *Sandlin and Maudlin (2012, 176)*

Historically speaking, there is a somewhat mythical conception that men are associated with the realm of production, depicted as *real*, whilst women are relegated to the superficial world of consumption and appearances (Veblen, 1900; Ewen, 1976; Edwards, 1998; De Grazia and Furlough 1996). This construction emphasises a dichotomy of man as producer and woman as consumer/shopper that is argued to continue into present day, perpetuated by a culture of consumption (Sandlin and Maudlin 2012). Indeed, De Grazia (1996) uses the Shakespeare-

esque adage: 'Consumption, thy name is woman' in the introductory pages of her edited book on the gendered nature of consumption from a historical perspective. She comments that feminists have long recognised the significance of consumption in the formation of the cultural category 'woman'. In this vein, De Grazia (1996, 7) contends that commercial culture, increasingly an institution of reference to which women look to understand themselves (McRobbie 2008), is 'an especially totalizing and exploitative force, to which women are more vulnerable than men because of their subordinate social, economic and cultural position and because of the patriarchal nature of the organization and the semiotics of mass consumption'. In the latter point, De Grazia notes the gendered nature of mass consumption along the lines of the traditional division of labour (men = work, producer, and women = homemaker, consumer), though men are increasingly also targeted as consumer subjects (Lambert and Desmond 2015; Hearn and Hein 2015). Women's association with the home and thus as shoppers and consumers of the family unit, giving consumption a feminine connotation (Slater 1997, Sandlin and Maudlin 2012), was further accentuated by the budding advertising industry in the mid-19th century – importantly run by a white male elite (Parkin 2006) – that continuously exhorted women to 'go out and buy' (Bocock, 1993, 95). Signified through advertisements, women in the 19th and 20th centuries were expected to perform their obligations to both country and family through their role as consumer. In this discourse, women – and consequently shopping – were stereotyped as emotional, a patriarchal label continually perpetuated into the 21st century as women in advertisements are often portrayed as the emotional, irrational counterpart to the neoclassical, rational, economic man (Sandlin and Maudlin 2012). Indeed, women in advertisements were – and arguably continue to be – illustrated as 'irrational, capricious dupes of advertising and of the ideologies of consumerism' who are even sometimes portrayed as mentally ill; as hysterical; as 'whimsical and inconstant, flighty, narcissistic' (Sandlin and Maudlin 2012, 180; Bowlby 2001; Slater 1997, 57). For example, Sandlin and Maudlin (2012) describe that in 2008, *New York Magazine* released a list of the 20 most 'most memorable' advertisements of the past thirty years. Of the 20, only two feature women as main characters, though they are not portrayed in serious or work-related roles like their male counterparts. In the two ads that centrally feature women, one (fast-food chain Wendy's 'Where's the Beef' campaign from the 1980s) depicts a group of octogenarians in pursuit of a cheeseburger who are 'portrayed as lacking a host of social and technical skills, such as operating a telephone, obtaining assistance and driving a car' (181). The other, a Calvin Klein jeans advertisement, features model/actress Brooke Shields posing provocatively and asserting that 'nothing' comes between 'me and my Calvin's'. Sandlin and Maudlin further argue that popular entertainment media continues to encourage 'the irrational, narcissistic stereotype that would eventually

lead women to proudly proclaim obsessive shopping as an acceptable – even desirable – pastime' (2012, 182), particularly in the form of women's fiction-turned-television or movie, such as Candice Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (Arthurs 2003; Zayer et al. 2012), Sophie Kinsella's *Confessions of a Shopaholic* and Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada*, all of which eventually achieved box-office success.

What is the lived experience of the woman-as-consumer subject position portrayed in media accounts? In her book that contributed to sparking the second-wave feminist movement (Maclaran 2015), Betty Friedan (1963) discusses the lived experiences of following a cultural script propagated by the media's encouragement of women to 'seek fulfilment as wives and mothers' through advice on 'catching and keeping a man', rearing children, furnishing the home and other housekeeping pursuits, and perhaps most importantly, how to look and act feminine. The reality of this cultural script, according to Freidan, was that pursuit of these ideals led to a malaise, a discontent that brewed silently in the minds of women. Over the course of fifteen years around the 1950s, media discourse focused on encouraging woman-as-consumer did not discuss this 'problem' that women experienced in everyday life. Freidan (1963, 20) explains: 'Just what was this problem that has no name? What were the words women used when they tried to express it? Sometimes a woman would say "I feel empty somehow... incomplete." Or she would say, "I feel as if I don't exist"'. The outcome of this inherently anti-marketing treatise was a second-wave-feminist uprising against the woman-as-passive-object in advertising that attempted to pigeonhole women in traditionally domestic roles (Maclaran 2015). Whilst feminism's 'first wave' was characterised by suffragettes' public campaigning for rights including wage and property, education, political voice and voting, and guardianship of children, feminism's second wave reenergised the publically dormant movement in the 1960s and 1970s, with a focus on exposing male domination and freeing women from traditional roles (Kinser 2004). Moreover, as Maclaran describes, this second-wave was marked by critique of 'the ideological control of a patriarchal market that manipulated women's bodies and desires to serve its interests' (2015, 1733). The second-wave revolt was to some extent successful as advertisers began to draw on 'more sophisticated representations of female empowerments' during the 1980s (ibid). The depiction of women as empowered and free from domestic roles, along with attention to feminist causes such as sexual awareness and freedom from conservative patriarchal double standards, is what McRobbie (2008) celebrated in her work on feminism and girls' magazines during the 1990s.

A sense that feminism 'worked' and was beginning to change perceptions of women's roles brought hope and ushered in a third-wave of feminism concerning an intersectional and post-

structural perspective (Mann and Huffman 2005) that questioned the treatment of race and ethnicity in the first and second waves, or acknowledging 'multiple and simultaneous oppressions' (Smith, 1983, xxxii) rather than homogenising female experience. Whilst the first-wave of feminism was marked by a strong racial bias as white women were recognised as suffragette activists publically, though bolstered by an invisible black female cohort (ibid.), the second-wave tended to described the experience of middle and upper middle class white women (e.g., Friedan 1963) that did not account for diversity of experiences and multiple oppressions. As Lorde (2000, 289) describes:

> By and large within the women's movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist.

Therefore, this third wave of feminism sought to destabilise conceptions of a singular female experience of oppression and explore the diversity of experiences, often from a post-structuralist perspective that further scrutinised the constructs of gender and woman (Butler 1991) as cultural categories derived from patriarchal, regulatory regimes. But concurrently, a postfeminist movement arose in academia and popular culture that contended the fight of feminism to be 'over' (Synder 2008) in opposition to third-wave feminists. Hall and Rodriguez (2003) contend that a postfeminist era is characterised by four 'claims': 1) the decrease in support for the women's movement particularly during the 1980s; 2) increasing anti-feminism particularly amongst younger women, full-time homemakers and women of colour; 3) the increasing anti-feminism and general lack of support for the movement due to its perceived irrelevance as gender equality failed for older generations but achieved success for young women in the current era thereby relegating feminism as unnecessary and 4) women do not identify with the feminist movement but do support issues such as equal pay, sexual freedom and economic independence (Ouellette 1992). Thus, within popular culture and the academy, third-wave and post-feminists engaged in a debate as to the purpose and necessity of the social movement, in opposition (Snyder 2008). More important for this study, however, is the co-optation of feminism by commercial forces during the late 1980s and early 1990s: 'Identities became bought and sold in a marketplace that increasingly promoted the 'pink pound' and female empowerment alongside a plethora of other lifestyle masculinities and femininities' (Maclaran 2015, 1733). The history of women as a consuming subjects is particularly salient in a postfeminist setting which promises women freedom through a space (the marketplace) which previously constricted and subjugated them. This, according to McRobbie (2008), has particular implications for young women coming of age as consumer culture, rather than a vessel for freedom, is instead infused with patriarchal ideals and

commercial interests seeking to exploit opportunities for profit in the making of female consuming subjects.

2.2. Young women, postfeminism and neoliberalism

In a postfeminist era, consumer culture is argued to be the dominant institution of reference particularly for young women raised in a setting in which possibilities for emancipation are increasingly situated within consumption practices that are argued to be charged with patriarchal ideals and therefore concerning to feminists (Sandlin and Maudlin 2012; McRobbie 2008; Gill 2003). McRobbie (2008, 534) observes that young women are making gains in both education and employment that offer 'great opportunities for new forms and patterns of consumption' that beget equality. But Gill (2003, 101) argues that a 'pervasive re-inscription of women as sexual objects is happening at a moment when we are being told that women can "have it all" and are doing better than ever before—in school, university, and the workplace'. Likewise, Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008, 231) observe inherent contradictions in the discourse around female identity and the marketplace, noting an 'I can be anything' rhetoric accompanying the opening of the labour market to women that coexists with an ever intensifying objectification and commodification of the feminine. This questions the position of young women engaging with a consumer culture in which 'invidious insurgent patriarchalism' is masked by celebrating 'female freedom' (McRobbie 2008, 539). Moreover, the postfeminist tide described in the previous section challenges feminist progress as feminism is increasingly construed as *passé* and irrelevant, with young women increasingly not identifying with the movement deemed, in some senses, successful (Rottenberg 2014; Hall and Rodriguez 2003; Murray 2015). Postfeminist discourse particularly emphasises the agency of the the empowered subject able to choose for herself (Murray 2015), taking personal responsibility for herself and life course, through what McRobbie (2008) terms the 'regime of truth' of consumer culture that is underpinned by neoliberalism. Thus, as Rottenberg (2014, 420) describes, when young women *do* identify with the movement, it is through neoliberal values of hard work and personal responsibility on an individual basis:

> *Individuated in the extreme, this subject is feminist in the sense that she is distinctly aware of current inequalities between men and women. This same subject is, however, simultaneously neoliberal, not only because she disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality, but also because she accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care, which is increasingly predicated on crafting a felicitous work–family balance based on a cost-benefit calculus. The neoliberal feminist subject is thus mobilized to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair.*

In this vein, McRobbie (2008) calls for further research into consumer culture as a 'regime of truth' or an institution young women look to understand themselves or bring themselves

into being (Butler 2005). Therefore, I first discuss what McRobbie means by 'regime of truth' and then explore consumer culture and the making of neoliberal subjects particularly in relation to feminism.

2.2.1.   'Regime of truth' and performativity

According to Butler, in an unpublished work, Foucault notes that 'juridical systems of power *produce* the subjects they subsequently come to represent' (1991, 4). In this vein, a 'regime of truth' is theorised by Foucault in reference to governmentality as: 'a particular type of discourse and a set of practices, a discourse that, on the one hand, constitutes these practices as a set bound together by an intelligible connection and, on the other hand, legislates and can legislate on these practices in terms of true and false' (2008, 18). In this sense, a 'regime of truth' links certain practices and discourses together, judging not from a moral perspective but from a position in relation to, but not predicated on (in a realist sense), truth and falsehood. This inscribes a way-of-being as *natural* and within the bounds of the law. That is, a regime of truth forms a sense of reality for a subject that appears as natural and 'true'. Butler (2005, 21) invokes his theory to describe how subjects gain recognition of themselves:

> *A regime of truth offers the terms that make self-recognition possible. These are the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in character, and they establish social norms, a domain of unfreedom and substitutability within which our "singular" stories are told.*

Accordingly, it is not that these frameworks or norms determine behaviour – rather these frameworks or 'regime(s) of truth' determine what is or is not recognised as real: 'what I can "be," quite literally, is constrained in advance by a regime of truth that decides what will and will not be a recognizable form of being' (Butler 2005, 22). Importantly, Foucault notes that bringing 'regimes of truth' to light is not a matter of uncovering hidden objects or exposing 'ideological products', which implies that there is an objective truth to be exposed, as discussed in 3.3.3. Rather, regimes of truth come to light when illustrating how a set of practices that align with a regime of truth are able to make exist that which does not exist, or that which is not objectively 'real' or 'natural', illustrated in Foucault's work through madness (1964), sexuality (1976), delinquency (1977) and also neoliberalism (Lemke 2001).

A key example for this research is gender as a 'regime of truth'. In Butler's seminal text *Gender Trouble*, she asks (1991, 11): 'How, then, does gender need to be reformulated to encompass the power relations that produce the effect of a pre-discursive sex and so conceal that very operation of discursive production?' This explains gender as a regime of truth that is experienced as *fact*: e.g., if asked, 'What gender are you?' (p. 11) I might answer: I have a

vagina (biological sex) which means I am woman (compared to a man, i.e., a binary) and I am (or should be) heterosexual (in terms of sexual desire) by nature (and culture). That both gender and sex are socially constructed as gendered categories presumed to be binary does not imbue the power relations that produce such practices which form gender to appear as a truth, a truth emanating from 'a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations' (p. 15). In this vein, Butler argues that gender is performative of discourses of power within which gender is imbedded. She describes (1991, 33): 'There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results'. That is, being a woman is expressed in certain ways that are said to be the *result* of being a woman. However, there is no original conception of 'woman' in this naturalised sense. Every performance is a parody of a culturally charged and power-laden 'regime of truth', including performances conceived of as original; i.e., the most reified gender performances. As Butler explains: 'Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the "congealing" is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means' (p. 43). Moreover, performances of gender are in a state of *becoming* rather than a state of *being*. That is, de Beauvoir famously claims: 'One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one'. Butler takes issue with her view of agency (conceiving that a 'doer' can act outside of the deed) as well as her view of the female body the locus of female freedom, a concept which Butler argues uncritically reproduces a Cartesian dualism between freedom and body. However, reflecting on the original quote, Butler concedes that envisioning woman as something that *becomes* is further indicative of performativity as it conceives of gender as a process with no origination point and no end point. Therefore, 'gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (p. 43-44).

Butler's theory of performativity is drawn upon frequently in consumer research. For example, in relation to masculinities, Hein and O'Donohoe (2014, 1311) illustrate how men engage in banter to negotiate masculinity within friendship groups, observing how 'banter provided spaces for gender parodies of the very norms that permitted the construction of gender in the first place'. Goulding and Saren (2009) explore the gender performativity in the context of the gothic subculture. Through the figure of the vampire, they observe that the reconfiguring of gender norms, something valued in the community, often occurs through practices of bricolage, or taking bits of different gender types and putting them together. In the context of roller derby, Thompson and Üstüner (2014) show how 'derby grrrls' re-signify femininity and challenge gender norms by engagement with the sport,

without losing of 'sociocultural legitimacy'. In final example, Maclaran et al. (2009, 723) draw on performativity to critique critical management and marketing studies, arguing that through performativity scholars in the disciplines 'repeat gendered patterns unreflexively that continually reinforce the status quo' as 'masculine norms are perpetuated by critical scholars just as much as by the mainstream'. These examples illustrate how gender is performed and re-signified *through* gender norms that are not fixed but fluid and negotiated. That is, gender is reconfigured and agency is imagined in some of the interplay as 'the performative construction of gender identity is simultaneously constitutive of agency in that the identificatory processes through which norms are materialised enable to formation of a subject who is capable of resisting those norms' (McNay 1999, 177). However, resistance is executed in relation to the 'regime of truth' of a gender binary (masculinity and femininity). Thus, for Butler, acts of agency or subversion of dominant subjectivities emerge from the setting through which the subject is formed. That is, she argues that we are not able to separate ourselves from the power structures or from the cultural milieu through which we are produced as subjects: 'there is no ontologically intact reflexivity to the subject which is then placed within a cultural context' (1991, 6). Rather, subject is ontologically reflexive within the cultural context that made her/him a subject. Butler (2005) describes: 'There is no making of oneself (*poiesis*) outside of a mode of subjectivation (*assujettisement*) and, hence, no self-making outside of the norms that orchestrate the possible forms that a subject may take'. Butler's view is further illustrated through a disagreement about agency with feminist theorist Seyla Benhabib (Benhabib et al. 1995). Butler and Benhabib inherently disagree about the nature of the 'subject' and subjectivity particularly regarding the issue of agency. For Benhabib, it is unthinkable to theorise a subject who does not have some capacity for self-determination *outside* of the cultural context. According to Webster (2000, 6): '[Benhabib's] argument is rather that subjects have the capacity to challenge their "situatedness," to contribute to the constitution of their own identity and to their own place in the world (1992, 8), and it is precisely this capacity, captured in part by the term "reflexivity," which she understands to be lost or disavowed by Butler's theory of performativity'. But Butler argues that a subject cannot act outwith the cultural context which forms the subject – thus an inability to separate 'doer' from 'deed'. This contrast Benhabib and Beauvoir who 'insist on an account of agency in which there is a subject who acts, a "doer" who "does."' (Webster 2000, 14). Butler rather conceives of agency in a Foucauldian vein as an *effect* of a subject's *resistance* to cultural norms rather than the reflexive ability to act separately. Change thus comes from 'disrupting and destabilizing the very processes through which we are constructed as subjects' and therefore, Butler views agency

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as 'the possibility of a variation on repetition' (Webster 2000, 12), rather than the subject's reflexive ability to autonomously choose.

In this vein, interrogating a regime of truth is a matter of exposing the social construction of a 'naturalised' phenomena given historically and socially situated norms. In this thesis, it is in relation to 'truths' about gender and being a young woman through consumer culture that inscribes female consumer subjects as free to pursue their identity and life choices embedded within a neoliberal regime of truth. Therefore, Butler (1998, 275) argues that 'feminist critique ought to understand how the category of "women", the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought'. She (2009) considers women as 'precarious' – continued to be subjugated through a capitalist patriarchy despite a feminist movement that has fought to free women from traditional roles. This is almost a contradiction in terms for Butler (1991), as the movement itself is a fight for the freedom of 'woman' as cultural-constituted category constructed through the patriarchy. In this sense, *woman* is the perpetual 'other': she is the other who confirms masculinity, who brings the male form into being. As de Beauvoir (1953, 16) describes: 'She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential, as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other'. This position as a subjugated Other always in reference to men renders investigations intending to emancipate women from subordination with the aim of equality problematic because any question of woman – the Other – ultimately questions the position of man – the Subject. In Butler's words, 'that process of meaning-constitution requires that women reflect that masculine power and everywhere reassure that power of the reality of its illusory autonomy' (1991, 57). To question the cultural constitution of *woman* is therefore to crack at the foundations of the masculine subject embedded in a fallacious position of power, and to question a patriarchal neoliberal ideological underpinning in a discipline is to question the very roots of a discipline itself, discussed in relation to consumer research in Section 2.3. But without confronting that which we take for granted, regimes of truth persist to benefit the powerful and subjugate the rest (of particular interest in this study, young women). Critique is particularly salient in a neoliberal regime give its position 'not just as ideological rhetoric or as a political-economic reality, but above all as a political project that endeavours to create a social reality that it suggests already exists' (Lemke 2001, 203). In this light, the next section interrogates 'consumer culture' as a regime of truth for young women, asking what is consumer culture? How did it come to be an institution of reference and what does this mean for the female consuming subject?

2.2.2. Consumer culture as a neoliberal regime-of-truth?

From its origins to the 20th century, modernity was predicated on historical progress rooted in grand narratives of legitimation (Lyotard 1984) that attached the Subject to Other(s) such as the nation-state, religion and so forth (Dufour 2008). With traditional pillars of identity increasingly questioned including gender norms (Bauman 2000, Giddens 1991) and the advent of an industrial age in the 20th century which fostered mass production and the pervasiveness of advertising, 'culture' has become increasing commercialised, particularly in western contexts but fast spreading globally (Slater 1997; McCracken 1990). Many argue that increasing marketization (McAlexander et al. 2014) characteristic of consumer culture sparked a change in 'modernity', termed by some as postmodern (Lyotard 1984; Baudrillard 1985, 1998; Jameson 1985) or increasingly post-postmodern (Nealon 2012). Jameson, whose thesis Nealon expands upon, explains: 'I believe that the emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism' (1985, 125). Slater (1997, 8) defines consumer culture as 'the dominant mode of cultural representation developed in the west over the course of modernity' which is 'bound up with values, practices and institutions'. That is to say a culture of consumption is not distinct from any other form of culture: it cannot be separated from institutions of reference (e.g., law, family, religion) or mundane practices (e.g., eating, conversing, and indeed shopping) that are embedded in a 'western' existence or subjectivity. In the introduction of her book on consumer culture, Lury (2011) demarcates various realities that provide evidence for this culture of consumption – or consumer society (Baudrillard 1998) – such as: the ever increasing number and range of goods sold; the increased marketization of 'more and more aspects of human life'; shopping as a leisurely activity; the ever multiplying modes of consumption, now spread to a digital world; the rise of brands; and the inescapabilty of advertising in everyday life. Thus, a commercialised, consumer culture *with corporate interests* (emphasised given the underpinning corporate objectives of profit maximisation as a locus of power) increasingly encroaches on 'traditional' institutions (e.g., law, family, education) to become the dominant institution of reference in the making of subjects (McRobbie 2008; Butler 2005). In this sense, as Slater (1997, 4) notes, 'consumer culture is largely mundane, yet that mundanity is where we live and breathe'. But how did consumer culture come to be a dominant institution of reference?

2.2.2.1. The neoliberal underpinnings of consumer culture

Stemming from de-regulationist governmental policies (Larner 2000), marketization increasingly imbues all aspects of life as discussed above (McAlexander et al. 2014; Lemke 2001). During the 1980s, Reagan in the US and Thatcher in the UK drew on neoliberal

practices to buttress their policies, both economic and social (Brown 2003; Slater 1997; Fitchett et al. 2014), practices that continue today (Vail 2015) and can be traced to post-WWII policies that foregrounded economic growth in the development of the state (Lemke 2001). Whereas German 'Ordo-liberals' attempted to govern society through economic principles, bracketing the social, US neoliberals redefined the social through the economic domain, facilitating the 'consistent expansion of the economic form to apply to the social sphere, thus eliding any difference between the economy and the social' (Lemke 2001, 197). This renders the government an enterprising institution tasked with universalising competition and creating market-based systems for institutions, groups and individuals alike. Thus: 'the economy is no longer one social domain among others with its own intrinsic rationality, laws and instruments. Instead, the area covered by the economy embraces the entirety of human action to the extent that this is characterized by the allocation of scant resources for competing goals' (Lemke 2001, 197). Larner (2000, 8) explains that for some, neo-liberal policies are 'highly problematic' because 'deregulation and privatization are identified as transferring power away from democratically elected governments with a mandate to ensure universal service provision, towards private capital concerned primarily with furthering opportunities for accumulation'. Therefore, as opportunities for profit are foregrounded, the subject is increasingly viewed as a consumer who must turn to the marketplace to express him or herself – to be discussed in relation to identity below.

Whilst often read as an opportunity for increased individual freedom, this consigning of responsibility to the individual can be interpreted as a 'technique for government' (Giesler and Veresiu 2014) and by extension a means of domination and subversion of the revolutionary (Foucault 1988; Brown 2003). That the government has less of a role in the lives of individuals is one of the most potent myths propagated by neoliberalism: instead, the market underpins the state as a regulatory guide which grants the state more power in organising individuals and contributing to power for an (economic) elite (Brown 2003), thus placing the onus on the individual to self-regulate. Foucault observed (Lemke 2001, 200): 'In the neo-liberal thought of the Chicago School [homo oeconomicus] becomes a behavioristically manipulable being and the correlative of a governmentality which systematically changes the variables of the "environment" and can count on the "rational choice" of the individuals'. In other words, by demanding individuals act in rational ways, the government can exert control over the individual through 'care', or knowledge, of the self, or what Foucault terms as governmentality (Miller and Rose 1990), as discussed further in Section 2.2.2.3. Therefore, rather than reducing the role of government in the lives of citizens, as most believe of a neoliberal approach, it takes on new functions: 'The neo-liberal forms of government feature not only direct intervention by means of empowered and

specialized state apparatuses, but also characteristically develop indirect techniques for leading and controlling individuals without at the same time being responsible for them' (Lemke 2001, 201). Therefore, revolutionary movements, such as feminism, are often co-opted by a neoliberal rationality that emphasises the individual and capitalism as a means of freedom. As Graeber (2011) explains: 'Neoliberalism consists largely of such systematic inversions: taking concepts and ideas that originated in subversive, even revolutionary rhetoric and transforming it into ways of presenting capitalism itself as subversive and revolutionary'. This is exemplified by the case of feminism.

2.2.2.2. The commodification of feminism and the neoliberal subject

As neoliberal economic policies began to fall into place in the 1980s, policies that demand the subject be responsible for her or himself and her/his actions, feminism began to move into its third wave (Mann and Huffman 2005). In this vein, Goldman (1992, 130) theorises 'commodity feminism', noting feminism's shift from a subversive movement to part of the neoliberal system. He argues that in the late 80s/early 90s advertisers, responding to feminist critiques of the positioning of women as objects, pursued a 'wide range of superficial ideological grafts' that in effect subsumed feminist narratives of emancipation into consumer-oriented depictions of femininity related to power, envy and desire. In this vein, Rottenberg (2014) observes that young women tend to either reject the movement on postfeminist notions of equality as achieved, or when they do embrace feminism, they do so from the perspective of the individual and through neoliberal values. Most importantly, implicit in techniques of self regulation, the feminist subject of neoliberalism 'accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care' (Rottenberg 2014, 420). This position is underpinned by 'point of reference' for neoliberalism: an 'artificially created form of behaviour' (Lemke 2001), highlighted in Nobel Prize winning Gary Becker's (1992) theory of human capital in which people are imagined as economic, rational, calculating agents. Lemke (2001, 200) explains that by positioning all that is social in economic terms, personal decision-making processes become cost-benefit analyses applied to family life, marriage, divorce, career and the like, the subject is encouraged to engage in 'utility-maximizing, forward-looking behavior' (Becker 1992, 386). Therefore, a legacy of neoliberalism is the reconfiguring of all that is human into entrepreneurial terms (Brown 2003; Peters 2001); as Lemke (2001, 202) explains, 'responsible' and 'rational' individuals are expected to 'give their lives a specific entrepreneurial form'. Therefore, Larner – citing Nikolas Rose's (1996) work on government and the neoliberal subject – explains that the citizen is reimagined as 'an active agent both able and obliged to exercise autonomous choices' (2000, 8). Not only is the neoliberal subject imagined through entrepreneurial means but s/he is also expected to personally invest in

her or himself, through financial instruments such as student loans (Peters 2001). In this sense, individuals become 'responsible' and 'empowered' by activities that were previously responsibilities of the state, particularly related to the social (e.g., benefits, healthcare etc.). Thus, Rottenberg observes 'a new regime of morality' which judges the worth of individuals on their ability to make autonomous choices, strengthening the link between moral self worth, efficiency and self reliance (2014, 421). A neoliberal regime therefore aims to create 'prudent subjects' whose moral worth is predicated on their ability to rationally calculate costs and benefits of decisions and actions (Lemke 2001; Miller and Rose 1990).

Rottenberg (2014) draws on Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg's recent feminist best-seller *Lean In* (2013) to illustrate 'neoliberal feminism' and its focus on the individual. Where previous feminist writers that made a similar cultural impact attempted to expose cultural norms that subjugated women (e.g., Friedan [1963] and pressures of femininity or Naomi Wolf [1991] and ideals of feminine beauty), Sandberg's focus is on encouraging women to overcome their 'internal obstacles' by changing themselves, in line with demands for self-transformation and self-realisation that have long been key aspects of American discourses such as the American Dream (Stansell 2010; Lasch 1979). Sandberg cites the behaviour of women as individuals in the gender power imbalance, particularly focusing on issues such as pay equality and corporate representation. In the introductory chapter entitled 'Internalizing the Revolution', she claims that women 'hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in' (2013, 8). Thus, women are at fault for their lack of equality and, as Rottenberg (2014, 426) observes, Sandberg conceives of 'true equality' as 'predicated upon individuals moving up the professional ladder, one woman at a time' and therefore the feminist objective is 'climbing the power hierarchy'. In this way, Sandberg switches the focus from structural issues to individual responsibility. McRobbie (2013, 24) thus notes that the 'Lean In' women's groups that have since emerged do not focus on issues of sexism or male dominance in daily life but instead help and encourage women to 'play the corporate game more deftly'. From this example, Rottenberg (2014, 424) elucidates a neoliberal shift: 'from an attempt to alter social pressures towards interiorized affective spaces that require constant self-monitoring is precisely the node through which liberal feminism is rendered hollow and transmuted into a mode of neoliberal governmentality'. Therefore, personal responsibility is placed on the individual to combat inequalities. Implicit in this view is the moral responsibility of the individual, who, if oppressed or subjugated, is blamed for personal insufficiencies or poor judgment. This is further exemplified through the example of criminality. Lemke (2001, 199) explains:

> *Neo-liberals thus distance themselves from all psychological, biological or anthropological explanations of crime. In the opinion of the neo-liberals, a criminal is not a psychologically deficient person or a biological degenerate, but a person like any other. The criminal is a rational-economic individual who invests, expects a certain profit and risks making a loss.*

This imagines a person who commits a crime as rational, agentic and able to make autonomous decisions, deriding any sense of cultural, social or personal reasons that might explain the act of crime. As Becker (1992, 390) clarifies: 'I was not sympathetic to the assumption that criminals had radically different motivations from everyone else. I explored instead the theoretical and empirical implications of the assumption that criminal behavior is rational'. This is reflected above in Rottenberg's (2014, 422) observation that young women must care for the self to achieve equality. She explains that a neoliberal sense of feminism 'forges a feminist subject who is not only individualized but entrepreneurial in the sense that she is oriented towards optimizing her resources through incessant calculation, personal initiative and innovation'.

2.2.2.3.   A self-subjectified female subject?

In this light, a Foucauldian lens of governmentality (linking French terms '*gouverner*' [governing] and '*mentalité*' [modes of thought]) and technologies of the self is useful toward understanding the subjugation inherent in personal responsibility and self-subjectification of the female consuming subject (Evans et al. 2010; Shankar et al. 2006; Gill and Orgad 2015). What Foucault noted in later works was the way in which the (neoliberal) state places responsibility for self-control on the individual as a *means* of domination, not necessarily the possibility for agency as it is sometimes read (McKay 1992; Evans et al. 2010). In this way, it is not the view that individual has agency to act outside of systems of domination; rather, it is the view that individuals are *burdened* with the responsibility for their own actions and are expected to act as – or try to become – the ideal subject (Fuss 1995) or empowered consumer (Shankar et al. 2006). Therefore, Foucault is interested in the ways in which a subject identifies with and performs the ideal subject form in a neoliberal setting. He explains that technologies are 'specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves' (1988, 18) and he notes there are four such 'technologies':

> *…(I) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things; (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.*

Importantly, rather than interpret human agency in the domain of technologies of the self (McKay 1992), Foucault (1988, 18) notes these technologies are constantly interacting, rarely function separately, and are all associated with a 'certain type of domination', not only in the sense of needing to 'acquire certain skills' but also the need to acquire 'certain attitudes'. Foucault's use of the word 'acquire' is reminiscent of Erich Fromm's (1976) observation that a 'to have' attitude is endemic in late capitalism: that is, we seek *to have* versus *to be* (Saren 2007).

Along those lines, Gill (2003, 2007) contends that the female subject is no longer objectified by the male gaze (i.e., no longer conceived of as a passive object of domination). Instead, she is told by neoliberal (media) discourse that she is a free, autonomous agent who can please herself and make her own choices through technologies of the self. Surprised by the popularity of t-shirts, for example, that render woman as sexual objects (e.g., a best selling French Connection t-shirt that reads 'fit; chick; unbelievable; knockers' to spell FCUK vertically), Gill (2003, 104) posits a shift from an external male gaze objectifying women to a 'self-policing narcissistic gaze' of the female subject which:

> *…offers women the promise of power by becoming an object of desire. It endows women with the status of active subjecthood so that they can then "choose" to become sex objects because this suits their "liberated" interests. In this way, sexual objectification can be presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects.*

Combined with postfeminist assertions about the ability for women to 'have it all' as they are purported to be making gains in education and the workplace, women are 'resinscribed' as sexual agents of their own making. Evans et al. (2010, 115) explain the sexualisation of contemporary cultural enabled by neoliberal discourse of choice and agency that produces '"up for it" femininity, a sexually savvy and active woman who can participate appropriately in consumer practices in the production of her choice biography'. However, the authors, drawing on technologies of self and gender performativity, theorise technologies of sexiness at the confluence of the adoption and subversion of discourses of sexuality, thereby offering a more 'nuanced' account that examines not only adoption of hegemonic discourses but also resistance and subversion. In this context, it is the former that is most concerning to feminists, given that one of the 'most disturbing aspects of this shift is that it makes critique very difficult' (Gill 2003, 104) as a neoliberal ideology inverts the feminist agenda – producing subjects who feel free and autonomous and therefore are oppressed through processes of self-subjectification. This is similar to Catterall et al.'s (2005) concern about the emphasis within consumer research on 'imaginative' consumers who utilizes marketplace symbols for individual purposes, a conceptualisation they argue stymies feminist critique, to

be discussed below. Because there is a singular focus on a rational, entrepreneurial subject who is purported to have freedom, there is little capacity here for communitarian political action which therefore acts to stem any real opposition to the neoliberal system. The neoliberal subject 'is less a social citizen with powers and obligations deriving from membership of a collective body, than an individual whose citizenship is active' (Rose and Miller, 1992: 201). Thus, as previously noted, Rottenberg (2014) contends that young women in particular, socialised in a neoliberal setting and coming to terms with their identity embedded in a neoliberal ideology are 'individuated in the extreme'. Gender inequality is therefore rendered an individual affair, up to the agency of the individual to deal with, rather than a structural problem.

As Gill (2003,105) notes, for young women, 'the figure of the autonomous, active, desiring subject has become—I suggest—the dominant figure'. This, Gill argues, results in subjects who are sexually subjectified and still largely adhere to traditional norms of feminine beauty through their *personal choice* to dress in sexy clothing or wear makeup, rather than passively objectified. She explains:

> *Of course the idea that in the past women dressed in a particular way purely to please men is ridiculous: it suggests a view of power as something both overbearing and obvious which acted upon entirely docile subjects (as well as implying that all women are heterosexual). But this pendulum shift to the notion that women just "please themselves" will not do as a substitute—it presents women as completely free agents, and cannot account for why, if we are just pleasing ourselves, the resulting valued "look" is so similar—hairless body, slim waist, firm buttocks, etc.*

Hence, there emerges a sense that the feminist narrative has been adopted by media/commercial organizations, popular culture pundits and academics (e.g., Katie Roiphe Camille Paglia and Rene Denfeld, see Synder [2008]) and to veil the 'patriarchal same' that exists in a powerful consumer culture which increasingly acts as the institution to which young women refer in the pursuit of self-identity (McRobbie 2008). Thus, young women coming of age in the 21st century must reflexively navigate identity within a dominant consumer culture that 'takes upon itself this role as champion of girls' rights and provider of the wherewithal which permits girls the quest for self-identity' (McRobbie 2008, 545-546). The result is the commodification of feminist ideals of success and independence, as 'personality can be represented, relationships achieved and resources acquired through personal consumer choices' (Goldman 1992, 131). In this view, women – as consumers – continue to be subjected to overwhelming pressures in the realm of attitude, personality and, perhaps most notably, appearance (Wolf 1991), pressures that McRobbie (2015) locates the 'apparatus of the perfect' which she associates with 'journalistic clichés' of 'having it all'. Thus, 'perfect', McRobbie (2015, 9) denotes, means 'a heightened form of self-regulation

based on an aspiration to some idea of the "good life"'. But instead of pressure seemingly stemming from an external (male) gaze, pressure is felt to mount from within (McRobbie 2015; Gill 2003).

2.3. Consumer culture, identity and young women

The above discussion raises questions about what consumer research says about women, particularly young women socialised in a neo-liberal, postfeminist setting, given the role of consumer culture argued to be an institution of reference and neoliberalism the underpinning 'regime of truth'. If consumer culture is a *regime of truth* (McRobbie 2008; Foucault 2008; Butler 2005) for young women, it is surprising that there is a paucity of consumer research on the experiences of women, particularly from a feminist perspective (Catterall et al. 2005; Maclaran 2015; Hearn and Hein 2015). According to Maclaran (2015), the discipline experienced 'an initial burst of enthusiasm' for feminist research particularly focused on the the deconstruction of patriarchal ideology in marketing rhetoric in the early 1990s (Bristor and Fischer 1994; Hirschman 1993, Joy and Venkatesh 1994, Dobscha 1993; Stern 1992; Thompson 1996). But enthusiasm soon faded and conversations around feminism and the experience of women in consumer culture remain stilted apart from a few key contributions (e.g., Catterall et al. 2000, *Marketing and Feminism*, and Scott 2005, *Fresh Lipstick*). Instead, Maclaran describes, the discipline incorporated feminist critique into conversations on gender and identity, importantly focused more on masculinities than femininities (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson, 2013; Holt and Thompson, 2004; Moisio, Arnould, and Gentry, 2013; Hein and O'Donohoe, 2014; Hein and Hearn 2015). Aside from work on mothers (Voice Group, 2010), one of the few comprehensive works on the lived experience of women of late is Thompson and Üstüner (2015) which examines gender performativity through the context of women's roller derby (Maclaran 2015). Earlier work discussing the experiences of women either does not focus on gender (e.g., Fournier 1997; Ahuvia 2005) or focuses on productive aspects of individual consumption (Jantzen 2006; Thompson 1996). It is thus evident that research on the lived experience of women in consumer culture is long overdue, particularly given the implications for young women increasing subjugated through techniques of self regulation (Gill 2003; Evans et al. 2010; McRobbie 2015). Moreover, much of the literature from media and cultural studies is unsurprisingly focused on media discourse and therefore not based on empirical exploration that could act to voice young women's lived experiences, a contribution of this study.

2.3.1.   Consumer research and the female subject

The need to critically examine the role of consumer culture in the lives of women from a consumer research perspective is particularly highlighted by Catterall et al. (2005), as mentioned earlier, in their call for research on the female consumer and from a feminist perspective. Echoing concerns of cultural studies detailed in the previous section, the authors express apprehension about the emphasis within consumer research on 'the creative and imaginative consumer' who, as an individual, draws on marketplace symbols, noting how such a view contributes to the reinforcement of 'a consumerist ideology of achieving a personal freedom through economic means' (2005, 490). The authors further observe (2005, 490) that, at face value, a 'liberatory' (Firat and Venkatesh 1995) emphasis on consumption, predominant across the discipline (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Fitchett et al. 2014) seemingly aligns with feminist aims of emancipation given an emphasis on individual choice rather top-down subjugation. Therefore, discussed in relation to neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg 2014), a liberatory viewpoint that underpins the field of cultural consumer research that *seems* to square with feminist goals of freedom of choice and emancipation, makes it difficult to critique dominant power structures (Gill 2007; Catterall et al. 2005; Graeber 2011). Not only does a liberatory and productive viewpoint make critique difficult, but feminist viewpoints are few and far between, particularly in 'top' journals (Hearn and Hein 2015) which aligns with a postfeminist (and post-race) ideology that renders struggles of the oppressed as fought, successful and no longer necessary to relive (Rottenberg 2014; Eng 2010). Thus, within the discipline, a focus on agency and the celebration of freedom and choice through the marketplace manifests accounts of female experience as productive and agentic.

A good example, noted in the introduction, is the discussion of women and lingerie in the *Journal of Consumer Culture*. In 2006, the journal published two articles on women and lingerie, one from a consumer research perspective and the other from a media, communications and cultural studies perspective. In the former, Jentzen et al. (2006, 179) explore – based on depth interviews – the contradictory role of lingerie, as both 'gratifying and a cause of despair', in 'affirming a 'real' feminine identity'. In this vein, lingerie is viewed, although *not* without critique, as a tool or symbol of identity. The authors thus describe the productive use and functions of lingerie in identity construction, noting their analysis (2006, 198; emphasis added) illustrates 'how underwear *helps* our respondents to define what an *interesting* and *relevant* way of becoming a modern woman – 'a woman to the backbone' – might be'. Therefore, though the authors mention the patriarchal associations with lingerie, through their analysis they demonstrate how 'lingerie is consumed in order to *express*

women's social, inter-psychological identity as well as to *impress* the body – to thrill and arouse it – thereby *enhancing* an intra-psychological identity' (2006, 199; emphasis added). Lingerie, rather than conceptualised as a patriarchal tool of continued subjugation, is considered a productive tool that allows women to express themselves. On the other hand, Amy-Chinn (2006, 156), examining advertising regulation discourse, finds that advertising regulation reinforces the representation of women as objects for the male gaze such that advertisements questioning the centrality of men in relation to female sexuality are banned. Although Amy-Chinn advocates against regulation of lingerie advertisements that portray women as 'active and desiring sexual subjects', she does so to the end of female emancipation noting how advertisement regulation is skewed in favour of patriarchal upholding of women-as-object, explaining (2006, 171): 'the majority of lingerie advertising continues to show women in underwear with little supporting text other than brand identification. This makes them virtually indistinguishable from the images of women that grace the pages of many men's magazines'. These two articles are empirically distinct and grounded in two separate disciplines; however, their contrast raises questions as to why consumer researchers emphasise the productive aspects of consumption rather than the problematic and subjugating nature of commoditised and patriarchally charged 'identity tools'.

These divergent perspectives chime with De Grazia's (1996) observation of a 'moralising debate' within feminist and consumer culture scholarship as to the role of consumer culture in the lives of women: is it an emancipatory space that gives women freedom or is it an exploitative, inherently oppressive space that continues to reify gender roles? On the one hand, scholars celebrate moments of agency and resistance (e.g., Thompson and Üstüner 2015) in subverting ideological frames, or in utilising consumption 'tools' to enhance identity projects (Jentzen et al. 2006; Fournier 1998; Ahuvia 2005). On the other hand, some view consumer culture as more problematic and underpinned by discourses of power. For instance, the Voice Group (2010) distinguishes the ambivalent role of consumption in women's transition to motherhood, noting the oft-complicating role of an ideology of consumption in this transitional period contributing to mothers' anxiety of consuming the 'wrong items' and thus impeding attempts to establish a desired identity. In exploring media discourse of the television shows 'Sex and the City' and 'Entourage', Zayer et al. (2012, 352) note anxiety experienced in gender role performances to sometimes be prompted by marketplace-induced tensions: 'The characters often experience tensions that result not only from complex negotiations of gender expectations but also from consumption itself – consuming the home (in economic and social terms), experiencing sexuality, and maintaining and projecting an authentic self, rooted in the material world' (2012, 352). However, as noted by the last phrase, these studies are arguably all situated within a neoliberal discourse predicated on the

assumption of consumption-oriented identity construction, thereby implicitly elevating consumption instead of focusing on moments of contention and strife. Thus, in context of this 'moralising debate' consumer research studies elicit more questions than answers. Why do accounts of gender – particularly in 'top' (i.e., hegemonic) journals – focus on agency, rather than question their oppression? And when agency or strife is observed, why is this with the assumption of a consumption-oriented identity? Perhaps these questions should be situated more broadly: why are accounts of lived experience of consumer culture and the formation of the self understood through consumer identity projects (Arnould and Thompson 2005) instead of subjectivity (Gill 2008; Shankar et al. 2006)?

2.3.2. Identity in consumer research

The above discussion elicits concerns not only about the lack of research on women in consumer research and the role of consumer culture in the lives of women, but also the conception of the subject in consumer research. As noted in the above example, understandings about the subject and the role of consumer culture are often discussed in relation to the concept of 'identity'. Identity is both a commonplace term that gives an individual an understanding of self in relation to others and society (Vanheule and Verhaeghe 2009) and an increasingly popular academic term fraught with contestation and critique (Hall 1996), discussed in relation to consumer research in Section 2.3.3. In CCT research, identity as a construct is rarely defined or deconstructed – rather it is assumed to embody the consumer's search for and expression of self through marketplace resources (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Belk 1988). Identity is often referred to in terms of a narrative about the self (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Ahuvia 2005; Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013; Thompson and Tambyah 1999; Thompson and Hirschman 1995) that is argued to be 'goal oriented' (Mick and Buhl 1992; Schau and Gilly 2003) though tacit and not well understood (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). Moreover, identity is understood to be marked by conflict, contradiction and ambivalence (Hirschman 1992; Mick and Fournier 1998; Murray 2002; O'Guinn and Faber 1989; Otnes et al. 1997; Thompson 1996). An example the theorisation of identity in relation to young women that elucidates these points (discussed in Lambert and Desmond [2013] in relation to narcissism) is located in Fournier's exploration of consumer-brand relationships. Fournier interviews a participant, Vicki, a 23-year-old student in the final year of her masters' degree. She describes Vicki's conflicted *project* of identity as related to a desire for autonomy versus parental dependence as well as a yearning for committed love versus a need for experimentation, 'identity' conflicts that are both symbolised through and mollified by her relationships with brands. Firstly, Fournier observes that 'Vicki attends college only hours from home and remains "half-in and

half-out" of each of her divergent worlds.' (1998: 356). She makes decisions on her own in everyday life but continues to rely on her parents for the 'important life decisions'. As noted in the introductory chapter, this is typical of what Arnett (2004) terms emerging adulthood, or a life stage in which young adults, not yet fully independent but not fully dependent, explore a variety of options before 'settling down', thus permeated with instability given a range of choices and lack of a pre-destined role (Giddens 1991). Secondly, Fournier observes that much of Vicki's thoughts and energies surround the 'concept of family' as they are 'organized around the activities of attracting a boyfriend and cultivating a meaningful relationship toward the goal of marriage' (1998: 356). Importantly, these points are observed without addressing feminist concerns by questioning the processes through which Vicki identifies with certain (gendered) ideals. Instead, Fournier notes that Vicki's 'project' of the self and ensuing identity conflicts are manifested through her relationships with objects, brands in particular. Fournier notes that Vicki's generation 'is a product of a postmodern society that encourages construction of highly individuated identities through eclectic borrowing of the fragments available in consumer culture.' (1998: 360). She has 'a multiplicity of potential and realized selves' (p. 359) that she expresses through brand loyalties, however fleeting. Vicki: 'readily adapts her identity to fit the powerful institutionalized brand meanings she judges to be relevant' (p. 359). Therefore, Fournier implies that Vicki experiences various possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986; Karanika and Hogg 2010) that she tests in the marketplace and *consciously* adapts her identity to fit identity resources.

2.3.2.1. Assumptions implicit in conceptualisations of identity

A key assumption in consumer research literature is the Cartesian core self (Belk 1988) existing within and then – through consumer culture – using 'stuff' to extend the self or express the self within. As Ahuvia (2005, 183) explains in his article on identity *narratives* and loved objects, the idea of a 'core self' might be problematic, but the thesis that 'consumers' use 'stuff' to express the self remains, noting: 'This article supports Belk's basic claim regarding the importance of identity issues in high involvement consumption'. However, Ahuvia expresses the self instead as a narrative constructed by the individual ('Each informant utilized a strategy of identity to create a coherent self-narrative out of potentially disjointed material'[183]) and supported by objects ('This research has looked at the ways love objects help resolve conflicts and tensions in the consumer's identity narrative' [182]). In this sense, as illustrated in the above example of Vicki, identity is a narrative (Giddens 1991) *expressed* by the participant who imprints a sense of meaning or self on the products, activities and the like with which the participant *chooses* to engage. Ahuvia (2005, 173) presents two case studies in the form of a life history of each participant and then a discussion

of identity conflicts and loved objects. Of one participant, he notes (emphasis added): 'Pam's lifestyle conflict plays out largely through *her choice* of *possible selves* as a musician versus a businesswoman. These career choices have profound implications for *Pam's sense of identity…*' In this example, identity again emerges as a conflicted zone in which possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986) are imagined and tested, from the perspective of *individual* experience, again reminiscent of a neoliberal ideological frame which focuses on individual choice (Rottenberg 2014). Like Fournier (1998), Ahuvia imagines Pam as able to choose from a range of possible selves on an individual plane as he does not examine ideological or cultural issues of feminism, gender, class and race intersecting to produce Pam's experience of her career and 'ability to choose' a life course.

Examining these underpinning assumptions further, consumer identity studies are often predicated on the assumption that given conditions of late modernity the individual must continually contend with 'constructing' or 'maintaining' a cohesive identity (Bauman 2004, Giddens 1991, Arnett 2004). Because the late/post modern self can no longer rely solely on traditional resources and fixed symbolic anchors (Dufour 2008; Bauman 2000), responsibility for the forming of the self is placed on the individual. Some view this as an ever-evolving project that must be continually and reflexively maintained, a conception in line with theories of a neoliberal subjectivity (Lemke 2001). As Giddens observes, the question 'How shall I live?' confronts us daily as we decide what to wear, what to eat, whom to befriend, among many other everyday dilemmas (1991: 14). In a discussion of youth culture and its underpinning market logic, Kjeldgaard and Askegaard (2006) cite Giddens as foundational to their theory, commenting: 'Contemporary social theories of identity in late modernity suggest that the project of identity has become a reflexive process in which the self is negotiated in terms of choice among a plurality of lifestyle options'. Similarly, Ahuvia (2005) draws on Giddens to support his theory of identity as a narrative. In theorising a 'reflexive self', Giddens (1991) argues that that the late modern self, riddled with choices, must develop a reflexivity to function in everyday life facilitated by ontological security developed from childhood with the goal of maintaining a *biographical narrative* that integrates one choice or experience into a biographical whole within an environment of uncertainty. Giddens draws on Laing (1965, 39) who explains the ontologically secure person as able to 'encounter all the hazards of life, social, ethical spiritual, biological, from a centrally firm sense of his [sic] own and others people's reality and identity'. Late modernity's environment of uncertainty is conceptualized by Bauman (2000) as *liquid modernity* in which fluidity and liquidity are metaphorical to the 'melting' of structures in modernity, reflected in recent CCT work such as Bardhi et al. (2012) who theorize a liquid relationship to possessions as well as theories around increasing popularity of fluid access-based consumption (Bardhi and Eckhart 2014)

versus 'solid' ownership of possessions. In any case, Gidden's viewpoint extols the necessity of stability in the face of uncertainty – that is, the need to cultivate a basic sense of self no matter the diversity of experience or external noise. A 'protective cocoon' woven from basic trust attained through early childhood experiences with caretakers facilitates a 'practical consciousness' that enables an individual to sort through a bombardment of information in order to carve a path that is stable and continuous, rather than rife with ontological insecurity and doubt. Thus, the 'recipe' to survive modernity's frenetic nature is a sense of biographical continuity that is best attained through stability in childhood and, as Erikson (1968) notes, successful resolution of identity crises (formative stages in which a child grapples with an inherent conflict of development – e.g., basic trust and mistrust in the oral stage – in order to form a sense of ego identity) both during childhood and again during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. This viewpoint implies that the various versions of self (personal, social, cosmic and increasingly digitally mediated) must align to form a believable cohesion, perhaps enacted slightly differently from one context to the next (Goffman 1959) but with a solid foundation (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Giddens 1991; Bauman 2000).

2.3.2.2.   Identity in a digital setting

Many of these viewpoints predate a digital milieu in which online life increasingly infiltrates and intermingles with offline life it a way that is no longer experienced as binary (Orton-Johnson and Prior 2013). The digital is integral to the postmodern setting and in fact has played a role in the increasingly mediated late modern setting (Giddens 1991) as well as the infusion of advertising into everyday life. In terms of identity theory and the digital milieu, a nascent perspective in consumer research (Schau and Gilly 2003, Belk 2013), the late modern subject, disembodied on the Internet, must 'learn to write [herself] into being' (boyd 2008). Indeed, relatively few studies in CCT have considered or integrated the digital sphere into their accounts of identity and lived experience, although a growing body of work seeks to include this perspective (Belk 2013; Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2010; Iqani and Schroeder 2015). But notably, many of the studies on digital life and identity are predicated on theories foundational to CCT identity theory. These theories argue that the pervasiveness of the digital increasingly mediates social relations, which changes the nature of relationships (Jamieson 2013) perhaps to the detriment of personal relationships and the self (Turkle 2011). The popularity and embeddedness of social media in particular demands a new sense of reflexivity, as 'offline selves' must be crafted to depict a (desired) version of online self (Zhao et al. 2008). As boyd (2014, emphasis added) explains: 'Based on their understanding of the social situation—including the context and the audience—people *make decisions* about

what to share in order to act appropriately for the situation and to be perceived in the best light'. Social network sites (SNSs) – predicated on friendships and social connection rather than interests (boyd 2014) – in a sense force subjects to compose online *narratives* that correspond both with the offline self and with accounts on other platforms (Livingstone 2008) and also portray them in a desirable way. SNSs are marked by an 'disconnected and invisible' audience that the user must imagine when 'choosing' how to present herself (Marwick and boyd 2011; Marder et al. 2016) This can be troublesome, as boyd (2014) notes, 'people must attempt to resolve context collapses or actively define the context in which they're operating'. Thus, Marwick and boyd (2011) describe how Twitter users actively define the audience they *imagine* they are posting for and how they manage tensions by, for example, targeting different audiences with different tweets, concealing the subjects of the tweets or engaging in practices of personal branding. In these cases, 'real' life often intermingles with online life in a way that promotes continuity and flexibility across contexts, although it is often perceived as complex as social contexts can shift quickly and blur (boyd 2014). Importantly, like the reflexive self, online identity is experienced as a process: 'personal sites operate as visual artifacts of…self-evolution…the unfixed, malleable, and evolving nature of personal sites is not at all unlike identity itself: an enduring process, rather than a fixed state' (Stern 2008:112). This implies a need for an ongoing sense of intrinsic reflexivity, as managing online and offline selves becomes increasingly normal and experienced as natural for those raised in a digital setting. From this we can gather that the most importance changes in the formation of the self given a digital setting is the increased presence of digitally mediated relationships in the place of face-to-face interaction (Jamieson 2013), as well as the increased reflexivity that occurs across social media platforms (Stern 2008). Again, this theory *seems* to imply a subject (attempting to be) in control of continuity between digital and 'real' life, reflexively managing the self in the context of the digital.

These viewpoints certainly influence the discipline and make it possible to imagine an identity-seeking consumer turning to the marketplace in the absence of traditional pillars of identity formation such as religion (McAlexander et al. 2014), with the goal of forming a cohesive sense of self. But I am more concerned in this thesis to question the necessity for the construct of 'identity' and to question how a neoliberal ideology has imbued CCT often through the notion of identity, the self, and the subject. Drawing on Giddens's theory, among others, as purporting a subject who must form her/his own sense of self is in fact the means through which CCT can theorize identity in a 'hyperindividualizing, overly agentic, and ahistoric' consumer subject. These views of the self are predicated on the idea that 'identity' as a construct exists for the individual to shape or fashion, implying a sense of agency on the part of the individual, or subject. In fact, the phrase 'identity construction' implies that there

is an identity to be constructed, or built by the subject, implying a sense of agency and failing to take into consideration discourses of power that influence, shape or even *make* the subject (Fitchett et al. 2014, Askegaard and Linnet 2011, Moisander et al. 2009). When there *are* discussions of power and ideology, individuals are often framed as resistant to dominant ideologies, as creative or agentic in the interplay (e.g., Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2013; Kozinets and Handelman 2004). Moreover, the reflexive self seems to be the embodiment of a neoliberal subjectivity as necessitating autonomous choice making and an enterprising perspective in navigating the instability of late modernity.

2.3.3.   Critiques of CCT's conceptualization of identity

Though there are some notable exceptions which emphasise the dominance and hegemony of consumer culture (e.g., studies on performativity outlined in Section 2.2.1, as well as Üstüner and Holt's [2007] study on the domination of consumer culture in the lives of poor Turkish migrant women who have no choice but to define themselves through Turkish consumer culture though often are not able to live up to its ideals given financial constraints and Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody's [2008] study co-creation as form of political power), the subject in CCT is largely theorized as productive in constructing her identity through the symbolic resources of the marketplace (Arnould and Thompson 2005); as agentic given an ability to construct her own identity (e.g., Holt and Thomson 2004); and as empowered or able to experience freedom from shackles of tradition through marketplace resources (McAlexander et al. 2014; Shankar et al. 2006). This view of the consumer subject is problematic (Bradshaw and Holbrook 2008), however, given concerns about covert subjugation via technologies of the self (Brown 2003; Lemke 2001; Gill 2008; Shankar et al. 2006) and the commodification of identity or reification of the self and social relations (Honneth 2008; Bewes 2002) within a neoliberal setting where the market infuses all aspects of life, as reflected in the discussion of feminism and the female neoliberal subject. More specific to the discipline, when seeking to understanding 'identity projects', this line of inquiry has two particular drawbacks. Firstly, the dominant methodology when studying identity projects is one of existential phenomenology which emphasises the perspective of the individual. This has been extensively critiqued of late, particularly in regards to the insufficient attention paid to 'the context of the context', or the structural and ideological issues that make a certain view of identity possible (Moisander et al. 2009; Askegaard and Linnet 2011), discussed further in the methodology chapter. Inspired by the field of cultural studies, Askegaard and Linnet (2011, 382) explain: 'There is a need for bridging the analytical terrain between the anthropological search for thick description and deep immersion in the field, and the sociological inclination towards broad social theories and movements often

quite remote from emic illustrations of everyday life experiences'. Secondly, Badje (2006) critiques the discipline for its 'detrimental' orientation toward the self interested subject instead of conceptualising a subject grounded in other-centred or altruistic behaviour. Finally, as described above, a focus on the consumer identity project as liberatory does not draw attention to potentially deleterious consequences and thus limits critical inquiry (Catterall et al. 2005; Earley 2014).These embedded ideological positions are reflected in Arnould and Thompson's (2005, 871) remark:

> *CCT research has emphasized the <u>productive</u> aspect of consumption. Consumer culture theory explores how <u>consumers</u> <u>actively</u> rework and transform symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings, or material goods <u>to manifest</u> their particular personal and social circumstances and further their identity and lifestyle <u>goals</u>.*

Thus, the authors, in institutionalising a stream of research, assert a focus on productive aspects of consumption, presumably at the expense of unproductive aspects, as reflected in the dearth of research on troublesome facets of consumption and consumer culture such as materialism, narcissism, anxiety and the like (Lambert et al. 2014). Moreover, there is an assumption that the consumer can 'actively rework and transform' meaning, without much thought to the way 'symbolic meanings' might actively rework and transform the consumer.

Given this positioning, from within the discipline there are many calls to interrogate CCT's view of the subject from more critical perspectives (including Earley 2014, 2015; Fitchett et al. 2014; Cova et al. 2013; Bradshaw and Holbrook 2008; Saren et al. 2007; Denzin 2001; Brownlie et al. 1999; Murray and Ozanne 1991). Rarely do accounts assess the conditions that make consumer culture possible, let alone consumer identities. This is problematic because without critical enquiry, ideological positions become uncritically reinforced – in idiomatic terms, it becomes more difficult to see the wood for the trees. In this vein, Cova et al. (2013, 220), in a discussion of communist consumer research, assert that CCT is blind to the possibility given its self-reproduction of a specific subject form: 'CCT maintains its own active subject position, a subject position that only sees the possibility of capitalist reproduction'. Thus, the authors note the lack of reflexivity in the discipline when it comes to 'its own production of ideology'. In a commentary on ideology and myth within consumer culture theory, Fitchett et al. (2014, 497) further discuss the capitalistic leanings of the discipline, remarking that – in ideological terms – the 'radical' position of CCT compared to the positivistic mainstream marketing academy was easily adopted because of ideological sameness. They remark that marketing scholarly work is predicated on:

> *…a shared belief in the importance of consumption as the foundation in personal, social, economic and cultural life, the centrality of consumer as an active subject (agent) and the notion that the market offers a legitimate (if not the most legitimate)*

context through which individuals should seek to explore, identify and experience the world around them.

Particularly regarding the construct of 'consumer', Cova et al. (2013, 220) remind us that the term, which labels the subject of consumer research, is not a state-of-being but an (ideological) frame that expresses the desire of cultural consumer researchers to 'see the world as a consumer culture mediated by mythology'. In this way, Fitchett et al. (2014, 498) attest that CCT research is underpinned by a neoliberal ideology: 'From the perspective of neo-liberal critique, there is no substantial ideological division between mainstream marketing and the alternatives offered by CCT and its interpretivist antecedents'. As such it is no surprise that the individual-as-*consumer* is viewed as productive, agentic and, most importantly, flocking to the marketplace for identity pursuits, a position which many have recently challenged (Moisander et al. 2009, Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Bradshaw and Holbrook 2008). Fitchett et al. (2014, 502), explains that this very stance embodies the ideal neoliberal subject form. They comment:

> *Cultural turn research [CCT] elevated consumption and by direct implication – consumers – as the primary site of social and cultural action because this was the primary purpose and substance upon which its neo-liberal ideological roots were founded. This is after all one of the most important and central features of neo-liberal ideology – that individuals, acting in their own private self-interest is the most efficient, just and legitimate basis for social and economic organization.*

In a biting response specific to Askegaard and Linnet (2011) and Moisander et al. (2009), three of the key players (and two 'founders' or 'synthesizers'[Askegaard 2014]) in CCT – Craig Thompson, Eric Arnould and Markus Giesler – contest this view, citing 50 articles that 'extensively addressed the institutional, historical, ideological, and sociological shaping of consumption and the broader market and social systems, which situate consumers' identity projects and consumption practices' (2013, 152). However, can research that *addresses* or accounts for these etic perspectives still maintain a hyper-individualized *consumer* as the implicit subject underpinned by a neoliberal ideological frame (Shankar et al. 2006)? Fitchett et al. (2014) argue that this is certainly the case, particularly based on Thompson et al.'s (2013) defence, in which they argue that this 'hyperindividualizing, overly agentic, and ahistoric, sociologically impoverished theoretical orientation' is predicated 1) on the psychologically-oriented nature of mainstream marketing scholarship and 2) on ontological and epistemological 'ambiguities' that emerge from 'CCT's complex institutional history'. That is to say, this is not an outward rejection of Fitchett et al.'s claims, but a defence in the spirit of appreciating that work *has* been done concerned with the etic; arguing that a focus on an individual may have been the case given the dominance of psychological perspectives in the broader context and that ambiguities exist as to the generation of knowledge from a

philosophical perspective given an institutional position as underdog in paradigm wars from which the sub-discipline emerged. None of these claims underplay the possibility of a field formed through neoliberal discourse and in fact indicate that it is most likely the case that a neoliberal perspective imbues work given this institutional context (Fitchett et al. 2014). As discussed, this is particularly evident when examining papers that do address ideology in which consumers are imagined as able to resist or subvert ideological forces (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2013; Holt 2002; Kozinets and Handelman 2004). For example, in their study on roller derby, Thompson and Üstüner (2015) describe female consumers who creatively resist dominant ideological forces and in concluding, denounce gender researchers for discounting individual agency. The authors (2014, 10) draw on Butler's theory of gender performativity to theorize ideological edgework as 'performatively challeng[ing] the constraints inherent to naturalized gender norms without losing social legitimacy', postulating their theory as a 'theoretical alternative to critical arguments' such as commodity feminism (Goldman 1992), a theory they position their work in relation to but fail to explore in detail. The authors disparage gender research (in particular Evans et al. 2010; Hein and O'Donohoe 2014; Moisio, Arnould, and Gentry 2013) for downplaying individual agency, describing that these articles 'are susceptible to the charge that they ignore or overly discount the agentic practices through which consumers rework ideological meanings and disciplining gender norms in their everyday lives and identity projects' (2015, 259). This illustrates a problematic tendency to subvert even the most revolutionary of theories (e.g., gender performativity) into a consumption-oriented celebration of the individual.

Thus, Graeber (2011) contends that examining consumer culture from the perspective of ideological critique is more useful to combating a neoliberal frame rather than focusing on acts of consumption. Interrogating the theoretical uncritical overuse of a consumption lens in anthropology, Graeber notes that the production/consumption dichotomy sparked by economic philosophers such as Adam Smith's use of consumption as the *opposite* of production when referring to the increasing separation between the workplace and the home has overemphasised consumption in the discipline (Saren 2015). He comments: 'This in turn made it possible to imagine that the "economy" (itself a very new concept) was divided into two completely separate spheres: the workplace, in which goods were "produced," and the household, in which they were "consumed."' (2011, 492). Of course, this binary is critiqued from a sociological perspective by Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) who argue for a 'prosumption' lens which emphasises the increasing demand – particularly in an online setting – on 'consumers' to some extent create the content they consume. But following Graeber's line of argument, drawing on the etymology of consumption as 'eat up, devour, waste, destroy, or spend' (2011, 491) and thus with a negative connotation, Graeber observes that *consumer*

culture 'is largely a matter of destroying things or using them up' (492). This is in direct contention with Arnould and Thompson (2005, 873) who refer to 'consumption as a dominant human practice' that 're-configure[s] cultural blueprints for action and interpretation'. That consumption is instead a practice that destroys is not surprising given the profit logic of corporate interests which demands constant growth, relying on consumer to continue buying, using up, and buying again, hence consuming. From a theoretical perspective, Graeber warns that splitting consumption from production enforces such a neoliberal perspective that refuses to imagine non-alienated forms of production as anything but a consumption venture (e.g., DIY work, or playing the guitar). Saren (2015) expands on this point in relation to Askegaard's (2014) response to Fitchett et al. (2014). Askegaard, somewhat bemused by Fitchett et al.'s claims (that he reads as consumer culture theorists being the 'useful idiots' of neoliberalism), defends the use of a 'consumption metaphor' to describe music, for example. He ponders (2014, 3): 'if I do not consume my drum kit when I play, when do I consume it? Maybe I don't – maybe I just use it? But 'usage' is a strange kind of term that seems to imply that material resources are 'just there' to be picked up and applied'. It is not clear why Askegaard would prefer to 'consume' his drum kit rather than play or use it. As Saren (2015, 568) notes, if consumer researchers attempt to find alternatives to the consumption/production duality dominant in marketing theorisations, 'then we would not have to force musicians and audiences to consume music, but compose, play or listen to it'. But Askegaard defends the consumption metaphor and its 'baggage' as a tool to illuminate a dependency on the marketplace, rather than an ideologically driven conception. This, according to Saren (2015), dismisses Graeber's critique 'too easily'. What Saren finds useful in Graeber's critique is the impoverishment of consideration of social relations and desire in the application of a consumption lens. To this end, he believes marketing theorists should imagine alternative conceptualisations that 'preferably … avoids the overdetermination of the modern concept and discourse of consumption' (2016, 567). As Fitchett et al. (2014) argue, to refute the hegemony is to in fact search for instances that consumer culture cannot infiltrate (Fitchett et al. 2014).

In any case, even Graeber (2011) does not deny the power of consumer culture and its infiltration into our everyday lives. Rather, he urges (anthropology in particular) to take a Frankfurt school (i.e., critical) approach (Saren et al. 2007) to acknowledging consumption or consumer culture as a *dominant ideology* in our society and embedded in many of our scholarly texts. In this vein, when exploring consumer culture, questions of person-object relations or materiality are less significant given the descriptive and acritical (in a Frankfurt school sense) nature of the line of enquiry that often emphasises productive or destructive relationships with 'stuff' on an individual basis (Cszikzentmihayli and Rochberg-Halton

1988; Miller 2008) without critique of ideology. This aligns with scholars who warn that searching for resistance or celebrating agency – e.g., Cszikzentmihayli and Rochberg-Halton's (1988) observation that happy families engage in 'instrumental' or productive materialism – ultimately aligns with a neoliberal ideology. But consumer researchers have been reticent to adopt Frankfurt school and other critical positions (Saren et al. 2007) particularly on the criticism that these views render the consumer as a 'passive dupe' (Kozinets 2001) without any independent thought or ability to think outside of the confines of ideology (Thompson and Üstüner 2015). But Gill (2008) askes why reject or resist analysis of ideology that renders all of us in one way or another as culture dupes? As Modleski writes (1991, 45):

> It seemed important at one historical moment to emphasise the way 'the people' resist mass culture's manipulation. Today, we are in danger of forgetting the crucial fact that like the rest of the world even the cultural analyst may sometimes be a 'cultural dupe' – which is, after all, only an ugly way of saying that we exist inside ideology, that we are all victims, down to the very depths of our psyches, of political and cultural domination.

With this in mind, along with the lack of research on women and from feminist perspectives, there seems a need for consumer research on the role of consumer culture in the making of female consuming subjects, not from the perspective of the productive aspects of identity but from the perspective of subject constitution and critique.

2.4. Summary

This chapter critically reviewed literature that addresses young women and consumer culture. Questions arise that problematize assumptions around identity (Alvesson and Sandberg 2011) in consumer research, particularly related to individual agency. A media and cultural studies perspective understands young women as embedded within a postfeminist, neoliberal regime of truth that makes individualism, a need for autonomy and personal choice appear as 'common sense' to young women who are told they can harness their internal abilities to overcome structural obstacles. However, consumer research tends to celebrate the individual and the productive aspects of consumption, even when discussing young women and ideological influence. Moreover, there is a lack of research on women's experience and from feminist perspectives, as well as perspectives that engender critique of power relations from emancipatory perspectives. This study is therefore concerned with examining the role of consumer culture in the lives of young women from a feminist, critical perspective, asking how young women experience a consumer culture that is argued to be their institution of reference. From the perspective of subject constitution, I ask: how and to

what extent does consumer culture influence or guide a young woman's way-of-being in every day life?

3. METHODOLOGY

This section details the methodology of this study. From the analysis of literature in Chapter 2, an investigation of the experiences of young women in the context of consumer culture as a neoliberal 'regime of truth' (Foucault 2008; Butler 2005) is warranted, based on arguments about: firstly, the paucity of research on the lived experiences of (young) women in the context of consumer culture (Catterall 2005; McRobbie 2008); secondly, the lack of critical perspectives in consumer research (Denzin 2001; Earley 2015), particularly from an empirical (versus conceptual or theoretical) perspective on the individual in consumer culture (Fitchett et al. 2014); and thirdly, the position of young women as subjugated by a patriarchal consumer culture (Gill 2007) that seeks to exploit their precarious position (Butler 2009) as *female* consuming subjects.

Given the above arguments and conclusions from the literature review, this section describes the methodological development of this study. By the end of the data generation period, I conducted an 18-month critical qualitative study with 15 participants in which approximately four interviews with each participant (life history, show-and-tell 'stuff', show-and-tell digital, and semi-structured designed from emerging findings) were conducted over time. Embracing a feminist reflexive stance throughout this study, I follow Stanley and Wise (1993) in this chapter, attempting to elucidate this study's production, reflecting on the *process* and *evolution* of this study, as well as the 'events' that took place along the way (e.g., data generation techniques, data analysis process and so forth). In essence, this thesis is the story of one woman's engagement with 15 women in the pursuit of firstly giving women a way to voice their experiences of hegemonic, patriarchal consumer culture; secondly analysing their stories and experiences with emancipatory aims, thereby illuminating silent forms of power latent in their words and in the space between our interactions; and thirdly providing this final documentation to validate my ambitions as a social researcher.

With this in mind, this chapter is organised as follows. First, I discuss emergent research questions that provided a basis for research design and data analysis. Then, I examine the philosophical assumptions inherent in this study. Next, I illustrate the particulars of the data generation process, including research design, sampling, and conducting in-depth interviews. Fourth, I detail the data analysis process, explaining the voice-centred relational method (Mauthner and Doucet 1998) as an introductory phase to a critical thematic analysis facilitated by computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. Finally, I reflect on the data generation and analysis processes through a discussion of the benefits and limitations of the methodical approach.

3.1. Research questions

Given social constructionist views (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Guba and Lincoln 1994; Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009), I sought to design an inductive study in which participant accounts, readings, emergent data and subsequent analysis shaped the research objectives and design, rather than adopting a fixed or static approach. Thus, the research questions were purposefully broad and evolved over the course of the study. Early on, the study was guided by the following question: what is the role of consumer culture – and, on an individual level, person-object relationships – in the evolving identity trajectories of young women? But during the data generation phase, I noticed some troubled rather than productive accounts emerging from participant life events and stories. I also gradually recognised that accounts of reflexive identity projects in the literature, assumed to be in the control of the individual-as-agent, discussed in 2.3, did not square with emerging data. Accordingly, and along with further methodological reading and reflection, the research objectives evolved to take a more critical perspective (Kincheloe and McLaren 2002). This perspective interrogates and challenges innate field assumptions through *problematization*. As Alvesson and Sandberg (2011, 253) explain from the perspective of critical management studies: 'the aim of the problematization methodology proposed here is to come up with novel research questions through a dialectical interrogation of one's own familiar position, other stances, and the domain of literature targeted for assumption challenging'. Thus, the research questions that formed the study evolved to challenge the theoretical construct of 'consumer identity projects' (Arnould and Thompson 2005) and interrogate assumptions underpinning the use of the theory within consumer research, the basis of which has been detailed in the literature review.

In the first set of questions, the construct of 'identity' was taken-for-granted: the idea that we 'have' an 'identity' as individuals was not thoroughly interrogated. 'Consumer culture' was treated almost as *thing* in itself, further elucidated through 'person-object' relationships (Miller 2009; Borgenson 2005) in which it was taken-for-granted that humans could have *relationships* with objects. In this vein, through an interpretivist epistemology (Cova and Elliott 2008), I sought to *describe* the lived experiences and symbolic meanings of young woman and consumer culture, adding a contribution to gaps in the literature such as a lack of research on women and identity projects (Catterall et al. 2005) or the need to explore, from a life-course perspective (Elder 1994), the emerging adult life stage (Arnett 2004) that seemed particular to late modernity (Giddens 1991). Whilst this study can still contribute to these conversations – and indeed can be considered within the interpretivist paradigm (Cova and Elliott 2008) – given the emerging data as well as continued reading, the epistemology

of the study evolved toward a critical perspective that seeks to interrogate assumptions and ideologies latent in the production of knowledge (Saren et al. 2007; Alvesson and Deetz 2000; Harvey 1990). In line with Alvesson and Sandberg (2011), it seemed that gap-spotting as a method for generating research questions serves the purpose of building around existing theory – in my case around materiality (person-object relationships), identity, gender and life course. But this method of generating research questions does not challenge assumptions inherent to theory, instead propagating ideological positions, as explained by Fitchett et al. 2014. This prompted methodological reflection as my philosophical positioning evolved from interpretivist with a more relativist ontology to critical with aim of emancipation and disrupting inherent power relations, to be further discussed in the next section. Therefore, the research questions became:

- How and to what extent does consumer culture guide or influence young women's way-of-being in everyday life?
    - How do young women come to understand themselves in everyday life?
    - What role does consumer culture as a postfeminist, neoliberal 'regime of truth' play in the experiences of young women?

These research questions guided the evolution of the data generation and the data analysis processes (which formally began during the last phase of data generation) as well as the writing of this thesis. In the next section I discuss the philosophical implications of the inquiry at hand, detailing assumptions of the social inquiry of this study, as well as my journey from a interpretivist, relativist scholar to a critical scholar.

3.2. Research philosophy implicit in social inquiry

In all research, there are assumptions about reality and consequently about the production of knowledge embedded in research praxis, from conducting literature searches, study design, and data collection/generation techniques, to positioning of the findings, theoretical abstraction and conclusions. Reflecting on such philosophical stances inherent within knowledge production is critical to examining the assumptions of the study (Stanley and Wise 1993); without thorough ontological and epistemological reflexivity, politics remain unaddressed and methodological dominance and determinism can ensue. Moreover, without reflexivity about the approach to reality and knowledge inherent in the study, one is left with a positivistic account of a study, no matter the method or finding. This statement has its own philosophical implications: as a *person* and a *researcher* who views reality as socially constructed or subjective – i.e., rejecting the idea that there is an external reality to be discovered, tested, or measured – interrogating philosophical assumptions inherent in the research at hand is part and parcel of the research project (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Miller

and Glassner 1997). On the other hand, positivist social scientists might assume that their view of reality is unassailable, so that delving into questions of the origins or assumptions intrinsic to their work is unnecessary (Harvey 1990). And given their position as hegemonic, at least in the discipline of marketing (Hackley 2003; Saren et al. 2007), the lack of consideration of positivists' position is not surprising. In this study, I engage in a critical, feminist interrogation of the assumptions of reality (ontology) and the assumptions of knowledge production (epistemology). Therefore, I am, and this thesis is, decidedly anti-positivist.

From an ontological perspective, the assumption underpinning this research is that there is no objective social reality as positivism claims: reality is subjective and in this vein, socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1976; Guba and Lincoln 1994). Tadajewski (2006, p. 438) notes that in interpretive research, reality is assumed to be 'socially constructed, multiple, holistic, contextual'. That is, there is no objective reality; each individual experiences reality as shaped by her or his subjective experiences relative to another person. This, according to Guba and Lincoln (1994, 110-111), implies a relativist ontology: 'realities are apprehendable in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature (although elements are often shared among many individuals and even across cultures), and dependant for their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions'. As described by Beckmann and Elliott (2000, 1) in their book on interpretive consumer research, this thesis might be characterised as constructionist or interpretive consumer research. They assert: 'a plethora of qualitative and interpretivist methodologies have emerged including existential-phenomenology, semiotics, hermeneutics, literary theory, introspection, critical theory, post-structuralism, feminist theory, discourse analysis, cultural theory, and postmodernism'. What broadly unites these perspectives is an anti-positivist agenda and an ontology of subjective reality. However, this study rejects the relativist ontology that Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe of constructivist, interpretivist research and instead is positioned as adopting a feminist perspective (Catterall et al. 2000) grounded in critique (Harvey 1990; Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009; Saren et al. 2007) of power discourses (Foucault 1980; Butler 2005) in relation to young women's position in consumer culture.

3.2.1.   A feminist epistemology

In advocating a feminist perspective in marketing, Catterall et al. (2000, 3) draw on Weedon (1991,7) who states:

> *Feminism is a politics. It is a politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society. These power relations structure all areas of life,*

the family, education and welfare, the worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure. They determine who does what for whom, what we are and what we might become.

To this, I would add that power relations determine *how* we become and why. By its topic, this thesis questions forms of gender subjugation and therefore, I take a feminist epistemological position in terms of methodology, critique and examination of power relations. DeVault (1996, 29) notes that feminist methodological perspectives are not characterised by a single method, but 'are united through various efforts to include women's lives and concerns in accounts of society, to minimize the harms of research, and to support changes that will improve women's status'. Therefore, it is important to take account of the view of knowledge production of this study and elucidate how it is feminist. First, this study is an effort to 'include women's lives' in accounts of consumer identity (Catterall et al. 2000), not just from the perspective of *including* women, but also giving voice to their experiences living their socially constructed gender category, woman, with attention to power relations, discussed in relation to the literature in 2.3.1. Thus, the inclusion of women seeks to 'improve women's status' by highlight their experiences and critically analysing these experiences with attention to power relations.

DeVault's (1996) second point is particularly relevant to the execution of the research method: 'to minimize harms of research'. As such, a key aspect of feminist methodologies is reflexivity and a distancing from objectivity and determinism in research (Stanley and Wise 1993). Instead, as McDowell asserts: 'We must recognize and take account of our own position, as well as that of our research participants, and write this into our research practice' (1992: 409). Therefore, the researcher – rather than 'hide' biases and influence on the research – must acknowledge his/her position relative to the researched and treat her/his data as an interaction between social beings, who are subject to structures of oppression, in line with critical research (Harvey 1990). In feminist and critical traditions, failing to be reflexive, or claiming objectivity only serves to mask the biases and subjectivity inherent in the data collected and deemed to be 'knowledge' (Mohammad, 2001: 103). Thus, an important aspect of the feminist inquiry of this study is to examine power relations not only in terms of societal discourse, but also in terms of the interview setting and analysis. In addressing social distance, drawing in power relations, Rose (1997, 313) observes: 'Differences between researcher and researched are imagined as distances in this landscape of power… the researched are more central or more marginal, higher or lower, than the researcher, because they have more or less power; perhaps they are insiders while the researcher is an outsider'. Therefore, feminist researchers must be keenly observant of their engagement with participants, reflexively reading the room so to speak to position themselves appropriately

relative to the participant. England (1994, 243) describes the different ways researchers can situate themselves relative to a participant: 'In general, relationships with the researched may be reciprocal, asymmetrical, or potentially exploitative; and the researcher can adopt a stance of intimidation, ingratiation, self-promotion, or supplication'. She claims that most feminist researchers adopt a suppliant stance, creating a mutual empathetic relationship based on respect and sharing, which was the case in this research.

But more than considering power relations implicit in the research setting, a feminist's production of knowledge is situated in relation to critical perspectives on power relations that structure lived experience, as noted in Weedon's quote. Therefore, this research takes a critical perspective to knowledge production that is concerned with the power relations implicit in young women's experience of consumer culture. In the next two sections, I discuss what I mean by a critical perspective, as well as how power relations are conceptualised in this research.

3.2.2.   A critical perspective

Critical research is distinguished from interpretive or phenomenological approaches given that in a critical methodology, 'knowledge is critique' (Harvey 1990, 3). That is, critical research is concerned with 'exposing underpinning ideologies and assumptions' in order to 'reveal the power relations and contested interests that are embedded in knowledge production' (Saren et al. 2007, xviii). Key to this analysis is the view that there are certain power structures that are historically situated and oppressive. Therefore, from an epistemological perspective, critical researchers are concerned with issues of power and subjugation, and their work is thus distinct from phenomenological or interpretivist research that 'attempts to interpret the meanings of social actors or attempt close analysis of symbolic process' (Harvey 1990, 1). Guided by an emancipatory interest, critical research instead attempts to interrogate how participants experience oppressive ideological and historical structures that shape subjectivity (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009). The roots of critical research are decidedly Marxist, most closely related to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (Harvey 1990; Saren et al. 2007; Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009), though some scholars argue for a wider purview that encapsulates other prominent critical perspectives such as feminism or post-structuralism. However, many feminists argue that Marxism and feminism are a problematic union (Hartmann 1979; Stanley and Wise 1993; Saren et al. 2007) given Marxism's male-centred formation and the lack of concern for women. But, as Bryson contends, feminism and Marxism have much in common:

> *Both can be seen as modern ideologies of the oppressed and, although they have problematized hegemonic conceptions of justice, freedom, democracy and equality,*

both are also inspired by the belief that a more genuinely just, free, democratic and equal society is possible. Both are, therefore, committed to the critique of existing societies and the pursuit of radical and far-reaching change.

In this vein, she argues that the position of Marxist feminist is feasible, so long as Marxists espouse feminist values in their critique of class and economic oppression: 'unless Marxism takes feminist claims seriously and acknowledges the validity of women's experiences, it will remain partial and impoverished' (Bryson 2004, 14). For me, it is important particularly in a study of consumption to emphasise the Marxist perspective. In urging marketing scholars not to ignore the 'dark side' of consumption, Bradshaw and Firat (2007, 40) argue that critical theory should be at the heart of all 'critical' analysis of consumption: 'critical theory can provide marketing with a lens to uncover domination, reification, alienation and fetishisation that critical theorists were convinced lay a the heard of the commodification process'. Therefore, I draw on critical theory perspectives though acknowledging feminist concerns with critical theory analysis and emphasising feminist principles of the fight for emancipation of women in the execution and spirit of this research.

Methodologically speaking, critical research is often associated with conceptual or theoretical accounts of material reality and critical societal analysis (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009). Empirical work of a critical nature is often regarded as a hindrance to theoretical abstraction (Harvey 1990). But Harvey argues that these accounts are limited given their tendency to be detached from historical social processes. Although he does agree that empirical accounts can 'reify common sense at the expense of deconstruction', he believes 'critical social research requires that empirical material is collected' (Harvey, 1990, 7). Geuss (1981, 2) identifies three theses that capture critical theories: 1) critical theories have aims of enlightenment amongst the people who hold certain assumptions as well as emancipatory aims that 'free agents from a kind of coercion which is at least partly self-imposed, from self-frustration of conscious human action'; 2) critical theories are forms of knowledge; 3) critical theories are epistemologically reflective rather than objectifying. Geuss then arrives at this definition: 'a critical theory, then, is a reflective theory which gives agents a kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation'. At the very core of this epistemological position is a critique of *ideology*. The Frankfurt school posits that ideology oppresses agents and obscures real interests. Engels (1965, 459) defines ideology as:

> *… a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process. Hence, he imagines false or seeming motive forces. Because it is a process of thought he derives its form as well as its content from pure thought, either his own or that of his predecessors.*

In order to become emancipated, agents 'must rid themselves of ideological illusion' (Geuss 1981, 3). Therefore, the role of the critical researcher is to 'untangle and disrupt' that which is taken for-granted, particularly those institutional ideologies that reproduce 'domination and repression' (Denzin 2001, 326).

Cova and Elliott (2008) explain that, in consumer research, what separates critical from interpretive work is the focus of the research: 'The focus of critical marketing is not on consumption but on marketing discourses and the way they construct "a particular view of society and markets, organizations, consumers and consumption objects" (Brownlie et al., 1999, p. 8)'. That is, critical marketing research should focus on marketing or consumer culture as an oppressive ideological frame. Though much of consumer research does deal with critical topics, importantly, Harvey (1990, 6) notes that research that deals with critical subjects – e.g., feminism – is not always critical. In order to be critical, the research must be 'located in a wider context which links the specific activities with broader social structural and historical analysis of women's oppression'. Thus, many interpretive marketing researchers work within critical paradigms – e.g., queer theory, feminism, postmodernism – but are focused on describing experience phenomenologically, for example. This work was initially situated in such a perspective: an interpretive, descriptive account of young women (i.e., feminism) and consumer culture. But it evolved to adopt a critical methodology that locates the oppression of the female consuming subject in broader socio-historical discourses stemming from marketing (i.e., a patriarchal, neoliberal consumer culture). Furthermore, compared to interpretive, relativist work, Denzin (2001, 328) asserts that critical consumer research 'will take sides' and 'will bring the consumer back in, guiding consumers in the development of collective and individual forms of resistance to the consumption cultures of postmodernism'. That is, critical research is on the side of the oppressed, concerned with power relations and with dominant discourses that constitute subjectivity.

3.2.3. Power relations

Though this thesis draws on critical theory to inform analysis and, as Bradshaw and Firat (2007) suggest, to reflect on the dark side of consumption and commodification processes, the subjective ontology underpinning of this thesis, its feminist perspective and its view of gender as socially constructed, is inspired by Foucauldian critique of *discourses* that constitute subjectivity. As Gill (2008, 439) describes in relation to the postfeminist subject, in this thesis I am concerned 'with the way in which power and ideology operate through the construction of subjects, not through top-down imposition but through negotiation, mediation, resistance and articulation'. Therefore, power is not viewed as necessarily 'top down' or propagated by fixed structures. Rather, power is negotiated and imbues all social interactions. As Foucault

(1980, 141) writes: 'It seems to me that power is "always already there", that one is never "outside" it'. Thus, whereas a historical materialist Marxist perspective might view power as top-down, imposed by 'real' structures as subjects experience a 'false consciousness' that must be de-mystified to reveal a truth, I prefer to consider how discourses imbue power and how that power is negotiated. As Purvis and Hunt (1993) write: 'The most immediate problem with Marx's invocation of the mystifying properties of ideology is that it relies upon a set of epistemological assumptions constructed around a "truth"/"falsity" distinction'. Lemke (2002) does not view Marxism critical theory as being at odds with Foucauldian analysis of power, noting how Foucault was inspired by Marxist critique. In fact, he argues: 'there are some striking parallels between Foucault's work on discipline and the technologies of the self and Althusser's remarks on the process of interpellation, the concept of ideology, and the formation of subjectivity' (2002, 60). Thus, rather than magnify the differences between perspectives, perhaps a focus on the parallels and convergences is more constructive in pursuing a critical agenda. If we reject ideology completely on the basis of the true/false dichotomy, the spirit of critique of domination is somehow lost. However, if we ascribe to the concept fully, then perhaps the negotiation of power between subjects and discourses will be overlooked, as in Foucault's conceptualisation 'the individual is part of a push-pull interaction in which power is negotiated' (Marwick 2012, 383).

Purvis and Hunt (1993) argue that these views can be reconciled in a way that is imagined not as contradictory but complementary. A 'regime of truth' is distinct from ideology in that firstly it is discursively informed, stemming from social theory's linguistic turn, and secondly it is not predicated on an epistemological position of truth/falsity. Ideology, on the other hand, is predicated in a materialist tradition that implies a need to de-mystify or uncover a truth (i.e., false consciousness, Hirschman [1993]). However, both concepts are grounded in critiquing what is considered 'natural' or 'common sense'. That is, Purvis and Hunt (1993, 479) describe ideology as

> …*concerned with the realm of the lived, or the experienced, rather than of 'thinking'.' An important example through which to make this point is provided by the notion of 'common sense'. It is precisely the 'spontaneous' quality of common sense, its transparency, its 'naturalness', its refusal to examine the premises on which it is grounded, its resistance to correction, its quality of being instantly recognizable which makes common sense, at one and the same time, 'lived', 'spontaneous' and unconscious. We live in common sense -we do not think it.*

This is commensurate with a 'regime of truth' which Foucault (1980, 131) argues is in relation to what a society holds to be 'true':

> *Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances*

which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

What is different about these views, for Foucault, is the analysis of the production of power rather than *a priori* assumptions of truth and falsehood. But the interest in what *appears* as true and the mechanisms of power in relation to 'common sense' unite the perspectives (Lemke 2002). Therefore, I do not mean to gloss over serious epistemological (not to mention feminist) fractures amongst the viewpoints. Rather, for this study, I leverage the theoretical positions in seeking to form meaningful critique around the experiences of women in consumer culture. Thus, Purvis and Hunt (1993, 496-497) suggest: 'a reformulation that establishes a distinction between discourse as process and ideology as effect'. In this way, ideological effects retain key aspects of Marxist theory that magnify the way in which subject positions are 'interpellated' to reinforce domination. Therefore, the authors suggest examining *discursive practices* ('the production of meaning and truth claims') and their *ideological effects* ('the connection with systems of domination'). To illustrate this compatibility, Purvis and Hunt (1993) give an example of the discursive practice of men opening doors for women. The act is associated with discourses related to gender norms, but the ideological effect is the connection that such an act has to the patriarchal subordination of women. In this thesis, then, neoliberalism and postfeminism are discursive constructs that have an ideological effect of the continued subordination of young women.

3.3. Methodological approach: The data generation process

Taking the above discussion as a whole, this thesis was driven, on the one hand by feminist epistemological approach to data generation and analysis in maintaining reflexivity both when interacting with participants and throughout the analysis process. On the other hand, the analysis and writing up of this thesis was influenced by a critical epistemology aiming to problematize theoretical assumptions with attention to inherent power relations. This section is thus concerned with detailing the data generation process that emerged from such ontological and epistemological mulling. Practically speaking, I conducted multiple depth interviews (focused on life history, show-and-tell 'stuff', show-and-tell digital, and semi-structured questionnaire designed from emerging findings) over time with 15 participants (see Table 1). This ethnographically inspired approach evolved from an existential-phenomenological foundation that sought to account for the first-person experience of young women and consumer culture (Thompson et al. 1989; Moisander et al. 2009). This section details the evolution of this process through a discussion of research design, methods, sampling, including reflection on decisions made along the way.

3.3.1.   Research design

The research design process occurred through iterations between emerging data and returning to literature; thus, research design was flexible and adapted as necessary throughout the 18-month data collection period, given emerging data trends. At the beginning of data generation, I approached research design with the objectives detailed in Section 3.2: to understand the role of consumer culture – and in particular person-object relationships – in the identity projects of young women. To that end, inspired by similar studies on consumer identity projects and/or lived experience (including, for example, Thompson 1996; Fournier 1998; Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013; and Ahuvia 2005), I decided that an existential-phenomenological approach was most appropriate in order to understand lived experiences of young women. In fact, at the end of my first year (June 2013), prior to beginning data generation, I wrote the following regarding my methodological approach:

> *This study's goal of understanding the life experiences of emerging-adults aligns with an existential-phenomenological philosophy approach, given the philosophy's holistic nature. Inherent in the methodology is the approach of relating different first-person experiences to give an overall contextual description – 'the research goal is to give a thematic description of experience' (Thompson, et al, 1989: 137). In fact, one particular manifestation of existential-phenomenology is the concept of a life-world, or the focus on lived experience (ibid.), which is the nature of this study.*

I was inspired to adopt this methodology based on conforming to the field: if I was to study consumer-identity projects, then surely I should use the recommended (i.e., dominant) methods. Although I was sceptical of its origins in Gestalt psychology given an association of psychology with realist ontologies and an individualistic, mentalistic perspective (Moisander et al. 2009), I was comforted by existential-phenomenology's rejection of Cartesian dualisms and positivistic methods that dominate the discipline, instead concerned with holistic, lived experience (Thompson et al. 1989). The authors write: 'Existential-phenomenologists do not seek to study individuals separate from the environments in which they live or the interaction of the two (which implies separation); rather, the study is of the totality of human-being-in-the-world' (135). Moreover, the focus is on experience as it is *lived* through Heidegger's concept of *lebenswelt*, or life world. Drawing on Sartre's existentialism, the authors note: 'the meaning of an experience is always situated in the current experiential context and is coherently related to the ongoing project of the life-world' (136). In this vein, I was excited to contribute to the literature by providing a depiction of women, in the emerging adult life stage, engaging in consumer culture through their *first-person* experiences.

As I began interviewing and reading more extensively, I became concerned about the limited contact that many existential-phenomenological consumer research studies have with their participants (usually one or two interview lasting a few hours, e.g., Thompson and Hirschman 1998) and so I decided multiple interviews over a period of about a year would be a better approach for the goals of my study; as Harvey (1990, 11) notes, 'the more contact one has the more likely one is to be able to dig deeper'. This contributes methodologically, illustrating the benefits of taking a longitudinal approach to engagement with different aspects of the participants' lives as events occur as well as covering topics such as life history, the self and relationships, and consumption. Firstly, multiple encounters give insight into the 'project' of identity which has a strong temporal element (changing over time) in a time of transition – emerging adulthood (Arnett 2004). Moreover, it would also give me an opportunity to 'get to know' the participants in a way that would provide more insight than just a one-off meeting, enabling me to experience both how the participants act in different settings and how they treat me as part of an ongoing relationship, not just after an introductory interview. From this platform, I began the data generation process with three 'pilot' participants in order to reflect on research design, described in Section 3.4.2.

The space I gave myself to reflect on research design through engagement with participants proved fruitful in examining the existential phenomenological method in practice. As data generation picked up, I began to question the methodology particularly regarding the role of the researcher, assumptions about the participant, and its inherently descriptive goals. Firstly, it seemed that I, as researcher and interviewer, was intimately involved in the (co)construction of interview dialogue, and therefore, rather than attaining a 'first-person description' (Thompson et al. 1989, p. 138) of a social experience, I was involved in a social interaction unique to a time and space, influenced by cultural discourses, or what Moisander et al. (2009) describe as 'cultural talk'. Secondly, the prioritizing of the participant as having the *ability* to convey first-person experience in a way that is purportedly not influenced by the researcher seems to imply a sense of agency in the construction of narrative, as well as an ability for the participant to separate life as it is lived (i.e., description of lived experience) and the space of the interview (i.e., a specific time and space that is influenced by another social being – the researcher). As Moisander et al. (2009, 334) explain:

> *The idea, in particular, that with correct interview techniques the researcher may have "the opportunity to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves" (McCracken 1988, 9) is called into question. It is emphasized that the interview is a particular form of social interaction and cultural practice that is regulated by the cultural discourses that are relevant for the topic and available in context of the interview, as well as by particular conventions about how interviews are to be performed both by the interviewee and the interviewer.*

Indeed, upon further reading, I realized that I was not the only one concerned about this methodology. Critiques of existential phenomenology are intimately related, if not essential, to critiques of identity in consumer research. The method itself, which is the main tool of exploration of identity in consumer research, is argued to overemphasis the agency of the individual. For example, Moisander et al. (2009), in proposing a post-structuralist approach to studying consumer culture at the level of the individual, argue – given existential-phenomenology's roots in psychology which is focused on the individual – that the method is not suitable for cultural analysis that seeks to situate the individual within cultural patterns. Moreover, the prominence of first-person experience, they believe, encourages the researcher to over-emphasise the independence of individuals (i.e., agency) and the role of the individual in everyday social life. This concern is echoed by Askegaard and Linnet (2011, 396) who question the focus on the individual in positing an epistemology that considers 'the context of the context': 'The task of the consumption researcher is to balance the understanding of this face-to-face immediacy and the subjective concerns of the consumer with the way that cultural, societal and historical structures and processes embed these intersubjective dynamics'. Thus, the authors plead for cultural consumer researchers to resist emphasis on the individual and rather situate the individual within a socio-historical and cultural context. This turn away from existential phenomenology is further accentuated by Earley (2014) who advocates for a political philosophy perspective in understanding the subject within consumer culture. In the spirit of social change, she believes that this perspective will encourage consumer researchers to 'critique power and identify sites of resistance, movement and change within such systems, despite the strictures of existing political and social structures' (2014, 78). Thus, Earley is more concerned than both Moisander et al. (2009) and Askegaard and Linnet (2011) with issues of power in relation to the subject, something existential phenomenology negates with its mentalistic tradition of examining individual experience. In her argument, a political philosophy approach – which constitutes critical traditions and more contemporary political theorists such as Mouffe, Laclau, and Badiou – encourages the questioning of power given its view that 'power is antecedent to and constitutes both structures and subjectivity' (Earley 2014, 77).

These perspectives, in concert with my observations from the field, called into question the existential phenomenological approach of this study, both philosophically and methodologically. Therefore, I began to understand the methodology for this study through a critical, feminist perspective. That is, during the part of the data generation process in which data analysis began, I treated the interview setting as the interaction between two social beings constitutive of power structures and ideological effects (Purvis and Hunt 1993). From a feminist perspective, I focused on the interview reflexively, following Stanley and

Wise (2002, 200) in the: '…recognition of the reflexivity of the feminist researcher in her research as an active and busily constructing agent; insistence that the 'objects' of research are also subjects in their own right as much as researchers are subjects of theirs (and objects of other people's)'. Thus, I will now discuss the methods used in the study from inception to data analysis.

3.3.2.   Methods

In this study, the main method used was depth interviewing, mainly unstructured with some semi-structured interviews. Depth interviews seemed to be the most appropriate method given the goals of the study, particularly at its inception, of understanding lived experience. As the study evolved, interviewing was important to '[generate] empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004, 140). In vein, I conducted unstructured interviews for the first three interviews in order to allow participants to describe their experiences and stuff without imposing pre-planned questions and stifling conversation. Instead, participants were able to guide conversation and 'describe and illuminate the meaningful social world' (Silverman, 1993, 2). However, given the interactive nature of interviews that are by their very nature social encounters (Holstein and Gubrium 2004), 'interviewers are deeply and unavoidably implicated in creating meanings that ostensibly reside within respondents…Respondents are not so much repositories of knowledge as they are constructors of knowledge in association with interviewers' (Holstein and Gubrium 2004, 141). From this view, the interview provided a site for young women embedded in a culture of consumption to discuss the social world with another young woman in a similar position, the researcher – considered in 3.3.2.3 – as my experiences as a young woman (unwittingly) influenced by consumer culture inspired the study. In addition to interviews, there were ethnographic elements to the study design including participation *over time* and engaging in the social space of the participant (e.g., entering her home, conducting interviews at cafés and bars of her choice). This generated data from observation as well as photographic evidence, to be discussed in section 3.4.2.1.

3.3.2.1.   Sampling

The sampling strategy used in this study was purposive with broad parameters. From the literature review, it seemed necessary to study young women in an industrialised context who were influenced by consumer culture. Thus, I opted to sample purposively in order to select participants that 'illustrate some feature or process in which we are interested' (Silverman, 2010, 141). As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) note, compared to random sampling, purposive sampling allows the researcher, with some social phenomena in mind, to locate

individuals in which the processes being studied are very likely to take place. Moreover, participants sampled must have the ability, time, and willingness to reflect on the area of study at hand (Richards and Morse 2007). In this way, purposive samples are not only reflective of a researchers' critical evaluation of the parameters of the sample (Silverman 2010), but also reflective of the self-selection of the sample or who is willing to participate; that is, I might have envisaged 'ideal' sample in terms of parameters (e.g., an average age around 26, varied educational and socio-economic backgrounds, mostly British) but ultimately the sample was formed by those who were both accessible to me and willing to participate. Therefore, I embarked upon the sampling process with an open mind.

	Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Occupation	Education	Relationship Status	Data Collection Method
1	Charlotte	24	French	Marketer	Master's degree (law)	Single	4 interviews; photos; social media sites
2	Emily	23	American	Social Worker	Master's degree (social work)	Single	4 interviews; photos; social media sites
3	Tiffany	28	American	Student; Business development	Master's degree (management)	Divorced; in a relationship	4 interviews; photos; social media sites
4	Catriona	25	Scottish	Law clerk	Master's degree (marketing)	Single	4 interviews; photos; social media sites
5	Sophie	34	Scottish	University administrator	Undergraduate degree (history)	Single	4 interviews; photos; social media sites
6	Alicja	25	Polish	Part-time salesperson	Undergraduate degree (anthropology)	Living with boyfriend	4 interviews; photos; social media sites
7	Sierra	25	American	Student; mission work	Master's degree (management)	Single	4 interviews; photos; social media sites
8	Madison	27	American	Student; marketing and PR	Master's degree (marketing)	Single	4 interviews; photos; social media sites
9	Simone	26	New Zealand	Student; Marketing and PR	Master's degree (marketing)	Single/in a relationship	4 interviews; photos; social media sites
10	Katie	25	Scottish	Ad-hoc nurse	Nursing degree	Long-term relationship	3 interviews; photos; social media sites
11	Elizabeth	25	Scottish	Student	Pursuing degree in speech therapy	Long-term relationship	3 interviews; photos; social media sites
12	Jade	20	Scottish	Unemployed	Secondary school	Married; 5 months pregnant	2 interviews; 1 written response; photos
13	Emma	27	Scottish	University Administrator	Undergraduate degree (history)	Married	2 interviews
14	Abeni	29	Nigerian	Post-doctorate	Doctorate degree	Single	2 interviews
15	Gretchen	28	German	Student	Undergraduate degree in accounting	Living with boyfriend	2 interviews

Table 1: Participants

I approached sampling with very broad parameters that I believed generally encapsulated 'young woman' or – at the beginning of the study – emerging adult. First, I sent messages to my friends/acquaintances asking whether they knew any young women who might like to participate in a study on young women and consumer culture. Given my own age (28 at the start of the study), most of the participants had graduated university and were at least 23 years old. Later, when I advertised for participants using flyers (see Appendix I) and social media, I stipulated participants should be ages 18-32. Thus, the youngest participant in the

sample was 20, and the oldest was 33 at the start of the study. I was therefore quite flexible and open. I also preferred, with the theory of emerging adulthood in mind, that participants be in a time of transition without 'stabilising anchors' such as marriage or children (Arnett 2004), and whilst there were not any mothers in the study, there was one married participant, two participants with long-term, live-in partners and one who fell pregnant during the study. As findings emerged, it did not seem necessary to be exclusive and so I took an inclusive approach and accepted anyone who wanted to participate in the study, so long as we were not intimately acquainted. I avoided interviewing close friends or partners of close friends given issues of confidentiality and trust.

Sampling for participants was conducted in three ways. First, I sampled through word-of-mouth, which was the most successful strategy and recruited 13 of the 15 participants, 8 of whom continued through four phases of interviewing. With a desire to diversify the sample particularly in term of socio-economic privilege as much of the word-of-mouth sample could be considered socio-economically privileged given my own position as a white, middle class woman, I began to advertise both on my Facebook page and on relevant Facebook pages such as the Scottish Feminist Network Facebook page. I recruited two participants from the latter, both of whom diversified my sample (Jade, who is less economically privileged and Alicja in terms her nationality). I also distributed flyers to the staff at a local gym, at my hairdresser, to friends who might have access to other social circles. This strategy proved to be awkward and unsuccessful as potential participants seemed wary and unsure; thus I did not pursue it extensively and it did not result in any participants.

Participants who were recruited through people who know me well were more likely to continue with the study, as well as those interested in the topic (i.e., in the feminist network). All but two participants were strangers to me at first meeting: I had never met them and in most cases did not know anything about them prior to the interview, despite meeting through mutual connections. There are two exceptions. First, I knew Abeni through my husband and met her at a social occasion once before the interview process and once after. She became a participant after I sent her an email regarding sampling and she volunteered herself for the study. Second, I worked with Katie's mother briefly so I had some prior knowledge of her major life events such as her father passing away and her experiences in the last months of her nursing degree. Again, when I sent my previous work colleagues an email in an attempt to broaden the sample beyond a university context, Katie's mother volunteered her for participation in the study. Admittedly, it was extremely difficult to find and retain participants, particularly those without some sort of personal tie to me. Often, potential participants who were complete strangers and heard about the study online or

through flyers, would contact me about participating but would stop responding to emails when I tried to arrange a time to meet. One participant even forgot to attend and did not let me know, leaving me waiting over a half an hour before receiving a text from the participant that she forgot and would reschedule, although she never did. Thus, the sample formed itself through these situations and therefore what emerged was unplanned and also reflective of my network of 'loose ties' or friends-of-friends. This resulted in a broadly middle class, white (all but four) sample which is a limitation of the study and unfortunately reinforces a class and race bias that exists in much research on women (Cannon et al. 1988). However, as illustrated in the findings chapters, despite most being middle class, there are nuances that speak to diversity of socio-economic experience in many cases; moreover, experiences of these women cannot be discounted as such and many rich themes emerged that problematize current theory.

Sampling for the study occurred in four phases. First, in September 2013, I sampled for 'pilot' participants who were essential to the evolving study design and engaged in four interviews (see Table 1 – Charlotte, Emily, and Tiffany and Appendix II for extended biographies), all sampled through word-of-mouth from fellow PhD students. The second phase of sampling occurred in April 2014, once I had conducted three interviews with the three participants. At this point, I became more confident in my study design and in adopting broad parameters for sampling given that emerging findings intersected despite diversity amongst the three participants (in the case of the three, in terms of nationality and relationship status). In this phase I added five participants – Sophie, Emma, Jade, Alicja, Catriona – who diversified the sample in terms of age, relationship status and to some extent socio-economic background, although participants could all be considered broadly middle class. Once I felt comfortable with the final questionnaire for the first set of participants as well as the pace of the interviews for the second set, I added a third set of participants in September 2014: Sierra, Madison, Simone, Katie and Elizabeth. In this sampling phase I was keen to diversify the sample in terms of nationality, adding two American postgraduate students to complement the two American participants added in the first phase. I was also keen to diversify away from participants associated with University of Edinburgh and therefore reached out to my former workplace – a small Edinburgh charity – and through their suggestion interviewed two participants living outside of the city centre with their parents who wanted to do the study together (Katie and Elizabeth). The final phase of sampling involved diversifying the sample in terms of career: I realised there were no participants involved in the professions (medicine, accountancy, law) and wondered whether themes of identity confusion in terms of career purpose were a facet of career instability that might not be present amongst those committed to a profession. Accordingly, I added Abeni and Gretchen to the sample, one of whom had a

career in accountancy and then switched in to academia and the other who had a career in social work and was switching into accountancy. Both participants requested a 'fast-tracked' version of the study and agreed to two interviews. And both participants had rather untraditional paths through a traditional profession, which again represents the self-selection of the sample as I was unable to attain interviews with any accountants/doctors/lawyers whose career path had been more straightforward.

3.3.2.2. The interviews

Where possible, four interviews were conducted with each participant. This section describes the interview procedures and details the content of each interview. Although unstructured interviews were suitable in the initial stages of the research and for life history and 'show-and-tell' interviews, I noticed recurrent themes in the data emerging from the first three participants' stories, as well as themes recurrent in the literature, particularly cultural studies literature on the position of young women within consumer culture. Semi-structured interviews in this vein were a useful tool to 1) enable participants to express their opinions on certain topics and 2) address topics across participants and 3) bring topics of research interest to the forefront that had been alluded to but not directly discussed in previous interviews. Perhaps most importantly, the fourth interview served as a platform for the participant to give her opinion on matters that were evidently (from preceding interviews) important in her life.

Conducting a study over time with a single set of participants is extremely taxing from a logistical perspective and therefore the study design remained flexible throughout the process to ensure participation. In some cases, participants not only led the interviews but also the process itself. For example, one participant (Jade) moved away from Edinburgh and thus two interviews were conducted – one in Edinburgh, one in-home where she moved - combining the second and third interviews. She provided a written response in lieu of the fourth interview over a year after the second interview. In Katie's case, she requested that her best friend Elizabeth take part in the study along with her; therefore, their interviews were conducted together. Also, these two participants opted, when given the choice because they were not very responsive to messages about the in-home interview, to switch the order, discussing their digital lives and then combining the interview on their stuff – through photographs rather than in-home – with the final semi-structured interview.

Staying in touch with participants in order to keep attrition rates low was both a delicate and deliberate process: it was a balance firstly to be fully available for participants for an interview regardless of my personal circumstances (such as feeling ill or having a presentation to

prepare, etc.) whilst also remaining methodical and persistent in follow-through, without being pushy. Typically, I would send participants an email, text message or Facebook message and if no response, one follow-up message. If I still did not receive a response, I would wait for a month or so and then politely follow up a third time which would often elicit a response (e.g., not hearing from Emma after two emails and then emailing a few months later to finally arrange the second interview). I was also very careful to conduct interviews on participants' terms, adjusting my schedule where possible to meet their needs. I never cancelled an interview no matter my personal circumstance and always offered to adjust interviews given any concerns. For example, I sensed that Elizabeth and Katie were not comfortable inviting me into their homes, perhaps because they were living with their parents or because felt it might be taxing to do the interview twice since they wanted to do every interview together. As such, I offered to adjust the process so that they took photos that we discussed at the pub where we conducted the other interviews.

I often sensed that some participants were not keen to participate in all four interviews and therefore I designed the 'fast-track' version consisting of one to two semi-structured interviews that combined the four interviews – i.e., we would discuss life history and the participants' 'stuff' in one interview, and digital along with some of the questions in the second interview. As noted in the table, nine participants engaged in the full process: two participants engaged in three interviews; and four participants engaged in two interviews, amounting to 15 participants and 50 interviews total. Each interview encounter lasted a minimum of 1 hour thirty minutes and a maximum of four hours, about two hours on average, and all digitally recorded on my iPhone which acted as a natural part of the environment making us both more comfortable with being recorded. The transcription text amounted to 1896 pages single spaced (nearly 900,000 words), excluding field notes which amount to about 25 pages (see Appendix V for a transcript excerpt).

Reflecting on the interviews, I felt, from the perspective of the interviewer, that time was an issue. On the one hand, I elicited interview participation with the understanding that the interview would take about 1-2 hours. On the other hand, I was keen to be quite open in terms of structure, following up as necessary on certain topics or points that the participant brought up. Therefore, it was important for me to both keep the interview going at a steady pace whilst also paying attention to important themes as they arose. This resulted in a process of 'reading the room' and adjusting the pace and questions as we went along. Keeping the time within the previously agreed upon time limit was particularly important in early stages so that the participant did not feel taken advantage of in any way or duped into participation – this was a trust-building strategy and indeed my responsibility. Another

trust-building strategy, as well as a means of observation, was to conduct interviews in cafes and bars of the participants' choosing. In some cases, particularly with the American participants who had just arrived in the UK, I met participants at the university and eventually suggested a place to go, as they did not know the area. In all cases, I treated participants to a cup of coffee, glass of wine and maybe a cake or snack if they were hungry (I always offered), or brought them a small gift such as flowers or a bottle of wine in the case of in-home interviews, in order to cultivate reciprocity and show my appreciation.

3.3.2.2.1.   Interview 1: Introduction and life history

In the first interview, the focus was largely introductory – a 'getting to know you' session. I began with the recorder off, giving the participants a snapshot about the study, something along the lines of: 'this is a study about young women and consumer culture…'. Then I told them what we might discuss in the interview: 'It would be great if you could tell me a little bit about yourself and your life experiences, and then we can discuss shopping and your stuff at the end'. I also told participants that they would lead the discussion – that I had no set questions or goals in the interview process and in that vein we would chat about their life and their stuff, a prospect some participants found daunting or a bit uncomfortable at first, whilst others revelled in the prospect of talking about themselves. I then started the recording, read the ethics of the study, and began by asking life history and 'grand tour' (McCracken 1988), 'tell me about' questions – e.g., 'tell me about yourself'. If that did not get the conversation going, I asked questions like 'tell me about your family, your background, where did you grow up? Where did you go to school?' My position as a 'stranger' to all but two of the participants facilitated such biographical questions. These questions were important avenues for the participants to open up and begin talking about themselves, and there was an emphasis on the interviewee's point of view and their 'unique ways of defining the world' (Silverman, 1993 quoting Denzin, 1970: 125). Participants were also asked, if it did not come up spontaneously, about their engagement with consumption so that the interview could stand alone in the event that the participant quit the study. In most cases, this interview flowed smoothly. Moreover, the first interview established trust and rapport necessary to inviting myself into participants' homes for a second 'stuff' interview. After the interview, I explained that the participants had a choice to continue with the study. I told them there were multiple ways to participate – either in the one-off interview or in four interviews that would occur over the period of six months to one year, or any variations therein.

3.3.2.2.2.   Interview 2: Show-and-tell Stuff

The second interview was typically an in-home interview about the participant's stuff. The interview began with a bit of a 'catch up' (what's been going on since I saw you last?), which gave a good indication of transition and of capturing life events as they occur. It also served to continue establishing rapport, to develop a relationship of trust. Participants also asked me what had been going on since the last interview. I found it important to facilitate a relationship of trust and sharing so I would tell them about my life, but this was usually discussed as we were setting up the interview, starting the recording etc., and therefore, when it came time to 'officially' start the interview, the focus was on the participant. After a catch-up, the 'show-and-tell' portion of the interview began. Participants often found it awkward and uncomfortable to talk me through their stuff at first but did not seem to mind once the interview was underway. But, as Miller (2008) remarked, through discussing objects we give an account of ourselves; thus, the show-and-tell process often enabled us to discuss other relevant issues that might not have come up in a simple question-and-answer session. Furthermore, this interview facilitated observation of the participant's home and space, something that importantly adds context to the understanding of the participant and her experiences. With the participant's stuff around, the element of recall necessary to the first interview was removed and instead the stuff told or shaped the story. Throughout the interview, I kept a generalist approach rather than focusing on a certain product category (e.g., clothes and makeup, or technology) and, when I could, let the participant begin telling me about their stuff in whatever order she chose ('So, show me your stuff!' was the general prompt). In this vein, we ended up discussing topics such as clothes, make-up, personal care, furniture, wall hangings, food, appliances, technology, etc. I did not bring up 'taboo' items such as products related to sexuality, etc., to ensure that the interviewee felt comfortable with me and did not feel I was invading her privacy, although would openly discuss if she actively brought up related topics.

3.3.2.2.3. Interview 3: Show-and-tell Digital

The third interview was a digital life show-and-tell interview. After conducting the first two interviews, I felt that, given the presence of digital and in particular social media in the first and second interviews, it was integral to focus part of the study on exploring digital life. There were many options of how to approach this interview, from reviewing their social media pages myself, to discussing them along with stuff. Ultimately, I decided to model this interview on the stuff interview – that way, the participants could talk me through their digital use on their own terms and also show me websites and social media sites they believe important, and viewed as they experience them rather than the end user (e.g., as a friend on Facebook or a follower on Twitter). This proved to be very complementary to the show-and-tell stuff interview. To get the interview going – after catching up – I asked participants to

'talk me through a day in their digital life' and show me websites along the way. We discussed social media sites, frequently visited websites and television shows that they watch regularly. In some cases, we also discussed movies. Like the stuff interview, I did not explicitly ask about taboo subjects in order to maintain a level of privacy, but if brought up (e.g., streaming TV shows illegally), I did not shy away from discussing such topics. Most of these interviews took place in a café or bar of the participant's choice. However, in one case I met a participant at her home because she had just moved in and wanted to show me the progress she had made in terms of moving in and decorating in a month's time. By this interview, rapport and trust was established, and in most cases a feeling of friendship developed. Again, the first part of the interview consisted of a catch-up period, with participants usually keen to discuss any developments in their lives. In some cases, I revisited topics that we had discussed in previous interviews to see if there had been any developments (e.g., any news on the job front?). Asking specific questions from previous interviews was useful to establishing rapport, making the participant feel special. So, when possible, I made sure to listen or to transcribe the interview before the final interview. This was easily managed with the three initial participants; however, it became more difficult as I accrued participants in later stages of the research. Field notes helped to jog my memory (if necessary) to be able to come prepared to ask such questions.

3.3.2.2.4.   Interview 4: Semi-Structured

The fourth interview was semi-structured. I decided to add a fourth interview during March/April 2014, about the time where I was between stuff and digital interviews with my initial three participants. Through transcribing these interviews I realised there were common themes that were either directly addressed or alluded to. Whilst the 'tell me about' and 'show-and-tell' interviews were a good way to get to know the participant and understand the context, there lacked an emphasis on opinions and thought processes, important to a critical methodology (Harvey 1990). It seemed ideal to combine reflections from the 'lived experience' interviews with a semi-structured guide in which participants could discuss their opinions on relevant matters, as gathered from the previous interviews. Moreover, it was very important for me as a researcher to engage with these women over the span of six to nine months (on average) and then be able to spend a few hours talking through the guide, getting their opinions and bringing the study to a close. Designing the interview guide from emerging data was key to understanding important issues in participants' lives, rather than trying to impose my ideas about what is interesting or important to their lives. The interview guide (see Appendix III) was designed around five areas: ideals; gender; appearance and body image; stuff; relationship with others and well-being.

3.3.2.1. Other methods of data generation

Because the interviews had ethnographic elements such as written communication, the in-home visit and experiencing the participants' social media, etc., there was data generated from observation including reflexive notes written up after each interview, describing the interview setting as well as my own thoughts and feelings, state-of-mind, and so forth. These notes were often used as contextual reminders when reading transcripts. I also took photographs of some of the participants' homes and selected 'stuff' items as appropriate, with participant consent, to reference during data analysis. The third source of ancillary data was reference to participants' social media pages. As I was analysing the data, I sometimes found it necessary to refer to social media pages that we had discussed in the interviews. In some cases, participants 'friended' me on Facebook with their agreement that I would be able to reference their Facebook pages in the data analysis process. I never 'friended' any of the participants myself. I also referenced, where necessary, public pages such as Pinterest, Instagram or Twitter in the case of clarification of the interview dialogue or contextual interest; for example, if it was unclear which Pinterest board we were discussing on the transcript, I could reference the online source if public.

3.3.2.2. Ethics

This study followed the University of Edinburgh Business School Research Ethics policy, and was a Level Two (of three) ethics study which requires informed consent. Participants were fully informed of the nature of the study and able to ask any questions they had about the study. Participants were asked if it was okay to record them (all agreed) and were told, whilst being recorded, about the ethics of the study; namely: that the study is anonymous and confidential; they can quit the study at any time; they do not have to answer any question that makes them uncomfortable; only my supervisors and I would have access to the original recordings; and all transcripts would be anonymised. Importantly, I was very careful to treat my research participants with the respect they deserve for trusting me and sharing personal information, inviting me into their homes, and inviting me into their lives if even for a brief moment. I was very vigilant to keep information confidential and not to share information that has not been anonymised, especially in cases where I have mutual friends with the participants.

3.3.2.3. Relationship between Researcher and Researched

As mentioned, throughout the 18 months of data generation, engaging with the participants was a deliberate and conscientious task. In many ways it was relatively simple to arrange the first interview, particularly when meeting friends of friends. Many participants were very

keen on the research topic and were excited by the chance to discuss their lives and issues affecting young women, particularly in the vein of consumer culture. As the process continued, I felt as though I was balancing on a tightrope between interviewing and conversing between friends. Given my position as a young woman and having a lot in common with most of the participants in terms of experiences, education, similar interests and even friends, it is not surprising that in some cases friendships began to form, particularly around the time of the third and fourth interviews. On the one hand, I sought a friendship-type relationship with participants so that they felt more open with their views and more comfortable with the interview process (England 1994). On the other hand, I wanted to maintain a sense of professionalism and did not want the interview to be two-way conversation between friends. It was therefore a balance between being active listener and partaking in the exchange whilst keeping the focus on participants. It was a challenge to make the participants feel affirmed and reciprocated without over-promising friendships that might be both difficult to maintain and ethically, if not methodologically, questionable during the data analysis and writing up phases in which I needed to focus on the data generated rather than continuing friendships.

My concerns grew from the interview process in which many participants mentioned meeting outside of an interview setting, something I would have enjoyed personally but was wary of professionally. For example, Sophie and I got on very well and live in the same area of Edinburgh. After the interview process we made hypothetical plans to have drinks at a local pub. She also works in a building where I go sometimes for work so I would pop into her office and say hello from time to time. Madison and I also got along well and at the end of the interview process she asked whether we could be friends. I replied affirmatively and we did see each other socially once or twice but this tapered off, partially driven by me. I worried about being friends with participants particularly given that I was in the process of analysis throughout. I worried that further encounters would not be plainly social but also observation-driven, acting to continue to inform the analysis of the interview cases whether or not consciously. My concerns were partially unwarranted: charged with the emotions of the interview process, friendships formed quickly and intensely. But as time passed, these friendships tapered and I have been able to maintain a friendly distance, with occasional social media interaction (liking photos, sending happy birthday messages or telling a mutual friend to say hello) without engaged interaction. Similar worries persisted throughout data generation about interviewing the close friends of close friends (e.g., Simone) who sometimes became directly involved in my social life (e.g., Simone, Charlotte or Abeni). With Abeni, because there were only two interviews and because she is not in Edinburgh often, this was less of a worry. But Simone had disclosed very personal information which made me

uncomfortable potential meeting socially. We did meet socially on two occasions related to our friend throwing flat parties, but nothing awkward occurred and eventually Simone moved away. With Charlotte the concerns also proved unwarranted as we only met twice socially after the interview process was complete. Given that my relationship with our mutual friend weakened over time due to circumstance rather than choice, the chance of meeting socially diminished. Part of my worry was driven by influencing my analysis (which was the case) but it was also driven by a perceived power imbalance in terms of information asymmetry. That is, the participants were very open with me. They would often comment and laugh about how I knew so much more about their lives than their close friends. At the same time, though I shared some details of my life, the information-sharing was asymmetric because I participated in the exchange as a researcher. Therefore, I did not want to extend the relationship to friendship to avoid making both the participant and myself uncomfortable in a social setting, given the information I knew about them.

3.3.3.   Data analysis

The data analysis process was ongoing from the beginning of data generation, as many argue should be the case with qualitative research (Miles and Huberman 1994). Because the study design evolved throughout the data generation period, continuing analysis was crucial. Thus, data analysis occurred in three phases: 1) during the initial phase of sampling and first three interviews (September 2013 to April 2014); 2) during the final phase of sampling (November-December 2014) and 3) after data generation completion (April 2015). This section is organised based on this chronology. Importantly, interviews were transcribed verbatim to a high level of detail (Miles and Huberman 1994) and anonymised (see Appendix V for an excerpt), also in phases to be addressed in each section.

3.3.3.1.   Phase 1: Analysis for study design

In the first phase of analysis, I transcribed interviews verbatim as they took place in order to firstly be able to follow-up with participants on specific questions and secondly to identify emerging themes in order to finalise study design and decide on what areas to focus (e.g., adding a digital show-and-tell interview and composing a final interview guide). This amounted to 12 transcripts from three participants. Therefore, data analysis was ongoing and enacted mainly through the transcription process. I read transcripts for emergent themes, annotating them carefully, noting what felt important to participants as well as themes I needed to follow up on. Importantly, this did not involve reflection on the literature given that it was important for themes to emerge from participant stories rather than the

literature. This open and thematic analysis resulted in the design of the interview guide (Appendix III).

3.3.3.2. Phase 2: Analysis to find direction

The second phase of data analysis began in November of 2014 with an eye to bringing data generation to a close and beginning the process of analysis and writing up. At this point, I returned to the literature to seek guidance both from a methodological and theoretical point of view. I felt overwhelmed by a lack of methodological direction in consumer research literature in analysing large amounts of qualitative data, literature that tends to follow a hermeneutical or existential-phenomenological process (Spiggle 1994; Thompson et al. 1989; Arnold and Fischer 1994). As noted in Section 3.4, I identified with accounts of a lack of context present within interpretive consumer research studies (Askegaard and Linnet 2011) and the value of going beyond the existential phenomenological approach (Thompson et al. 1989) in order to examine cultural context (Moisander et al. 2009) from a critical perspective (Bradshaw and Holbrook 2008; Earley 2015; Denzin 2001; Harvey 1990). Therefore, I sought a data analysis method that would allow me to: 1) be reflexive; 2) treat the interview as an interaction between two social beings – the participant and myself – rather than only considering the participant's point of view; and 3) understand and critique the discourses and institutions informing and influencing the interaction. In the words of Denzin (1991, 68):

> The subject is more than can be contained in a text, and a text is only a reproduction of what the subject has told us. What the subject tells us is itself something that has been shaped by prior cultural understandings [and ideologies]. Most important, language which is our window into the subject's word (and our world), plays tricks. It displaces the very thing it is supposed to represent, so that what is always given is a trace of other things, not the thing – lived experience – itself.

With this in mind, I turned to the voice-centred relational (VCR) method of data analysis, an analysis appropriate for critical methodology given that the data is interrogated, read multiple times (Harvey 1990).

The VCR method was developed by Brown and Gilligan (1992) in an extensive study of girls and women from the perspective of development and education. Importantly, the method, rooted in both literary and clinical approaches as well as interpretive/hermeneutic tradition, proposes a relational ontology that postulates the theory of 'selves-in-relation' (Ruddick 1989, 211), or 'a view of human beings as embedded in a complex web of intimate and larger social relations' (Gilligan 1982). With Gilligan's guidance, Mauthner and Doucet (1998) adapted the method to fit a sociological perspective for their doctoral studies. What appealed to me intuitively about the VCR method was not only its relational ontology, but also the idea of a 'listening guide' (Doucet and Mauthner 2008) used to analyse a core set of cases to

first methodically trace a narrative from various perspectives – such as plot and reader response, voice of 'I', relationships, and structural influences – and then write up cases. Thus, themes are identified in a way that values depth of understanding and complexities within cases, as well as accounting for often meaningful differences across participant narratives. Moreover, the method requires a high degree of reflexivity, an understanding of context and societal structures, and attention to the participant's account of herself. And as emphasised by Mauthner and Doucet (1998), the method is very flexible and adaptive depending on research goals. The aim of Mauthner's (1999: 146) study was: '…*to explore motherhood and postpartum depression from women's points of view […] finding out what the mothers themselves had to say about motherhood […] How did they experience, view and make sense of their depression? What did they think were the reasons for their depression?'* This is similar to my initial research aims: to *explore* from young women's points of view; to find out what the young women themselves have to say and how this connects to other aspects of their lives. How do they experience, view and make sense of their 'identity'? Thus, during this phase of the analysis when I was moving away from an existential-phenomenological and toward a more critical approach, this analysis technique seemed worthwhile attempting, particularly given its relational ontology and focus on context and reflexivity. Moreover, this method provided me with comprehensive guidance on how to approach analysis of large amount of qualitative data. I decided to analyse Charlotte's case using this method because she was the first participant and many themes from her interviews resonated with ongoing accounts from other participants. I will now detail the process of analysis in which I undertook four readings: plot, researcher reflexivity, the voice of 'I' and 'we', and structure/context.

Reading for Plot

Closely aligned with Mauthner and Doucet's (1998) account, the first reading I conducted was for plot – to gain an understanding of what is going on in the transcript using elements of narrative analysis (Doucet and Mauthner 2008). To this end, I used colour coding to identify various 'codes' such as main plot, sub plots, protagonists, antagonists, metaphors, contradictions and images/words. This reading proved very effective for tracing Charlotte's account. Not only was I able to understand her background (i.e., Charlotte as a 24-year-old French woman living in Edinburgh for three years and working as a marketing manager for a tech start-up; Charlotte from an upper-middle class [by all accounts], traditional, religious (Protestant) family of six living just outside of Paris), but also subplots emerged such as Charlotte's extremely ambitious nature, her need to gain independence from her parents, and her attention to appearance. Through the protagonist themes, her family members emerged as heroes, as well as a few of her very close friends. A notable protagonist is a senior executive in her company who has taken her under his wing, spotting nascent ambition and talent

within her that must be cultivated. As for antagonists, an ex-boyfriend emerges, a childhood sweetheart who she grew to know spending summers abroad in Scotland during her teenage years. It was for this boyfriend that she moved to Edinburgh. Coding for images/words and metaphors, Charlotte's way of being becomes apparent. She repeats phrases, in relation to plot, such as 'single-minded', 'too ambitious', 'very creative', 'I make it happen', as well as more adverse phrases such as 'inadequate' 'need to be in control' 'I feel completely vain'. Metaphors draw in celebrity role models such as Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg given her book *Lean In* (2013). But contradictions and future/hope codes demonstrate an identity trajectory rife with contradictions argued to afflict young women (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008), most notably Charlotte's desire to ambitiously pursue a corporate career, but at the same time her worries about wanting to start a family and raise her own children. Also, since her life has not gone to plan in the past (e.g., breaking with her boyfriend rather than getting married) she is afraid plan her life, though not planning proves difficult for her. So, it is evident that this reading not only helped trace the major events, but also generated key themes.

Reading for Researcher's Reflexivity
Given the importance of researcher reflexivity I separated this as a second reading, diverging from Mauthner and Doucet's (1998) account in which they suggest reading for reflexivity in the first reading. When I initially contemplated reflexivity, I considered myself in relation to Charlotte's self. I considered the ways I identified with her (e.g., her ambitious tendencies, breaking up with a long-term, long-distance boyfriend) and, on the other hand, experiences with which I could not relate (e.g., her religious faith, her love for fashion). Afterwards, I noticed that the codes began to resemble the plot codes (e.g., emerging adult situation, reflexivity/self-awareness, identity shifting). One criticism, therefore, was that I was not reflexive enough – where was my voice in the written analysis of the reflexive reading? Upon further research, I found a paper in which Mauthner and Doucet (2008) discuss reflexivity in their version of the VCR method. I empathised with the authors' acknowledgment that they were not reflexive enough when writing up their PhDs, as they assert that proper reflexivity might take years, something not supported by an academic system seeking quick turnaround in submitting PhD theses and papers. In order to improve reflexivity, the authors suggest writing an academic and personal biography. Doing so allowed me to understand theoretical angles that informed me when reading Charlotte's transcript (e.g., theories of narcissism given my previous work in the area [Lambert and Desmond 2013]) and also allowed me to flesh out my position in relation to Charlotte, given the personal biography. But one comment from their paper particularly struck me: 'At the time of conducting our research, our relatively uncritical adoption of the method meant that implicitly we were aligning

ourselves with the epistemological position built into the method by those who developed it' (Doucet and Mauthner 2003, 423). I realised I might be doing the same thing. Besides understanding the method as inherently interpretive, relational and feminist, I had not considered its ontological implications. This launched me into a quest to understand the ontological position of voice-centred relational method and whether that aligned with the approach for my study, discussed further on.

Reading for the Voice of I, Reading for Relationships

In this reading, I copied and pasted into a separate document every instance in which Charlotte used the personal pronouns 'I', 'We', and 'You'. I found this reading to be particularly helpful as it allowed me to understand the way Charlotte perceives herself, the way she perceives her relationship with others and others generally, or how it manifested in her case – the way she thinks others and herself *ought* to be. I also found it useful to consider tracing other words that might benefit the analysis (in this case, words like 'could' 'would', 'should', and 'want'), demonstrating the flexibility of the method. One potential criticism in this reading (Mauthner and Doucet 2008, 423) is it ascribes too much agency to the voice of 'I', assuming 'subjects' utterances are…transparent passageways into their experiences and selves' – also a criticism of existential phenomenological approaches (Moisander et al. 2009). From my point of view, I read these three pronouns as a performance of identity (Goffman 1959), to understand how Charlotte wants to be perceived by *me* as a social being. In that vein, the code for 'I' illuminated some of the following themes, also reflected in the first reading: 'I' as ambitious; 'I' as creative; 'I' as uncertain; 'I' as dominating and liking control; 'I' as a bit of a prude; 'I' as just love, love working; I' as worried about being 30 and single; 'I' as following fashion intensively; 'I' as pretentious; 'I' as feeling spoiled and gifted; and 'I' as confident.

The reading of 'We' demonstrated the spheres of collectives with which Charlotte identifies. A first 'we' is her colleagues at work with who she spends every day and has lunch with. She describes them as bringing out the best in each other, although she notes their different values as her family 'earns' more. A second 'we' is her siblings with whom she has very close relationships. She views herself and her siblings as 'all kind of single-minded, all very different' having grown up 'in the spirit of having to create.' She recalls a shock entering the 'real' world when noticing that people are different to her family – 'the four of us are like this, the world should be like this.' Regarding her family 'we', she notes that they are very religious and pray together. She notes they shop together and 'we are not rich, we're not poor, we are well-endowed'. Finally, she describes her family as extremely open, discussing with and 'analysing' each other often. One antagonistic 'we' is Charlotte and her ex-boyfriend

– she speaks of their relationship as 'we', noting they met every summer and dated for four years before 'we' broke up. As reflected in this account, separating out 'we' was aligned with reading for relationships and therefore this was also a focus. Nevertheless, it was helpful upon completion to physically map out Charlotte's relationships in order to understand how she views herself in relation to others.

Finally, I found the reading of 'you' most informative, given that it illuminated how Charlotte perceives others (and herself) *ought* to be. Thus, this code seemed to illustrate ideological or structural influences that affect Charlotte's way of being. She uses 'you' mostly when referring to her career and as such a neoliberal ideology and a realist ontology is apparent (Verhaeghe 2014; Lemke 2001; Rottenberg 2014). For example, she notes: 'You have responsibilities and expectations, if you want to move on you have to work very hard. It really depends on the kind of person you are'. She also hints toward anxieties inherent life as it occurs and what she imagines as an ideal: 'Just having to realise what you see in movies or the way you project the future is going to be is actually not necessarily that, even though you're successful'. So even if she is deemed 'successful' in her career, she must still deal with the disparity between life promoted by media and 'real' life.

Reading for Structure and Context
This section again required a high degree of reflexivity, and for me to refer back to the literature, in order to begin to abstract from the minutia of conversation to the societal discourses driving the conversation. A critical agenda took shape here for these reasons. Contextual or structural influences in Charlotte's case are: her culture as French with an international background; her upbringing as traditional insofar as gender roles (i.e., father breadwinner, mother homemaker) and religion (i.e., Protestant and attending a Catholic private school), and politics, with a family 'voting where their money is', i.e., conservatively; her position as one of privilege, growing up in a wealthy Parisian suburb, part of the international ex-pat community in Edinburgh, and being highly educated. From the perspective of media, in the first interview her love of fashion is evident and she remains in the fashion 'know' reading magazines like Vogue regularly. She also reflects on the messages she receives from movies, noting that 'life isn't like the movies'. Finally, she refers to Sheryl Sandberg as a role model after reading her book on women, career, and feminism *Lean In*. On this note, she is implicated in young women's struggle for legitimacy (McRobbie 2008), evidenced by her career position ('I don't want to be admired for being 23 and blond but for my intellectual ability') and her relationships ('He told me I did not have to be so ambitious; this was an insult'.) In many ways, her way of being seems to reflect a neoliberal subjectivity (Lemke 2001; Brown 2003; Verhaeghe 2014): she works for an entrepreneurial firm, and

much of her vocabulary when speaking of goals/motivations are steeped in neoliberal jargon
- wanting to 'be the best', being 'ambitious', 'dominating', 'investing in education', and so on.
Of course, these structural/contextual themes each warrant their own exploration.

Reflections on the Method

For this study, the VCR method was an effective, methodical way of approaching data
analysis with specific research goals in mind – to explore a social phenomenon from the
perspective of the participant, with an emphasis on researcher reflexivity and context.
Moreover, the method is a much-needed addition to the qualitative data analysis repertoire
of interpretive consumer research, particularly following calls for reflexivity, consideration
of context, and methods alternative to the existential phenomenological approach
(Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Moisander et al. 2009), including feminist approaches (Catterall
et al. 2005). Despite experiencing the effectiveness of the method, after conducting a VCR
analysis on Charlotte's case consisting of four readings of four interviews and concluding
with a case write-up, I was unsure whether to continue. Mauthner and Doucet (1998) suggest
using this intensive method on a core set of interviews (for them, 10 interviews out of 40)
and then writing cases for each, finally extending a thematic analysis to the rest of the data.
In this vein, I decided that the VCR method was very effective in informing and sensitising
me to the nature of my data, as well as to the importance of reading for reflexivity, voice and
context. But I decided after Charlotte's case to begin a critical thematic analysis instead.

Firstly, faced with the prospect of selecting 'core' cases, I felt an open-coding strategy might
be more appropriate for the remaining data since I was already informed by Charlotte's
analysis. Secondly, whilst the VCR analysis of Charlotte's case illuminated many interesting
themes, they remained very broad and the process of theory abstraction, in my opinion, was
still far removed, perhaps due to the extensive nature of my data generation approach and
multiple interviews, rather than an interview strategy aimed at understanding a specific
experience (e.g., Mauthner's study on postpartum depression). Thirdly, as illustrated by the
reflexivity reading, the VCR method challenged me to consider my ontological position more
deeply, and upon reflection I realised my critical inclination (Section 3.3). Reflecting on such
themes, I realised that the aim of my study might be more critical than I first imagined.
Through the 'you' reading and the fourth reading for context, I realised ideological influences
and thus adapted my research objectives (3.2). Though well suited to feminist research
agendas given its relational ontology, and proving an excellent alternative to existential
phenomenological approaches given the focus on context and reflexivity, I realised the idea
of subject-in-relation could be potentially problematic (Doucet and Mauthner 2008) to a
critical agenda (Harvey 1990) seeking to view subjects as constituted by social and cultural

contexts (Butler 1995). That is, in relation to the discussion in the literature on performativity (Section 2.2.1), Doucet and Mauthner (2008, 407) seem to agree with Benhabib that a 'doer' can act outside of the 'deed' in terms of agency explaining: 'we maintain a position more aligned with Benhabib than Butler – that is, we argue for an ontological concept of subjects-in-relation over a position that posits subjects constituted by language or discourses'. Thus, they discuss the subject as *narrated*. But I resonate with critical and poststructural accounts of a doer formed through the deed, constituted by discourse and its ideological effects (Purvis and Hunt 1993). This critical agenda certainly emerged from themes generated by VCR analysis, particularly its focus on researcher reflexivity.

3.3.3.3.   Phase 3: Critical thematic analysis

With the above in mind, I embarked on a three-month process of intensive open-coding and analysis of Charlotte's case and three other cases (Emily, Sophie, and Jade) in order to generate themes that guided the structure of the thesis. The significance of this stage of the process was a fresh sense of critique that emerged from the VCR method analysis. From a critical feminist perspective, data analysis involves not taking the data at 'face value' but instead embedding findings in a socio-historic context, or as DeVault (1993) notes, understanding how ideological processes shape women's accounts of their experiences without fully determining them. According to Harvey, 'the probing of the subjects' meanings is not the end of the story', as it would be in interpretive research. Instead: 'The role of the critical ethnographer is to keep alert to the structural factors while probing meanings: to explore, where possible, the inconsistencies between action and words' (1990, 13). Critical research must thus 'untangle and disrupt' what is taken for granted to attend to power relations and ideological effects of subordination (Denzin 2001, 326) that might not be otherwise scrutinised. Therefore, I was concerned at this stage to generate themes, not only to examine what was present and parallel across cases – as is often suggested in interpretive analysis (Thompson et al. 1989) – but to examine contradictions within cases and across cases; to interrogate what *was* being said, but also what was *not* being said. Moreover, as noted from the VCR analysis, an important aspect of this analysis was to examine discourse and ideological influences, by taking notice of, for example, *you; should; could; would* statements that might indicate a way-of-being emerging from hegemonic, oppressive discourses.

This stage of analysis began, importantly, by outsourcing the remainder of transcripts for verbatim transcription. Although I preferred to transcribe myself, it became crucial to prioritise analysis given the amount of data amassed. I read and analysed each transcript and listened to each recording as necessary, spot-checking the transcripts for accuracy. In this

phase of analysis, I used computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) (NVIVO 10) as a data management tool. Themes generated from careful reading of the data were further interrogated through (handwritten) mind-mapping (Appendix V), note-taking, and reading and re-reading transcripts. As mentioned, this third phase of analysis involved first intensive open coding of three cases: Emily, Sophie, Jade. I selected participants for analysis based on diversity of cases in order to focus on potential contradictions rather than confirm emerging themes. With Charlotte as an anchor point, I next decided to analyse the case of Emily who seemed very different in terms of nationality, socio-economic background and, perhaps most importantly, career. Charlotte was driven by corporate career ambitions of financial/power gain, whereas Emily was studying to be a social worker with ambitions to help others. Influenced by Charlotte's analysis in terms of focusing on ideological influences, I began the process of open coding. As noted by Richards and Morse (2007), open coding often begins through descriptive codes that given factual, surface level accounts of the data. I began with this coding strategy in order to come to grips with Emily's account. This process amounted to over 120 codes. At this point, I paused to condense the codes into topics that would allow me to categorise various codes into themes. But this process still did not result in any sense of abstraction. Therefore, over the course of a week, I interrogated the codes, printing them out and taking notes, asking myself how they related to one another. Richards and Morse (2007, 141) refer to this process as analytic coding used to 'make, celebrate, illustrate, and develop categories theoretically'. Thus, a process of abstraction occurred whereby codes such as 'taking charge' and 'in control' became more theoretically dense codes such as 'personal responsibility'. This process resulted in a code list (Appendix IV) that were then used to analyse the rest of the cases, although as cases were analysed, new codes continued to emerge and the abstraction process was ongoing, as further discussed.

After analysing Emily's case, I wrote a critical thematic case study. This process allowed me to become more familiar with the analysis and to compare her case study to Charlotte's. Moreover, it gave me space to re-contextualise the data and consider contradictions within the case, questioning the consequences of the story as it was told in the interview setting and considering ideological influences or ways of being. After completing this process, I further reflected on the codes. At that point I decided to analyse Sophie and Jade's interviews. Sophie is the oldest participant and she is also British. I sensed that her case differed most from Charlotte and Emily given that she had grown up in Edinburgh, she is an only child, and she has a stable career path. I next considered Jade because she is the youngest participant. I sensed her case to be quite different from the other three given that she is perhaps the least socio-economically advantaged of the participants, she is the least educated and the least secure in terms of career. Conversely, whereas Charlotte, Emily, and Sophie are single, Jade

is engaged, married and pregnant by the end of the study. The coding process for both Sophie and Jade further sharpened the abstraction of codes through both continuous integration of codes and generating new codes, as well as writing case studies. In total, there were 3.5 cases written; that is, as I began writing Jade's case, I realised that perhaps it was time to move toward analysis of the remaining cases. There were significant overlapping, interacting and contradicting themes amongst the four cases that suggested I could forge ahead and code the remaining cases with a set code list, though mindful to adding new codes or integrating old codes if need be.

In order to create a 'set' list of codes, I analysed the four cases in depth, through reading both case studies and a print-out of all of the codes, creating mind maps from this analysis, first of each participant and then of specific themes. For example, a main theme that emerged was that of Control, underpinned by themes such as self-monitoring, anxiety/rationalisation, personal responsibility, managing choices and so forth (see Appendix VI). I drew mind maps for themes of control, desire, stuff/digital and gender. This enable me to 1) create a fixed set of codes and 2) design a layout for the findings chapters. Over the next six months, I wrote my findings chapters whilst coding the remaining participant cases. These overlapping processes facilitated the emergence of themes given that I was in the thick of the data whilst writing up. It enabled me to consider context and to maintain a critical perspective, both analysing data broadly and honing in on pieces of text analysed in the spirit of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 2013; Caruana et al. 2008) – asking questions like to what audience is she speaking; what is being said; what is not being said; what is the logical consequence of certain statements; what ideologies and discourses are present in the text? Reflexively speaking, during this phase of data analysis I began work on another project that used CDA as its approach; this undoubtedly influenced my experience of analysing and writing up. Importantly, I initially wrote the findings section without referring to literature, only returning to it in the latter months. This further facilitated findings and critique that emerged from the study, rather than findings that emerged from the literature and were imposed on the data.

3.4.   Limitations and conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodological process that developed though reflection on literature, data generation and data analysis. This process emerged inductively and evolved throughout data generation and analysis. What began as an interpretive study of the experience of young women in consumer culture became a critical study with the aim of exploring the process of subject constitution of young women through consumer culture and its ideological effects. As detailed, data was generated through critical, qualitative

engagement with 15 participants over the course of 18 months. Participants engaged in multiple interviews, each with its own focus (life history, stuff, digital and semi-structured thematic interview guide).

As with any method there are limitations or drawbacks. This study emerged through my engagement with 15 women. It was organic in its production, particularly given the evolving philosophical stance and the study design and analysis. Therefore, one potential drawback is the shift from an existential-phenomenological to a critical study. Perhaps early parts of the research design and data generation process would have benefitted from a more critical perspective. Second, as with all research 'mess' (Law 2004) is part of the process: therefore, bumps along the way such as losing bits of recording that had to be made up for with detailed notes recalled from memory just after the interview (Tiffany and Alicja's stuff interview where I lost about 20 minutes of the recording) or forgetting to ask certain questions given the unstructured interview process may have affected the quality of the data at times. A third particular drawback is the lack of diversity, in some respects, in the sample. For example, the lack of socio-economic diversity – as reflected on earlier – was particularly disappointing. Although I made some effort to diversify away from educated spaces (e.g., the university setting) and to reach out those less socio-economically privileged, this was very difficult to do given the bias of my social network as middle class and well-educated. Furthermore, efforts to attract participants who were complete strangers was very difficult, other than from feminist online networks. With these limitations in mind it is also important to note that this study and its methodology emerged from one social actor's (me) engagement with the field (15 participants) over time. Thus, it was formed from unique interactions, both academic and personal, in a specific space and time. Reflexively engaging in discussion of the methodology, and exposing its means of production, warts-and-all as attempted in this section, is the only way of addressing the methodology's limitations. In this way, I hope this chapter illuminates the production of the findings of this study which attempt to form a critical reflection on the subjugation of young women by consumer culture.

4. INTRODUCTION TO FINDINGS: BEING A WOMAN

As detailed in Section 3.2., this study asks: how does consumer culture guide or influence young women's way-of-being in everyday life? Therefore, the findings of this study, presented in this and the next three chapters, are predicated on the experiences of participants who are living the cultural category of *young woman*. That is, following Butler's (2005) argument that we can only give an account of ourselves through the norms and cultural settings within which we are embedded, the experiences accounted for in chapters five through seven are based on the the subject position of 'young woman' in a certain environment (e.g., western, neoliberal). These chapters discuss: being a 'consumer', particularly driven by engagement with social media; the experience of the self as a project; and exploring 'identity' through identification theory (Fuss 1995). The purpose of this introductory interlude is to sensitise the reader to the thoughts that the participants of this study have about being a woman: what are their experiences, thoughts and opinions? Each ensuing chapter reflects these experiences and expands upon emergent themes; therefore, this chapter acts to foreground the findings and situate this research in the experience of the participants *as young women*.

4.1. Being a woman today…

> *I guess it all comes down to this 'having it all' thing [...] I think it's like, there's an expectation for you to be all of these things: you have to be a mum and you have to be successful at your career and you have to be a party animal and you have to be the demure, virginal good woman that somebody wants to marry, but you've got to be a really good time and you've got to feel bad about yourself when you go out and get shitfaced and have to get picked up by your husband at the club and you're berated for being sick in the car. All that kind of stuff. You have to be immediately great at handling babies and know exactly what to do. Like people give you these babies and [my husband] is like, 'What do I do now?' I'm like, 'I don't know, I've had as much experience as you've had'. But then you're expected by your peers and by yourself to do things for you and to do them well and to represent women well and be that modern women because people fought for you to have the vote and they fought for you to have equal rights and equal pay and you therefore shouldn't give up your job to have a baby. (Emma)*

Discussed in the literature review, in *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan (1963) asserts that there is a 'problem that has no name' afflicting 1950s American women. This 'problem' related to a general malaise, dissatisfaction, and despair that women felt in pursuing the ideal feminine self promoted in societal discourse. Freidan describes a disconnection between how women were *supposed* to act – as good mothers, attractive wives and efficient homemakers – in order to attain existential fulfilment and the reality of their lived experience, leaving many of her participants wondering, 'is this all?' Over 50 years since the publication of the text

that arguably sparked second-wave feminism (Maclaran 2015), young women in this study also seem to experience a 'problem that has no name' in the form of pervasive anxiety to perform, to be everything to everyone (McRobbie 2015). Reflected in Emma's words, the participants of this study ask themselves: '*Can I have it all?*'. The questions 'is this all?' and 'can I have it all?' are both existential anxieties – 'who am I?' – that clash with the social – 'who am I supposed to be?' – plaguing participants as they navigate the space between what societal discourse tells them about being a woman, and their lived reality. This interlude is therefore concerned with understanding the lived experience of the present day 'problem that has no name'.

So how do the women of this study experience life *as a woman*? As Harvey (1990) explains, it is important for the critical researcher to engage participants in discussion about the discourses that oppress them, in this case gender. As such, in the final interview, I asked participants questions related to their experiences of living their gender, as well as questions related to feminism. Below are responses from participants who were asked the question 'Complete this statement. It's a woman's lot to be…' and who responded directly:

1. *Emily: It's a woman's lot to be… well the first word I thought was **free** (laugh).*
2. *Sophie: Ohhh…. **Everything**! (laugh).*
3. *Tiffany: Hmm (long pause) **Anything she'd like to be**.*
4. *Catriona: Well cook or cleaner or whatever.*
5. *Charlotte: I think it's a woman's lot to just **stand for themselves**. And just believe in themselves I think.*
6. *Simone: **Whatever she wants.***
7. *Gretchen: I don't know if you can actually complete this. It's a generalized answer because I think gender differences are not as big anymore, at least **if you don't let them be that big**.*
8. *Katie: I would say it's a woman's lot to be a harder worker. I think women have to work twice as hard as men.*
9. *Elizabeth: **Whatever she wants.***
10. *Sierra: **Whatever the fuck she wants to be**.*
11. *Emma: It's a woman's lot to be required to be **good at everything**.*
12. *Madison: Strong. Strong in all aspects. You're the pillar that **holds everything up** around you.*

The above answers indicate the ambiguity and contradictions women face in navigating their lived experiences as *women.* Many responses are along the lines of 'whatever she wants', suggesting a sense of agency that should allow women to take *personal responsibility* for shaping their future, and implying that, unlike Friedan's 1950s women, young women today have the ability to do so (Rottenberg 2014). Importantly, however, some participants claim this as an ideal but recognise reality as very different; that is, as one in which women have unrealistic and excessive expectations placed on them, demands to be 'good at everything' – another prevalent response – or, like Emma notes in the opening quote, demands to 'have it

all' (McRobbie 2015). Thus, there is a sense of both a postfeminist milieu in which feminism is rejected as a thing of the past (Tasker and Negra 2007) and neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg 2014) in which young women understand their position as subjugated and support the feminist movement, but subscribe to neoliberal principles of individualism and personal responsibility in combatting injustice. Drawn from the quotes above, I will detail three broad positions related to being a woman:

1) *Being a woman is no different from being a man. Women simply use sexism as an excuse for personal failings.*
2) *Being a woman means you <u>should</u> be able to be free to do whatever you want but more often than not, women are still burdened by responsibilities and expectations that men don't experience.*
3) *Being a woman still means being a subordinated gender in which women are relegated to a lesser position than men.*

4.1.1.   Being a woman is no different from being a man…

Most women I think they, they are feminist because they try to get attention rather than actually fighting a cause. Because there are underlying problems in society where women don't get paid the same, but then, is it a gender issue or is it a personality issue?... I think a lot of the arguments are flawed, at least in the society like Britain. (Gretchen)

As Gretchen explains, some participants identify with postfeminist claims that the fight is over, that second-wave feminism has 'worked' in developed countries like Britain and women who complain about sexism, injustice or inequality are making excuses for their personal failings. This is a moralising argument in which Gretchen draws on familiar gender tropes (women as attention-seekers) and othering (some women have 'personality issues' that inhibit their success compared to men) to exalt her position as unaffected by these supposed societal issues. Tiffany makes similar claims, though she is quite different from Gretchen both in nationality (American, whereas Gretchen is German) and in her way-of-being: whereas Gretchen is more concerned with career, Tiffany prides herself in her appearance, conforming to hyper-feminine standards of beauty, asserting: '*I'm actually really girly; there would be like a lot of like sheer, lace, bows on pretty much everything*'. At the same time, she is career-oriented and inspired by strong, independent women, espousing many values of second-wave feminism in her lived experience, such as gaining a master's degree, pursuing a career, and not depending on a man for financial support. Tiffany's understanding and experiences of being a woman further reflect a postfeminist (in the sense that she rejects feminism) and neoliberal attitude of personal responsibility also present in Gretchen's account. Drawing on her answer to the question 'Complete this statement: it's a woman's lot to be…' Tiffany responds:

Tiffany: Anything she'd like to be. I, um, I don't know. I'm not a feminist by any means but I believe that as a woman you have actually a lot more power than a man. The only way that, you know, like society or career anything can keep you down is what you limit yourself to. And I've never…I've never been one to use my gender in any way. I think that is… it's an excuse for something, good or bad. I don't believe in that, so. So yeah, anything you want to be.

Interviewer: What do you mean when you say you think women have more power?

Tiffany: I think because you have, like you have a power over a lot of men as a woman if you harness, you know, your womanly instincts and sexuality correctly. Um but I think, there's, I mean women are more educated than men now. Women, you know, the only thing we lack is pretty much the physical abilities but you're just as smart, you're just as capable, um yeah. I just don't, I think sometimes, maybe because people keep themselves down, they like to think it's because they're a woman. I think that guys would love to play into that, keep us down a level. And I think if a lot more women believe in themselves, and believe that there was no difference, then there wouldn't be.

For Tiffany, aside from physical differences, women are 'just as capable' as men and in some ways more powerful in terms of sexuality and education; perhaps she mentions the latter to justify her invocation of the former. Her narrative draws on personal agency in overcoming societal issues (*'the only way that…society or career anything can keep you down is what you limit yourself to'*) that she views as manufactured, propagated by a continued discourse of feminism and inequality and by excuses for *personal* failings. Tiffany derides feminists in relation to herself, claiming *'I've <u>never</u> been one to use my gender in any way'*, though in the next breath commenting she uses her 'womanly instincts' to gain <u>power</u> over men. This contradictory stance suggests sexual subjectification (Gill 2003) and ideals of traditional femininity entwined with neoliberal values of agency and ability. In advocating values of a strong, independent yet sexualised version of what it is to be a woman, Tiffany's attitude conveys a sense of superiority in the *othering* of women who feel subordinated (<u>*they like to think it's because they're a woman*</u>), a mind-set which fractures the feminist movement (women against women) and contributes to anxiety-provoking way-of-being through the judgement of others ultimately in comparison to the self (me *versus* them).

Importantly, this view of feminism or experience of being a woman also contributes to anxiety as values of agency and choice are often imagined rather than experienced in real life – as explored further in Chapter 6. Moreover, the burden of responsibility is placed on the individual to rationalise choices and outcomes. For example, Elizabeth explains:

*I know that there is a big gender equality issue, but I don't feel in recent years that women are ever stopped from doing what they **want**. There shouldn't really be an issue. There is quite a lot of debate, because in my profession [speech therapy], it's female. There are two males, and I have no problem with the fact that it's female dominated because that's what women **want**. No one is making them do it. If I **want** to be…an engineer I would do it. I don't **want** to. I **want** to do something that is*

*female. It doesn't bother me. Also, I **would quite like to** be a housewife at some*
point. There's nothing wrong with that.

Like Tiffany and Gretchen, Elizabeth experiences gendered roles in terms of agency: women can do what they want to do; nothing is forced on them. Drawing on examples from her own life to generalise to the case of other women like Tiffany, she asserts that she *chooses* a gendered career, and she could *choose* whatever career she <u>*desires*</u>. Elizabeth explains agency and choice through terms of desire such as *want* and *would like*. She experiences the gendered construction of roles as a consequence of individual desire and defends the femininity of her profession as well as her wish to embrace the traditionally feminine role of becoming a housewife, perhaps like her mother, in terms of desire. This implies a dominant consumer culture in which individuals are encouraged to have (Fromm 1976) and to fulfil their fantasies and desires (Lasch 1979), at least for those in a privileged socio-economic position like Elizabeth, for whom becoming a housewife is a financial possibility. But, whereas Tiffany seems defiant and superior in her phrasing, Elizabeth is perhaps less confident and admits that she suffers from a 'stress problem':

> *Elizabeth: [I] stress out quite a lot. Like a lot. But everyone stresses out.*
>
> *Interviewer: Everyone does. About like your job and…*
>
> *Elizabeth: No, I'll stress about what I'm wearing the next day. Like I used to have a really, really bad stress problem when I was at school. It's better now. Like I can handle it a little bit better, but it's fine. I'm used to it because I've always had since I was 8 years old, stress.*
>
> *Interviewer: Do you mean stress by anxiety?*
>
> *Elizabeth: Yes. Well, less anxiety and more worrying about lots of different things all the time.*

Elizabeth's worry about her appearance is in line with traditional values of women-as-object in a setting where she believes herself to be liberated. She comforts herself with the thought that 'everyone stresses out', intimating a *desire* to be like others, but also asserting agency in the statement that she can handle her stress problem. In this sense, everyday anxiety about 'lots of different things' is a normalised part of Elizabeth's life that she is reticent to harp on about during the interview.

The belief that feminism has 'worked' and that individuals have agency *to have (or be) what they desire* and are therefore personally responsible for their choices does not appear to square with the lived experience. For example, Tiffany repeatedly refers to events in her life as random or lucky (e.g., '*it kind of happened randomly*'; '*I came here randomly*'; '*I'm really lucky*'; '*if you would have asked me a year ago what my life was going to be like, I had no clue this is what I was going to be doing*'). Therefore, in lived experience participants seem to feel pressured from

personal responsibility implicated in choice, as denoted by a postfeminist, neoliberal discourse (Gill 2003; Rottenberg 2014; McRobbie 2015). This is reflected not only in Elizabeth's example but also in Gretchen's admission that she becomes overwhelmed with anxiety at times about (not) being successful in her studies, given a pressure of her age (28) as an undergraduate and the realisation that '*this needs to work out because I had a career change and I'm like close to my 30s, so I can't really have another career change*'. Another avenue that perpetuates anxiety, at least in the cases of Tiffany and Elizabeth, is that materialistic and appearance-oriented values that seem more characteristic of Friedan's era (i.e., woman-as-object). This triggers an overemphasis on opinions of others in the formation of self-esteem, feeling pressure to look their best in order to be their best, as explored in Chapters 5 and 6.

4.1.2.   Being a woman means you *should* be free…

Whilst Elizabeth, Tiffany and Gretchen embrace a postfeminist philosophy and experience being a woman as a matter of choice and personal agency, rejecting the feminist movement as it currently stands, most participants express awareness of the structural difficulties women face. As Rottenberg notes (2014), they are aware of feminist issues and some might identify as feminists, but they attribute change to individual agency and envision a future in which they can *choose* a life course and career. However, beliefs related to biological determinism and pressures on women in society continue to hamper their ideals of freedom and choice. Moreover, many contradictions in understanding what it is to be a woman go unarticulated. For example, Emily answers that it is a woman's lot to be free. She expands: '*I totally don't think that women need to just get married and have kids and stay at home. I think they should be free to choose what they want and what appeals to them*'. In her own life, she eschews 'traditional' ideals of needing a relationship or children by a certain age. In the first interview, she asserts: '*I don't like have that like drive that I must be married and have kids by the time I'm 36 or else I'll reach an expiration date*'. But when she considers her own position further in the final interview, she retreats to traditional norms, noting that women still have to 'compromise'. She discusses raising children to illustrate her point:

> *If I ever ended up having a kid, I wouldn't want to have the career that I would want otherwise cos I know how important it is to like develop relationships with your children like in the first three years in particular but longer and I would know that I would be setting them up for their life like later on based on how I lived my life with them when they were really young so. I would not be like the 9-5 career woman. I'd probably work part-time or something so I could be around for my child.*

In this hypothetical scenario, Emily's career ambitions fade as she considers the possibility that she might have to give up her career for her children. When I ask her why she doesn't consider that the father might be equally involved in childrearing, she notes both that she

would like an equal partner, but that women might be biologically more inclined to care for children:

> *I think I'd want to [work part-time] cos I would feel like it would be the right thing to do. Yeah it's so hard to talk about hypothetically cos I know so many more emotions would be involved and like 'Oh this is my daugh-my baby I never want to leave her I want to be with her all the time'. Or whatnot. But, yeah, I'm not…maybe is that a gender construct that women are always told they're supposed to stay at home with their kids? I don't know! I don't think so. I'd kind of say it's in our DNA (laugh) to be nurturing. Because we are childbearing, built to be childbearing.*

The sense that women are biologically or genetically predisposed to childrearing clashes with beliefs about freedom and possibility, possibly contributing to a sense of anxiety. Though Emily's narrative is infused with ideals of freedom, independence and choice, she also adheres to beliefs of biological determinism and 'fact' that women *are* different than men (Butler 1991). She tentatively arrives at this opinion, questioning ('*I don't know!*', '*I'd kind of say*') but rejecting ('*because we are childbearing*') ideas of gender as a social construct. Sophie articulates these contradictions and how they manifest in her experience:

> *Sophie: I guess as modern women, we are told that we can do whatever we want but then you do have societal pressures to settle down, have kids and have a family, a car, a job, you know a house, whatever, ehm, you've got to be—you're judged a lot more on how you look, how you are in meetings, how you are… in every part of your life, I think so a woman has to be lots of different things I think.*
>
> *Interviewer: You think that's more so than a man?*
>
> *Sophie: Yes.*
>
> *Interviewer: In what sense?*
>
> *Sophie: Well, I guess men put themselves under pressure as well and look at their peers and friends and think 'Oh he's earning more than me' and like I think its more in that kind of sense rather than 'Oh I better settle down now', you know, or I better… walking down the street they don't think that people look at them and—I don't think they get that sort of feeling that you know… you just got a bit more, I don't know they've got it easier.*

Sophie reflects on a pressure to have it all, reminiscent of Emma, and the pressure to 'settle down', perhaps arising from her situation as single and nearing her mid-thirties. She also notes that where men might be under duress in terms of careers and finances, women experience multi-directional pressures regarding career, family, behaviour, and appearance, indicating a feeling of constantly being under surveillance, as McRobbie (2015) describes in relation to the pressure to be 'perfect'. Sophie also laments that men have it easier than women, something the majority of participants experience. Simone observes: '*I think it might have been slightly easier to be a guy, definitely a lot easier. […] I don't think there is quite as much a social pressure on men*'. As Emily explains, if she were a man: '*The expectations on me would be*

different. I know because every time I talk to my parents it's always 'When are you going to get married, when are you going to give me grandkids? […] And I know they never say that to my brother, like definitely'. Emily feels that pressure to fulfil traditional feminine ideals of marriage and children is especially extreme, despite the fact that her brother may be more inclined to marry: '*I know when they have the conversations with my brother it's like "Well what do you want to do with your life? Like what kind of career do you want to have?" Whereas it's much less, I get that much less than my brother. Even though I'm probably, like my brother's more family inclined and I'm more career driven'.* Consequently, she must justify her actions more than her brother, from travelling alone to not necessarily wanting a family. These justifications and expectations culminate in a pressure on women to be good at everything, and to be there for everyone. Madison explains: '*[it's a woman's lot to be] strong in all aspects. You're the pillar that holds everything up around you. […] You're the support and encouragement for your children, for your husband […] you're the support. You're what everyone needs'.* For Madison, female emotion and anxiety is thus relegated to a private space, not dissimilar from what Freidan's participants experienced suffering privately from a 'problem that could not be named'. Madison continues: '*I think a lot of time, for women, we have to do our failing in private. […] I think that sometimes we have to feel alone, feel in private for the sake of others'.* From these examples, it seems that young women today experience the similar pressures as in Betty Friedan's day, but these pressures are supplemented with demands to be successful in the realm of production as well, in terms of education, career and balancing both areas.

In a final example, Sierra echoes the above feelings about the challenges women face, particularly emphasising neoliberal values of maximising potential. Sierra's response illustrates how these women deal with or approach the challenges intrinsic to their subjectivity as women. Her response is also indicative of the contradictory scripts inherent in a postfeminist neoliberal discourse. Spirited in tone, Sierra asserts women can be '*whatever the fuck they want*':

> *I think it's a woman lot to be the best human being that she can be. Whatever that means. I think it looks different. For some people, like my friend, that's being a wife and a mother and a stay-at-home-mum. If that's the best human being that you can be, be the best. But that's not me so.*

Sierra initially constructs her argument on the assumption that women have every opportunity to define themselves in a way that maximises potential. But this dissolves into a rejection of identification (Fuss 1995) with traditional femininity though her friend. Sierra's choice of this example indicates the ever-strong association between women and traditional feminine roles. Sierra defends the choices of women who retreat to these roles whilst rejecting that possibility for herself, although by all accounts, this disavowed identification

is one she also desires given repeated comments throughout the interview process about wanting to find a husband and become a mother. This perhaps encapsulates the plight of the participants: contradictory identifications and desires intermingle as pressures mount to be successful in all areas, contributing to a pervasive sense of anxiety. But Sierra, along with some of the other participants such as Emily, frames being a woman as a welcome challenge: *'I think being a woman is the most important thing in my life… It makes me, it makes you stronger. Being a man is so easy. You can do anything you want, no one asks questions, you get like in…every culture the man is like the king and, and it's so stupid so I think it would be making me lazy I think that's why men are lazy honestly.'* Again, this chimes with neoliberal fantasy of overcoming challenge and adversity through personal striving. Sierra rationalises the hegemonic position of men as an opportunity for personal growth, rather than an obstacle. This viewpoint may reflect a desire to feel in control of her life; she is, at other points in the interview, riddled with anxieties about her life course and her position in comparison to her peers.

4.1.3.   Being a woman still means being a subordinated gender…

The third attitude that participants express in relation to being a woman is a feeling that woman are still the subjugated gender, hardly progressed from the traditional gender norms typical of the 1950s. This opinion, however, is not dramatically different from the above position which is also predicated to some extent on this feeling. Two participants in particular, however, assert that women are stuck in traditional gendered roles. For example, Katie – who was interviewed with Elizabeth, discussed in the first sub-section, though answered this question without Elizabeth present – explains:

> *I think women have to work twice as hard as men. In my profession it's maybe not too bad because it's nursing and in mental health nursing there are quite a lot of guys as well. But there are more male doctors and you have to prove to yourself to people in a job like mine that you are emotionally strong enough. Because women are emotional and can't deal with pain and death and all that kind of stuff. So yeah. In other jobs as well, women have to work a lot…I know my sister-in-law's sister, she works with primarily males and she's the one that's there from seven to eleven while they're out schmoozing with the clients and all of that. She's the one doing the paperwork. I think even though it's 2015, you still find it's like that. Even men are more likely to move up the chain, even in nursing.*

Katie is disheartened by her professional position as a woman in comparison to a man, in a traditionally female profession but a male-dominated workplace. She finds it necessary to 'prove herself' and to work harder, implying that women are still the subordinated gender, the second sex, though no longer necessarily consigned to the space of the home. Catriona similarly views a woman's lot in the traditional sense, although she doesn't desire this position. When asked the question, she responds that it is a woman's lot to *be 'well cook or*

cleaner or whatever'. When I press her to expand her answer, she explains: *'I guess, I think [it's a woman's lot to be] quite traditional, but at the same time, I wouldn't associate myself with that'*. For Catriona, traditional means: *'sitting at home all day waiting on the man to come home'*, which she states with a face of disgust. She desires something different from this traditional construct that she has experienced in her nuclear family, noting: *'I want to be my own person, not this person that's like, yeah I guess more earning your own money and doing your own thing rather than getting your allowance or whatever'*. This again expresses a desire for agency, control and independence in relation to financial means, rather than being directly subordinated by a man. These desires arguably should no longer be in question in this day and age, but are evidently still concerns for young women today.

Despite these views, both Katie and Catriona find it difficult to identify with the feminist movement. Katie describes:

> *For me a feminist is just someone who believes in equal rights for women. But I know other women who think that it's burning your bra and basically saying that men are evil, people like that. For me, that's not feminism, that's just emasculating. I like when [my boyfriend] opens the door for me and I don't think that makes me any weaker of a woman. […] He opens the door for me and stuff or he walks on the outside of the pavement, stuff like that. To me that's manners. Like if I was with a child, I would do the same thing. I have heard a lot of people say, 'Well you can't have it both ways, you can't have a man open a door for you and be a feminist'. But considering for me feminism is literally a case of I just want the same pay, I just want the same rights as my male colleagues and all that kind of stuff, if you want to open a door for me go ahead and open the door for me. […] So to these really militant women, they wouldn't consider me a feminist, they would probably consider me quite weak.*

This presents a contradictory standpoint: on the one hand, Katie is reflexive about the inequalities and unfairness inherent in being a woman; on the other hand, she is disillusioned by and therefore partially rejects the label of feminism given its more recent postfeminist reputation as a bra-burning and man-hating movement that rejects all forms traditional femininity and chivalry. She explains that while she desires equality, she enjoys her partner treating her *as a woman*. She describes what a man's behaviour to woman *should be* as analogous to how she would act towards a child, thus equating the power position of man/woman to parent/child, hinting toward a continued sense of inferiority as a woman. This is further intimated by consideration of herself from the viewpoint of a *'militant woman'* who would consider her *'quite weak'*. Some of her rejection of the movement may have been influenced by Elizabeth who had returned by this point to interject, imposing her view on Katie: *'if you're going for what the newspapers term as a feminist then <u>we're</u> definitely not feminists'*. Importantly, Elizabeth seems to be in a position of power in the friendship, influencing many of Katie's opinions as Katie seeks affirmation from her friend, at least more frequently than

Elizabeth. Regardless, these views position women as subordinated, yet rejecting the very movement that seeks to emancipate them, resulting in a lived experience beset with contradiction, perplexity and ultimately anxiety.

4.2. Having it all? Contradictions and anxiety

> *Alicja: I think it's really easy to become an overly anxious woman. Apparently there are some studies from Sweden that this whole equality in Sweden resulted in women having to have plastic, I don't know the word for that, but something they have to put inside because at night they are like… (gesturing towards her mouth)*
>
> *Interviewer: Oh, they're grinding their teeth. Mouth guards.*
>
> *Alicja: Yeah. And it doesn't happen to men.*

The examples above suggest a confused and contradictory cultural script that women experience in everyday life, particularly in the formative time of 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett 2004) as they come to terms with existential questions (who am I?) that fuse with social expectations (who should I be?). Whilst ideals of freedom and equality are espoused by all participants, the reality of lived experience is more muddled as a pressure to 'have it all' begins to mean not equality and shared roles and responsibilities, but mastery of both the traditional feminine space (e.g., appearance, child-rearing) and spaces open to women during second-wave feminism (e.g., professional life). Alicja speculates that, despite instances of gender equality and a push for men to become more involved in traditionally feminine tasks, biological essentialism constrains experiences of women. She explains:

> *I think a lot of people are not really imaginative about changes that could happen. My boyfriend, I think I gave you this example once, about how he feels that women after having a child just know how to care for the baby. Like it is instinct or something like that. I think a lot of people still think in these terms. I think that men can be equally good fathers; it's just a matter of creating this background.*

Despite this 'background' existing in certain socially progressive countries like Sweden, Alicja finds it telling that women are still 'stressed'. Postfeminist and neoliberal discourses of choice and agency (Gill 2003) increase pressure on young women to be responsible for themselves (Rottenberg 2014), and render vocalisations of sexism or oppression as weaknesses of individual women rather than issues intrinsic to inequality and patriarchal, hegemonic structural forces (McRobbie 2008). These contradictions and confusions contribute to a 'problem that has no name' in terms of a pervasive sense of anxiety in everyday life as women navigate demands to 'have it all'. Whilst seven participants suffer or have suffered from clinical anxiety and depression related to specific personal circumstances (typically related to family situations such as divorce, death, or abuse), cultural norms and

scripts, many of which stemming from consumer culture, that confront women do little to alleviate anxiety in the interpersonal sphere.

The remaining empirical chapters seek to develop nascent themes from this introduction. First, the role of consumption emerges as shaping the experiences of these young women who focus on appearance and the material in understanding themselves as young women, or as consumers. This is evident in Elizabeth and Tiffany's concern with appearance and in relation to Sophie's comment that women feel pressured as others look *at* them. This will be discussed in Chapter 5. Next, in Chapter 6, I discuss a way-of-being that emerges in which the self is imagined as a project, as well as the experiences of participants in living such a subject position. This is evident across participant accounts that indicate valuing autonomous choice and agency in the making of the self (e.g., Catriona stating *'I want to be my own person'*, Elizabeth desiring choice in terms of career, or Tiffany and Gretchen espousing values of personal responsibility in overcoming gender inequality). In the final empirical chapter, I present three participant cases (Emily, Sophie and Jade) that illustrate processes of subject constitution: rather than discussing identity as an agentic, individual project, I examine each case through the psychoanalytic theory of identification (Fuss 1995), as illustrated in this chapter by Sierra.

5. ALWAYS A CONSUMER?

As demonstrated in this chapter, the young women in this study feel they are always consumers, in a way that appears to be experienced as *restrictive* rather than empowering (McAlexander et al. 2014) or productive (Arnould and Thompson 2005); they reflexively acknowledge that they cannot escape from the subject position of 'consumer' (Kozinets 2002). This is particularly reinforced through social media, a space infused with advertising and consumption, experienced as interwoven with 'real' life and therefore similarly unescapable (Jenkins 2006). The digital sphere – representative of digital technologies increasingly pervading everyday life in an 'Information Age' (Orton-Johnson and Prior 2013) – is a relatively nascent area of study in consumer research that is often regarded separately rather than simply a part of life (Belk 2013; boyd 2014). Moreover, a key finding in terms of the digital consumption sphere – through which 'real life' consumption is increasingly mediated – is that social media reinforces heteronormative gender ideals and thus, for these young women, standards of hegemonic femininity (Schippers 2007). Thus, in this chapter I first discuss participant reflections on living the subject position of *consumer.* Because participants often cite digital technologies such as social media in their experience of being a consumer, I next discuss the intersection of real and digital life as participants (sometimes attempt to) negotiate their engagement with digital technologies, particularly social media, that are increasingly pervasive and often manifest as vehicles of consumerism. Finally, I reflect on the reinforcement of hegemonic femininity through social media as participants look to and interact with platforms of consumption in understanding themselves as women.

5.1.   An unavoidable consumer subjectivity

In consumer research, the tendency is to label the subject as 'consumer'. As Cova et al. (2013) remind us, the term *consumer* is ideological in itself, betraying the desire of consumer researchers to experience life as revolving around consumption activities, also discerned by Graeber (2011) from a social anthropology perspective. But Fitchett et al. (2014), along with the previously cited authors, warn that this risks propagating a neoliberal ideological position, and suggest as a corrective that consumer researchers examine moments in which consumers *do not* consume or engage in consumption activities. Along this line of argument, the final interview guide included the question: *Are there moments in which you consider yourself a consumer? Are there moments in which you do not?* I also reflected through analysis on the *fairness* or *justness* of uncritically labelling participants as consumers, thereby conducting an analysis on the assumption that these participants—these humans—*are* consumers. I decided against this, in part based on the reflexive understanding of my own aversion to being

labelled as a *consumer*; to me this prioritises my capacity to consume over my capacity for being a human, thereby espousing a neoliberal view of the person-as-consumer (Becker 1992). I contemplated how participant accounts, particularly in the first interview about life history, centred on existential events, ponderings and anxieties in which participants attempt to reconcile what it is to be a person within their social and societal milieu, sometimes embedded within consumption practices and other times not. I realised that participants also indicated, to varying extents, embarrassment or shame over materialistic habits, particularly during the in-home and digital show-and-tell interviews, further reflected in their grudging acceptance of their position as consumer when answering the question poised above. From these observations I write this section on being a consumer and on the feeling of participants that they are trapped in a consumer subjectivity, often to their chagrin.

5.1.1.   Reflections: On being a consumer

Participants overwhelmingly consider themselves consumers. Often, it is difficult to elicit responses as to when they do not consider themselves consumers. Participants cite bombardment of advertising and marketing in everyday life for reasons they feel that they are consumers (e.g., Tiffany: '*just the amount of advertisements, marketing <u>out there</u> I feel like I always consume, like literally consuming something*'). Besieged by advertising and marketing, participants experience the subject position 'consumer' as inescapable, for some even in moments when they are not engaging in the act of purchase. This is indicated by Tiffany's use of the words *out there* in reference to marketing, an implicit comparison to *in here* or what could be interpreted as the self as separate from marketing that acts as an outside force attempting to work its way in, and by all accounts has succeeded as Tiffany feels that she is always consuming. As Emily describes: '*I'm pretty, well a consumer all the time coz I'm always a consumer of information like even when I'm not intentionally like consciously consuming, when I'm walking down the street and I'm reading billboards like I'm consuming that information*'. In this vein, some participants pinpoint desire (Belk et al. 2005) propagated by a culture of consumption in their feeling of being a consumer. Catriona considers herself (and others by her use of the second person) a consumer: '*probably when you're buying stuff you don't need*'. She mentions Black Friday, often cited as the biggest shopping day of the year, both expressing disdain for those '*going mental and buying stuff because it was cheap*' and implicating herself in the consumerism: '*I mean I wouldn't rush to the shops, but at the same time, I was like, "Oh, I need to get another dress"*'. This suggests that she feels she is a consumer, though would rather not be, or indicates shame associated with the label *consumer* as she *others* 'them' – those who 'go mental'. Continuing her train of thought, Emily blames feeling like a consumer on unprovoked marketing as generating desire or creating ideals: '*I'm always consuming ideas*

about like what's, what's appropriate in a society like how men are supposed to look and how women are supposed to look and how you're supposed to dress and what you're supposed to drink and what not'. Again, the use of second-person 'you' indicates a sense of expectations and ideals shaped by something bigger than the self, in this case a discourse of consumerism, reading for pronouns as suggested in the VCR method of analysis. Emily implicates herself in the understanding of 'what's appropriate' by the use of 'you', whilst simultaneous wishing to detach herself, particularly noted by the use of 'men' and 'women' as *them* in the phrasing preceding her use of 'you'.

Abeni makes similar observations that are reminiscent of Fromm's *To Have or To Be?* (1976):

> *I think we are in a very consumerist society and I think we are consumerists in the sense of we are constantly being told we need, we want, <u>we should have, we should have, we should have</u>. <u>You should have this, you should have that, you should have that, you should have this</u>. Even now children are being consumed, you <u>have</u> children because, you <u>have</u>, <u>have</u> a husband, <u>have</u> a boyfriend, <u>have</u> a wife, <u>have</u> a girlfriend, you should <u>have</u>, you should constantly should <u>have</u>, you should <u>have</u> a holiday, you should <u>have</u> a coffee, you should <u>have</u> a... So what it means to me is a constant need to be constantly taking, owning, having.*

Abeni first connects herself to being a consumer (I think) and then including herself with others through third-person plural 'we'. She then shifts to 'you', like Emily and Catriona, to convey a sense of something *out there* that is monitoring *us* and imposing expectations and ideals on 'we' unknowing subjects, suggesting a consumer-as-dupe argument. Repetition is used to emphasise the strength of the message that encourages a *'constant need to be constantly taking, owning, having'*. Furthermore, Abeni believes that consumerist discourse is manifested in people (children, partners) being treated as *things to have*, suggesting the extremes to which the possessive tendencies of consumerism have reached. Abeni's observation resonates with concerns about the reification of human relations (Lukács 1971; Honneth 2008; Bewes 2002; Jameson 1979) as 'even now children' are treated as objects to take or possess. Marx's theory of commodity fetishism is the point of departure for Lukács' theory of reification in which he contends 'a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a "phantom objectivity", an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people' (1971, 83). Thus, like Abeni argues, that which should be human (a parent-child relationship) is alienated through objectivity. According to Agger (1991), commodity fetishism describes the making of commodities in which the social nature of the labour process is mystified. Marx writes: 'A commodity is a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's (sic) labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour' (Marx 1976, 286). Thus, Marx refers to this as a *fetishism* given the denial or refusal to admit

the forces that make consumption of the commodity possible, relating to the object in its terms and not the terms by which it it was produced – or the labour involved (Cluely and Dunne 2012). Thus, in the case of a commodity-driven society (i.e., today's consumer society), 'the process of production has mastery over man, instead of being controlled by him' (1976, 302). Updating Lukács's theory of reification from the perspective of the human need for recognition, Honneth describes the relationship to the self as reified 'in which we experience our feelings and desires as thing-like entities' (2008, 73) to be 'observed or manipulated' through the marketplace. That is: 'We would then even experience our own desires and feelings as thing-like objects capable of being passively observed or actively engendered' (75). In Abeni's observation, it is not the self that she views as reified but the relationship to others which are equated with things ('*have a wife*, *have a girlfriend*, *[...]* *have a holiday, you should have a coffee*). As Honneth (2008, 75) warns: 'as soon as subjects are compelled to conduct their social interactions primarily in the form of commodity exchange, they will necessarily perceive their partners in interaction, the goods to be exchanged, and finally themselves as thing-like objects; correspondingly they will relate to their surroundings in a merely contemplative fashion'. Thus, Abeni's observations, in the context of these findings, reignite concerns over the reification of social relations, a prospect often rejected in studies of consumer research (e.g., Bardhi et al. 2012)

In all examples, there is an underlying sense of shame or distaste associated with consumerism and the subject position 'consumer', first evident in the 'stuff' interviews. However, many participants exhibit materialistic tendencies, through the sheer amount of clothes, beauty supplies, handbags, technology and so forth that they have in their private space as well as through their love for objects. Though discussed in 6.3, and illustrated through the digital in 5.2 and 5.3, a brief example that highlights the latter, as well as commodity fetishism, is Madison and her Ted Baker jacket. In a conversational part of the fourth interview which was more informal and relaxed, Madison tells me '*I have been eyeing this coat in Jenners [an upmarket department store] for like a month and a half*', and I respond detailing my experiences:

Figure 5.1: Madison's Ted Baker jacket on model

> Madison: I have been eyeing it but I hadn't tried it on because I was like if I try this on I will love it and I will need it.
>
> Interviewer: And you'll buy it immediately.
>
> Madison: Yeah. So [my two friends] are like 'Oh my gosh Madison you should just try it, you should try it!' And so I did and I was just like, 'I am better person in this coat'. Like.

Interviewer: I have that feeling in my stupid coat. I have the same feeling. I just told my mom it was like 'Mom I know I don't, I don't ask you for much, but I need this coat'.

Madison: Yeah, I was just like I am I am a better person wearing this coat like I am, I am the better for it and um so yeah. I bought it and I am just obsessed with it which, of course it got little dirty going through security um to Dublin, which I was like and that happened because God thought I was coveting this coat too much and He was like this was my, my humbling experience for you that I was to obsessed with the coat and He was like 'Madison you are loving the coat more than anything else and you need to love it less because'... you know. Um 'you love no such thing this much'.

This passage illustrates the materialistic love that Madison has for a coat (Ahuvia 2005), a feeling with which I can empathise, as well as the shame she feels in 'coveting' a materialistic object and needing objects to bolster the self, illustrated by her description of an internal dialogue with a disciplinary super-ego figure, in this case God given her religious convictions (as noted in her biography in Appendix II) who punishes her for falling in love with this object by tarnishing it with dirt. This also exemplifies commodity fetishism as: 'The commodity fetish allows us to relate to commodities in such a way as to construct an idealized sense of self and draw attention away from the possibility that when we consume, what we are actually doing is wilfully engaging in the elevation of ourselves at the cost of the destruction of others' (Cluely and Dunne 2012, 260). The love for a coat (a commodity) is enabled by a capitalist system that mystifies production mechanisms and marries 'signs' with 'commodities' to become a commodity-sign (Baudrillard 1998) in which 'commodities hence become free to take on a wide range of cultural associations and illusions' (Featherstone 2007, 14). For Madison and myself, coats do not represent the process of labour but the symbolic meaning that eventually leads to object love or the pursuit of an ideal self through a commodity. However, Madison's expression of shame in the exchange through the metaphor of religion implies her action as wrong or, to extend the metaphor, a sin. This chimes with Žižek's observation: 'it is not the one who does not know the adverse consequences of their actions but rather the one who does know these adverse consequences and yet acts as if they did not know them that qualifies as today's commodity fetishist' (Cluely and Dunne 2012, 256).

Turning to examples from the question poised about being a consumer, Katie and Elizabeth similarly express a sense of materialism and shame in their responses:

Katie: When you see my shoe collection, you will definitely think I am [a consumer]! Or my DVD collection. Yes, definitely a consumer. I don't really think I can say that I'm not, but I don't really care. It's my money, I'll spend it on what I want. I do like fair trade stuff as well, so I kind of feel better about myself.

Elizabeth: Definitely. I think I wouldn't consider myself not a consumer.

Both answer instantly and affirmatively that they consider themselves consumers. Katie answers, with expectations of how the *other* would view her, in this case me: '*When you see my shoe collection, you will definitely think I am!*' She cites her obsession with shoes and DVDs enthusiastically, but her enthusiasm wanes as she defiantly claims she doesn't care and that if she earns money she has the right to spend it as she wishes. She then rationalises both her position as consumer and her consumption choices, asserting that she does buy fair trade products '*so I kind of feel better about myself*', suggesting that consumerism of shoes and DVDs that initially feels normal or acceptable is quickly rendered a shameful reflection *on the self* – like Madison equating the coat with self enhancement. In the same vein, Elizabeth later responds to the question – after a discussion in between about buying fair trade – with a double negative: '*Definitely. I think I wouldn't consider myself not a consumer.*' Again, she is initially sure of herself, responding with a definitive, but expresses doubt in prefacing a double negative with 'I think' rather than 'I know'. The double negative, *I wouldn't consider myself not*, suggest that she first ponders the opposite – that she might *not* be a consumer – before answering the question definitively. She logically deduces that because she doesn't consider herself not a consumer, she must then be a consumer, although this tentativeness suggests some sort of hesitancy to label herself *consumer*, a hesitancy evidenced across participant cases.

5.1.2.   Reflections: On *not* being a consumer

Oh I am definitely a consumer. I think everyone is a consumer. I think you have to be off the grid to not be a consumer. (Simone)

I wouldn't say I'm a consumer like here in my room really. Even though I have like products, I have name brands that I purchased and whatnot but I wouldn't consider myself a consumer in the same sense here. It's like a comfortable, protective space and I, yeah I guess I don't feel yeah… I guess I don't feel I have to measure up to any certain like image that's being portrayed I suppose here. (Emily)

The sense that marketing creates ideals toward which participants strive is not surprising (Ewen 1976) but perhaps the experience of this as conscious and 'exhausting' (in Tiffany's words) is a new insight, particularly when paired with implicit feelings of shame surrounding the position of consumer, as well as reflections on when participants do not consider themselves consumers. The previous section suggests that the subject position *consumer* is experienced as unavoidable. Thus, participants tend to react with bemusement when asked the follow-up question: 'Are there moments in which you do not consider yourself a consumer?'. On the one hand, some participants associate not consuming with not making a purchase on their own, such as Elizabeth and Katie who answer that they are not consumers when she does not have money (Katie) or when her mother buys her stuff (Elizabeth). On the other hand, *not* being a consumer is often associated with nature or living 'off the grid',

though consumer research literature tends to cite nature as a space of consumption (Canniford and Shankar 2013) and Giddens (1991) writes on nature as a space increasingly captured and delineated as nature in high modernity – e.g., a national park. But for participants, those living outside of a city and without access to internet are not consumers, whereas the rest of us are. As Tiffany explains:

> *Tiffany: I sometimes look at people who like you know live in the middle of nowhere and I'm like, you know, that's almost like, I'm almost a little envious of them because it would just be very nice to be that chill, I'm so not.*
>
> *Interviewer: (laugh) You're not going to move to the middle of nowhere though?*
>
> *Tiffany: Yeah no. I wouldn't survive and I don't think, but um, yeah no I would just say it's [constantly consuming] really tiring. But I mean I guess the only time I'm probably not consuming is like when I'm asleep, you know.*

Envying those who _have the ability_ to 'be that chill' and live 'off the grid', but feeling that she cannot further indicates a desire to escape the position of consumer, particularly as she experiences a consumer subjectivity as 'really tiring'. Gathered from these accounts including the opening quotations, the only moments in which we can avoid constant advertising and marketing, and therefore consuming, is when we are off the grid or in nature (as compared to in a city); in our private space; or asleep. Emily's phrasing of her room as a *protective space* implies that the outside world is the opposite, or unprotected, suggesting that there is something that needs protecting from marketing and advertising – i.e., herself. Further on in Emily's quote, in the 'outside world' which she associates later in her account with city life ('*I'm equating it all to city things because I equate so much of it to advertising (laugh) and news media*') compared to nature or country life ('*Sure if I'm like hiking out in the wilderness or if I'm rock climbing I wouldn't feel like a consumer. If I was like on my family's ranch I wouldn't feel like a consumer*'), exposes her or leaves her vulnerable to images and ideals that she feels she must 'measure up to'.

For many participants, the digital is often cited in the push of consumerism. For example, Emily implicates the digital indirectly in mulling over when she might not be a consumer: '*I don't know I'd have to be so like out of touch. Probably if I yeah sure I'm camping there I don't have cell phone service I don't have my cell phone or laptop or newspaper*'. Again, this hints to the idea that a non-consumer is out of touch or cut off from media, internet and life in general. Tiffany, after noting she would have to be in the 'middle of nowhere' not to be a consumer remarks: '*Uh other than that it's like, yeah I mean it's like, you're on the internet, you're on Facebook, you're checking email, like you're, yeah. It's tiring*!'. Finally, when I ask Sophie if she considers herself a consumer, she responds: '*Well yeah coz I'm constantly looking at something in my phone or at work or to cheer myself up or just to be interested or if I see a link I like I'll click through it*'. In this vein,

the remainder of this chapter discusses what appears to be the predominate way young women of this study relate to 'stuff' and experience being consumers: through the digital.

5.2. Consuming through the digital

> *I think I'm [a consumer] 24/7 um because I'm always, I'm always on social media and a lot of it is like goods. Well it appeals to your sense of 'I want more, I want to possess that'. And even though I don't buy 24/7 and you know I might just buy like one item a month, I'm always in the mind-set of 'I want more, I don't have enough'. So yeah in that sense, yeah. I'm always, yeah definitely. (Charlotte).*

For the young women in this study, life is experienced through through a consumerist discourse that encourages constant consumption, an attitude of possession (i.e., a need to have) and an urge to 'measure up' to the standards set by marketing and advertising. Whilst the idea of a consumption-oriented identity is fundamental to consumer research (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Giddens 1991), the experience of this demand to consume is not often articulated (Moisander et al. 2009) as *oppressive* in lived experience, or as potentially reifying (Honneth 2008). Though the ideological positioning of the discipline itself may be to blame for this lack of insight (Fitchett et al. 2014), a contributing factor *might* also be the lack of attention to the digital sphere which emerges in this study as a carrier of a discourse of consumerism. This may be understandable given that digital life has only recently become inextricably intertwined with real life, particular in terms of the social and younger generations (boyd 2014; Orton-Johnson and Prior 2013). However, many recent studies fail to encapsulate the digital in explorations of 'lived experience' and ideology. For example, in their study on roller derby gurls, Thompson and Üstüner (2015) mention that they tracked participants on social media but neglect to discuss it further. However, in this study, the digital world – particularly social media – emerged as *the* vessel of a consumerist discourse. Failure, then, to account for the interconnection between social media and offline experiences could hamper consumer research given that in this study, digital life emerged, quite simply, as real life. Social media is particularly salient in the interconnection between real and digital life, given its mediation of social relations as well as the tools it offers for communication (e.g., Facebook messaging) (boyd 2014). Perhaps the feeling of oppression or of being forced into the subject position of consumer is telling of an inability to escape from a space – social media – that is in itself consumerist, as Charlotte suggests. Therefore, the following sections discuss first how lived experience is digital and second how the digital space emerges as an incubator of consumerism.

5.2.1. The melding of digital and real life

When discussing digital life, it quickly became apparent that there is no longer a binary distinction between online and offline life, unsurprising given reflections of my experience of the digital along with digital sociology literature (boyd 2014; Orton-Johnson and Prior 2013). For these participants, digital life melds into 'real' life seamlessly as digital devices become appendages (Dennis 2008) and social network sites vessels for self-expression (Livingstone 2008), vessels through which participants are always connected, making any attempt at distinction between offline and online life futile. As Madison describes: *'I'm on Facebook a lot. Like I'm one of those people who are... I'm just.... I don't know... I just have to check Facebook every fifteen minutes for whatever reason. I just do'.* This *compulsion* is evidenced across accounts, and indeed experienced in my everyday life, in which we become attached to our personal communication devices to engage socially, compelled to constantly monitor ourselves and others online (Marwick 2012).

To illustrate this point, in the digital interview, I asked participants to talk me through their digital day. Most participants began their response with the moment they physically awaken; waking up in the real world means waking up online:

> **Tiffany:** *When I wake up in the morning probably the first thing I do is check my phone <u>but</u> I check it for like WhatsApp, mostly because all my family and friends back home obviously are like up way later than I am um so I check that and usually, we've got like a bunch of group messages going for like students at uni so I'll usually find out like what everyone's up to for the day…*

> **Sophie:** *Well ehm I wake up, (laugh) and I faff about, go back to sleep for a bit, and then finally, I'm up, and instead of getting up, I'll check my phone, you know, in the morning.*

> **Catriona:** *Probably wake up in the morning and obviously look at my phone, it's usually my alarm clock and then start getting up, probably get to my messaging, check out Facebook, see what's happening. (laughs)*

Tiffany justifies her habit of immediately checking her phone through a desire to catch up with her family and friends in the US and to see what she has missed overnight. Her *'but'* suggests a rationalisation for the temptation to reach for her phone first thing. Sophie, who sheepishly giggles through her description, also admits that rather than pop out of bed, she 'faffs about' on her phone. Again, this confessional-type response indicates that checking a phone first thing, although it is typical of participants as well as a habit of my own, is somehow embarrassing. Catriona also laughs through her response but notes that it is *obvious* that she checks her phone upon waking, acknowledging that most people are likely in the habit of doing so. Are participants embarrassed by their reliance on technology and/or compulsive need (i.e., potential lack of agency) to check in online immediately upon waking?

A second theme in the above is that most participants cite some form of social media in their habit of checking their phone: for Tiffany, it's WhatsApp (a free messaging application) to communicate with her family; for Sophie it's three sites – 'I look at Instagram first, then Facebook, Twitter'; and for Catriona it's Facebook. Importantly, social media seems most conspicuous in influencing 'real life' as social life is increasingly mediated through social network sites (SNSs). These sites or apps are often incorporated into the temporal space of 'real life'. For example, Tiffany discusses the shaping of in-person interactions through the digital app Snapchat:

> *Interviewer: How do you use Snapchat?*
>
> *Tiffany: We... I don't use it like... in a sexy way (laughs). We usually use it in class. Like we use it in class a lot so we'll take like pictures of each other or like of like our professors and I'll usually write like little notes on it and or whatever.*
>
> *Interviewer: Like funny things?*
>
> *Tiffany: Yeah, like joking around, like one guy, one of my classmates, he had a bad back and so he was literally like laying on the floor so I was like taking pictures of him and laughing about it, oh, and like sending it to my other friends that weren't like in class or whatever. So Snapchat tends to be pretty frequent. Or if we go out, I think it tends to be pretty, like I mean I think last night I was out with all those people, I think I probably sent like three Snapchats and I got like four or five from other people. Even though we're all at the same event.*

Though Tiffany and her friends are physically present in a social space, social apps are used to mediate or enhance the interaction, in some cases to include absent others who would normally be present. Examples such as Tiffany's offline interactions mediated through online activity reverberate across participant accounts. Therefore, any attempt to separate the digital sphere (particularly social media) from 'real life' is futile (boyd 2014), as became apparent in organising the logistics of interviews for this study. At first, all communication was executed through email or text message. However, participants tended to eschew these means of communication in favour of social media. For example, although I initially made it a policy not to accept Facebook friend requests from participants until after their participation in the study, many participants ignored my advice and friended me on Facebook either after the first interview or at the first point of contact. When arranging Catriona's in-home interview, for instance, adapting to her communication style, we messaged on Facebook to determine a time to meet. She rarely responded in a timely manner to a text message, but was quick to respond on Facebook messenger. During her in-home interview, she continuously casually checked

Figure 5.2: Picture Catriona posted on Facebook

her phone, and showed me examples of 'stuff' online. After the interview, I noticed upon

checking Facebook that she updated her status with a photo of the flowers I brought her as a gift, gushing about the surprise and thus extending the offline encounter into the digital sphere. Accompanying the picture in Figure 5.2 she wrote: 'Nice little surprise tonight ☺ #gerbera'. Digital therefore isn't simply a medium for the social but an active participant in creating the social, melding online and offline life.

5.2.2.   Always plugged in: A 'necessary evil'?

How do participants experience this blurring of online and offline life? Mirroring the feeling of always being a consumer as exhausting and unavoidable, participants discuss the increasing digitalisation of real life as overwhelming and inescapable. Perhaps the link is not surprising: if the digital world is cited by participants as a space that is infused with consumption and commercialisation (Hinton and Hjorth 2013) and therefore propagating a consumer subjectivity, then the increased influence of digital life might be experienced as similarly oppressive. Indeed, participants tend to feel they are always plugged in; they struggle to control (or feel controlled by) the digital. They rarely consider themselves offline, and if they do, it is typically by circumstance (e.g., not having internet access) or conscious, if uncomfortable, choice as will be illustrated. In this context, participants either accept the oppressiveness of digital life as it stands or attempt to negotiate their relationship with the digital, seeking to create space between online and offline life.

More often than not, participants answer the question 'tell me about your digital day' with a sense of shame, bemoaning constant connection 'forced' upon them by digital technology or justifying their engagement with digital space, a noted in Section 5.2.1. Consequently, the digital emerges as a sort of unwanted guest, as something that must be dealt with and, though it might be appreciated in certain contexts, feels oppressive, overwhelming in its current form. Emily describes the digital as a 'necessary evil':

> *I'm really happy I did not have it as like a teenager growing up because I think it could be like really stressful. Because I know a lot of it could be like fear of missing out or like envy when you see people post things or even when like people are like 'Oh we're getting married or we're having kids!' and I'm just like well that life is so far removed from mine. I wonder if I should be doing that or not! So it does make you question it sometimes. So I try not to spend that much time on it. So I don't know. I think it can be stressful at times, like Facebook. Um and I think it's some... it can be very narcissistic as well, like depending how people take it. But I guess I look at it as a necessary evil. Because there're people I want to keep in touch with that I, like I don't have international texting on my phone so I can't text people back home. And I don't use my [mobile internet] data all that often so I can't use like Whatsapp or Viber. And so like Facebook's like an easier way...*

Firstly, in the same way that advertising generates ideals and standards that Emily feels she must 'measure up to', her use of Facebook prompts social comparison, causing Emily to

question her life choices in comparison to others and provoking feelings of envy and the recently manifested social disorder in popular culture termed FoMO, or 'fear of missing out' (Przybylski et al. 2013). Secondly, the sense of digital as 'evil' is intriguing: Emily asserts (or rationalises) that by virtue of circumstance, she is roped into digital sphere to keep in touch with friends and family abroad, despite the anxiety or stress it causes in forms of social comparison (and fear of missing out), forced reflexivity ('*I wonder if I should be doing that or not!*'), and the fostering of narcissistic tendencies also frequently cited by participants. This frames SNSs as controlling as she is forced to participate though she tries to resist perhaps not only engagement but also the feelings associated, both in terms of narcissism and social comparison.

Emma also feels controlled by constant digital connection, as propagated by social practice and professional pressure. When I ask her to describe her digital day, she frames it in terms of a serious problem: '*We have a real problem with phones. Phones are like permanently by my side or in my hand [...] they're like additional appendages. It's unbelievable*'. In an attempt to show a large part of her story, below is most of the narrative of her digital day:

> *Emma: It's really bad. So yeah, in terms of the day, I'll wake up, my phone is my alarm so like my phone does everything. My phone is my alarm. Then yeah, in bed the first thing I do is check Facebook, check work email, check Instagram, look to see if I've got any messages anywhere else. Then like, go to the bathroom and like come back and I'm on my phone again while I put my makeup on. Then my phone is my iPod so I'm listening to it on the way to work but then also at the same time checking my emails a couple of times before I actually get to work, texting whoever, and then it's like, it's mapping my training for my walking [training for a walkathon], so there's an app for that which automatically updates Facebook every time I complete a certain number of miles with my sponsorship page and everything, so that's happening. It does that. Ehm, my calendar is all synced to my phone as well so I get all my reminders throughout the day for workout stuff but also my home calendars too. [My husband] and I are going to create a joint calendar because we keep missing each other and not…he never knows what we're doing so he always has to phone me to find out what we're doing as a couple. So we're going to have a joint calendar so that we can both populate it with our activities.*
>
> *Interviewer: With your social activities?*
>
> *Emma: Yeah, yeah. Um, so that we can like do holidays and stuff a bit more coordinated. Um, and then my whole day is spent on the computer at work. I'm on the computer all day and everything is…and like a break is looking at the Daily Mail online or checking your phone on Facebook or whatever. So then, yeah, that's the whole day is on phone, I mean on the computer. Sometimes if I'm remote or whatever, I'll use the MacBook that I've got, so I use that. Sometimes I take the iPad Mini to do things.*
>
> [...]
>
> *Interviewer: So you're fully Mac?*

Emma: Um, I am fully Mac, although I use PC at work, which I think is really good. It's like you're multilingual when you can do both. Um, and then, home that's like the walk back, it does the iFoot thing again, then I sit and watch television but with my phone in my hand and then we Google all the time. Like, 'Oh I'm pretty sure I've seen him in something, I'll just IMDb [Internet Movie Database] it'. We're going to do a new kitchen, 'got any kitchen ideas'? So he will send me a pin like, 'I've seen this, do you like…blah blah blah' Have these pinterest boards for inspirational house stuff and nails and hair and everything. Then set the alarm again on the phone and it's bedtime.

This story encapsulates the interconnectedness of digital and real life, the overwhelming feeling of always being plugged in, and the mediation of relationships by the digital. Every aspect of Emma's life is tied into her iPhone and her entire day is mediated by a screen, from iPhone to iPad to laptop computer to PC. Activities from waking up to getting ready to exercise to engaging with her husband are mediated through digital. For Emma, the digital is now as innate as the spoken word: she uses a metaphor of language to explain her competency in both Mac and PC, a metaphor also used by Elizabeth who claims: '*I only use Macs because I seem to be illiterate in anything that's PC based*'. There is no separation between online and offline worlds as the smartphone in particular becomes an appendage, an aspect of the self. This again raises the possibility of the reification of the self (Honneth 2008) as the person becomes attached to objects that are tools for self monitoring and quantification of the self (Lupton 2016) as well as the technological mediation of relationships. It seems that, for these participants, there is both a need to justify this appendage and a desire for relief, for a break from the digital, suggesting the anxiety-provoking nature of digital life as keeping the human plugged in at all times.

Thus, rather than extolling digital life as making life easier or more interconnected, Emma experiences digital as intrusive, overwhelming and inescapable, suggesting that she feels controlled. Emma explains that she uses her iPhone '*Well, constantly, like for everything*'. She attributes this <u>addiction</u> mainly to her work, but notes her 'entire life' is captured by the technology of the object: '*Like, my whole life is in there. It's my address book, my diary, it's connected to my work, my email is connected on there so I'm constantly checking work email even like at random times like midnight*'. Therefore, without the digital, Emma implies that she would not have a life. There is no life without the digital, a metaphor emerging across participant accounts. Not only is the iPhone integrated into her personal life, but Emma's work life seeps into the fold, as norms in her new job demand constant engagement, leaving her struggling to maintain control and causing anxiety:

Emma: I don't have any down time now.

Interviewer: Because of the phone?

Emma: Yeah. And like I'm like the emergency contract as well for students if they're failing and stuff too. So yeah, it's mental. I found I started like grinding my teeth when I sleep and I genuinely think it has to do with stress because I don't actually switch off!

Emma thus frames digital life as all consuming and causing <u>physical</u> anxiety because she cannot *switch off.*

Emma is not the only participant who has difficulties 'switching off' from the digital world. Charlotte also remarks: '*I'm constantly on it. I can't really switch off*'. This provokes a feeling of not being able to gain control over the device or its output/content, though gaining control might be a desired outcome, as noted by Emily who attempts to limit her time online. In many cases, however, participants feel they *cannot* overcome the interconnectedness and therefore only exogenous circumstances can dictate a divide between online and offline. Charlotte explains:

> *I spend so much time on it. It's crazy. I think the best time that I remember was in Iceland when I had no Internet access. My phone was dead cos I had no battery so for I think five days, no Internet, no phone. It was the best thing. Cos, because of work I'm constantly on it, then I arrive home I'm on it, then it's my phone, I even go to the toilet with my phone and it's like all the time!*

Charlotte's attitude is one of relief when she gains temporary freedom – not through conscious choice but circumstance – from this unavoidable, integrated life and her own compulsion to be online. Her words imply that it would be sane not to spend much time online, and that spending exorbitant amounts of time online is linked to madness. She describes reintegration with the fully 'offline' world as 'the best thing', implying that the worst thing is the amount of time she spends online. Further linking digital with mental illness, she describes her relationship with the digital in terms of addiction, something she wrote an article about in a professional capacity on LinkedIn: '*[Digital life] uh, its addicting, uh, but not in a good way because I'm not even, I don't even look, you know when I, first thing in the morning it's Facebook, I don't even look surprised, it's habit I guess. It's probably a bit unhealthy*'. From the experience of being forcibly cut off in Iceland, Charlotte began to realise the harm that her engagement with the digital world causes, and took steps to 'switch off' from time to time, in particular associated with a crescendo of anxiety that caused a 'burnout':

> *I had kind of a burnout on Thursday because I had so many projects uh almost cried I was like, I made a list of all the campaigns and all the things I'm working on and I was like I don't know how to stop! And then I put, I turned off my phone I think on Saturday and I felt so much better. I was like just to be disconnected from it all was nice.*

The act of taking control and cutting off her communication assuaged Charlotte's anxiety over work. I asked her what she did instead of going online:

Charlotte: Well I went to class, you know I'm doing my [part-time marketing] degree?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Charlotte: So I did that and…no it was Sunday I think I turned off. Spent the day cooking, then I was reading, went to the gym. It was quite relaxing. And then there's always the kind of um (GASP) am I missing something? Did someone try to reach me (GASP). It's, uh, but I mean we used to <u>survive</u> without those so...

Charlotte notes the activities she completed when she was disconnected, as well as the feeling of relaxation. However, these feelings were somewhat stymied by a niggling anxiety, a feeling of discomfort associated with the fear of missing out. Whereas Facebook and other SNSs may prompt a 'fear of missing out' sparked by social comparison, disconnecting is similarly uncomfortable as it causes a feeling of being in the dark – or dead – in terms of online activity. Like Emma describes, Charlotte relates being online as living, framing being offline in terms of *survival,* or the surprise of survival.

In this vein, for some participants, the bombarding of information and the connectedness of digital life is too much to bear all the time and therefore these participants 'opt out' of the constant connectedness in various ways. For example, Abeni speaks of her relationship with the digital in terms of control and laments the 'oppressiveness of emails'. She engages in a negotiation of digital space as she uses the space on her own terms by maintaining a blog, a Twitter account and a LinkedIn account, but refusing to engage in Facebook or Instagram:

> *I was on Facebook for a while but I just thought it was becoming too much and I just dislike people having so many ways to contact me. But I'm still out on Twitter but I also don't have the apps on my phone so if I need to, I need to log on to and people send me messages so I'm not alive (laugh) not online so to speak. Um, what else? That LinkedIn, which I'm not very active on, but it's really obvious that people ask me to add them and I add them and then, and then people add me. And then what else? So I'm not on Instagram, I'm not on. Like I'm just, I just think, think there's too many ways to contact people and I think I'm a bit of a [unclear] in terms of I just like old tech, I think phones should just be made for... I mean I think they're good for being used for contacting people it's just for me gets overwhelming.*

Abeni finds the digital world overwhelming and she negotiates her engagement in unique ways, by limiting the ways in which she can log on (i.e., not having applications on her phone) and not engaging in SNSs except for in a professional sense (e.g., Twitter and LinkedIn). Again, she (unconsciously – a Freudian slip) uses the metaphor of life to suggest that because she is not engaging extensively in social networking she is 'not alive' or as she corrects herself, not online. She discusses this limited engagement as a need to take back control (or take back her life?), to increase the quality of her life and potential to increase productivity and maximise her potential. She describes websites like Facebook as 'junk food', again intimating the innateness of the digital to life using the metaphor of food. She first describes

how she felt out of control when she was using Facebook: at times when she wanted to be productive in other ways or attend to other activities (e.g., write her PhD) she was mindlessly scrolling: '*You're just like what's this person do, what's this person, let's find out what people are doing but beyond that I just found that a lot of time, the things that they say they were doing and the things they are putting on Facebook did not interest me and I was just like what am I consuming, ok this is, this is like junk food, this is junk news, you know, cut it*'. She relates <u>consuming</u> to taking in, to eating and thus potentially destroying (Graeber 2011) rather than how consumer researchers tend to conceive of the term – to express the self, and so forth. More than just consuming 'junk' through social media, Abeni finds her social relationships lacking on Facebook in the form of a thousand friends to whom she is loosely connected (Ellison et al. 2011): '*And so you just had, ended up having this spider web of friends that you have very loose time, very loose connection with, that you have to accept it because it's [Nigerian society] very connected*'. Thus, she describes an overwhelming feeling of losing time and productivity: '*It was just small consciousness of time and life being very transient and very, very short*'. In this way she had to take back control and '*be more in charge of what I'm consuming*', a resistance both against the infiltration of digital life and the pervasiveness of *consumption*. Again, she draws on the metaphor of diet and food – or life and the body – to describe her relationship with the digital and her attempt to take back control: '*We should see it like a diet. You need to be healthy*'. As a result of quitting Facebook, Abeni feels her offline life and relationships have greatly improved:

> *I now have more time for my friends. [...] I just think leaving Facebook has helped me develop, or not develop but just spend more time with friendships that I want to spend time with, with all the people I was spending time anyway, with people I meet up, with I go for a coffee, with I talk to on the phone, you know...*

(A side note illustrative of the inability to escape social media: Abeni re-joined Facebook about six months after participation in the study upon moving back to Nigeria from the UK.) The feeling that relationships would improve with the abnegation of the digital, or with the unplugging of the self, is echoed across participants. For example, Charlotte envisages that she would spend more quality time with friends if she were to quit using social media:

> *I'd probably make more efforts to spend quality times cause now, you know, lets say even maybe less than a year ago I would see [my good friend] maybe two or three times a week. Now WhatsApp, you know, will do. But it's not because I don't want to see [my friend]; it's just because it's a quick fix to keep in touch but I can keep doing other things. So actually I think, not the relationships, but the um effort I'm putting into relationships is diminishing because I have solutions to kind of palliate that, so make it so I can keep on doing so many things...*

In this case, Charlotte implicates the digital in the increasing superficiality of relationships that were previously strengthened by in-person interaction. Charlotte's use of the word

'palliate' in reference to correcting her behaviour again is implicit of a life metaphor in which she is diseased when relying on the digital to keep up relationships and therefore must takes steps to lessen the severity of this disease – though not removing it completely – through in-person interaction.

In other instances, an active Facebook or social network online is reflective of a full social life in real life. Alicja does not care very much about technology. For her, there is a tangible distinction between real and digital life, enforced partly by circumstance and partly by choice. Alicja's phone does not have internet access and she only recently bought a used PC laptop for £120. She had the settings changed on her phone so that when she is visiting Poland she is able to access Internet, but in the UK she isn't too bothered:

> *Now it's not working here, but I don't think it's worth changing it another way around because I think that this phone is just so old that I could just get a new one, but to be honest I am, because I don't use it pretty extensively or excessively I, I like every time I have to like, cos I have been looking on the different kind of phone providers, um, for a long time, well sometimes I do it yeah but if I have to spend £130, I am a bit you know I am not too happy to do it. Because I don't really need it that much.*

For Alicja, the fact that she doesn't feel a need for the phone along with the price of investing in a new one puts her off. As a result, she often doesn't engage with the digital until late in the afternoon noting herself to be different from others in the sense that she doesn't check her emails or Facebook first thing in the morning: '*So in the morning and unlike other people I do not check any emails. Nothing like in the morning. Before going to work I don't do it normally unless I am expecting something*'. This delineates a separation between digital and real life, mostly facilitated not by price or use but by different social circumstances:

> *Alicja: In Poland I needed it for Facebooking with my friends more, ahm like when you, if something was urgent with… that said well nothing is so urgent people have to use Facebook but still we do it right?*
>
> *Interviewer: Yeah, of course.*
>
> *Alicja: Or, I don't know, I just feel like it was more intense in my life. My social life was more intense and fun so I had Internet and well it was just working.*

In contrast to her lively social life in Poland, having just moved back to Edinburgh, she doesn't feel the urge to be online ('*without it I'm not completely lost*'). Reflecting on the prevalent 'life' metaphor, Alicja realises that she can survive without a phone, although her social life in Edinburgh is quieter (dead?) compared to life in Poland. However, as Charlotte found when she 'switched off', Alicja engages with 'real world' media in ways that she wouldn't if she had a smartphone, ways that enliven her social life:

I actually started reading the newspaper. One of the reasons, obviously the most, the biggest reason was that I just wanted to read something during my lunch and I don't have internet on my phone and there is no other way to read something because I don't want to read a book and obviously, oh well obviously I could buy like a science magazine or something but still I think that sometimes it's not even a proper time to do it i just want something really short. […] And so this is like then I can chat about it, you know, it's just like I think that reading something just for the sake of reading about it is less interesting if you don't have anybody else to talk about it. So I can tell them you know I read something about Scottish news and they will tell me what they think about.

In this way, relying on traditional media not only fills her time but also allows her to connect to local Scottish people, integrating her more into the community. But interestingly, after recounting various circumstances in which having an internet-enabled phone would have helped (such as getting lost in the city), Alicja admits: *'But probably I will eventually get it because I think it really makes life easier'.* This hints to increased engagement with the digital sphere as an eventuality, much like Abeni who ultimately re-joins Facebook.

Like the subject position of consumer, it is clear that there is anxiety inherent in engaging with the digital world. For some participants, like Abeni or Alicja, opting out *to a degree* or taking control seems feasible. For others, disconnecting or unplugging is a day-to-day struggle. And for most, unplugging is not an option. I ask Emma whether she considers disconnecting, to which she replies, reminiscent of a sort of 'Hotel California' syndrome: *'I can't now. It's like once you're in, you're in. It's really weird. In my own head, I just can't now'.*

5.2.3.   The digital and consumption

Returning to the purpose of this section – consuming through digital – how does the digital space (discussed here through social media) encourage consumption? This section illustrates that, flooded with visual artefacts of what *could be,* social media encourages consumption through both its infiltration by the commercial and its encouragement of social comparison. The social media sphere is an engine of materialistic desire in which idealistic images continually confront participants as they both actively engage in the formations of their own desires (e.g., following, liking, posting) and are passively informed by the noise of advertising, sponsored posts, and the unpredictable activity of those sources that they once followed or currently choose to follow. Often, advertising is encouraged by the participant; for example, Sophie explains: *'I'll see [things] on you know one of their adverts or something, and then I guess I think, "Oh, I should follow them," because you might see things, something you like [without] having to troll through lots of websites'.* Thus, social media – advertised as a space for connection and knowledge (note the mission statements of SNSs: 'Connect with friends and the world around you on Facebook'; 'Welcome to Twitter. Connect with your friends — and other fascinating people') – in practice becomes a space in which participants act out a desired version of self,

express (desired) cultural influences and inspirations, and are influenced by peer groups and commercial interests (van Dijck 2013). In terms of the former, social media reminds participants of what others have and, in turn, what they don't have and, following Fromm's (1976) logic 'I am what I have', what they are not and should therefore try to possess and in order to become. As expressed by Charlotte, social media '*appeals to your sense of 'I want more, I want to possess that'*. Thus, for these participants, social media propagates feelings of lack and insufficiency of the self, thereby driving a consumerist discourse that encourages young women *as consumers* to fill the void with stuff, as portrayed in this section.

Pinterest is perhaps the most obvious example of 'digital materialism', or a social media site that particularly encourages consumerism. On its website, Pinterest describes itself as 'a visual discovery tool that you can use to find ideas for all of your projects and interests'. For Charlotte, Pinterest is a platform to indulge her desires and fantasies about her life. She describes her Pinterest page:

> *So Pinterest I'll show you. So that I go on quite a bit. I have a few boards. So I have what I would, so I plan my outfits first, I plan my outfits on this one. This kind of stuff I'll never wear but I find very nice. That's more like outfit for the office. That's just like fashion shoots I like. That was for [my trip to] Florida, home, dance, this kind of like wedding stuff, New York, travel, food, and shoes, and then I share one with my friend from Florida and her sister. It was like a hidden one, but we share stuff on there.*

Pinterest is Charlotte's favourite site which she checks first thing in the morning and peruses throughout the day, often whilst she is doing other things such as cooking or watching television ('*Usually if I watch a movie I'll, I'll go on it looking through stuff*'). Therefore, she is almost constantly engaged in consumerist fantasies. Her most populated board is the one in which she methodically plans outfits that she wears in real life. She also has multiple boards which depict fantasy, from clothing and fashion shoots to a love/marriage board, to sharing clothing ideas with friends. In this sense, Pinterest enables a virtual mingling of Charlotte's fantasy about *who she could be* (e.g., what she could wear, her marriage, travels) or an ideal self, as well as who she is (e.g., wearing the outfits seen on Pinterest in everyday life). Lines are therefore blurred between what Charlotte's real life and the exalted images of models displayed on Pinterest. For example, she describes buying a pair of trousers, with the help of Pinterest: '*And for instance I bought those pants [referring to the visual] the other day [...] I put like skinny wee beige pants and then I came up with some outfits*'. The pictures she shows me are of models and celebrities in hegemonic feminine forms (Schippers 2007) casually strolling along wearing the trousers and looking fabulous, prompting the rhetorical question: can Charlotte's real life experience of wearing the 'skinny wee beige pants' measure up to these idealised images? In another example that interweaves other social media platforms, in

preparing for a trip to Miami to celebrate the New Year with some of her friends, Charlotte starts a Pinterest board. On this board, she gains inspiration for her Facebook profile picture, in which she is in Miami wearing a red dress, a chunky gold necklace and Rayban Sunglasses, with the South Beach sunset engulfing the background. She describes:

> *Charlotte: So that was Miami*
>
> *Interviewer: That's a very pretty picture. So why would you post these pictures, or not why but can you just tell me [about posting the picture]…*
>
> *Charlotte: (laugh) why are you so self-centred!*
>
> *Interviewer: No no no. I'm just curious what would make you choose a picture as a profile picture.*
>
> *Charlotte: Ahh I guess I think I look good in it? And I always go for different location cos I think that's quite cool. But, that was in Miami. A friend, well my friend took it, I thought it was quite natural, it was fairly natural so!*

On her Facebook profile picture, Charlotte seeks to emulate the models on Pinterest by posting a picture portraying her in a way that she looks attractive. Her reaction to my questions is to assume that I (the other) believe her to be self-centred or narcissistic in selecting such a photo, perhaps a reaction to my comment that the picture is pretty, and thus betraying her own feeling that she is somehow self-centred. In the last phrase, she describes an ideal that is reflected in her Pinterest quotes: she looks good and natural (preponderance of boards focused on appearance), she seems cosmopolitan (different locations, many boards about travel). Considering the innate comparison in this statement, it is clear she does not desire to look over-done or unnatural, and she desires to seem well-travelled, and not provincial, something very important to her sense of self as almost the first phrase of the first interview was that she comes from a 'very international family'. This example on the one hand shows the intersection between social media platforms, digital and 'real' life person-object relations, and on the other hand social media's encouragement of expression and cultivation of an ideal self underpinned by (consumerist) fantasy. Moreover, as Honneth (2008, 83) notes, in a digital age, reification becomes more likely, given the demand for self portrayal: 'The more a subject is exposed to demands for self-portrayal, the more he [sic] will tend to experience all of his desires and intentions as arbitrarily manipulable things'. An online setting which demands increased reflexivity and managing of an appearance or impressions often in an ideal form that corresponds with 'real' life (boyd 2014; Livingstone 2008) is thus an environment that encourages reification of the self.

Most participants acknowledge social media as a space in which ideal versions of the self and life course are on display, whilst the complexity of real life is strategically invoked or concealed altogether, similar to presentation of self theories (Goffman 1959; Marder et al.

2016). Madison describes: *'I think people take more <u>ownership</u> on Facebook and it's like you have the best that people want to project. The best version of themselves'.* Similarly, Simone explains:

> *I'm very much a… um, always believe that Facebook is part of your personal branding, you're own personal PR and you should use this propaganda tool for yourself. If you don't, you're not using Facebook correctly. Like I just think it's silly like. And I feel like that's kind of where face... like, it's not what Facebook was designed for, like but that's what it's become; it's kind of for voyeurs and exhibitionists.*

Both quotes indicate a sense of reflexive management of social media accounts; as Zhao et al. 2008 explain, social media sites are typically managed in a way embellishes the online self in a way that corresponds with the 'real' or offline self. Madison describes this in terms of 'taking ownership' of online selves, whilst Simone argues that Facebook is part of the personal branding and public relations for the self. Imbued in their dialogue is a sense of the person-as-object online, or self-reification (Honneth 2008), as the self is in a sense 'marketed' to multiple others (Marder et al. 2016). Not only do profile pictures and posts constitute this online identity, but participants also strategically follow commercial entities. Most follow brands, celebrities, lifestyle bloggers, local businesses, and so forth that correspond with a version of the self intended to be expressed. For example, Catriona describes her 'liked' Facebook pages as aspirational, or a depiction of a fantasised self that is congruent with her offline self. In mid-flow of describing her 'Liked' pages, consisting of brands, celebrities, local shops and restaurants, beauty pages, often linked to real-life happenings such as 'liking' a restaurant where she recently dined, Catriona describes:

> *Catriona: Liberty cos I really like the… I don't know I think it's in London. Cos I really like the, you know the designs so I follow it in case there's any nice things popping up (laugh). Net-a-Porter, dunno, just to see, just to kind of…*
>
> *Interviewer: Yeah. Do you ever buy from them?*
>
> *Catriona: No. That's weird cos when I did marketing, you kinda like, it's the aspirational, you follow them, but you don't necessarily like buy them you know ehm. [...]Sweaty Betty, quite like this stuff but I can't afford that. (laughs)*
>
> *Interviewer: Lots of aspirational things.*
>
> *Catriona: Yeah. Ehm... Michael Kors, got a Michael Kors bag, I guess I like some handbags, Kurt Geiger, got shoes, like those shoes, ehm... I don't know, like random…*

Catriona, having studied marketing, recognises her tendency to follow brands which she aspires to have. For example, Net-a-Porter is an online shop for expensive, designer clothes and Sweaty Betty is an upmarket gym clothes retailer. Although she can't afford to buy their items, she nevertheless follows them on Facebook to see the *'nice things popping up'*. After acknowledging these aspirational brands, along with Liberty, an upmarket department store

in London, she, perhaps rationalising, gives two examples of brands she likes that she purportedly followed *after* purchasing an item: first, her Michael Kors handbag which she proudly showed me at the first interview, seeing an expensive handbag as an 'adult' purchase; and second a pair of Kurt Geiger shoes.

What is interesting for scholars of consumer culture is how the material is mediated within and between the digital. It is not enough to display oneself in the presence of others or to spend time shopping (which still remains an important activity); one must also craft an image online, and often mediated through the material. Material items are sourced online, with purchase often inspired through idealised images, bought in 'real life' to be displayed online again such as Charlotte with her profile picture. This is perhaps exemplified in the case of Jade. Unsatisfied with her appearance in real life, Jade turns to YouTube for inspiration and to discover her true self, at least in terms of style. During her in-home interview, she describes the relief after a stint of unemployment of gaining an income in order to shop with a friend in real life, rather than simply watching self-help fashion videos. In order to know what to buy, she turned to YouTube:

> *The other day, because I have loads of stuff in there [wardrobe] that was really nice but I've had it for two years and I never wore it. Because I was like, I had the habit of because when you've got a negative body image, a lot of time you buy clothes that you think they look nice off you. But it wasn't really my style or did not, well no they flattered me but it just wasn't my style. I was just buying things because I thought they were nice. So I was watching videos on YouTube and all that like how to identify exactly your style. And exactly what you like. And it was like 'well you should narrow it down to your favourite colours and your favourite like cuts or what sort of feel you go for. What personality type you have'. So I cleared out my whole wardrobe and then I sort of rebuilt it yesterday, went shopping with [my friend] for few hours.*

On YouTube, Jade finds inspiration to understand her style, hoping to assuage her anxiety over a negative body image. Through these videos, Jade realises that she has been buying clothes that were not her exact style, so – despite still being in a tenuous financial situation – she bins most of her clothes in order to start afresh with clothes that are her 'exact style'. Appearance is very important to Jade, as discussed in Chapter 7, and she frequently displays herself on Facebook through countless mirror selfies (*'I take a lot of selfies'*) depicting various outfits, hairstyles and makeup styles (*'I like the fact that I can take an attractive picture of me'*). Importantly, 'real life' Jade looks nothing like 'selfie' Jade who, completely made up, positions her face into seductive poses that are overtly feminine. This is unsurprising in light of Döring et al.'s 2016 finding that selfies tend to be more gender stereotypical than magazine adverts. The same could be said for Charlotte, who also takes many selfies, posting on Facebook and especially Instagram. In one Instagram post with 42 likes, Charlotte takes a mirror selfie.

Her pink-glossed lips are seductively parted, shimmering, black-lined eyes gazing down into the screen of the gold iPhone that she grips with her manicured hand. She captions the photo with hashtags in relation to her autumn outfit. The idealised image serves as an advertisement in its own right she responds to a compliment on her outfit with a detailed breakdown of the brands which adorn her (Gant; Zara; Charles and Keith).

Jade describes the compulsion to take selfies as a way to show an imagined audience that she is enjoying herself with friends, and importantly, looking good. Explaining why she takes selfies, she says:

> *I mean God this is embarrassing but other than that, for the sake of honesty for your study. Yes. Ahm Ok I wasn't one of the cool popular girls although it's ironic we called them the popular girls; everyone hated them because they were horrible. But ahm I was like the other group like I was popular in the natural genuine way like I had a quite lot of friends but I was, they constantly took the piss out of me and I did not care about hair or makeup or anything which still most of the time I don't, ahm and the thing is like sometimes you get sad. I know this is really pathetic but sometimes you get sad when you see that they've got like 50 likes on a picture and I've got like my mum. Well like thanks mum. Always supportive. Like my mum and [my fiancé] and my friends like 3 to 5 people or something and then I'm like sometimes and I hate slagging off other girls and I wouldn't like just insult their appearance, I wouldn't, but like sometimes it's not like they are just doing a random picture and they are like making a shot. I am like ahm do I not look good? But then I know it's not because of that, it's not because of the how they look it's because of who they are. That's why they get it instead but it does make you feel like and I know she [the popular girl] is the same as well she will go oh like what if I don't get many likes? And I'm like it is so sad that we think that way but.*

Implicitly a fantasised scene of redemption, Jade imagines an audience of 'popular' girls seeing her Facebook selfies in which she is made up and having fun on nights out. But as translated through likes, her 'real' audience is close friends and family. Like the 'popular girls' who teased her, Jade desires to have the 50 likes on her selfies. She feels 'pathetic' not only for the lack of likes she receives, but also for desiring affirmation through the likes, affirmation that she imagines popular girls also desire as they anxiously anticipate 'likes', symbolically linking herself to them through 'we'. Thus, the SNS feedback loop is an important factor in a participant's quest for self affirmation through affirmation by others. Participants posting selfies or other pictures often expect or monitor 'likes' or 'followers', engaging in surveillance of self and others (Marwick 2012). Sierra, for instance, notices during her digital interview that she is following slightly more people than follow her on Instagram:

> *Sierra: …I have 966 posts, 216 followers and I'm following, aw shit! I'm following more people than are following me.*

> *Interviewer: Well, how does that make you feel?*

Sierra: I don't like that. I try to keep it under.

Interviewer: Can you explain?

Sierra: I don't know why. [chuckles] I want people to follow me more than I follow people.

Sierra expects recognition from others through the number of people who 'follow' her as well as through the amount of 'likes' she receives, expecting around 16 likes per Instagram post. She monitors this by 'unfollowing' in order to manage the ratio. Like Jade, this relates to a need for social recognition pursued through the digital space in which Sierra desires to appear more popular by following fewer people than are following her.

The construction of these Facebook and Instagram selfies and profiles therefore appears a strategic attempt to attain social affirmation, driven by consumerist fantasy and products sourced online. Drawing from these examples, therefore, the intersection between digital and 'real life' follows a pattern:

1) She gains inspiration for real-life appearance (makeup, clothes, hair, nails, fitness, etc.), experiences (travel, food), and home (decoration, DIY) through consumption of digital images typically on social media (video or still, personal or advertisements, or both).
2) She enacts or personalises these inspirations/ideals in a fragmentary manner through consumption in everyday life (e.g., buying a pair of trousers but not the entire outfit, taking inspiration from YouTube in the form of style tips but doing the shopping on her own), often through the digital (shopping online).
3) She then displays herself online, appropriating the material in a way that depicts an idealised version of her own self, emulating the original idealised images of desires or ideal self (e.g., through selfies).

Of course, this is not a linear but a complex, intensive, and now second-nature process that occurs *ad infinitum*. Importantly, this process involves a high degree of surveillance of self and others, reminiscent of Foucauldian (1988) technologies of the self (Marwick 2012). In order to engage in this process at all, the subject must keep abreast of social media accounts and online forums, engaging in self-surveillance to enact the idealised image of self and surveillance of the other (peer group, media images) to achieve the 'perfect' look or selfie, a potentially reifying process as individuals look upon themselves as objects to manipulate. This is not the case with all participants, particularly those such as Abeni, Alicja and Gretchen who limit their involvement in the digital sphere, and are less concerned with their appearance and are more career-oriented than some of the other participants, as discussed in Chapter 6. However, this section indicates that the digital space, depicted through social media, is both social and consumerist, promoting materialistic tendencies and propagating the feeling that participants are (forced into?) living a consumer subjectivity.

5.3. Gendered cyberscapes: Hegemonic femininity

An important unaddressed theme in the previous examples is that for many – if not most – of the participants, the digital space reinforces feminine ideals; generally speaking, the digital space, rather than reinforcing and supporting feminist ideals for young women, seems to provide them with a space to project and construct an ideal feminine self (Döring et al 2016; Dobson 2015). Again, there are notable exceptions to this, particularly with participants who are less engaged with social media sites (e.g., Abeni and Alicja – see Section 5.2.2) or those, like Gretchen, who do not follow ideals of femininity in everyday life. Gretchen only uses the digital space for cursory connection (on Facebook to connect with colleagues and friends with minimal posting and no 'likes' etc.), career purposes (following accounting and finance news), and to watch TV. As discussed in subsequent chapters, she is not very materialistic in real life and also not very keen to spend time online. Moreover, her appearance is not traditionally feminine – she wore little to no make up and dark or neutral coloured clothing to both interviews. Emily similarly avoids using social media in a way that focuses on appearances or femininity: she asserts that she is more career driven and less driven by 'traditionally feminine' ideals of marriage, children, and tending to the home. This is reflected in her digital use as she doesn't follow celebrities, doesn't tend to follow makeup and beauty sites, quit using Pinterest after university, and doesn't shop online. Instead, she tends to follow liberal news media and preferred NGO charities on Facebook and Twitter as well as photographers on Instagram given her passion for photography, a passion exhibited in her Facebook and Instagram landscape photography.

But for some participants, it is striking how traditional gendered norms are reinforced online (Döring et al. 2016): from fashion websites to Pinterest to beauty advice forums to shopping online, the digital space seems to be a place that promotes materialism and reinforces ideals of hegemonic femininity. For example, Tiffany is a self-confessed product junkie. She relies heavily on online beauty forums to keep abreast of the market, continually striving to find the best products: '*I just have a ton of products. I'm always that person that's like looking for the miracle product*'. She describes: '*I rely on other people like online. I rely on like people's reviews and then try them out*'. Her favourite website is 'Beauty Department', a website run by US reality-TV star turned beauty guru Lauren Conrad:

> *Tiffany: So I love it um so Beauty Department. So they have like like what you should drink to like get like better skin or how to whiten your teeth or*
>
> *Interviewer: So how often would you go on this, oh [reading aloud] 'keeping your waves overnight'*

Tiffany: About once a week. So they don't post super often so I don't need to keep up on it but it'll tell me like what's the newest in like the hair trends, nail trends, make up, and it will give you like product suggestions, so. I really love this website.

For Tiffany, the website enables her to stay on top of trends without having to observe others in-person to gather ideas about trends related to traditionally feminine concerns of beauty and appearance. It allows Tiffany to enhance her appearance in everyday life, which is displayed through Facebook and Instagram posts. She notes, for example, using Instagram after '*just of like nights out*' for which she meticulous styles herself: '*If I'm going out out. Um and then in that case I would wear eye shadow, eyeliner, I do like fake lashes*'; '*So I tend to have like, for like going out, I have tall shoes*'. Thus, as evidenced in this chapter, participants perform hegemonic feminine ideals not unlike Betty Friedan's participants who are told 'that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity' (1963, p. 15). In a passage echoing Charlotte, Tiffany describes her Pinterest account:

> *I have 206 followers on [Pinterest]. The majority are not my friends. They're just people that like, I guess, like what I do. So imaginary closet, clothes, decorating ideas, home sweet home, red carpet ready, like beauty tips, hair, makeup, nails, just because, just random ones, jet setter, travel places I want to go, I have a quote board, eats and treats are like, it's the original recipes ones I started out with but then I'll show you I made a different one. DIY projects, celebrity style, so um animals, a shopping wish list cos I think it makes things a little easier for my mom. I made her get a Pinterest and I was like this way you don't have to like ask me every single time you can just go on there. [...] so yeah okay so places I want to go in Scotland, and then I have like a wedding board for ideas, for hopefully when I get married again and then recipes to try. So I made this one [the wedding board] specifically because I'm like 'I don't think people really want to see every single thing I want to like make' so I've made both of those secret [wedding and recipes].*

Reading this passage is almost like translating a 1950s woman's desires into the 21st century digital world: every single one of Tiffany's Pinterest boards relate to 'traditionally' feminine pursuits, perhaps with the exception of travel, including: clothes, the home, beauty, food/recipes, celebrity/red carpet, and even an aspirational (and – importantly – secret) marriage board filled with images of brides, couples, engagement rings and so forth.

Like Tiffany, for Charlotte, Pinterest visuals are expressive of life goals. For example, on her Pinterest board entitled 'Love', Charlotte fantasises about a future life with an imaginary husband. Most of the pictures on the board are of thin, feminine women dominated in some way by tall, dark and handsome men. In many pictures couples are kissing or the man is holding the woman. One post of a black-and-white picture (Figure 5.3) in which a man is hugging a woman, pulling her head to his chest whilst he kisses her forehead, is captioned either by Charlotte or the original poster: 'kissing the top of my head or forehead. That screams I LOVE YOU in the softest, sweetest, quietest and most assuring way'. In addition to artsy, black-and-white photos of couples, Charlotte 'pins' sensuous grey-tone photos

celebrating pregnant women and infants (Figure 5.4). In conjunction with a preponderance of boards focused around appearance, both Charlotte and Tiffany's heteronormative gender ideology is evident. This could be considered an exception or an anomaly; however, traditionally feminine desires are rife across participant accounts. Reflected by traditional desires of being a woman such as 'mother', 'wife', 'sex object', the digital space becomes a place where 'hegemonic' femininity is propagated through images/discourse, particularly elicited by participants themselves through social media accounts. It is telling that most

Figure 5.3: A man embracing a woman; from Charlotte's Pinterest.

participants (11 of the 15) use the digital space as a way to learn more about how to be feminine through beauty forums, blogs, online retailers and social network sites, and most participants also express their (traditionally feminine) desires through 'liked' pages, followed items and most tangibly, social media 'wish lists' and secret boards that depict wedding wishes and the like.

Figure 5.4: A woman holding a baby; from Charlotte's Pinterest.

In an extended example, Sierra is an avid social media user. As previously detailed, she regularly posts on Instagram and on Facebook via Instagram, sharing silly photos of friends, selfies, and politically relevant videos and posts. She also 'likes' and 'follows' many commercial entities (e.g., brands, movies, television shows, celebrities, restaurants) noting that when SNSs prompt her to 'like' or 'follow' an item, if she likes it, she will accept: '*If it pops up I'm going to "like" it. If I like it, I'm going to like it*'. But she notes: '*Pinterest is where I'm most active*'. It struck me, particularly whilst conducting the digital interview with Sierra, that social media envelopes her in desire. Whilst Sierra's other three

Figure 5.5: Victoria's Secret sweat-suit like Sierra wore to interview

interviews lasted about an hour to an hour and a half, Sierra's digital interview lasted over three hours, as she meticulously took me through each of her social media accounts in painstaking detail. She even skipped a school-related group meeting in favour of continuing the interview. Rampant in her discourse were phases: 'I love…' 'I want…', particularly in terms of Pinterest. In other interviews, Sierra did come across in appearance as heteronormatively feminine, in the first interview, for example, wearing a pink-coloured sweat suit from Victoria's Secret with the words PINK emblazoned across the chest (Figure 5.5), as well as wearing full makeup, and glittering piercings in her ears, nose, and lip. During the interview, she was adamant about

her feminist ideals of pursuing a career and encouraging gender equality, attempting to reconcile these values with her religious views as a devout Christian. Given these ideological influences, in the first interview she downplayed materialistic and feminine tendencies. For example, she describes her ire with Christianity for its anti-feminist ideals, particularly the idea that women are encouraged to seek a husband:

> Sierra: *I went to a Christian undergrad. We have this thing called the MRS degree…you literally came to find a husband. […] I mean, way to put feminism back a hundred years. Thanks a lot, ladies. You know?*
>
> Interviewer: *So do you feel like you're a feminist?*
>
> Sierra: *Definitely. I think women… because the church has been so anti-feminist, like women should, not be able or, should say like, 'Fuck you man. Women have lot to say and we're really smart and we can hear God just as well as you can'.*

In this first interview, Sierra came across as politically active and prosocial in her way of being exemplified by her feminist views, interest in corporate social responsibility and career goals of starting a charity in Brazil, continuing a family tradition of missionary work. She did not focus on materialistic or feminine proclivities, not that the two are mutually exclusive. Even in her in-home interview, though she did have lots of stuff including makeup and seemed a bit more materialistic than experienced in the first interview, the interview was quick and she did not seem too bothered by 'stuff'. However, in the digital interview, Sierra's materialistic tendencies and feminine ideals were expressed in a more obvious way, for example in relation to her relationship status. For Sierra, who is single and at 26 still a virgin given her religious views, finding a life partner is a source of anxiety. She describes:

> *I have a tattoo here that says 'Beloved' in Hebrew. Uhm, I have this, it's kind of like, you know, Christians usually have a purity ring, uhm, but it's not… it's… purity rings are just to say 'I'm not going to have sex without marriage', but this is more of a reminder that I believe that God has someone, a specific person that He has for me, uhm and my heart belongs to that person even though I don't know who he is right now and so I want live in such a way that I'm fostering that relationship even now. Uhm and it gives me hope because I'm single. So one day… one day.*

This idealised picture of a relationship and assumption that she will find 'the one' is reflected

Figure 5.6: A ring Sierra 'pinned'

in her Pinterest use. Importantly, many participants assume future husbands and children to inform their present discourse. This is the case when Sierra describes one of her boards entitled 'Sparkly Things':

> Sierra: *Anyways, sparkly things. This is my board for when my boyfriend decides that he wants to buy me an engagement ring, he can find out what I like. So my taste is unique. I don't need it to be big although my fingers are pretty fat so it would have to be a little bigger.*
>
> Interviewer: *Like it would be proportional.*

> *Sierra: Yeah, it would need it to be proportional. I don't want this tiny little dust speck. Since my fingers are quite fat it would need to be a little bigger but if it's too big then I'm like, no...*

This reflects not only Sierra's assumption that she will have a boyfriend, using language like 'when my boyfriend' although she doesn't have a boyfriend and has not been in a long-term relationship, but it also reflects her materialistic values, desiring a unique and proportional diamond ring when she is proposed to. Also, she asks about my engagement ring and when I tell her that I have one but don't wear it often, she exclaims: '*If I had it, I would be like, "oh yeah, look at my damn ring!" you know?*' In this example, materialism is mediated online in terms of visual images of desire, and hegemonic femininity exudes through pictures of engagement rings and imaginary husbands. Referring to a picture on Pinterest she fantasises (similar to Figure 5.7):
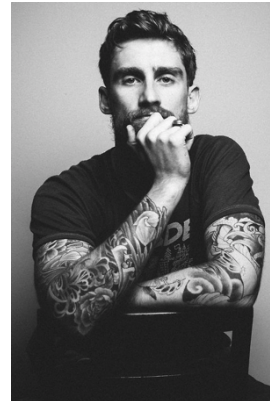

Figure 5.7: Exampe of a picture of a man Sierra 'pinned'

> *Sierra: He is beautiful. If I have a husband that looks like this when he's old, I will be a happy woman.*
>
> *Interviewer: With the tattoos and everything?*
>
> *Sierra: Hell yes. Love the tattoos, love the beard.*

I ask her directly:

> *Interviewer: So is Pinterest sort of your future? Like your wants, desires?*
>
> *Sierra: Yeah. Things that if I could have, I would have them.*

Images on her Pinterest effuse idealism; the ideal man, the ideal ring, even the ideal honeymoon, reflected in a picture of a treehouse hotel room: '*I want to stay in a tree house. Possibly like a honeymoon thing. Yeah, tree house honeymoon. Then nobody can hear you!*' In relation to men, she describes quotes on one of her Pinterest boards with childlike enthusiasm:

> *Sierra: "I don't want realism, I want magic." That's my life. Magic! Adventure! I love Maya Angelou, she's one of my heroes.*
>
> *Interviewer: [Reading] 'If you're only trying to be normal, you'll never know how amazing you can be' I totally agree with that.*
>
> *Sierra: I love her. Any man that wants to be with me has to understand this. I can't handle men that want their woman to follow them. I mean, I respect women that can do that, hat's off to them but I cannot. I cannot do that. I need a man that sees my wildness and says, "that's what I want. I want crazy and wild."*

Sierra imagines her life almost as if it were a movie – a magical adventure. Maya Angelou is only one of many women who Sierra admires. What is interesting about this quote is the

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feminist position that masks latent femininity: she states that she '*can't handle men that want their women to follow them*', assuming woman as property in the possessive adjective 'their', yet goes on to say '*I need a man that sees my wildness and says: 'that's what I want*'. This continues to render woman as the object of a man's desire and an object to be possessed ('that's what I want') but for her wildness rather than submissiveness. This woman-as-object position is also reflected in the women Sierra admires. She has a board on Pinterest called 'Pretties', a hegemonically feminine statement in itself as she is unconsciously objectifying women through an appearance-based label. She describes:

> *Sierra: We have 'pretties'. These are all the women that I think are inspirational or beautiful or something. Of course Emma. Lupita Nyongo, I love her. Jennifer Lawrence, she's funny and wonderful. She keeps it real, I love women like her. She's from Dr. Who.*
>
> *Interviewer: … Which one's from Dr. Who? Oh yeah, you love Dr. Who.*
>
> *Sierra: Her name was River Song in Dr. Who, I always forget her real name. But yeah, Liz Taylor, you know. Gwyneth Paltrow, Scarlett Johannson, Audrey Hepburn, love Audrey.*
>
> *Interviewer: What is it about Audrey?*
>
> *Sierra: She's just the embodiment of grace.*

In all, this example encompasses many participant accounts that depict (traditional) ideals of femininity underpinning lived experience, ideals expressed through digital platforms. Though participants are able to (and certainly do) embark on careers and focus on things in life other than traditionally feminine activities, in many cases participants strongly identify with and desire for that which is traditionally feminine, also discussed in Chapter 4, which can cause anxiety. This is particularly propagated in a digital environment in which participants' real life feminine desires are magnified through desirous and idealistic images in an online space (Dobson 2015).

5.4. Concluding thoughts

The above examples indicate a prevailing way-of-being that is enveloped in the digital. On the one hand, participants use the digital to organise their everyday lives and engage in self-surveillance (Emma: '*Like, my whole life is in there. It's my address book, my diary, it's connected to my work, my email is connected*'). On the other hand, digital space acts as a conductor for desire; it is a space saturated in a consumerist and gendered discourse that demands the individual to want more; to be more. As Charlotte notes, '*It's a bit overwhelming because there's so, there's endless. And so many opportunities and I could do always more*'. Adjusting this sentence to 'I could always have more' is perhaps more apt to describing what the digital space represents to

these young women. Social media both mediates and perpetuates materialism, propagating a desire to become the 'ideal self' through frenetic and intersecting images, as well as fostering a desire to exhibit this ideal self to others. In this process, there is a tendency to reify the self and others (Honneth 2009) given demands of self monitoring and self care (Foucault 1988; Lemke 2001). That is, participants, writing themselves into being online, increasingly observe themselves as objects to be manipulated for an audience, engaging in surveillance of the self and others (Marwick 2012). Bringing Fromm's (1976) marketing character, which represents the experience of oneself as a commodity on the 'personality market', into a digital age, social network sites demand the subject place herself at a distance from herself in order to anticipate the desires of the other and write these identifications into digital being, thus conceivably to *sell* oneself to others as both Madison and Simone suggest. As Fromm (1976, 120) explains: 'The principle of evaluation is the same on both the personality and the commodity markets: on the one, personalities are offered for sale; on the other, commodities. Value in both cases is their exchange value, for which "use value" is a necessary but not a sufficient condition'. Thus, one could imagine Jade's crafting of an online image through posting selfies as 'selling herself' to those who previously mocked her (the popular girls).

Whilst productive and celebratory aspects of identity construction or tools for identity expression online can certainly be read in this data, a critical reading notes the problematic use of commodities in the experience of the self. Participants, reticent to embrace a consumer subjectivity but acknowledging that it cannot be escaped, express a sense of shame over materialistic tendencies. The digital is implicated in this push of consumerism as social media emerges as a space that continues to subjugate women through the encouragement of hegemonic femininity. With these findings in mind, this chapter raises questions about how the young women of this study come to know themselves through consumerist discourse online. But in this chapter, a detailed account of 'identity' or the experience of the self remains underexplored. Therefore, Chapters 6 explores the experience of the self as a 'project', something suggested both in Chapters 4 and 5 but not thoroughly examined.

6. THE 'PROJECT' OF THE SELF

As demonstrated in Chapters 4 and 5, the young women of this study, conflicted about what it is to be a *woman*, feel they cannot evade the subject position of 'consumer' in an increasingly pervasive melding between digital spaces and offline life. At times, participants seemed to exhibit tendencies of reification of the self given the demand of self-monitoring, observation, and social comparison. These themes are further developed in this chapter which explores participants' experience of the self as a task, or an individual project for which they are responsible, despite the unpredictability of the life course. Alluded to in consumer culture theory by the theoretical construct *consumer identity projects* (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Fitchett et al. 2014), neoliberal discourse encourages individuals to adopt entrepreneurial qualities as responsibility for the self is shifted from society to the individual (Peters 2001; Giesler and Veresiu 2014). With this 'responsibilisation of self' emerges a way-of-being in which 'certain enterprising qualities—such as self reliance, personal responsibility, boldness and a willingness to take risks in the pursuit of goals — are regarded as *human virtues* and promoted as such' (du Gay 1996, 56; emphasis added). This is reflected in the data by participants focusing on the 'success' of the project of the self – or actualising ideals and expectations – as reflecting the moral worth of the individual (Rottenberg 2014). Thus, this chapter illustrates how participants come to understand the self as a project to be constructed, emphasising its 'success' through personal agency and its failure either through personal failure *compared to others* or circumstances beyond control. Therefore, participants work to continually craft a story of success and agency throughout the interview process despite contradictory events conspiring, or feeling otherwise. Participants' sense of self is thus performative (Butler 1991; Thompson and Üstüner 2015) of a market logic, reflective of a neoliberal, enterprising subjectivity. In engaging in a 'project of the self', participants feel a desire to maximise their potential and attain a sense of control or mastery over the self and life course. Thus, they engage in social comparison or benchmarking to monitor the 'performance' of the self compared to ideals and the 'performance' of others. In doing so, participants often rely heavily on commodities to craft an appearance that communicates an ideal self to others. With this in mind, this chapter explores the experience of living this the project of the self, illustrating how the self is experienced as self-referential (Dufour 2008) by: first illustrating the linear, task-oriented perception of the life course and self; second, discussing the benchmarking of the self and social comparison; and third, demonstrating the importance of appearance and influence of commodity flows in projecting the 'success' of the project of the self.

6.1. Personal responsibility for the project of the self

From participant accounts, the self is experienced as an individual project for which participants feel personally responsible. Experiences of the self and life course are articulated in terms of action, agency and goals to be achieved. For example, Madison, who is studying abroad for a year after forging a career in marketing communications, describes her journey to Edinburgh in the first interview. It was always expected that Madison would pursue a higher education: *'I always knew I would come back and get my masters just because I was just brought up as a kid to like…college wasn't the end of learning. You get masters or law degree or med school or something but, you know, go get advanced degree it was just what everyone does'.* She formulates her decision to come to Edinburgh both in terms of meeting familial and societal expectations (indicated through *you*) without question and a mythicised realisation of a childhood dream: *'I always wanted to live here. Like I fell in love with London the first time I went and just decided at 14 I was going to live here one day and so when I decided it was the right time to come back to for my masters I just decided you know, I'll do it over there and kill two birds with one stone so I can fulfil my 14-year-old prophecy'.* Madison refers to her desire to move to the UK – generalised in reference to London – as a *prophecy* that she gave herself. A prophecy is typically a message conveyed by someone in communication with the divine; thus Madison implicitly compares herself to a prophet, portending her own destiny. This, in tandem with her statements of desire (*I always wanted… I fell in love...)* and action (*I went and just decided… I decided it… I just decided… I'll do it…so I can fulfil…*) suggests that Madison experiences the self as a project she is in charge of, so to speak, as the self is anchored *internally* rather than founded by an external Big Other (i.e., an actual prophet representing some sort of God), in spite of Madison's 'deep-rooted' religious beliefs. Dufour (2008) argues that the modern subject was symbolically multi-referential, brought into being by Others *external* to herself, influenced by 'grand narratives of legitimation' (Lyotard 1984) that he identifies as the monotheist religion; the nation-state; the emancipation of the working people; and finally, nature. But, as illustrated by Madison, Dufour (2008, 70) describes the (post)postmodern self as *hysterologically* constructed or self-referencing, drawing on the rhetorical device of *hysteron proteron* meaning 'latter before' in which the conventional order of phrasing is reversed:

> *To employ hysterology is basically to postulate something that does not yet exist in order to derive authority for engaging in action. This is the situation in which the democratic subject finds herself, placed as she is under the constraint 'Be yourself'. She postulates something that does not yet exist (herself) in order to trigger the action through which she must produce herself as a subject.*

Madison must define herself in neoliberal setting which demands personal responsibility for the success of the self through individual agency (Brown 2003; Rottenberg 2014). The data

indicates that this is an inherently anxiety-ridden position given the contradiction of being forced to define oneself, an agentic construction, and the impossibility of doing so.

Like Madison, participants often frame their life story in terms of personal agency, though contradictions and anxieties are frequent. Abeni conceptualises her life journey in terms of her ability to make decisions and plan the future, although her account is often contradictory. For instance, she describes coming to Britain to complete her A-Levels:

> *After that most people came to do A-Levels, so you could do A-Levels either in Nigeria or do it here. I chose to do it here. Actually no, I wanted to do it in Nigeria but all my friends were coming here so I came here. That was a very good life decision.*

Abeni oscillates between personal responsibility for her 'decision' to come to Britain and a lack of agency in following social expectations, similar to Madison. In formulating a narrative – demanded by the interview process – Abeni first recounts her choice, dissolving into a realisation that her desire was to stay in Nigeria but social pressure dictated her move. However, she corrects this admission of a lack of agency in the next breath as she frames her move 'a very good life decision', presumably *her* decision, reflected further on:

> *Abeni: Being in England and being away from Nigerians, and that was part of it actually. I did not want to be with Nigerians when I was doing A-levels.*
>
> *Interviewer: You did not?*
>
> *Abeni: No. I wanted to…I felt like I wanted to be myself. I felt like I wasn't myself. I wasn't very happy in high school. And so then when my mom came she was like, 'Wow! You're smiling, you've emerged!' And that was the emergence I guess and that's the confidence and I guess that's when I became like, 'you know what, I own my own opinions and I'm going to tell them to anybody'.*

Abeni explains the *choice* to move to Britain as a desire to separate herself from a cultural space that was stifling her agency or ability *to be herself*. Despite the influence of her friends, in this passage she indicates a desire – and disavowed identification (*I did not want to be*) – to separate herself from fellow Nigerians, perhaps an outcome of her actual experience more than an agentic choice. Nevertheless, Abeni frames her experience as her decision that facilitated an 'emergence', or her ability to embrace who she *really* is, as affirmed by her mother. For Abeni, a desire to 'be herself' manifests in assertiveness and expressing opinions, or perhaps being this entrepreneurial subject, antithetical to 'traditional' feminine traits (Sandlin and Maudlin 2012). Considering the logical consequence of her claims, to be herself is to own her opinions (indicating neoliberal discourse); therefore, for someone to dictate her thoughts or choices is *not* to be herself. She thus *requires* agency (and confidence) to be herself. However, she speaks tentatively, as if she herself is unsure, saying *I guess*, pausing, and changing her story frequently, perhaps suggesting agency is an ideal rather than an actuality.

Throughout the two interviews, Abeni frequently reformulates her thoughts into agentic terms, expressive of this desire to highlight agency rather than a lack of control. For example, she initially states that in high school she was clueless as to her career and was inspired by an ex-boyfriend to work for a consultancy ('*At the time I was dating a guy who was working at [a big four consultancy] in corporate tax. He was an accountant. I was like, "Oh, this is quite cool"*'). Later, she reframes the story to present herself as in control of her decisions all along:

> *Interviewer: Do you plan your life? Are you thinking about the future in that sense?*
>
> *Abeni: Oh yeah for sure. When I was…I knew I wanted to work in [a consultancy] when I was 16-17.*
>
> *Interviewer: Really, that young?*
>
> *Abeni: Before I met my boyfriend. He kind of helped because he also was working there, but maybe that's why I dated him, no that's not why I dated him. But I wanted to work at [a consultancy] then. So I knew that. I knew when I started to work for [a consultancy] that I wanted to do my PhD, I knew…*
>
> *Interviewer: So you had these kinds of goals.*
>
> *Abeni: Yeah. Five-year plans. Now I know, that's why I said in five years! I will do this lectureship thing and create, spread my, kind of learn, know how to do impact research engagement, learn about different things. After that I want to work in this organisational space. Then maybe after that I can do teaching. I just think right now I'm only teaching theoretically. I want to teach for practice. So I plan, I plan, so 30-35 is that and then 35-45 is working at organisations and then 45-whatever is that.*

This passage not only portrays embracing personal responsibility and a desired sense of agency in her career path (particularly as in her view her career has been quite successful in terms of many promotions in her accountancy job and then attaining a doctorate and subsequent research fellowship), but also denotes a sense of methodical, linear decision-making as the life course is conceptualised in the present through planning for the future; i.e., as a project with benchmarks every five years. Again, like Madison, Abeni imagines her teenage self portending her employment at a consultancy, rejecting the notion that she gained inspiration from her boyfriend. She even conjectures that she may have used her boyfriend in order to further her own goals of working for this consultancy (i.e., as a means to an end), a prospect she quickly rejects, though it reinforces her conviction that it was her decision to work for a consultancy rather than derived from outside influence. In this sense, she momentarily conceives of her boyfriend as a pawn in her game, needed to achieve a goal and thus indicative of the reification of others (Honneth 2008). Moreover, in articulating past achievements, Abeni realises why she stated her life plan in five year increments ('*now I know*') suggestive of rationalisation during the interview and <u>a desire</u> to seem as though she lives her life through methodical benchmarks.

Many participants similarly experience their lives through methodical plans, goals and benchmarks. It is difficult to think of an example of a participant who does not express attempts to plan life or worry about the future in terms of goals, achievements, or fulfilling ideals. For example, Madison describes her goals and expectations in the fourth interview when she describes 'the good life':

> *I feel like that's the easiest way for me to think about it. Like at the end of my life, what would I like to say like, "yeah, <u>I ticked all these boxes</u>". Ok. Married once happily for that time that we're both on the planet. It doesn't mean life is perfect, obviously there's ups and downs and ups and downs can be days, months, even years for people. But generally happy marriage. Kids, probably 3. Three that I can easily afford. I keep telling my parents and they're like, "yeah, so see how much the first one costs and come back and tell me if you're having two more". So three children that I could comfortably keep, the lifestyle I want and maintain that and provide that for them as well. So not a struggling three. Great career, I'd like to own my own company and my own business at some point. I'd like to have multiple homes. One in the Highlands. I have a friend where her parents alternate where they live by season now that they're retired.*

Madison alludes to perfection sought in attaining 'the good life' (McRobbie 2015), from accomplishing conventionally feminine goals of getting married and having children to (post)feminist, entrepreneurial goals of having a 'great' career and owning a company. Her acquisitive mind-set is further exemplified by conceptualising her children in terms of cost ('*three children I could comfortably keep, the lifestyle I want*'), reminiscent of Abeni's observation of the consumerist tendency to treat children as objects to possess (Section 5.1.1). She also desires to maintain a luxurious lifestyle. Madison's conception of the good life is both reflective of her position of privilege as well as a neoliberal conception of the life course. That is, she describes, at the end of her life, being able to 'tick' all the expected 'boxes', rendering her life an exercise in matching up to ideals or outcomes to which she is attached, expressed metaphorically in terms of a list, a recurring theme amongst participants. This implies that if she were not able to 'tick' these boxes, it might reflect on her personal worth. Therefore, if the self is imagined as agentic, then failing to 'measure up' means failing the project of the self. Charlotte has a very similar conception of 'the good life' and also desires to 'tick the boxes' that Madison describes. But she also notes anxiety that things might not happen the way she imagines:

> *Interviewer: And what is it about a plan for you? Because you mentioned that you like to have a plan?*
>
> *Charlotte: Yeah I think it's the, um, <u>ticking the boxes</u>? Like I have the, I think it's an anxiety thing. It's putting everything that would make sense or that would be defined as success and being able to match myself against those. And without that it's a bit more like I'm a free will and it's difficult to look back and to judge is that a good decision or not. I think it's an, it's an anxiety thing or a controlling thing.*

Interviewer: Yeah. In what sense?

Charlotte: It's a, it's easier to follow a roadmap then just, you know, trying to wing it, so. [...]I used to do like maps of in six months I should be here and should have done this and this, and in <u>even if it doesn't happen it makes me feel like I'm in charge of my own destiny.</u>

Throughout the interview process, Charlotte oscillates between feeling a sense of security from planning her life and throwing caution to the wind because her plans do not often come to fruition. She attributes her need to 'tick the boxes' to assuaging her anxiety. Rather than embrace what she terms as 'free will', she feels that *'putting everything that would make sense'* which she defines as success symbolically speaking in one column and herself in the other. She describes her plans in terms of *should*, importantly commenting that she must at the very least maintain the illusion that she somehow controls her destiny. Winging it, for Charlotte, is perceived as daunting and makes it more difficult *to judge herself*. Charlotte thus demonstrates the hysterological making of the self, in which anxiety is provoked in relation to the adequacy of the self and whether the founding of the self is successful. It seems, like Dufour (2008) observes, that Charlotte is 'under constraint' by the reflexive project of the self, in contradiction to CCT literature that often considers the consumer empowered by increased agency away from the binds of tradition (McAlexander et al. 2014), or a 'responsible consumer' in charge of her moral project (Giesler and Veresiu 2014). But for Charlotte, this constrains her as she faces the impossibility of 'speaking in the first person' (Dufour 2008, 71) by trying to 'found' (bring into being) that which she is: herself.

Throughout all of the interviews, Charlotte uses age to signpost where she <u>should be</u> in life, similar to Abeni and Madison: for example, she believes that by 25 she should own her own company (first interview) or become a manager (fourth interview) and by 30 she should either be managing a company or owning her own (fourth interview) and have met her husband. These strict goals invite disappointment as the chance of following such a linear, goal-oriented and exact plan is minimal, as Charlotte has experienced. In the first interview, she recalls being shaken when her long-term romantic plans fell apart; she directly contradicts her statement above about *not* wanting to 'wing it':

Probably I was…because of the breakup… or you know… just the trauma in a way I just stopped thinking about it all in all. And I know every time my mum or my sister, 'why', you know, marriage or anything related, you know, I just don't want to speak about it… ehm… It's just like I don't see it anymore. I know that it will probably happen. I'd like it to happen. But I just don't want to plan it anymore. And the story of my life…This is very, I mean, career wise you never know what's going to happen but it's easier to be in control, you know? It's yourself. There's no one else to take care of or, you know, to think, you don't think for two. So that's very easy. Easier. And there are no… No. Can't remember… Marriage I don't know. It's

hard. I don't know what will happen. I'd like it to happen but decided not to plan. Let life happen (laughing). Wing it. We'll see.

Whereas Charlotte envisages her career as something she may be able to 'control' (although this is called into question in the fourth interview, as discussed in Section 7.2), her love life is decidedly unpredictable. The 'trauma' she associates with plans going awry and being out of control is exacerbated by others who press her to talk about her romantic life (in this case her mother and sister). Charlotte rejects conversation about marriage, although much of her understanding of self is through men and focused around her single status. Toward the end of the second interview, Charlotte remembers a collection of jewellery from Swarovski that her ex-boyfriend gave her over the years. She keeps the box hidden away, the jewellery within entangled in a sparkling heap (Figure 6.1). After a difficult and relatively recent break-up the year before, she is uncertain about what action to take: part of her wants to throw the jewellery away or, following her sister's advice, she might sell it. But ambivalence and a lack of action indicates a liminal position in which she is still attached to her ex, yet trying to break away. From this conversation she mentions that she still has nightmares about her ex:

Figure 6.1: A necklace that Charlotte's ex-boyfriend gave her, with the box of jewellery in the background.

> *The last one we were in a church. Maybe it ties back to [religion], I don't know. It was a big wedding of someone. It wasn't mine; I don't think it was his. And he was with his like entire family. And just seeing him was like horrible. It's not that bad, he wasn't killing me and I wasn't killing him! But, uh, yeah it's just, I think, the anxiety to see him again. Might happen at some point.*

In this dream, she encounters her ex-boyfriend with his family in a church during a wedding, which she is certain wasn't her own, but isn't certain whether it was his. She describes the wedding as 'big' with his 'entire' family present, imagining herself as an outsider looking in on communal joy, a family and setting from which she was rejected. She relates this to a fear of seeing him again in person; but perhaps it also relates to a fear of rejection or a fear of not being able to fulfil her plan of getting married or finding someone, a fear of identifying as a single woman. Thus, there is a palpable anxiety in Charlotte's sense of self that she might not be able to 'tick' the boxes, in this case related to her romantic future but often also related to her career (McRobbie 2015).

Similarly, in Madison's second in-home interview, when we are discussing her experience of living in Edinburgh and the possibility of staying to work after her degree, she explains:

Madison: …Part of me is like if you go back like that's, it's because you are going to be settled and like you are going to want start settling down and yeah it is so.

Interviewer: What do you mean by settle down, just wondering?

Madison: Just like I mean I don't know. You know I think about like buying a house instead of you know renting for another several years. And hopefully getting married and all that stuff and so.

In this exchange Madison verbalises qualms she has with potentially staying in Edinburgh long term, representing a divergence from norms and expectations that she will return to her home state. Home ownership and marriage are priorities for Madison, particularly in relation to her age: *'It is kind of weird. I feel just because of my age it is a very, I don't know, I am too young to necessarily be so concerned with where I am going to settle but too old to not consider it at all. […] because my dissertation is due at the end of August and then I am 28 in November'*. To date, Madison believes she is well on her way to accomplishing the goals she has set for herself, particularly in terms of career. Again, drawing on a prophecy from childhood as well as neoliberal conceptions of success, she recalls: *'I said when I was 6 I will be an executive and/or make six figures by 30'*. With thirty approaching, I ask her if she still believes it possible: *'Yeah, so I think it's doable. I asked my parents "what do you think?" and they're like, "yeah, totally". Ok, all right. Game on. I have three…two and a half years almost'*. Madison thus believes that climbing the corporate ladder to reach a position of power by a young age to be possible, although she looks to her parents for affirmation. I ask her to expand on this conception of 30, which resonates with Arnett's (2004) observation of emerging adulthood as a time of experimentation before the responsibility of adulthood:

Madison: It's the end of excuses. There is absolutely no more, "well she's young" when you do something or say something stupid. Not that I really believe in that now, but it's absolutely the end of any excuse that could possibly be given for one's behaviour. You're just accountable. You are a grown up. It means having a plan. I think it's the beginning of permanency, thinking in the long term.

Interviewer: In what sense?

Madison: You know like I was saying the next 3-5 years, obviously 30 falls in that. Getting married which hopefully is final. Buying a home which, you're not there forever but it certainly is…you're going to be there a while.

Interviewer: So anchoring?

Madison: Yeah. Wherever you're going to be, you're going to be there for a while. You're building something. You're not just kind of bouncing around the things that are already standing and renting, if you will. Not just real estate wise, but in general. Building, you're really building your life. And if you were smart, you were already setting a foundation before that but now it's time to actually start getting a structure up of what you want, who you want to be and what you want things to look like.

Madison uses the metaphor of building a home to describe the agentic process or crafting her life, or a sense of self, and describes it in terms of desire, further indicative of the (hysterological) founding of the self internally rather than by external others (Dufour 2008). She depicts turning thirty as 'the end of excuses', implying that she might have made mistakes in her 20s for which she is responsible but she can explain this away by inciting the folly of youth argument (e.g., having a fling with an 18-year-old upon her arrival to Scotland as discussed further on). But when she turns thirty, she will be held responsible for 'bad' decisions, again allusive of a neoliberal ideology of the rational human (Becker 1992; Shankar et al. 2006). She further equates being in her thirties to having a plan, and being held accountable, even morally responsible, for that plan. She distances herself from the thought that she uses her youth as an excuse to do 'stupid' things given that she is older and wiser ('*not that I really believe that now*'). But this implies that with age, behaviour goes from excusable given lack of knowledge or experience to being (morally) reflective of a person. So, within three to five years, Madison hopes that the foundation she has created (agency) for herself (self-focus) will support goals for her thirties, described in the good life quote and repeated here, particularly getting married and having children. She remarks that '*if you're smart, then you were already setting a foundation before that*', drawing on the pronoun 'you' as many participants do when discussing ideals and expectations. This seems to be an anxiety-provoking linear conception of ticking boxes and goal-oriented in approaching life as it if needs to be conquered. Implicit dichotomies are rife throughout her account, such as, from the first paragraph: absolutely versus relatively; stupid versus smart; accountable versus excused; young versus old; grown-up versus immature; now versus then; permanency versus flux; long-term versus short-term. Madison therefore seems to value and implicitly judge herself and others on being absolute, smart, accountable, grown-up, permanent, and long-term. Importantly, in the position of being 28 and in graduate school, in many ways a fulfilment of her ideals, she also questions aspects of her life-plan that are not aligning, particularly in terms of being single, as discussed in Section 7.2. Thus, by way of a conclusion to this section, I will detail two examples in which a lack of agency must be rationalised: first, Madison's clinical depression and second, Katie's weight.

Although Madison comes across as composed, confident and self-assured throughout all interviews, at the very end of the interview process when I ask her whether she is an anxious person as part of the interview guide, she matter-of-factly admits to suffering from clinical depression, something she rationalises as a medical issue that she (the agent) is unable to control:

> *Madison: Not an anxious person. I suffer from clinical depression.*

Interviewer: You do? You never told me that. Can you please discuss that? Do you mind?

Madison: I just said it. I could have not…no, I don't have a stigma about it. It's clinical depression, it's not something that I can control because it's clinical, it's my brain. I can't control the chemistry of my brain any more than anyone else here can.

I was initially taken aback by Madison's admission given her frankness about other sensitive topics throughout the interview process (e.g., her parents' divorce). But I was not surprised as I had noticed two prescription medication bottles above her bed during the in-home interview, bottles she disregarded when describing her stuff, but did not conceal. Madison admits the possibility that she could have avoided discussing her mental health issues. However, she is adamant once she does bring it up that she does not feel a stigma because of her depression, particularly citing that it is something she cannot control. She contends that *if* she did feel a stigma, she would evade discussion, drawing others in to strengthen this justification ('*I can't control the chemistry of my brain more than anyone else here can*'). However, relating her depression to stigma and only mentioning it in the last ten minutes of a ten-hour interview process suggests the possibility of her experience of depression as stigmatic or not 'normal'. She mentions that most of her friends (vaguely) know about her condition, although they found out through observation and asking questions rather than Madison providing the information: '*They all know more or less just because obviously over several years, "what is that you're taking every single day?" or whatever*'. This suggests that Madison might consider her depression somehow stigmatised, wrong, or a personal failure, despite claims otherwise. Madison describes the history of her mental health condition:

Madison: I started taking that [Wellbutrin, an anti-depressant] when I was 17. It was a bit difficult to diagnose because my parents…my mother, but also my father, my parents took me to a psychologist/psychiatrist when I was 13 which…it's hard to diagnose. I get it from my mother's side. My mom thought that I was clinically depressed or had chemical imbalances but it's hard because…

Interviewer: …You were going through puberty.

Madison: Right. That doctor was like, 'I don't know if she has a chemical imbalance or if she's a teenager. I don't know'. So when I was 17 and my parents separated then obviously things got more drastic. At that point it was just diagnosed as situational depression and I was put on Wellbutrin and Lexapro to help me sleep because I did have anxiety going to sleep at night. Then when I got in my Sophomore year [second year of university] I was in okay with some things, went off everything. Still had problems maintaining my mood, went back on Wellbutrin, felt like a normal human being. Um so that's what I've been on… since then. When situational incidents happen that are, you know, super depressive, because I know obviously that I do have clinical depression now, I immediately go to a psychiatrist so that I both can talk to…and, and I'm very distinct about going to a psychiatrist that's uh, not, not just a pill pusher but a psychologist too so I can speak to that person about what's going on but I also then know just based on my body chemistry that Lexapro does work as an anti-anxiety medication to help me sleep. So with [my ex-boyfriend],

that we talked about before, um when he and I broke up (sigh), that was obviously really tortuous and abusive and whatever so there was a lot to deal with. Um you know I broke up with him over the weekend and I immediately was in therapy on Thursday and asked that the psychologist/psychiatrist put me back on Lexapro being able to say 'Listen I'm on Wellbutrin regularly because I have clinical depression so I can't control that, that's just my every day. I need that to be a normal person and function. But I do know, I do get anxiety when there is situational depression on hand as well. Lexapro has worked for me in the past. Would you please prescribe that as a supplementary medication until our work psychologically is able to get me to a point where I'm, my normal everyday suffices and we can just talk?' Which was great and it worked extremely well. So I was able to sleep and then able to go to my sessions and discuss the things that were bothering me. So I guess a blessing in disguise with my parents is being able to get under control a clinical disease but also understanding, you know, I think everyone in life needs a therapist at some point!

Eager to absolve herself of responsibility, she describes her condition as out of her control because of her genetics (*'I can't help my brain chemistry, that's genetics'*) and exacerbating situational factors (*'When some shit happens, then I can't help that necessarily either'*). However, how she <u>manages</u> her depression is telling of a self-project and reclaiming a sense of agency. Considering this passage through the lens of Laing and Esterson (1970), who contend that mental illness, specifically schizophrenia, is socially intelligible (particularly through familial relationships) rather than a scientific, positivistic 'clinical disease', we can see the influence of family relations, situations and ideals in the construction of Madison's illness, as reflected by interview text. Madison's parents took their young teenage daughter to a psychiatrist when she was experiencing mood difficulties, observed by the doctor as symptomatic of puberty. Thus, Madison describes her depression as initially being 'hard' to diagnose, despite her mother's conviction of a 'genetic' issue. Madison then cites a troubling experience four years later in which 'things got more drastic' – that is, her parents divorcing and Madison, an only child, discovering her father's affair and having to 'make a decision' as to whether to tell her mother, something she describes as a trauma. Thus, there are two circumstances in which it is not surprising for a teenager to act in irrational, emotional, moody and depressive ways: puberty and the divorce of her parents. It is furthermore not surprising that Madison would be anxious and have trouble sleeping given the stress of her parents' divorce. Eager to assuage the emotional turmoil she was experiencing, Madison turned to anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medications. This was a gateway to her eventual diagnosis in which upon going off the medications completely during university at a time when she felt 'okay', she noticed she had *'problems <u>maintaining</u> her mood'*. The term 'maintaining' aligns with agentic, project-oriented terms and suggests that Madison *should* be able to manage or maintain her 'moods' or emotions, likely in comparison to an ideal neoliberal subject that is rational and in control. Because she lacks this control, she relies on medications to return her to a 'normal' and 'functioning' state. Normal can thus be logically concluded to be in control of the self and moods: that is, a normal person can maintain her moods and therefore can <u>function</u>, an

allusion to a human-as-machine metaphor. This realisation leads to Madison's methodical approach to her treatment of depression. Later in the account she instructs herself: '*Madison, you have clinical depression, you need to handle this proactively. This is not something where you need to manage it yourself and then try and see. Not at all*'. There is no 'winging-it' if she desires to continue 'functioning'. Instead, she instructs doctors, cognizant of the medications she needs and the processes she must go through when 'situational incidents' arise, such as a difficult break-up. She describes a no-nonsense approach to being proactive in first adjusting her mood and regaining sleep with Lexapro and then being open to talk therapy, noting her reliance on Wellbutrin in acheiving her version of 'normal' and 'everyday'. Therefore, she reimagines her past difficulties as a 'blessing in disguise' that allowed her to pinpoint her 'clinical disease' framed as a genetic issue and takes back agency in the management of her situation in which she maximise her efficiency and functioning through methodical control of the disease, despite life circumstances.

Indicating a sense of personal responsibility for the self, the above example illustrates ambivalence around agency in dealing with incidents beyond participants' control but that others perceive to be in their control. In a way, what are perceived as uncontrollable circumstances must be reimagined in order to bolster the project of the self, rather than deem the project of the self a failure. As Simone notes, fear of failing the project of the self drives anxiety, drawing on a metaphor of falling off the pedestal indicating a conception of success as being above or better than others: '*Failure makes me quite anxious even though like I experienced so much failure in my life and realistically if I fail at something I'll just feel like "Ok well that sucked", pick myself back up and get going, it's kind of like that falling off the pedestal I guess is kind of scary*'. For example, Katie is overweight and describes having serious pain in her abdomen that doctors cannot diagnose. She oscillates between feelings of acceptance and despair when it comes to her body image: '*I kind of go through phases where I go, "yeah it's alright, it could be worse" and I have times when…usually when I'm watching like TV or see really skinny women and you just never want to leave the house. I'm like, "I fucking hate you"*'. Katie feels ire for the ideal feminine body type in attempting to reconcile her weight with ideals propagated by media, i.e., 'skinny women', leading her to cut herself off from society at times (never leaving the house). She describes in the fourth interview:

> *I'm know I'm slightly overweight, I'm tubby. […] My doctors take great delight in telling me that I'm overweight. Like when I first started getting my pain, before I had my pain I had sort of abscesses and I think that's where the pain's come from. But it's from like a virus, kind of like when you have a tooth abscess. One of the doctors was like, 'well it's your fault for being the weight you are, you're too overweight, you need to lose weight, it's your skin rubbing together'. But it wasn't that. Then I went to another doctor and they were like, 'it's like a virus, it's not your fault'. But for ages I felt really, really shit. I got home, I cried, I wouldn't eat for the*

rest of the day. It did not last long obviously, the not eating thing. That's the worst thing you can hear is, 'you're ill and it's your fault'. Which it wasn't. But yeah, if they can blame pretty much anything on your weight, they will. 'Oh, you're going blind? It's your weight'.

This example highlights anxiety from feeling a sense of personal responsibility and agency in the failure to live up to expectations (i.e., being skinny or managing her weight). Hence, Katie describes hearing that her illness might be her *fault* as the '*worst thing you can hear*', as a verbalisation of fears and doubts that she may be responsible for the 'failure' of the project of the self vis-à-vis the body. She rejects the possibility that her weight – which neoliberal discourse implies one should be able to control (McRobbie 2015) – might be causing her pain. Therefore, Katie revels in the diagnose of a virus that is *out of her control*, absolving herself of personal responsibility for her health issues. However, she emphasises pressure from doctors who 'delight' in focusing on her weight issues as the cause of her health problems, implying that these doctors believe her to be responsible for managing her weight; it is something she *should be* able to control. Thus, failing to manage her weight, and resulting health issues, seem like personal failure, a possibility that causes significant anxiety and feeling '*really, really shit*'. With two possibilities in her mind, Katie chooses to embrace the possibility, like Madison, that she cannot control both her health issues and her figure:

> *I would love to be able to fit into a size 10, but I know even if I had a completely flat stomach, I've got hips. These hips aren't going anywhere, they're part of my build. I'm never going to be a size 10 and top wise it's never going to fit over these [gesturing to her breasts]. So I have to just accept that I'm not going to fit into it…Even if you could see my ribs sticking out, I'd still never fit into these, so I have to just accept that as my build.*

She reconciles her inability to live up to a societal ideal (fit into a size 10) given something out of her control: like Madison must accept her clinical depression, Katie resolves to accept her lack of agency in terms of her body shape. Acceptance of a lack of agency is key: if there is not a possibility for agency in some aspect of the self, then the project of the self can still be a 'success'. Thus, when participants experience what are perceived as 'personal failures' through neoliberal discourse, they rationalise these failures as outside of their control and attempt to manage them as such.

To feel and then rationalise away personal responsibility is an anxiety-provoking task and causes much stress for participants in everyday life, driven by a need to be successful. As Emma describes, even executing mundane activities create a sense of performance-anxiety in relation the project of the self:

> *Emma: I get nervous about going on holidays. I get nervous about the things I need to have planned. I get nervous about going back to work when I've been on a holiday. If I start to feel sick I get nervous about meetings that come up at work.*

Interviewer: What makes you nervous about all these things?

Interviewee: My performance. That I'm going to do something purely…that when I'm driving I will stall and embarrass myself or I'll crash the car or hurt someone. That I'm not prepared for a meeting. That I'm going to make a fool of myself. That I am going to fall off of my bike. That I'm not going to be adequate. That I'm not going to excel.

This passage leads to the next section: Emma feels a fear that she won't be accepted or that she won't excel, in relation to the opinions of others. She therefore oscillates between narcissistic feelings of grandiosity (desire to excel) and fragility (desire to be adequate) as she cites *performance* as the driver of this anxiety-provoking mind-set, again eliciting a machine metaphor. Like Madison strives to function, Emma strives to *perform*. The question then becomes – from what does the pressure to manage the project of the self, to function and to perform, derive?

6.2. Benchmarking the self: In comparison to others

Seemingly paradoxical, a self managed as an *individual* project demands increased attention to the opinions of others as participants seek validation and affirmation in the pursuit of a 'successful' self. Therefore, others, both real and imagined, become yardsticks by which participants judge the efficacy of the self and the life course, thus encouraging habits of comparison to others through a focus on the self. This section expands on these themes, addressing a tendency of *social comparison* which relates to conscientiousness or concern for the opinions of others, whether that opinion is validating or rejecting. Neither the need for recognition from the other (Graeber 2011), nor the role of the other in the forming of 'identity' (Fuss 1995) is emphasised in consumer research literature. But the data suggests that participants seek constant approval for their life choices – however mundane – from others. In seeking validation, participants also judge others and thus oscillate between feeling inferior (failing) or superior (succeeding) in relation to an other. Resonating with Marwick's (2012) theory of social media as social surveillance, Emma explains:

> *I think women are actually terrible at wanting everything that we don't have. Like what woman is satisfied with their lot? I don't know if it's a women thing. I think it's probably a human nature thing, but I think women succumb to peer pressure a lot more. I think women try and benchmark against other women all the time. Like if you look at, if you Google things…I caught myself Googling today because I was wearing this pencil skirt that was tight and I was like, 'Is a size 12 too fat to wear a pencil skirt?' And then I was like, 'what the fuck am I typing here? What kind of answer do I expect to get back off another person?'*

Emma finds that women in particular 'are actually terrible' for wanting what they can't have; for desiring the position of the other or desiring what the other desires. She notes the peer pressure to perform, as women attempt to benchmark – or live up to – the expectations of

one another. Emma rationalises her tendency for social comparison to 'human nature' but her use of the term succumb suggests an inability to resist such tendencies. That these tendencies are potentially resistible (maybe by men?) implies a gendered lack of agency as women focus on appearance and comparing themselves to others (McRobbie 2015). Emma finds her behaviour both shameful and bizarre in this instance when, unsure of her appearance, she turns to Google for affirmation. The search returns articles from blogs ('Style advice for curvy girls'), Reddit ('What is the secret to rocking pencil skirts'); Wikihow ('How to dress well when you're overweight'), and Dailymail ('How most size 12 women still believe they are too fat'). These articles may be more anxiety provoking (suggesting she is plus-size or curvy) than comforting, perhaps explaining her reaction of disdain.

Catriona similarly vents about the anxiety inherent in social comparison and the pressure of constantly measuring herself compared to others and desiring what others have. Typical of the ambivalence of emerging adulthood (Arnett 2004), Catriona emphasises throughout the interview process a desire to '*be doing more stuff -more adult type stuff*' and 'ticking the boxes' such as '*just like buying a house, getting a better job bla bla bla*'. She is single, living in a rented flat and 'stuck' in a job that she enjoys day-to-day but feels it isn't 'good enough' for the long term ('*I don't know. just………fed up. I'm fine on a day-to-day basis, but it's the long term…*). When asked about 'the good life', she mulls over the question for some time, responding '*it's hard to explain*'. Prompted for examples, she responds:

> *Catriona: I guess you always look at other people, like they've got this, or they've got that, you know, the job or the man or whatever the handbag, or whatever. I suppose that would stem from Instagram though, everyone's like 'Oh, I want this, I want that'.*
>
> *Interviewer: What do you mean?*
>
> *Catriona: Like I want that, you know from Instagram, they're always doing this, or they're always there, or whatever and everyone has this perception of they've got the good life, I guess.*
>
> *Interviewer: So who would some examples be for you?*
>
> *Catriona: Don't know, people who are jet setting or, don't know, or… I don't know. I guess my friends always jet setting for work, and I'm always like 'oh I wish...'. I'm always kind of envious of them. But I guess the people who post pictures on Instagram, they could be going, 'Oh, I wish I was like…' and it's almost like a chain. They wish they were like the next person.*

Catriona envies that which she is insecure about in her own life. She describes people with 'the job' and later 'jet setting' careers in comparison to worries that her career isn't 'good enough'. She mentions those with 'the man', reflecting insecurity about her single status and failed attempts to find a relationship. In the same breath, she references a handbag, equating

'the job' to 'the man' to 'the handbag', thus indicative of the importance of the material (Dufour 2008) and equating a husband to acquiring an object (Honneth 2008). Catriona values objects and her appearance, for example proudly showing me her Michael Kors bag that she saved for in the first interview. Catriona's language is acquisitive in nature, looking at what other people *have* (they've got this, they've got that) and translating this into her own desires (I want this, I want that). Rather than 'being', she compares herself to what others *have*, feeling envious but also, as reflected in her digital interview, displaying to others what she has, posting pictures when she travels or goes to upscale restaurants or is wearing a nice outfit. Like Emma, Catriona links this cycle of desire to social media, but specifically to Instagram where she sees images of others that she desires ('*the job or the man or whatever the handbag, or whatever*'). She consoles herself with the notion that the other she desires is also desiring another other, feeding an endless cycle of desire. She therefore reflexively acknowledges that others do not 'have it all' either, going on to describe the negative aspects of the life of her friend who seems to have it all:

> *…there's one of my friends, she's working for [corporate firm] now and she's earning like, loads, and she's got the perfect man, and she's got like, she owns her own flat but she never has time, so I guess that's not a good aspect, but everything else, so she seems to be like successful and that sort of thing.[…]yeah, I always think she's got the kind of………but I'm guess she's probably say she'd rather be sitting here having a glass of wine than in the office until 8 o'clock or whatever.*

This friend, however, acts as a guidepost to Catriona's conception of ideals and what Catriona lacks (the high-paying job, the 'perfect' man, her own flat), though when she considers her friend's position, she realises the potential pitfalls of her friend's life compared to her own.

However, rather than focusing on their life course or on living in the moment, participants tend to look to the other – to varying degrees – in order to assess their decisions, from career to family to appearance. An overemphasis on the actions of others, particularly when one feels 'different' in an undesired way, leads to a sense of anxiety about one's own circumstance. In the first interview when I outline the study to Madison, she launches into a reflection that rationalises her single status:

> *Madison: I think it [the study] is really great topic actually. I think it is really. Actually I was talking to my mom I guess last week or two weeks ago and I was talking about being single and because you know people are getting married now and no one said the word baby yet but like you know…*
>
> *Interviewer: It is going to happen soon.*
>
> *Madison: …Buying homes where I am like 'oh so there is an extra room' or buying a Dodge Durango which I am like 'you bought a car that seats seven you are basically willing a family at this point. What are you going to do with this car?' Um and so I was saying I was like, you know, 'I think I kind of give off this vibe, like I'm just*

fine like on my own'. I was like not like trying to like I think I just give out a vibe like I'm cool on my own. And she was like 'that might be true so I think it is going to be, I think it is an interesting kind of situation that is unfolding where, you know, like it's like I feel like mothers, my generation, we just hammer, hammer, hammered into our daughters just being strong and being independent but then like what consequences does that have?' And not, she did not mean consequences like she is concerned that I am going to be alone, but the consequence of just like, you know, dating is different and the kind of people you meet and how maybe conversations get started and you're taught certain social nuances. But at the same time it doesn't really fit with who you are like that I guess I am very independent. I can do things on my own but at the same time I am not going to approach a boy. He has to approach me. Which is creates these very weird consequences for who you are as a woman and who you want to maybe be in terms of a girl and boy or whatever.

In the first passage of the first interview Madison expresses her insecurity of being single for two and a half years and counting, *compared to others.* Her 'box ticking' life goals manifest in the first part of the quote, in which she draws on the notion that others in her peer group are already beginning to 'achieve' goals of marriage, home-ownership, with a possibility of children, perhaps a reflection of her insecurity. She then recounts a conversation in which her mother almost laments the 'hammering' into young women of values of independence and strength. Madison is quick with the caveat that her mother did not mean she is concerned about Madison being alone, although this speedy retort that zeroes in on Madison's single status in comparison to her mother's more macro message of the (unintended?) consequences of being a successful, independent woman is telling of her insecurities. Thus, in this instance, failure to be on the path that she plans for herself is not her responsibility, but the fault of society and the confused gender roles born from second-wave feminism.

Madison occasionally dates throughout the time I interviewed her, but during the first interview, embarrassed, she admits a fling with a much younger man, perhaps being something that can be excused since she is in her twenties. In the first place, Madison reflects on expectations of her year abroad:

I don't know. Everyone I think has this like ideal vision that I will come to Scotland and fall in love. I mean, I don't know... Obviously that's a fantastic fairy tale. I did not come here… to fall in love.… So I guess that would be like very… I am confident someday, but I am not particularly concerned about it. It is just it's not top of mind honestly.

Speaking slowly through long pauses, Madison recounts the expectations of 'everyone' for her – after two and a half years single – to meet her 'Prince Charming' abroad and to live out a 'fantastic fairy tale' – a cultural trope perpetuated by Disney, of which Madison is a huge fan. This (gendered) fantasy harks back to her mother's worry about the consequences of feminism and Madison not being able to live out the fantasy of finding a fairy-tale like love. She asserts that falling in love is not top-of-mind, but it is a recurring theme throughout the

interviews. As Charlotte notes, perhaps it is something out of her control unlike her career which *seems* to be on-track, though a year after participation, upon graduating from her master's degree, Madison found herself unemployed for a time despite tentatively planning to return to her previous job at a large corporation. In any case, Madison's preoccupation with being single *compared to her peers,* is juxtaposed with the story of a fling she had for the first couple of months of her master's degree. When I ask her during the first interview if she has dated in Edinburgh, she looks embarrassed. Grimacing, she admits: *'I have like a…..friend-ish…'* Upon arriving in Edinburgh and staying with her mum at an upmarket hotel, Madison began a flirtation with a concierge. She describes him as exotic and interesting compared to her provincial roots, noting he was born in Dubai and then moved various places whereas *'I was going to move in [US city] and then I moved to [US city] and then I went to college and then I came back to [US city]'*. She describes their meeting as accidental: *'It was an accident. I did not realise that until later on in whatever's happening and so…'* She then admits that he is 18 years old and describes:

> *Madison: He is, I mean he is great and it is fun and… you know we like go places together and I guess ordinarily you call it dating but I can't date him, so.*
>
> *Interviewer: Do you feel that?*
>
> *Madison: I can't date him.*
>
> *Interviewer: Like you mean date him long term?*
>
> *Madison: Yeah! like I can't date him! So I can't call it dating!*

Madison is in denial about her relationship because of its stigma and discordance with her life plan. Perhaps this is a folly of youth that Madison is willing to engage in so long as she isn't over thirty, as noted from the previous section. Her denial and refusal to engage in a relationship with him is directly implicit in sticking to her life plan that is predicated on the expectations of others:

> *He is great and very sweet and really fun to be around, but he is 18 and I am 27 and that's weird A) and I creep myself out. You know I mean… I don't, I mean I want to get married! […] Yeah I mean he is in like a longer programme so he will when graduates he will have his masters. As well as his bachelors. Yet like I think it's because it's gross. I will be in my 30s when that happens let's say by the time he will be done I will, I am like married like with a bun in the oven like living in the 'burbs. And that is just not that timeline will not work out. So yeah it was one of those I wish I'd known how old you were I wish I'd known before we started….*

Rather than focus on the relationship in the now, Madison rejects the relationship because it doesn't fit with her linear conception of how her life *should* be, imagining herself without question to be married, pregnant and living in the suburbs by the time her lover graduates from university. Her continued engagement in the relationship is almost as a way of living

out the fantasy of falling in love with an exotic, Scottish stranger at least for a moment in time, fulfilling an expectation in an unexpected way. That is, she fulfils the desire of those who expect her to fall in love, as she describes: '*That's what my friends are telling me, just like whatever like when you are writing memoirs when you are old this will be great story'*. Madison lives this love affair through the opinions of her friends who give her a form of affirmation – that she will one day laugh at this story when she is writing her memoirs; the implicit other is an older, successful and presumably married Madison remembering a silly Scottish fling.

When the life course does not align with ideals or expectations, participants experience anxiety and recalibrate their 'project of the self' to reflect an unexpected development, like Madison and her love affair. In another example, rather than choosing a career, Emma has 'fallen into' working as a university administrator: '*Well it was just by accident to be honest. It was never something that I thought I was going to do. It was never something I dreamt I was going to do'*. Emma explains her current situation as a need to 'get on with it' and maximising the potential for the circumstances in which she finds herself, despite insecurity of her career position. She attributes her failure to her lack of foresight and planning ('*I think that was one of the problems that I had never had a vision of what I was going to be. So it was really hard to benchmark actually where I should be')* as well as misplaced expectations from school where she was a top student ('*I spent the whole of school being told, given a lot of praise, being told how good I was at various things, what I was going to achieve')* and university where she performed as she thought she should ('*I did okay in my degree, like I got 2:1. It was good')* but perhaps not as well as her peers ('*I haven't maybe got all the CV boxes checked that maybe some other people had')*. Thus, given expectations of ambition in her youth imposed by others and comparing herself to others now (e.g., friends doing master's programmes), she finds her current job position shameful, a passage reminiscent of Catriona:

> I think about this [whether she is disappointed] quite a lot. I don't think I am disappointed because I like my job. I'm good at my job. It takes…I berate myself all the time because I devalue what I do often. Like if people say, "where do you work?" 'I work for the university'. 'Oh are you a lecturer?' 'No, I'm just an admin'.

Pressure to living up to one's 'full potential' (or to maximise utility, in neoliberal speak) burdens Emma as she wonders whether she is disappointed in her career position ('*I think about this quite a lot')*. She senses a discrepancy between the level at which she must perform in this dynamic role, and pressure stemming from the perceptions of others who she perceives as looking down on her as 'just an admin', implicitly comparing herself to the academic (lecturer) other, or perhaps her at her full potential: '*So in some ways you kind of do think, "is this me to my full potential?"'* Moreover, the sense that she did not *choose* to be a university administrator and the expectation that she should be able to choose a career causes anxiety

as taking charge of the 'project of the self' fails. Compared to others, Emma did not carve her own path and she is not in a position perceived to be powerful or important, a neoliberal ideal (Verhaeghe 2014). That being said, she describes her career both as meaningful to her and as just one job she might have over a long and varied career (*'I've never been a person that's like, "I've got to have a career now and that's going to be me for the rest of my life"'*). But she describes her transition from university as adjusting to the failure to achieve an ideal: '*It kind of was just a really hard couple of years because I just felt like isolated and just a bit of a failure? Because I hadn't achieved what I thought I sort of, thought that I had?*' Like Madison and Abeni, failure and success is reflected through the self (Dufour 2008). If she had achieved what she though she should, she would experience herself as a success in comparison to an implicit other. Again, this is a binary construction of success versus failure. In an effort to assuage her feelings of failure in terms of career, Emma decided to make a change and buy a flat in Edinburgh:

> *Kind of had a bit of a meltdown one day. We [my husband and I] were talking about brands or something. Then we had a big fight and I had a bit of a meltdown and then I was just like, 'I need to leave here, need to move from here because it isn't enough, I've not done anything'. So we just decided that we would save to buy a house [in Edinburgh]. And so we saved as much as we possibly could, loads and loads, and then bought a flat here two years ago.*

Interestingly, Emma asserted herself and 'did something' through a consumer purchase (a flat), at least taking initiative to live in a place that she wanted to live and that did not represent 'going backward'. She cites lack of action and accomplishment on her part (*'I've not done anything*') as a need to spark change. Not only did her first property purchase give her a feeling of control, but also she began advancing her position. She notes: '*It was starting to creep up, started to get a bit more money, started to get more responsibility, then I moved to [a permanent contract]. I just feel like it's starting to come together a little bit now.*' In this vein, Emma has embraced her position, though it wasn't the position she desired.

For Charlotte, the position of a successful other disrupts the initial contentedness she had with her career. Although she was unable to get her ideal job in Brussels due to a lack of experience, Charlotte, in the first few interviews, is proud of her entrepreneurial, business career path: '*For me it's just perfect. It's very different from everything that my friends are doing in law firms, and all that but I think at 23 I'm actually a shareholder and I would never have this anywhere else'.* Comparing herself to her friends, she seems to feel a sense of superiority due to the unique nature of her job, and the fact that she is a shareholder in a fast-growing firm at a very young age. However, there is also an underlying sense of justification for not being able to achieve what her friends achieved; i.e., getting rejected from international law firms. This rationalisation disintegrates by the fourth interview when her position shifts to one of inferiority and anxiety. The introduction of an 'other' – a love interest –causes her to question

everything, from her career to her religion (*'He's not Christian but he says he really respects people that believe if they need this, the thing he says is if they need something to make them feel better. And it made me wonder, is that what it is about?'*). Importantly she is not only benchmarking against women but in this case against the career trajectory of a successful male peer:

> *…I started seeing someone at the end of March who is … doing a career in finance. And I realised that I did, not the similar studies, but I did law and finance and somehow seeing how those people are moving into their career, and I'm like maybe I did something wrong. Maybe I should have like a more corporate career. Not that it would have made me more happy, but somehow it would have fit better with the plan I designed. Because at the moment, I don't feel really proud to say, not where I'm working but what I'm doing. And I don't feel like it's really matching, that sounds a bit pretentious, but <u>the potential that I have</u>.*

A lack of confidence in one's own path and an unconscious reliance on the position of others through benchmarking creates a tenuous situation in which Charlotte questions life choices in meeting an other she identifies as her ideal, or in a superior position. Forward momentum is particularly important to Charlotte, similar to Emma who felt at one point as if she was 'going backwards' in her career. Because Charlotte is in the same job relative to others who have progressed or been promoted, she feels that she perhaps made the 'wrong' decision not to pursue a corporate career, something she imagines *'would fit better with the plan I designed'*, valuing agency and planning over happiness. But her 'plan' went awry when she did not get a corporate job and was presented with this alternative opportunity that was going well until she reflected on the position of others. Like Emma, Charlotte does not feel proud to tell others about her career position (e.g., to please the other or feel superior to the other), instead feeling ashamed and embarrassed given that it does not match her ideal manifested through the career trajectories of others, and her perceived potential. She describes: *'I feel like for the last year I've been kind of, even though I've done lots of stuff, I'm like standing by a little bit in my career. Because I had so much momentum at the start and it kind of settled into, well, this is what your role is now, kind of felt like am I still moving up or not?'* Charlotte seems to feel helpless and out of control of her future. She wonders how control slipped away and how the momentum was lost. She speaks of her career trajectory in this case as linear (moving up) and in neoliberal terms – having 'invested' in her studies with the expectation of an outcome. Like Emma, she implies that compared to her love interest who has done well in finance, she is 'just' a marketing manager, wondering if she should desire to achieve more. She envisages a turning point in which she must *'take my life back in charge'*, implying if she does not act, she will lose control or be at risk of not achieving her potential. She wonders whether she is stagnating, although she has only been in the job for a year.

The feeling that one has not achieved enough compared to others is rife across participant accounts, encapsulated by Simone. In the first interview Simone describes her admiration for her aunt and uncle in terms of their lifestyle and ambitions (ideal), compared to her parents (rejected). Simone was raised in a difficult family setting in which her half brother passed away when she was young and her mother left New Zealand to return to her home country in Europe when Simone was a child. Simone rejects identification with her parents in favour of the ambition and lifestyle her uncle and aunt embody, a lifestyle that includes travel, important careers (in the United Nations) and 'having it all together' compared to her parents and in particular her father who she viewed as 'a bit dumb' just being a farmer. She also mentions that her aunt and uncle 'are also like crazy like crazy rich like millionaires rich'. In this way, Simone aspires to be like her aunt and uncle:

> *I just always wanted their lifestyle as like that's what I am aiming for. Like I look at my parents and I am kind of like yeah, you guys do fine, like dad is a farmer, mom is a nurse. You are not struggling, but it is not enough for me. I've got much higher expectations and I kind of feel like, I don't know, like I missed out on something. Like I, not being born to parents like [Uncles Jeff] and [Aunt Jenna]. But then at the same time, I kind of go, well it's making me strive for it.*

Simone almost feels cheated for having her parents who are 'average' compared to her aunt and uncle whose example she uses as a benchmark for her future. This not only suggests that Simone desires to be 'better than' her parents but demands rejecting the desires of her family (for her to be a professional athlete or to have a corporate job in New Zealand) in order to achieve her own dreams, or to become like Jeff and Jenna. For example, Simone describes quitting professional sports at 18, deciding to backpack around the world instead. Another one of her uncles reacted by driving across the country when he heard about her decision, to which she responded: '*No, this is the family dream. I am now 18 I am going to go and do what I want*'. Simone rejects the influence and desires of her family in favour of her own dreams, much like Emily discussed in Chapter 7. In this way, she describes her decision to go to university as both reflective of her high-achieving 'nature' and born out of overcoming personal tragedy:

> *Plane crash, car crash, suicide, tsunami and another suicide and it was just like… so I had a lot of loss. … A lot of deaths. So that certainly shaped me a lot. So I ended up coming back [from travelling abroad to the US] and two weeks later while I was in London I just decided that I was going to go to uni. Generally it was thing because I always wanted to, I mean I just managed to get in just off my grades. Well that was the thing like I was supposed to have an interview and do like this intern exam but my grades were so good that they were just like yeah come and even that did not make me click that I was smart enough to go to Uni.*

Death and loss are key aspects of Simone's life (she declares: '*Death is my whole existence and I don't mean to sound like emo about it, but it really is*'), not surprising given the loss she has

experienced and her involvement in the heavy metal subculture, of which death is an important discourse. This passage suggests that she becomes 'better than' her parents and family in following her desires to become her aunt and uncle by travelling the world. Then, a catharsis amidst of personal tragedy, Simone decides to apply to university. Simone often frames stories through personal agency amid difficult or tragic circumstances and often notes that she never believes she is good enough until she receives validation, such as realising she is 'smart enough' by getting into university instantly. This contradictory stance is often present in Simone's narrative – a sense that she is 'humble-bragging', commenting that she did not believe herself to be qualified but then once she achieves a position, exceeds expectations. Her statement is also contradictory in terms of time: on the one hand she describes a speedy decision to apply to university but on the other, she notes applying as something she always wanted to do. Thus, in Simone's story, overcoming hardship and eschewing immediate family expectations is her personal responsibility in order to maximise her potential, or become the other she desires (Jeff and Jenna). Importantly, although Simone is extremely focused on her career and dedicated to working in the marketing of creative arts, it is her attitude towards success that reveals a way-of-being focused on benchmarking and constant achievement, reminiscent of both Emma and Charlotte's desire to move forward. Rather than embrace the temporal 'now', participants constantly look to the future to imagine what they *should* be doing, and in Simone's case with this benchmark at the back of her mind. Thus, Simone is unable to be satisfied with such success, feeling an urge to continue to succeed in an endless cycle of achievement:

> *…Objectively I think if I met someone, if I met myself as another person, if someone came up to me and was like 'I've done all these things' I would be like 'Holy crap! Like how did you even… wow!', you know? And I look at myself and I kind of go, I could be doing better, I could be doing better, I could be doing better! And so every time I set myself a goal for success, once I get to it, it's like well that's, that's now* <u>beneath</u> *me and now I need to look to the next ones so I never kind of enjoy…the moment so…I don't really know how to answer that [question about what success means to me]. I guess it would be like an international career but I already have an international career that I am not apparently satisfied with enough. Um, so I don't know! I don't… I think, I know, I suppose I get a lot of self-esteem from success so I've kind of got to be on this constant path of succeeding all the time.*

Simone's statement is reflective a sense of superiority in achieving her goal of being like her aunt and uncle through having an international career as a marketing manager in the creative industries. Yet she is unsatisfied and strives to 'increase' her success, presumably compared to a more successful other, and the feeling that she is moving forward and superior to the goals that she achieves. Placing herself in the position of an imagined 'other', Simone believes she *should be* in awe of her achievements, implicitly admiring herself. But simultaneously, she feels inadequate with the present as the goals she sets will be achieved, with another goal to

achieve looming ahead, leading to a constant sense of dissatisfaction with the present. This resonates with Žižek's (1991, 92) argument that *desire* is continuous as the place of the other, where the subject desires to be, can never be reached. As he explains, when confronted with a conscious desired object, the desiring subject has a feeling 'this is not it'.

Whereas Simone suffers from clinical anxiety and depression given problematic family relations and loss, she notes that success gives her a sense of self worth, or in her words self-esteem. Thus, she feels more pressure to succeed as she strives for a feeling of achievement to bolster her fragile self. Alicja echoes this sentiment in discussing *potential*:

> *I think that when we talk about people, or even animals, I think the word would be potential or potentiality. Everybody has some sort of…obviously I think some of it is imaginary because you can't know really what you can do until you do it. You're getting so many messages when you are a kid and everybody tells you you're this and that. You kind of tend to believe that you have certain talents or you don't. So I think success would mean that you have achieved as much as you could.*

Alicja highlights a sense of (imagined) potential instilled by others ('*everybody tells you you're this*') that an individual constantly works toward. Like Simone, Alicja imagines success as achieving *as much as possible*, implying that success can be an endless cycle of achievements to *have*. She explains:

> *I don't believe that people ever feel successful. I think when they achieve something, they want something more. I've never met anybody who would say 'I'm successful'. I feel like even Angelina Jolie, she said now she is going to quit acting because she doesn't feel like she's ever been good at it and she wants to go into politics more and development issues as she has been doing for the past decade. I don't know. I feel like if you say you're successful it's like you're going to die. When older people are just like 'I've done everything I could and that's it'.*

Alicja equates death with the desire to stop achieving. Therefore, within a neoliberal regime of truth, to be alive is to constantly pursue goals or embody the need to achieve. Alicja reflects on a media other in conceptualising how people are generally unsatisfied with the present, even those who others deem as very successful such as Angelina Jolie. She also later notes how we cannot see ourselves as successful, yet: '*We deem other people as successful*'. Success is then predicated by and through the other in relation to the self. Alicja is in a position of precarious employment when we meet, unemployed at first and then working in retail and volunteering, very unsure of what her future holds. When she reflects on her own views of success, she reflects on societal ideals, noting she doesn't believe feeling successful is something she could ever *be* by virtue of her personality:

> *I don't think it belongs to my personality. I think even if I had a job that I really like and a family that I really like, I feel like I am always going to see the things that are wrong. I also think that people mostly see them, even if everything is going…like I'm*

an optimistic person, but I always see those stitches. Like even if the fabric is nice, you see things that are wrong or pulling.

She says success does not '*belong to*' her personality, as if her personality does not *own* a sense of success. She imagines an ideal life and her tendency to see things wrong with everything, using the metaphor of a nice sweater with a pull in the fabric to imagine seeing that which is wrong rather than admiring the sweater as a whole. But for many participants, a sense of the success is experienced in a moment, in relation to ideals and expectations. This indicates sense of superiority that is short-lived, as participants, measuring themselves and the progress of the project of the self against others, oscillate between feelings of superiority or inferiority, the magnitude of the oscillations dependent the strength of the need for validation. That is, participants who are more secure in their sense of sense (e.g., Emily and her career) are less affected, whereas participants who are more insecure tend to seek out validation more frequently and are more sensitive to the opinions of others. Without an external anchor to found the subject, individuals are vulnerable to oscillating feelings of grandiosity and inferiority, constantly comparing the self to the other. This prompts as sense of competitiveness, disillusionment with the present, living for the future and an over-socialised self (Slater 1997) that appears narcissistic in its focus on the opinions and validations from others.

6.3. Objectifying the self: A focus on appearance

In this study, susceptibility to commodity flows as a way to found the self or to gain validation from the other is evidenced through importance of appearance, resulting in a consumerist way-of-being and materialism. As Dufour (2008, 71) describes: 'The subject is increasingly trapped between a latent melancholy (the depression we hear so much about), impossibility of speaking in the first person, the illusion of omnipotence, and the temptation to adopt a false self, a borrowed personality or even the multiple personalities that are made so widely available by the market'. Tendencies towards materialism and attempting to *be* through commodities and appearance are particularly emphasised in cases in which there is a lack of passion or meaning found through intellectual or career pursuits, which is prevalent. In cases where intrinsic meaning is derived from intellectual or career pursuits, the material and appearance are valued less. For example, Gretchen notes '*I'm happy with much less material things but then I'm more about like doing things*'. She desires a level of income to maintain a lifestyle where she can travel, but does not care about material goods as they do not make her happy. In that way, she finds '*mostly people are more materialistic than I am*'. Whilst others are worried about comparing themselves to one another, Gretchen feels intense pressure to do well in her studies so she can attain her version of the good life, or buying a home,

travelling and maintaining a happy relationship (*I'm really stressed out with study, and I feel like I put a lot of pressure on myself*). In this way, she only finds her appearance important *'when I have to go to a job interview or when you show up to work'*. Therefore, in one way or another, appearance is paramount for most participants who believe it represents being, an important way to gain validation from the 'other'. However, in most cases, this other is not a professional ideal as with Gretchen, but a generalised other. In Sophie's words: *'I just want to look good, and attractive to girls and boys ... cos, you know, you always see girls in the street that look good. You know I want people to think, "Oh, she looks good"'*. Thus, the self-referential subject, confronted by existential insecurities that cannot *necessarily* be answered, is encouraged to turn to the marketplace in expressing the self and seek existential validation through commodities (Dufour 2008). But there is a feeling of shame in this pursuit. As Emma describes: *'You want to shake yourself because we're intelligent women. We don't need to have justification from other people. And yet, nothing feels so good as when someone says to you, "Oh my god I love your skirt!" How amazing is that?* This statement pits intelligence against the superficiality of craving compliments from others based on appearance. Emma goes on to describe the importance of appearance:

> *Everything that I do is pretty consciously done in terms of how I present myself. I like to look good. I take pride in my appearance. I probably value appearance a bit more than I should. I like being attractive to both men and women but in sometimes different ways. I like clothes. I like what my clothes portray about me, both a sense of individualism and I like to dress up. I like when I kind of play at being professional at work and that requires a certain outfit versus when I'm being edgy and going to a gig and then I look like this. I like when people notice my clothes, when they compliment me. Like when I changed my Facebook profile picture last night, I like receiving all the likes.*

> *Interviewer: How many likes did you receive?*

> *Interviewee: 46 or something like that.*

This passage suggests reflexivity and increased self-awareness in managing impressions and self-presentation and receiving validation from others online (Marwick 2012). Importantly, this is not just a celebratory pursuit of individual self-expression through the material and digital; of course, it could be read in this way and that is certainly a piece of the puzzle that has been explored extensively in consumer research. The other piece of the puzzle that has received far less attention, however, is the notion that she is trying to express herself through the material in order to gain validation/recognition from the other. This is evident both through her assertion that she *'likes receiving all the likes'* and through the previous quote in which she notes, with sense of shame, that *'nothing feels so good'* as receiving an appearance-related compliment. Like Sophie, Emma mentions that she wants to look *attractive* to both men and women as she attempts to live out her identity through commodity flows, 'taking

pride' in the crafting of her body and appearance. In this way, Emma endeavours to receive compliments from others, feeling affirmed, for example, when she receives likes on a selfie she posted on Facebook after wondering whether she was a bit narcissistic for taking so many selfies. Importantly, she is aware of this tendency, a tendency she seeks to correct: '*I seek approval of others to validate what I've done. […] I get a total buzz off it, like a proper high when someone wants to tell other people how great I've done*'. After giving several examples, Emma explains: '*I think it's healthy that I'm starting to recognize it*'. Therefore, Emma feels that too much attention and importance placed on the opinions of others and a need for validation is somehow unhealthy.

Described in Section 5.3, Tiffany relies heavily on online beauty forums to keep abreast of the market, continually striving to find the best products: '*I just have a ton of products. I'm always that person that's like looking for the miracle product*'. She describes: '*I rely on other people like online. I rely on like people's reviews and then try them out*'. It is very important for Tiffany to keep up-to-date and be

Figure 6.2: Tiffany's bathroom where she keeps her bath and beauty products

current on fashion trends, through the Beauty Department website as mentioned. Although a student at the time of the study, in her five years working in corporate America, Tiffany shopped frequently at the upscale department store Nordstroms, spending around $700 a month on clothes and over $2000 a year on beauty products. This is indeed reflected in her university flat in which she has at least 15 pairs of shoes, an overflowing closet and a

Figure 6.3: Tiffany's jewellery

bathroom swarming with makeup, moisturizers, hair products, nail varnish and the like (Figures 6.2 and 6.3). Not only does Tiffany express materialistic values that inform the process of 'founding' the self (Dufour 2008), but also appearance is equated with being. That is, she experiences a sense of responsibility for crafting an image through the marketplace that others will judge as a reflection of the self. Tiffany also judges others by their appearance: '*Like I'll see girls that have like chipped nails, I'm like why don't you just take that off? It just looks trashy*'. It is almost as though she equates how someone looks with their worth as a person. She comments after the previous assertion: '*I like looking put together*'. I ask her to explain further:

> *I think for me it is very much I like to be confident in the way I look and the way I feel so that's also a reason I do tend to be like dressier cos it… I like, I like it. I like being dressy. Um and I think as much as people don't like it, or maybe try to fight it,*

like people judge you on your appearance. You walk into somewhere like if I go somewhere, people are probably going to be nicer to me if I'm dressed in like jeans and blazer than if I like go in in sweatpants. Like people make assumptions based on how you look and love it, hate it, that's the way of the world so why not care how you look?

Thus, Tiffany places significant importance on commodities to found herself and her sense of self worth in relation to others. This is far from a one-off, extreme example. Many participants devote time, effort and money crafting appearance and experience appearance as paramount to their self worth and the worth of others. For example, Charlotte similarly judges others for their appearance: *'I'm very, very critical and judgmental and I find myself sometimes, you know, looking at people and saying "ugh what the fuck is she wearing"'*. Charlotte takes pride in founding herself through her appearance:

Figure 6.4: Some of Charlotte's personal beauty products

> *It's almost like I'm affording now the person I want to be: I got skinnier because I go to the gym every day this week, you know all this kind of stuff. I'm changing myself into something that I wanted to be? Or the image of the girl that I wanted to be? Um so I like that better and, you know, I was like oh so much better. Then again I could be so much better I think as well.*

Through the commodification of the body (*'I can just pay for it'*), Charlotte can become closer to the version of the self that she desires, a self, however that is ultimately grounded in the commodity flows of the market that are fluid and ever changing. That is, contrary to accounts that read marketplace resources as symbolically enriching (Arnould and Thompson 2005), commodities and brands are inherently desymbolizing as the pervasion of a market (read profit) logic pursues ideals of 'fluidity, transparency, circulation and renewal' (Dufour 2008, 160) thus rendering commodities as unstable, vacuous symbolic anchors. In the above examples, participants attempt to bring themselves into being through appearance, drawing on commodities as symbolic of the self. But there is a sense that the quest to find oneself through a commodity-driven project that is vacuous and never-ending. This is reflected in Charlotte's acknowledgement that she will never be completely satisfied with her appearance and can always strive to continue to improve, or in Tiffany spending money month after month on new clothes and beauty supplies.

In this vein, Elizabeth is very concerned with appearance and likes to receive the affirmation of others. Although she comes across as confident and assertive in the interview space, in her favourite pub and with her best friend Katie, she acknowledges: *'I can be quite quiet and naturally quite shy, so I like having different clothes. It's always nice when someone is like, "Oh I love your dress"'.* This suggest that Elizabeth bolsters her sense of self with material goods. The logical consequence of her statement is that if she were not quiet or 'naturally shy' she might

not like having different clothes. She comments, like Sophie and Emma, that she desires to be complimented – as she implies that it would not be nice for her not to be recognised given the effort she puts into her appearance. Each time I met Elizabeth she clearly put effort into a perfectly coordinated outfits from colour-coordinated but funky sweaters and skirts to shoes (usually Russell and Bromley loafers) to jewellery and always with a Mulberry handbag (Figure 6.5). During the final interview, she describes a compliment she has recently received:

Figure 6.5: Elizabeth's favourite Mulberry bag

Elizabeth: The girls at work really liked my outfit and then they were like, 'We're going to have an Elizabeth corner'. […] [Retail brand where she works] isn't quite my style and it made me really chuffed that they recognized.

Interviewer: What were you wearing?

Elizabeth: It was like a little stripy skirt and I had put a white shirt under a little lemon jumper then with loafers on and they were like, 'It's so cute'. Then they made me go pick them outfits for the weekend. It made me really chuffed. That's my compliment.

Elizabeth seeks validation from others in the form of appearance-related compliments, happy with the recognition from those who she perceived as having a different style. Elizabeth takes great pride in her appearance and is quite materialistic, coveting expensive brands, noting that she and her mom shop frequently: '*That's all we do, spend my dad's money*'. And like Emma, there is a sense of embarrassment around the emphasis she places on her appearance. In discussing make-up, she describes:

Elizabeth: I wear too much makeup every day.

Interviewer: I asked you this question. When you leave the house, do you have to have makeup on?

Elizabeth: I've never left the house without makeup.

Interviewer: Not even to go to [the grocery store] or something?

Elizabeth: No. Like I have to have eyebrows on, mascara, foundation, blusher; the whole shebang.

By saying she wears too much makeup, Elizabeth implies that she should not wear so much, but a sense of anxiety about how the self is presented to the other (i.e., with makeup on at all times) and also the desire for recognition (i.e., crafting her appearance to be like everyone else and in an effort to receive compliments) outweighs this sense of shame. Her claim that she never leaves the house without makeup suggests that displaying herself to others requires thought and attention to appearance, something evident in her Facebook photos

where she is perfectly groomed and made-up in most photos. Elizabeth describes herself as quite a 'stressed' and unconfident person, perhaps related to conflicting feelings about her weight and body image. She relates high levels of stress again to her appearance – *'I'll stress about what I'm wearing the next day'*, described in Section 4.1.1. This perhaps explains the elation Elizabeth felt when her co-workers collectively complimented her appearance. In citing her clothing as something she likes about her body image, Elizabeth retains control, proud of the style and fashion sense that she has cultivated, versus other aspects of her body that she cannot control as easily.

From the above a tension emerges: the desire to be unique or special, yet conforming to collective standards of recognition. That is, participants both feel the need to 'stand out' or be different from others, but also to be accepted and validated by others. For example, in the quote below, Elizabeth describes both her desire to fit in, but importantly, also to stand out:

> *It's nice to be a little bit different, for people to like what you're wearing without being uber-trendy. Like I don't wear clothes that are necessarily like, "Oh my god, she's so cool". Like in the magazines, look like that. I quite like having a different sense of style. I just like weird clothes.[…] Things that people wouldn't normally pick. I like the ugliness.*
>
> *Katie: They look good on you though. I couldn't pull that off! I would look weird.*
>
> *Interviewer: Do you feel individual as well then?*
>
> *Elizabeth: Yeah. I just pick things because I like them, not because other people might like them.*

Elizabeth's earlier statement that because she is 'naturally quite shy' she likes to express herself through 'different clothes' that she even terms 'ugly', contradicts with her admission that she thrives on compliments from others, like the compliment she elicits from Katie in the passage ('*They look good on you though*'). Therefore, she desires to conform to standards of recognition by 'other' whilst identifying herself as unique, and it is evident that she does believe that she achieves this: '*Like I'm not like, "ugh I can't be mainstream like everyone else." I'm quite uncool, that's all right; I don't mind that. I can be a massive nerd and that's ok, I'm ok with that. It's nice to be the cool nerd with the weird clothes'*. Importantly, observation contradicts Elizabeth's claims of uniqueness. Through Facebook pictures and four real-life encounters (three for interviews, one unplanned), it is evident, at least to me, that Elizabeth adheres to 'feminine' and 'trendy' conceptions of fashion. This is further evidenced through accounts of her favourite brands, all ubiquitous, high street and high-end names (e.g., Russell and Bromley; Harvey Nichols; Mulberry, etc.). Thus, feeling different from others, unconfident about her body image and quite shy affords Elizabeth a sense of uniqueness and individuality

through fashion choices that *feel* expressive of her sense of self. That way, when she is complimented by others, she feels affirmation of the project of the self.

Participants often attempt to allay insecurities, lack of confidence and anxiety through an emphasis on appearance and materials (both real and digital). This is illustrated in the cases of Katie and Simone and relates both to self-expression through material, often a result of life choices that are not necessarily validated by certain others. For example, Katie has struggled to cope or fit in at times throughout her life ('*Actually I hated school and I found uni very stressful*'; '*I was one of these kind of awkward kids*'). She struggles with sometimes debilitating clinical anxiety and depression as well as chronic pelvic pain, as discussed. Many of these issues are rooted in a somewhat troubled childhood in which Katie lost her father suddenly as a teenager. Prior to her father's death, the family also struggled with issues related to her eldest brother who was abusing drugs and alcohol and often ran away from home, living on the streets for long periods. She describes that time at home as a 'high stress environment' that contributed to subsequent anxiety issues. By university, she was suffering from severe panic attacks and bouts of depression that often, to

Figure 6.6: Comedian/Actor Miranda Hart

this day, leave her unable to work for weeks on end ('*So anxiety sort of became a normal almost everyday thing*'). Whilst in some ways inducing anxiety, the expression of self through her appearance is often a source of assurance for Katie. When asked who her role model is she describes:

> *Miranda Hart. But not just because she's funny. She's hilarious, but also because I know from reading about her and stuff that she's had a lot of personal demons and she's come through it and she's made such a success of herself. She's ok about it now; she laughs about it. I know from reading stuff that she's written she had really bad depression for a while and was battling her weight and her size and the way she looked and stuff. I can kind of identify with her because when I was younger I hated the way that I looked. I know you have a question about it later, but I've always had issues with my nose, right from the age of 5 or 6. Then as I got older, I decided I'm getting my nose pierced. I hate my nose, I'll get pierced and then it will look pretty. I think that's sort of something I identify with because of her because that's something she did. She was like, 'Well I'm big and I'm chubby but I like comedy value'. And that's what she's used her height for and stuff ehm like she's done really, really well.*

Katie identifies with Miranda Hart as an example of the success she might become through adversity. Like Katie who is very tall and overweight, Miranda struggles with her weight and size. Like Katie who has battled depression since her teens, Miranda struggled with depression and other 'personal demons'. The note that Miranda has '*done really, really well*' as '*she's come through it and she's made such a success of herself*' gives Katie hope that she will also

come through her depression and become successful (a side note is that at the time of the study Katie was struggling to find full-time employment as a psychiatric nurse). Piercing her nose is thus analogous to hope and a means by which to make a body part that she perceived of as 'ugly' pretty. Katie took charge of her appearance in the way that Miranda took charge of her appearance by appropriating it for comedy use, transforming a body part that has troubled her since early childhood. But whereas Miranda uses her 'big and chubby' body for career purpose, Katie turns to the material for comfort. She also uses tattoos as a means to gain assurance and recognition. In describing a tattoo on her hand she notes: *'It's a dove. It just means peace. It was really a time when I was not feeling so great and I thought I need something…so I've got that to remind me that it's all good, that anything life throws at me, I'll get through'*. When Katie feels down or low and struggles to receive recognition in day-to-day life from the 'other', she gains assurance from actions she has taken in relation to her appearance – piercings, tattoos, and the like, and from examples in celebrity culture of those who have made a difference or overcome their struggles to become 'successful' through their own agency (*'she's made such a success of herself'*) in the face of adversity. When her sense of self is fragile, she seeks the material to reinforce her sense of self, much like Elizabeth with her style and fashion fetish.

Simone similarly imagines her sense of self and being through her appearance. She describes the story of how she expressed herself by changing her appearance – through her own volition – at the young age of 13:

> *When I was 13 I had long, long straight brown hair down to like the small of my back and all of my life, my whole life when I was a kid all I ever said to my mum was that I wanted short hair and she always told me I couldn't do it, not because she did not want me to do it but because my hair was too thin and it wouldn't like the pictures that I was showing to her that I wanted the hair cut. She is like 'you hair just won't be able to do that'. And I always wanted like a mohawk or stuff like that but you know. Anyway I remember being 13 and I just, I was like 'Oh Mum I need to go to get my hair cut'. So she gave me some money to go and I walked in there and they just chopped all my hair off. I got it cut really short and spiky and dyed it bright red and I walked in and my mom did not even recognize me. She is like 'Oh my God!' She was just like doing the shopping and I just kind of went off and out and came back and suddenly looked like a completely different person. My dad almost cried because he loves long hair and said 'Oh my God what have you done!' He was really upset about it. But same thing; now he is just like 'I couldn't imagine you ever having long hair'.*

Figure 6.7: Simone's Agony Scene t-shirt

From a young age, Simone began to craft her appearance to fit the heavy-metal subculture: *'I suppose I've always just worn a lot of black, lot of like big boots like I am wearing now and if I get dressed up like I don't dress up, I don't think I dress up like normal girls do. It's like a corset and skinny jeans and some big like stomping boots'*. She defines

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herself through appearance in opposition to what is 'normal' – or the hegemonic feminine form that her parents idealised: by cutting off her hair she severs an identification representing of conformity to what others deem 'normal'. Simone instead identifies with the heavy metal subculture in opposition to what is normal, an identification that is heavily influenced by appearance. One might argue that she could not be part of the heavy metal subculture *without* ascribing to a certain way of dressing that conforms to subcultural ideals (Chaney and Goulding 2016). For Simone, dressing in ways that signifies the subculture both makes her feel more like herself (equating appearance and fashion with being) as well as acting as a signifier for other 'metallers':

> *What I wear to heavy metal concerts and what I wear to shows and stuff has just become my normal every day fashion now. With slight twists, like fluorescent jeans because I still quite like, I don't know, I am pretty heavy and quirky and I like colour. It's not that I don't like colour; it's not that I am ugh depressive I have to wear black. It is just I like black and it makes me feel like more me if I am wearing my metal shirts and at the same time it is kind of a flag to other people. The other day I was sitting down at a bar and somebody commented, 'Oh my God you like the Agony that's amazing!' Agony in Heaven, they disbanded like 10 years ago and this shirt I have, never seen another shirt like this before, but it is the cover of one of the albums and I was like 'Wow you must be a really awesome person if you know this band!' So it's kind of a flag as well.*

Simone crafts her appearance in order to live out her identification with the heavy metal subculture in her everyday life by modifying acceptable attire in certain situations. Her appearance as such allows her to 'be' herself and gives her a means to gain recognition, either in relation to 'normal' ideals or as conforming to a subculture. Attention toward her appearance is therefore a means by which she can come to *be*.

6.4. Concluding thoughts: A way of being?

That the self is experience as a project by the participants of this study is not surprising given long-standing claims of a reflexive self in late modernity who, unbound from the pillars of tradition, must increasingly define her or himself (Giddens 1991, Bauman 2000) by turning to the marketplace (McAlexander et al. 2014) in search of symbolic markers. This is demonstrated by participants who tend to embody an entrepreneurial spirit in a quest to meet (or exceed) expectations and ideals broadly associated with 'the good life' (McRobbie 2015). However, though possibilities of uncertainty are reflected by the theorisations cited above, participant accounts in this chapter vividly illustrate the anxiety-provoking way-of-being that emerges from treating the self as a project. Oscillating between feelings of omnipotence (agency) and fragility (lack of agency, uncertainty), participants rationalise that which they can't control through personal agency, continually seeking to benchmark themselves compared to others. In doing so, they often turn to commodity flows for symbolic

anchoring, valuing appearance particularly in cases in which other aspects of the project of the self are lacking (Woodruffe 1997). This encourages self-subjectification (Gill 2003) as the young women of this study focus on consumerist goals of wealth and lifestyle as well as their appearance and image, subjugated by a market logic that encourages individualism, entrepreneurialism and a consumerist way-of-being.

Contrary to accounts in CCT that read marketplace resources as symbolically enriching (Arnould and Thompson 2005) and productive to identity (e.g., Ahuvia 2005; Jentzen et al. 2006), commodities emerge as symbolically vacuous. Dufour contends that commodities and brands a short-term, exploitative market logic disintegrates historical, cultural values such as 'moral principles, aesthetic canons, models of truth' (2008, 160). It is these cultural values to which a subject can symbolically anchor, whereas marketplace symbols are frenetic, ever-changing and inherently unstable. In this claim, he ties a distinct market logic to symbolic debasement, or that it is based on goals of profit maximization: 'The advertisers have already realized that they can exploit the debacle of the superego and attempt to make brands our new symbolic markers. The market (and especially the market in images) has become a major supplier of new and volatile ego-ideals which are constantly being reshaped' (2008, 84). This is certainly reflected in participant accounts that demonstrate materialistic tendencies and a focus on the importance of appearance. This is particularly worrying from a feminist perspective as the young women of this study feel they should be emancipated or seek emancipation through practices that encourage hegemonic femininity and woman-as-object positioning, or at the very least, in the case of Katie and Simone, seeking freedom through consumption. These findings bring up serious questions about the role of the market in the making of identity, questions that consumer research often fails to address (Fitchett et al. 2014) in light of more productive accounts (Arnould and Thompson 2005). This further illustrates a need to interrogate the construct of identity from an alternative perspective as, rather than taking for granted the selection of marketized resources and tools as self expressive, participants seem to adhere to cultural scripts, performing the subjectivity demanded from them in this particular postfeminist, neoliberal milieu (Butler 1991, 2005; McRobbie 2015; Lemke 2001).

7. IDENTITY: IN RELATION TO AN 'OTHER'

This chapter is devoted to interrogating the construct of identity through the psychoanalytic perspective of identification (Fuss 1995; Descola 2013[2005]). Drawing on observations from the previous three chapters, it seems necessary to reimagine identity not as an ability to choose from selected identities and resources but from the perspective of subject constitution through identifications. As an introduction, Chapter 4 addressed the participants' experiences and opinions on being a woman which were often underpinned by a sense of choice and responsibility (Rottenberg 2014). Chapter 5 highlighted participants' experiences of living a consumer subjectivity, mediated and reinforced through social media which is increasingly pervasive in everyday life, and in many cases reinforces hegemonic feminine ideals. Chapter 6 discussed practices such as imagining the self as a project, benchmarking and social comparison, and a focus on appearance which are suggestive of an entrepreneurial, neoliberal subjectivity. What these chapters suggest is the lack of *individual agency* in the making of the self, and the role of consumer culture in imbuing ideals and expectations, encouraging symbolic attachment to commodity flows. Though this manifests in a focus on the self, such a focus is mediated through the expectations of, and pressures from, others. That is, a need for validation and recognition *from others* seems to drive the 'individuated' 'project' of the self.

From the accounts in this thesis, it seems that identity is a construct that exists necessarily in relation to an 'other' (Fuss 1995; Vanheule and Verhaeghe 2009), performative of ideological discourse (Butler 2005). Rather than consider identity from an individual perspective, as is typical of research on consumer identity projects (Moisander 2009; Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Earley 2014), these findings highlight the significance of the role of others in the making of the self. The 'other' is like a set of mirrors surrounding the participants on all sides: the subject does not know who she is without recognising herself in – or identifying with – an 'other'. Through the psychoanalytic theory of identification, in this chapter I dissect how participants initially describe themselves. I draw on three participant accounts – Sophie, Emily and Jade – in which an open-ended 'tell me about yourself' question was posed without any leads to illustrate how what might uncritically be glossed over as a description of identity or self expression is laden with identifications. I selected these participants first because they directly answered the question without asking for further prompts (i.e., most participants asked what I meant or where I would like them to start), and secondly because of their diverse backgrounds: Sophie is Scottish and the oldest participant, single, and working as a university administrator; Emily is an American studying for her degree in Social work, she is single and very religious; and Jade is Scottish and the youngest

participant, married and pregnant by the end of the study and working freelance. Before exploring these cases, I will briefly discuss the theory of identification.

Identification marks every experience the self has with the external world, embedding culture into the subject, a concept integral to the theory of performativity (Butler 2005). Hence, in psychoanalytic terms, it is the experience of identity *through* the Other (discourse, norms, peers etc.). From this perspective, the self is not considered in categorical terms or in terms of agentic self-expression. Rather, 'identity' is understood as the way the self relates to the self (Lacan 1961; Vanheule and Verhaeghe 2009; Fuss 1995; Descola 2013). For instance, Jean Luc Nancy refers to identity as 'the Self that identifies itself' whilst Lacan conceives of identity as 'an entity equal to itself (i.e., A = A)' (Vanheule and Verhaeghe 2009, 392). Thus, identity is not related to how a subject chooses to express the self or maintain continuity (Giddens 1991), but to the experience of the self by the self. As Butler (1991, 17) notes, self-cohesion and continuity of a 'person' are not ontological fundamentals of personhood; rather these principles are 'socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility'. The theory of identification bypasses these culturally constituted *expectations* (to have a sense of self, to experience continuity) to understand how the self relates to itself through the production of self-recognition. Identification is thus a process that *allows for* the experience of identity or ontological security, though prevents identity from actually being tangible or 'real': 'Identification is a process that keeps identity at a distance, that prevents identity from ever approximating the status of an ontological given, even as it makes possible the formation of an illusion of identity as immediate, secure and totalizable' (Fuss 1995, 2). In this sense, identification is understood as a mirroring of the self to the self (thus the illusion of identity), but importantly, in relational terms. Through identifications, identity is experienced in relation to something else such as a person, norm, a discourse, etc. (Vanheule and Verhaeghe 2009). Therefore, psychoanalytically speaking, identification is the process of internalizing an external other; in this sense the other *is* subjectivity. As Fuss (1995, 3) explains: 'Subjectivity is the name we might give to the place of the other, to the place where I desire as another, to the place where I become the other'. In the theory of identification, it is not the self that takes precedence – as theories of identity in CCT might expect – but the *other* through which we derive our identifications. What is important, in the context of this study, is that the Other is not stable or external, as the theory of identification might posit based on its foundations in modernity. Instead, the 'other' is as precarious as the subject it represents. There is no Subject or Other, rather subjects and others who are intermingled and intermixed. Or, as Dufour (2008) might argue, the Subject becomes the Other, as the subject seeks to become the ideals represented by an increasingly unstable Other represented by the marketplace and commodity flows. In this way, the role of desire is paramount, both

to the theory of identification but also to the role of consumer culture in the lived experience of the young women of this study.

From a Freudian perspective, identification is a form of desire – or as Borch-Jacobsen notes, 'desire is precisely a *desire to be a subject'*. Thus, identification can be interpreted as 'a way to assume the desires of the other' and by extension, according to Fuss, desire is 'a means of becoming the other whom one wishes to have' (1995, 12). Lacan similarly relates identification with desire. He contends that the experience of identity 'is located at the level of desire' whereby humans continually ask themselves of the other 'what does he or she want from me?' (Vanheule and Verhaeghe 2009, 397). This anxiety-provoking question (given that there is no way to ever <u>know</u> what the Other desires) relates to the introspective question 'Who am I' given that this question is answered in relation to the other, or what the other 'intends' or desires in relation to *I*. That is: 'By molding one's own Ego, and by observing the way the other reacts to it, a subject tries to see which object it is in relation to the other's desire, and tries to make sure that the other desires the content one tries to be identical with.' (Vanheule and Verhaeghe 2009, 397). In this way, it is not difficult to imagine that the experience of the self is predicated on an inclination to experience life from the perspective of *I* or what Lacan (1961) terms *mihilisme*. As such, the subject (consciously or not) is perpetually monitoring reactions, expectations and desires *of the other*. Thus, identification is symbolically mediated as the subject unconsciously adopts traits and characteristics that may provide an 'answer' to the mystery of the other's desire (Vanheule and Verhaeghe 2009). But what exactly is the subject looking for when s/he looks to the other to make sense of her/his self? A question also central to theories of performativity, Fuss asks: 'With what in the other does the subject identify if not a particular familial or social ideal? Put slightly differently, what does the subject desire in the other if not a cultural reflection of what she herself aspires to be?' Thus, the subject tries to envisage what the other desires *as an ideal*, unsurprisingly given the emphasis on ideals in the lived experience of the young women of this study. What is the desired form a subject *should* take given a particular place in time? In Lacanian theory, the Ego-Ideal – defined by Freud (1914) as 'an ideal in himself [sic] by which he measures his actual ego' – serves the purpose of bolstering the subject's identification processes which allow her/him to understand both who s/he is and who s/he would like to be. Through identification with Ego-Ideals, a subject feels 'both satisfactory and loved' in relation to others. This is one of the reasons Lacan (1958/2006b) claims that 'man's [sic] desire is the other's desire' (Vanheule and Verhaeghe 2009, 398). But how does this come to be through identification processes? Do we identify what we desire or desire with what we identify? Borch-Jacobsen (1988, 47) describes:

Desire (the desiring subject) does not come first, to be followed by an identification, a primordial tendency which then gives rise to a desire; and this desire is, from the outset, a (mimetic, rivalrous) desire to oust the incommodious other from the place the pseudo-subject already occupies in fantasy.... Identification brings the desiring subject into being, and not the other way around.

So, this posits that identification sparks desire, a desire upon which identifications are then founded. Moreover, identifications are founded on a desire *to take the place of the other* (or to consume the other as Fuss [1995] describes in Chapter 2) as the place of the other is where the subject desires to be herself (as the subject of the other's desire). This relates to Lacan's theory of a divided or alienated self that he formulated later in his career in which, on the assumption that the experience of *I* is based on identification with the desires of the other, the self is in a perpetual state of desire or alienation given that the desires of the Other are inherently conflicting. That is, the desires of the Other(s) are multiple and contradictory. Thus, 'the subject is divided between and through them' (Vanheule and Verhaeghe 2009, 399), a process referred to by Lacan as alienation. Moreover, there is a division on a more basic level – on the level of the *real drive* and the 'signified' part of the subject – that is, between the part of the subject that cannot be managed or tamed and the part of the subject that experiences identification. This suggests that the experience of identification is not straightforward; rather, it is wrought with contradictions and ambivalence bubbling beneath the surface of an illusory 'cohesive' self experience. As Fuss (1995, 49) explains:

Identification thus makes identity possible but also places it at constant risk: multiple identifications within the same subject can compete with each other, producing further conflicts to be managed; identifications that once appeared permanent or unassailable can be quickly dislodged by the newest object attachment; and identifications that have been 'repudiated and even overcompensated' can re-establish themselves once again much later. The history of the subject is therefore one of perpetual psychical conflict and of continual change under pressure. It is a profoundly turbulent history of contradictory impulses and structural incoherencies.

In this sense, from a Freudian perspective, subjectivity is the experience of unconsciously navigating an ever-shifting field of contradictory or ambivalent identifications that coexist with in the subject at once. Fuss notes (1995, 34): 'indeed subjectivity can be most concisely understood as *the history of one's identifications*'.

From the data illustrated in Chapters 4 to 6, this seems a far more intuitive account of how a subject comes to know herself; not as an active, agentic construction but through processes of identification. Not only are these identifications personal (e.g., through parental influence) but also cultivated through societal ideals. Thus, identity is in a sense an empty concept as it imbues a sense of responsibility on the subject to create a self, rather than understanding the self as formed through deep-seated identifications and processes of subject constitution. By way of concluding the findings chapters, I will illustrate this through the three case studies

described above in order to balance the breadth of the data with richness, detailing an individual's experience rather than focusing on the interplay between participants.

7.1. Case study: Sophie

I met with Sophie after work one summer evening. She struck me as self-effacing and kind, with a lovely smile. She dressed in a British high-street fashion, wearing a loose fitted black and white striped blouse, black skinny jeans, and sparkly gold sandals. Charcoal lined her bright eyes, accentuating her pale skin and rosy lips; her dyed raven-coloured hair lay loosely about her shoulders. She seemed quite nervous, and after an awkward, blind-date-esque introduction, I asked where she wanted to go. Unsure, despite being well-acquainted with the area, she deferred to me so after a bit of to and fro, we decided to walk over to a trendy gastro pub nearby that she hesitantly suggested. We chatted along the way, mostly about her job and our mutual connection. Upon arriving at the pub and offering to buy her a beverage, she said she wanted the coffee and cake on special, but was tempted by a glass of wine so we both decided on a glass of Sauvignon Blanc. The recording began as soon as we sat down at a table near the back of the somewhat crowded pub. She described herself as follows:

> *Interviewer: So, um, if you wanted to start by just honestly telling me about yourself.*
>
> *Sophie: Okay. Well, I'm Sophie. I'm 33, and I have been working at the university for six years, in my current job for one year, and I live alone. Eh I've just made the biggest purchase of my life and bought a new property.*

Sophie's initial account of herself is both descriptive of and allusive to identifications which become significant themes in her overall account. She begins by naming herself, identifying her age, describing her career, and mentioning her living situation. She then declares a pivotal and exciting life change: the purchase of a new flat. Whilst an 'other' through which her sense of self is formed may not seem obvious, moving this short passage to the whole of her story illustrates ideological influences and identification processes through which her sense of identity is formed.

By identifying her age, Sophie implies its importance. Drawing from her accounts across the interviews, identifying as nearing her mid-thirties emerges as significant to her sense of self, given norms she perceives as associated with her age, the position of peers-as-'other' and her life course. Evident through her reflections is the feeling that her career is not in the place she feels it should be given her age as well as her relationship status (norm/ideology), noted in the next two phrases: '*I have been working at the university for six years, in my current job for one*' and '*I live alone*'. Throughout the interview process, Sophie expresses ambivalence

toward her career, like Catriona and Emma, on the one hand enjoying aspects of the job itself, but on the other hand feeling inferior to friends who earn more and have 'high-powered' jobs. Her career has not gone to plan and she is not as successful as she once thought she could be, importantly, given her age ('*well this isn't the job that I thought I was going to be doing <u>when I was 30</u>, but actually it's a really good job and I get satisfaction from it*'). Sophie conceives of success in relation to her peers-as-other who she perceives as more successful, particularly in terms of salary: '*Within my peers, and friends, I don't earn as much as most of them*'. This demonstrates capitalistic values, in which Sophie relates success to power and money, and importantly to being able to purchase material goods. In the fourth interview, when reflecting upon what success means to her she describes:

> *Sophie: I'm pretty shallow. I always say that, remember?*
>
> *Interviewer: You always say that.*
>
> *Sophie: Money, being able to afford nice things, and well what I think are nice things, and do nice things…*

Sophie explains those who are successful can afford 'nice things' implying that those who are unsuccessful cannot, therefore, perhaps, expressing doubts as to her own success given her modest salary in comparison to her peers and need to budget ('*I'm limiting myself now. This year I started Excel spreadsheet of what goes in and what goes out*'). And, stemming from a neoliberal discourse, success is intimately related to self-worth as the individual has personal responsibility to work hard and make herself successful (Lemke 2001; Rottenberg 2014). However, this passage also illustrates a negative identification as Sophie finds herself to be 'shallow' in expressing consumerist values.

Throughout the interview process, Sophie worries that I (the academic other?) will perceive her as a <u>shallow woman</u> – a disavowed identification with which she strongly identifies – particularly when she describes her love for material goods (e.g., in the first interview: '*I hate to say that cos I sound shallow, but I do, I love lifestyle things. House, food, shopping, makeup, clothes…*'). This 'shallow woman' identification appears in opposition to her (desired?) identification as opinionated and knowledgeable on topics such as feminism. In the first interview, we discuss her feminist values ('*feminist issues are very important to me*'.) Though consumerism and feminism are of course not mutually exclusive, Sophie directly pits these two identifications (perhaps one representative of hegemonic femininity and consumerist values – or the postfeminist subject [Gill 2007] – and the other the feminist subject) against one another at the end of the first interview rejecting both in relation to the interviewer – me – as the other she imagines judging her in that moment in time:

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Sophie: I don't want you to think that I'm this really opinionated, eh, opinionated yet shallow woman, you know yeah. I do care about what people think about me, and I don't want you to think, I'm…yeah, that's my problem.

Interviewer: That's not- what do you mean? Can you tell me about that a little bit more?

Sophie: Well, I've obviously said some quite strong opinionated things, like, 'I don't want to just get married for the sake of it, have children for the sake of it,' uh, but at the same time, I'm like, 'let' talk about make-up! It's two different…sides of a…. [pause]

This illustrates the conflicting identifications that comprise Sophie's sense of self: on the one hand she is passionate and zealous about feminist issues and doesn't want to conform to traditional feminine roles of wife and mother (as discussed further on), frequently confronting her friends who do not identify as feminists ('*I get annoyed with people. I've had a lot of arguments with friends that say they're not feminists. Like friends that are girls. How can you not be a feminist, you know?*'), but on the other hand she feels shallow in her love for material goods, and defines a sense of success through consumerist values. However, rather than feeling confident in her convictions, she is conscious ('*yeah, that's my problem*') that she is anxious for my approval or affirmation and worries that I, and others, will judge her. In a passage reflecting Sophie's worry of the opinions of others as well as her attention to her appearance, she describes the mundane experience of shopping with her mum at a hardware store and feeling the penetrating gaze of other women:

> *I think I come across okay. I felt like, yesterday I was Homebase with my mum. And I felt like I had a few women looking at me. Like I had a big bright lipstick on and my fur hat and I felt like people look at me going 'why are you all dressed up to go to Homebase?', you know? But that was just, you know, I thought I'm going to put this bright pink lipstick on cos I've not had it on in ages and, you know, it cheers me up. I've got my fur hat cos it's cold and you know just walking round with my mum. And I did get a few women, I felt them looking at me going, a woman out on a Sunday, you know …so but then I don't know if that's was just my me being paranoid or no, it wasn't. It wasn't me being paranoid. I could feel it.*

Sophie frets about what others – strangers in this case – think of her appearance in an everyday situation as she *feels* their judgment, questioning whether this is her own paranoia or real. This uncertainty and feeling that she is being judged, coupled with the phrase that she put on the lipstick to cheer herself up, indicates a preoccupation the opinions and judgments of others as well as feelings of ambivalence over her identifications related to feminine beauty and traditional gender norms ('*a woman out on a Sunday*' perhaps implying that women should be in church or the home on a Sunday?). She is not confident or assertive about how she looks, rather she seeks the approval of others and imagines her own fears and insecurities as manifested through the penetrating gaze of the other.

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How does this relate to age? Sophie's conflicting identifications might be clarified in relation to a generalised picture of success as constructed through media-as-other. She describes in the fourth interview:

> *[Having it all is] like a sort of Hollywood sort of portrayal maybe of woman in society. She's got a good job, if she wants it. If she doesn't, she doesn't have to have it. She's got a partner and a supportive partner, and a baby, a big family, friends. To me that's what it sort of is and you know I can sort of see films in my head, flashes of you know a woman in a film sort of having that.*

The media as creating a generalised other who seems to 'have it all' is especially relevant for Sophie, also considering the celebrity and lifestyle personalities she follows on Twitter and Instagram ('*[On Instagram] I'm following 138 people, most of whom are … celebrities, fashion magazines, and makeup and beauty type things, journalists and things…*'). Thus, feelings about her career and life course are manifested in relation both her peers and to media. There are two aspects at play here: first, in relation to the above, in trying to 'have it all', Sophie might feel it difficult to be the independent, knowledgeable and opinionated woman (feminist) as well as embracing her hegemonically feminine desires of being the *consumer* and revelling in her feminine beauty, something she attributes to her mother's influence. She describes her mother as her role model given her ability to have it all ('*she was just always a well balanced mum and a career woman I guess*') as reflected in her description, and in a way that embraces femininity. In discussing appearance, I ask Sophie if she has an 'image role model' and she replies:

> *Sophie: Well, I would say my mum again but I don't—no she doesn't let my, she did not used to let my dad see her without putting make-up on. And she gets, she still gets up early to put her make-up on. Ehm I remember when she worked part time she would go and do her make-up again before he came home from work.*
>
> *Interviewer: Really?*
>
> *Sophie: Yeah and I just think that's ridiculous*

Sophie instinctively identifies with her mother's femininity, but then quickly rejects the identification based on her mother's hyper-vigilance toward her appearance, particularly not allowing her husband to see her without make-up, indicative of her mother's identification with the traditional woman-as-object of men's desires. This again suggests conflicting identifications and ambivalence about what it is to be a woman as Sophie construes being a feminist in opposition to being hegemonically feminine. In (perhaps unconsciously?) desiring what her mother desires (traditional feminine beauty and attention to appearance), Sophie perhaps feels her feminist ideals under threat, exemplified in a rant about Beyoncé being a poor role model for feminism, given her position as a feminine sexual object: '*Beyoncé, you know, they [her friends] think of her as a feminist, and I'm like, how can she be the most powerful*

women in entertainment and she's standing on the front of a magazine in her pants!' Thus, Sophie is insecure about these competing identifications, reflected in her experience at Homebase and her need for approval *from other women.* Second, considering herself in comparison to her description of 'having it all', Sophie does not experience her definition of 'the good job', a 'supportive partner' or a baby. Therefore, though she might identify this picture as success, she is unable to fulfil this ideal. Importantly, the language that Sophie uses in the description resonates with a neoliberal discourse: she uses acquisitive terms to describe this ideal position of *have* (to possess) and *got* (to attain). She also idealises choice in the description, perhaps conveying a desire for agency – *'She's got a good job, if she wants it. If she doesn't, she doesn't have to have it'.* Sophie has not experienced this sense of choice, as the career she desired slipped away, something she attributes to a personal lack of effort, again suggestive of a neoliberal discourse that emphasises personal responsibility for success. As an undergraduate, Sophie studied history, hoping to become a documentarian, ideally working for the BBC. Instead, she began her career in online marketing shortly upon graduating and realised quickly this wasn't the career path she wanted: *'I worked in online marketing and advertising agencies for a couple of years and decided it wasn't really for me'.* Sophie admits her naivety upon entering the 'real world', chalking up her failure to attain the career she wanted to personal agency. She notes, again framed through acquisition and desire: *'I don't know what I thought I was going to get, but I wanted to work for the government and do policy or research-type roles when I graduated. That's what I thought I was gonna do, but, or work for the BBC making history programmes. Everyone wants to do that who's got a History degree, and wasn't, I did not try hard enough really.'* Again, she positions herself as unsuccessful in relation to peers-as-others, given her lack of hard work and her career standing given her age.

Another important theme throughout Sophie's interviews is uncertainty and anxiety about her relationship status, particularly in relation to her age. Sophie is 33 and single after losing hope on a long-term, dysfunctional relationship she sustained through her twenties and into her early thirties, a relationship she struggles to sever completely (e.g., during the fourth interview she received text messages from her ex-boyfriend). Sophie's desire for a supportive partner, intimated in the media-as-other quote above, may be indicative of her inability to end the relationship with an unsupportive partner until after 30, given the possibility that it might work out. In search of affirmation, or perhaps avoiding the (gendered) stigma of identifying as a single, older woman (Reynolds and Wetherall 2003), she finds solace in considering others also in her situation: *'So turning 30 was a bit, uhh, scary, but actually, once you get past it, it's absolutely fine and you realize there's loads of other people in the same position: they don't know what they want to do with their life, and things aren't happening for them the way they expected. But you just get on with it'.* This passage associates fear with the age 30 – again perhaps

related to the perceived stigma of being 30 and single or of becoming older – and allows her to identify with others who are *like her* and *'just get on with it'*. She discusses this in terms of *you* rather than *I*, perhaps indicative of an ideal of how she <u>should</u> feel and act, rather than her personal experience. Moreover, throughout the interview process, she repeatedly references the role of others in explicitly pushing her to 'address' her relationship 'situation'. Therefore, her family and friends as others seem to be encouraging her to do more than *just get on with it*. She describes:

> *Sophie: Every year [my best friend's] like - not every year every time I see her, I don't know why I said every year, cos I know it's my birthday soon and I'm gonna get the heavy talk.*
>
> *Interviewer: What are these talks?*
>
> *Sophie: 'You'd be much happier if you had a boyfriend. You've got so much love to give. You ehm, you need to move on. You need to live your life. You need to have a boyfriend', basically.*

Again, in reciting her friend's words, she uses 'you' like Abeni and Emily use 'you' in relation to ideals and expectations of consumer culture (Section 5.1.1). Here, Sophie reflects on the gendered ideals and values that dictate a woman in her thirties must find a man (Reynolds and Wetherall 2003). Whilst on the one hand there is an 'other' telling her she needs to find a boyfriend (and she does note she wants to share her life with someone), on the other hand she repeatedly emphasises her newfound confidence since leaving her boyfriend, and conceives of a different 'other' in envisioning her life had she settled:

> *Let's take an example, my friend [Sarah]. She got, she was in a long-time relationship all the way through university. He dumped her when he graduated. She went straight out, found a new man. The first thing she said about him was he's got a good job and good house; he's got a good car. And I was like, she like locked him down straight away. Married him, and they have two kids now, isn't very happy. And that's, you know, that's something that I did not ever aspire to do.*

This undesired identification with one who marries for the sake of ideal fulfilment affirms Sophie's 'decision' not to settle, but considering her final statement 'I did not ever aspire' suggests rationalisation for her current situation. The semantics of the passage are agentic in nature: 'I did not aspire' – implying she actively made a decision *not* to settle, rather than position her situation as a circumstance beyond her control. Thus, this other gives Sophie a sense of agency and confidence in her life course to date. In some ways, it emphasises her overt identification with a younger self, or with a less 'traditional' mind-set compared to the above identification as a traditional feminine role of woman-as-wife and mother. She describes: *'I mean, I think my lifestyle isn't like a lot of 33-year-olds. … Eh I still think I'm sort of in my 20s, eh, go out and spend a lot of money on booze and nights out'*. She further explains: *'A lot of people I know from school or from university that are my age with kids now, they just… are, most of*

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them I wouldn't say are like me. They're quite traditional and… don't think much, or do much, or don't want much, if you know what I mean'. The position of this generalized 33-year-old other as 'traditional', 'with kids' is justified as being different to her as they don't *'think much, or do much, or don't want much'* in comparison to Sophie. There is a sense of superiority – implying she isn't just someone who follows tradition blindly like the rejected other. But by the final interview, it becomes clear that although content with much of her life, she shares many of the desires of this rejected 'other'. She describes the 'good life' as: *'Sharing it with the person and being able to not being loaded but being able to do stuff like going on a holiday to somewhere nice if we wanted to or do something to the house if we wanted to, kids at some point but just yeah being generally happy'*. Thus, identification with this other may contribute to a sense of anxiety over her life course not fulfilling these traditional norms. Moreover, the shift in perspective indicates that at times Sophie might feel superior as she identifies herself with those strong enough to avoid the lure of tradition; other times, she might feel inferior, as she has not been able to achieve the desired traditional path.

The assertion at the end of the opening passage about making 'the biggest purchase' of her life further indicates an attempt to come to terms with her life as it stands: as a single woman in her thirties who has not followed the 'traditional' path like her friend, or hasn't managed to 'have it all' like the media other, like her friend, or like her mother. It is also likely a rationalisation, juxtaposing the statement: *'I live alone'*. Sophie previously lived in a small flat in a less affluent, alternative area, a flat she bought when she was in her early twenties upon moving back to Edinburgh after university and a year of work, a move intended to be a pit stop, potentially on the way to London. But instead she stayed in the flat for eight years: *'The other flat was always an interim period measure in my head. We [she and her parents] bought it, and then I thought I was gonna be moving there with my ex-boyfriend, and we did not and then I thought I was gonna be there for maybe three years, and I ended up being there for eight, and it was a bit depressing in the end'*. Thus, the purchase of a new flat is an acceptance both of the end of one *we* – her relationship – and of her independent life as an adult, though her parents provided financial assistance in purchasing both flats. She describes the difficult transition process:

> *…Deciding that I wanted to move house… It took me a while to come to terms with that. It's, you know, it's my house, it's been my house for a long time, but my life has to change. I am in a sort of stuck in a rut where I am, and my Mum and Dad were available to help me out and I wanted to change things, so I went and spoke to a solicitor, and started looking, and did it.*

She seems to gain a sense of affirmation from the traditional 'other' in at least ticking the box of home ownership as a mark of adulthood like Emma. She notes: *'I feel a bit more grown up. This is much more of a grown up flat than my last one, and this is the kind of flat I've always wanted,*

you know…. It is a sort of like a realisation of a dream I guess'. But two points are evident in her statement: First, the standalone quote shifts from present to past to present tense. The phrase: *my life has to change* is situated in the past, relating to her decision to move, a decision which has been made. But she invokes the present which likely suggests she still feels that her life needs to change, identifying with an 'other' she perceives as a failure. Or perhaps it indicates that because at this point (in the first interview) she is still a few weeks away from actually moving, she still feels stuck in a rut because she is physically living in the space that, for her, represents 'time wasted'. Her words '*I wanted to change things so I went… and did it'* indicate an agentic other associated with the realisation of a dream – of owning a flat that she has always desired. This draws forth the second point: her dream, and a major event, is associated with the purchase of a flat, with ownership. This indicates a capitalistic ideology and materialistic tendencies as a feeling of adulthood and moving <u>forward</u> is associated with a purchase. Thus, like Emma, the only way Sophie feels her life can change is through a purchase that will make her feel more adult and as though her life is in line with one of her desired identifications – perhaps the identification as a responsible adult?

Importantly, this analysis shows the ambivalent, tension-filled and anxiety provoking nature of Sophie's identifications as she struggles to come to terms with and rationalise the oppressiveness of conflicting expectations and ideals that face her, emanating from social relations and from consumer culture. This is represented not only in Sophie's understandings of success or being a woman, but also in the words and phrases she uses that are ideologically driven, situated within a neoliberal, postfeminist regime of truth. Whilst Sophie's experiences in day-to-day life *might* be decidedly less anxiety-provoking, the confessional nature of the interview depicts these identifications as both conscious and unconscious, and to be essential to the formation or understanding of the self. Moreover, theories of identification (Fuss 1995) call into question the usefulness of identity as an uncritical reading might construe of Sophie's identity as productive in its drawing on the marketplace for self-expression (i.e., her attention to appearance and love for fashion) and to cement her identity (i.e., purchasing and decorating a home she can call her own). But a critical reading calls into question the role of a consumerist discourse and illustrates the anxiety provoked by such an identification and by the conflicting and somewhat burdensome process by which Sophie identifies herself.

7.2.   Case study: Emily

I was introduced to Emily through a friend and, on her recommendation as the coffee aficionado, we made arrangements to meet one autumn morning at a 'hipster' coffee shop near the university. I waited outside for her to arrive since the café was busy and as she approached, I immediately noticed her by a perceptible smile of recognition. She was dressed

casually, wearing jeans, a jacket, a blue scarf with her hair pulled tightly back. She wore almost no make-up, with a pearl earring in her left ear and a long feather earring dangling from her right. Upon awkwardly greeting one another and entering the café, she waited as I ordered a peppermint tea and then ordered a flat white coffee. She seemed considerate and patient in nature, and a bit unsure when it came to the interview itself. After explaining the study and reassuring her about the interview process and how it was conversational and relaxed in nature, I asked her to tell me about herself:

> *Interviewer: …Tell me about yourself.*
>
> *Emily: About myself, hm. I'm from [south-western state] originally so West Coast of the US and from a cattle ranching family.*
>
> *Interviewer: Oh wow.*
>
> *Emily: Um, I'm the first person in my family to graduate from college.*
>
> *Interviewer: Oh really?*
>
> *Emily: Yeah. I lived in [the Pacific Northwest] for four years for my undergrad.*
>
> *Interviewer: Which school?*
>
> *Emily: I was at, um, in [small town], at [X] University, it's a really small school. So I doubt you've ever heard of it, yeah. Um and then I went to moving back home to [home state] to work as a journalist and save up money to move here, and now I'm here.*

Emily first identifies herself geographically from the western US, specifying her familial roots as cattle ranchers, and then describes how she is *'the first person in my family to graduate from college'*. This contrasts two identifications that manifest intensely and in various forms across her narrative: identifications related to her upbringing as traditional, religious and working class, versus identifications with a cosmopolitan, well-travelled, educated other desiring to distance herself from a small-town, conservative mentality.

Emily's divergence from the expected path by gaining a university education (the first in her family) is very important to her understanding of self. She describes the 'other' who she could have become had she stayed in her home state:

> *I just had such a limited view growing up of like what I should expect from life. Like you just get married and you have kids and like maybe you have an education outside of high school, maybe you don't. Doesn't really matter because all you're just going to do is like stay home, you know, with the kids. And if you work you're probably going to sell like beauty supplies from your house, you know, and like that's always like the idea that I had very much from the town that I was in.*

Drawing on the pronoun *you*, Emily expresses gendered ideals and expectations that influenced her growing up. In the description, education is not valued, unlike traditional

gender roles such as getting married and having children. Moreover, in this context, if women do work, their employment is gendered, working from the home in jobs involving conventionally feminine pursuits of beauty. Therefore, a significant identification is manifested from Emily's youth in a traditional, gendered setting, further reinforced by identifications with her parents: her mother worked part-time as a librarian and bore the brunt of childrearing whilst her father worked full-time as a park ranger – as well as her deep-rooted Christian beliefs, to be discussed. During high school, Emily, with no choice but to attempt to embrace this identification given lack of exposure, felt isolated from her peers: '*I was such like an angsty unhappy teenager. No one I could find in school was like similar, that I could relate the same way*'. She struggled with mental health issues and drug/alcohol use stemming from a series of traumatic experiences, as well as disquiet experienced in living out this undesired identification. In her words: '*I did not like being who I was*'. At the time, she sought affirmation from an online 'other' to whom she could relate, one more aligned with her ways of thinking. Through blogging and forums, she realised '*I wasn't alone in how I was thinking or feeling*'. Emily also describes herself as materialistic during this period, keeping up with popular brands such as Hollister and spending hard-earned money in that direction, a clear divergence from the frugal, functional way she lives her life now. She explains: '*When I was younger I always had to have like every new Apple product that came out, so I had lots of iPods and iPhones*'. Moreover, she was very concerned with her appearance, suggestive of the attempt to adhere to traditional views of feminine beauty: '*So growing up I would always straighten [my hair] and I always dyed it brown, as you can see. Like for years and years and years it was like dyed brown and straightened*'.

In the next statement of the opening passage, Emily identifies where she went to university, specifically in the Pacific Northwest. This specification triggers the transition from her home state's conservative mentality to a fresh liberal perspective, presenting an alternative way-of-being to Emily. She describes her first impressions of meeting an 'other' that she hadn't been able to imagine before given lack of exposure, an other with whom she now desires to identify:

> *I wasn't used to that at all, to have people who thought so differently. And I would, I met people that have like studied abroad in like other countries and looked at so many career paths that I had never like thought of. And like just the people, the pursuits people have as like college degrees and just it's amazing I'd never thought about that. And then, well, I don't know after I saw how many <u>opportunities I could have</u> I just, I just couldn't reconcile like going back to [home state] to that like… I don't know so confining.*

The introduction of this 'other' changed the course of Emily's life and broadened her mind to possibilities she couldn't previously imagine. Her eyes were opened to opportunities she

could have (importantly using acquisitive terms) that she envisions through the other, an other she describes as challenging basic assumptions that she held from her upbringing, implicitly regarding her unquestioning acceptance of these assumptions as ignorant or uneducated: '*People were a lot more educated and they would have like a lot more worldly discussions with you or they were like well travelled and they would like question the basic assumption that you held*'. Through this other, Emily's sense of self evolved as she began to desire the desires of this other: to be well-travelled, to reject tradition, to question assumptions. She began to change physically, as well as mentally: '*When I moved to Washington I got tired of [dying and straightening my hair] coz it is so humid, my hair would just go curly. So normally it is generally always curly [now]*'. Eschewing habits of dying and straightening, Emily let her hair be natural and free, perhaps representing a revival of what she perceives as her *natural* way of being. She describes arriving on campus for the first time: '*It was just like a feeling, like this is where I'm supposed to be*'.

Emily's metamorphosis into a well-travelled educated other and her (eventual) re-appropriation of the rejected other of her youth is exemplified through two examples: first, a high-school relationship and second, a gift from her father. Emily describes how she was involved in a serious relationship as a teenager which resulted in a proposal just before she left for university: '*I was proposed to when I was 18…. Of course where I'm from that's what you do*'. Her quip implies judgment of the rejected other (represented here by her boyfriend) as blindly following assumptions and expectations imposed by the geographic space. She describes the relationship:

> *We started dating when we were like 16. 16, I was 16 and a half or even 17. And like so dated all the way through high school. [Pause for thought]. I don't know yeah, we lived in two different places so we would like alternate weekends on visiting each other and what not. And when I was, like a month before I left for university he proposed to me. Ugh. And then he joined the military and I was in like [Pacific Northwest state], very liberal state and he did not go to like university because he was doing like military basic training and what not and so when I saw him a couple months later at like Christmas we were just such different people already. We were just like going such different ways. And like the way we viewed the world and like regarded one another. Yeah so then I called it off (giggling sheepishly).*

This indicates Emily's attempt to live through a later disavowed identification with this small-town, conservative other, an 'other' she attempts to sever ties with upon going to university by ending the relationship with her boyfriend who followed a traditional path of joining the military at the end of high school. A visit with him over the winter holiday affirmed to Emily the contradictory nature of the two identifications that confronted her: a traditional, small town, conservative wife versus a worldly, liberal and cosmopolitan woman. In her words: '*I could just see my life going in like two different directions*'. Emily is surprised by

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her treatment of her boyfriend in ending the relationship: *'It's so hard to think back because I know I handled it poorly'*. She describes how rather than confront and discuss things with her fiancé, she slowly pulled away (*'I wasn't making him the priority I guess because I was so conflicted'*) and avoided the confrontation as long as possible. Emily describes the breakup:

> *He was like trying to… I'd always make plans to see him like right away when I got to [a big city near her hometown] because he like lived in the same town that my grandma lived in and my relatives so we were there often for family gatherings and I just like wouldn't answer his like phone calls for the first couple of days or like make any plans to see him and then I said let's go get coffee one day. And then I just, I just told him that like I thought that we're, I just saw us going down two different paths in what we wanted with our lives and like I was thinking about things that I had never considered as being possible for myself and I… (laughing) just like that I and that like since he joined the military too I saw a lot of differences in him and differences in myself as well, and I just did not know if we could like reconcile it because our lives were growing like too separately.*

Emily realises her uncharacteristic behaviour in coming to terms with the separation and taking control in the interaction, rather than engaging in a mutual discussion. Revived, quite literally, by the possibilities she envisages for herself, terminating the relationship could be seen as a symbolic amputation of her previous identification. She recalls that he was very upset and cut off communication. Perhaps indicative of her struggle to truly dissolve this embedded identification, Emily describes trying to get in touch with him multiple times throughout university and even before she moved abroad:

> *I wrote to him and said you know 'I hope you're doing well like you're in my prayers. Hope things are okay'. Never got a response. Then before I was moving here I was in [his hometown] and he was like he was on like reserve duty now so he's back in his hometown and I was like 'Hey I'm moving to the UK for two years, you know it would be great to see you, just like hear how things are going whatnot'. Nothing. So was like, hmm okay.*

This passage illustrates Emily's attempt to reconcile the loss not only of her boyfriend but her disavowed identification, as well as a desire to end things on a positive note. However, her message prior to moving abroad could also suggest a repudiation of this identification, indicating to him that she did pursue the possibilities that she envisioned for herself, possibilities marriage would have prevented.

The second example that illustrates Emily's transformation is through her religious beliefs. Gendered and religious ideals reinforced through her upbringing are particularly highlighted by Emily's father's gift of a 'purity ring'. In the second in-home interview, Emily describes:

> *Emily: My dad likes to give me purity rings, and I would always lose them. But this one I've had for four years and I haven't lost it thankfully! [shows the ring]*

Interviewer: Is it a purity ring?

Emily: Yeah, it is.

Interviewer: What does that signify to you? Just wondering

Emily: Uh (laughs) not the same thing as it signifies to my dad! (laughs)

Interviewer: What does… Tell me about that, that's very interesting

Emily: Um. Well he like gave it to me before he knew like anything that had happened to me. So he did not know so he was just like the importance of saving yourself for marriage, and like the only one person and whatnot. And then once he found out about it, I think it changed to him, just like not to give myself away so freely. But, I just wear it cos if I ever don't wear it he's like where's your ring?! [pause] Yeah, but. It's like nice cos of the thought that he had to give me it, like in particular but it doesn't mean, what he wants it to me for me!

Firstly, the act of a father giving a daughter a purity ring signifying that she is saving herself for marriage is typical amongst Christian evangelicals in conservative US states (Manning 2014). That her father 'likes to give' her purity rings is expressive of the strong religious upbringing that Emily appropriates to fit her desired identification, to be described. From a Freudian perspective (Fuss 1995), that Emily frequently 'lost' her purity rings prior to university is perhaps an unconscious attempt to reject this gendered and ultimately oppressive act of 'The name of the Father' (Dufour 2008) protecting his daughter's sexuality, linking female sexuality not only to a man, but to her father. This suggests the treatment of women as property to be passed from the father's house to the husband's house and reinforces gendered and patriarchal ideals of unmarried women as chaste, virginal and pure. In the past four years, however, Emily has managed not to lose the ring she currently wears, years which represent the manifestation of a desired identity, liberated from the small-town mentality: *'He gave it to me originally when I like turned 16, is when he gave me my first one and I lost it. I lost like two subsequent ones he gave me, and then he came to visit me when I was doing my undergrad in second year, parents weekend. And that's when he gave me this one and said "Please don't lose it"'.* During the time when she was struggling to fit in, she 'lost' her purity rings on three different occasions. The loss of the rings may indicate a rejection of the traditional, religious other reinforced by her father. Even now she admits that she wears the ring because of her father's insistence and indignation when she does not wear the ring in his presence, a fitting metaphor for the endurance of her disavowed identifications. Making matters more complex, Emily describes that when her father discovered that she was not a virgin (she briefly noted at the end of the first interview that in high school she experienced a sexual assault but did not disclose during the interview process whether she had otherwise been sexually active), his attitude changed and the ring now represents 'not giving myself away so freely', again indicative of the treatment of Emily and her sexuality as an object to be 'given away'. In

describing the timeline of receiving the rings above, Emily details another gift from her father:

> Emily…he's given me earrings too which I never wear. I think they're over, nope they're not over here. Maybe I left them at home.
>
> Interviewer: Maybe you lost them! I'm just kidding (both laughing)
>
> Emily: But they're like, I don't know, really proper, nice like my mom would wear them but not me earrings.

She relates the gift of the purity ring to a pair of earrings that she believes would better suit her mother, the conventional figure associated with the object of a father's sexual desire. She cannot find the earrings during the in-home interview, indicating recognition and rejection of her position as the symbolic object of her father's desire as imbued through the purity ring, further emphasised by his vigilance and desire to control and protect his daughter's sexuality. By the time Emily is in university and settled, she (superficially?) accepts the fourth ring her father gives her, urging her not to lose *it* (the ring or her purity?). Perhaps her acceptance of the fourth ring is also symbolic of independence and strength in overcoming her hometown's mentality, and knowledge that she can accept the ring without being oppressed. This is further reflected in her religious beliefs that she reformulates from oppressive traditional structures of organised religion to an individual interpretation. In the first interview I ask if she is religious, noticing a small ichthys tattoo on her wrist. Laughing she responds: *'It's funny I'll actually never refer to myself as religious cos I think that like being religious or like being called a Christian is such a negative connotation nowadays […] I really like, I like Jesus as a person. Which is why I have a Jesus fish tattoo'.* Thus, she re-appropriates her conservative upbringing into an individualised perspective of her Christian faith, rejecting organised religion in favour of identification with Jesus.

The last phrase of Emily's opening passage suggests her desired identification as an educated, cosmopolitan subject (*'I went to moving back home to [home state] to work as a journalist and save up money to move here, and now I'm here'*) eager to free herself from the confining nature of her hometown as she endeavours to start a life abroad. She appropriates the 'wild west' American discourse of freedom and expanding possibilities to fit her globalised perspective:

> My mother was talking to me the other day about how much I like freedom (laughs) it's funny I totally did not ever associate the things I appreciate in life with freedom, because I'm so used to the typical view of freedom with like government don't mess with me, where's our guns, where I was raised. But, hm, I think freedom's true...it's something because like freedom to choose, freedom to travel, freedom to make your life what it will be.

The identification Emily attempts to embrace is one embodying neoliberal ideals of the hard-working, adventurous individual who challenges herself in order to maximise her potential and live out her 'destiny' through personal choice and individual agency (Lemke 2001). In the quote above, Emily reconciles disavowed identification with a desire to become more educated and well-travelled by drawing not on her experiences growing up, but on her roots stemming from a cattle ranching family, importantly noted early on in the opening passage. This is similar to her rendering of religion, from something that once harmed her into a positive re-appropriation. Therefore, the freedom that she embraces is not one of provincial, small-town America, but of neoliberal, individualistic values of choice and agency. She draws on this identification in her careful decision making and planning, endeavouring to move abroad and pursue her own dreams through her own financial means, highlighting for example that she moved home for a year to save money. Self-sufficiency is an important theme throughout her interviews, a value she attributes to constructive experiences in her youth and through family roots: '*My mom grew up on like a cattle ranch and so we'd always go out to the ranch growing up. So I always had the impression that like it was good to be self-sufficient and like strong, independent and able to do things for yourself*'. Emily thus is now engaged in individualistic pursuits that challenge and broaden her horizons. This is signified through her peers, who, compared to her friends in high school, help her grow as a person and challenge her assumptions: '*Now a lot of the people that I am like good friends with, like, they do challenge me. They'll like question my assumptions. Or they'll come from backgrounds that are just like so foreign to me that I just don't understand. And they make me grow, I think a lot as a person. And now I'm way too ambitious!*'

Personal growth and ambition are important to Emily's current sense of self, in direct contrast to the stagnant and uneducated other she imagines in her past. Moreover, her disavowed identification is evident in the final statement '*now I'm <u>way too</u> ambitious*' presumably in relation to expectations of women in 'traditional' or 'gendered' careers. But Emily describes her self as project of continues improvement: '*I've spent so much time trying to challenge myself, improve myself or like broaden my horizons and like I've made good progress… so I'm not like entirely content with who I am as like a person yet, so.*' This refers to the self as able to be improved, and implies that progress can be made in terms of the self, discussed in Section 6.1. She refers to progress as 'good', implying the potential to regress, likely a comparison to her disavowed identity. Moreover, she notes she is not 'content with who I am as a person *yet*', implying there will be a point at which the project of the self is complete: '*There's so much I still want to do and like so many different areas which of course involve travelling… all the things I'm really interested in doing. Because they involve social work and humanitarian projects, so.*' She intends to continue to work on herself, importantly, without engaging in a relationship: '*This*

is the only time I can really live for myself you know? Like I can work on improving myself and bettering myself like through school and travelling and what not. And I don't think… I wouldn't put a like relationship as a priority right now cos I don't think it would be fair to the other person'. But this also emerges as somewhat of a rationalisation for the end of a recent relationship that left her 'really heartbroken'. At the end of the fourth interview, she explains the reason he ended the relationship:

> *It was something, sounds similar to what I've been saying for years is that he wasn't, hm, to the point in his life that he wanted to be yet and he didn't feel like it would be fair to me to pursue it any further knowing that he wasn't like happy with who he was and what he was doing cos he knew that it would ultimately come down to like me being left behind until he found it, who he was.*

Perhaps protecting herself from further heartbreak, throughout the interviews Emily identifies with an individualistic self-improvement, pursuing individual goals of progress in order to form the self. Like her ex-boyfriend, who she never mentions until the fourth interview, Emily believes she must focus on the self rather than risk leaving others behind. Thus, she rationalises her project of the self through identification with her ex-boyfriend's way-of-being. This individual pursuit *seems* to be in direct opposition to a self she continues to reject, a self who was in a serious relationship, was provincial, uneducated, materialistic and interested in romantic pursuits. Now, Emily values that which contradicts her disavowed identification as she frames her sense of self as a project in the making, a quest for 'self improvement', or perhaps the continued rejection and fleeing from the oppressed other from her youth. After her mental health struggles and upon going to university, she recollects that perhaps her struggle was 'meant to be': '*I was able to like pinpoint like different like things in my past life where I'm like oh so that's why that happened and I started thinking about like all the things I'd overcome and I was like maybe I am meant for something more. Maybe I'm meant for something great'*.

7.3. Case study: Jade

I met Jade through an advertisement for this study that I placed on the Scottish Feminist Network Facebook page. She was very keen on participating given her passion for feminist issues, but cancelled the initial meeting last minute, citing a sleep disorder. She cancelled once more due to a change in plans and finally we were able to meet about a month after we initially communicated. Jade suggested we meet at a bar in the city centre in the late afternoon. I waited outside, unsure if I would recognise her having only seen her Facebook profile picture. She was about ten minutes late and when she arrived I was taken aback by the unhealthy pallor of her complexion. She wore chunky burgundy boots, dark tight trousers, a black top and an oversized jacket. Her short, maroon-coloured hair was

dishevelled and she wasn't wearing any makeup. The bar was overcrowded with no tables available so we decided to go elsewhere. When I asked where she preferred, she confessed that she wasn't very familiar with the area as she hadn't lived Edinburgh long and did not have much disposable income. I suggested a nearby pub and as we strolled along she mentioned she might move back to her hometown if neither she nor her fiancé could find employment in Edinburgh, as they were struggling financially at the time. So, starting the recording with a sense of her background, we sat at the bar of the pub. I offered to buy her a drink but she declined in favour of a soft drink, whilst I opted for a cider. I tell her a bit about the study and myself and then ask her to tell me about herself:

> *Interviewer: If you just want to tell me…like if I just said, 'what is your life story?' is that too much of an open question?*
>
> *Jade: No. Ah…mmm…where to start? The classic lost soul. Yeah. I went and tried uni twice, two different…two years in a row. Umm I dropped out both times. The first time I dropped out because…basically in summary, eh I just wasn't ready. Like, I moved into a house with five girls who did drugs and parties and [...] So I was quite…not naïve, I was innocent. I was a lot more sort of… 'Wow, this is going to be amazing!' and then it was all a bit too much. And also the course wasn't what I thought it was going to be.*

What is striking about Jade's account compared to Sophie and Emily is her admission of failure upfront. Sophie and Emily hint of massive 'achievements' in their passages – for Sophie, buying a new flat represents a new beginning and for Emily, being the first of her family to attend university indicates overcoming a small-town mentality. But it is almost as if Jade identifies more with failure than success. Her initial identification is the 'classic lost soul', invoking imagery of the struggling artist and not surprising given her desired identification as someone involved in the creative arts. Most of Jade's career aspirations revolve around the creative industries, and indeed she intended to study drama in university. But in the second line of the passage, Jade admits her failed attempts to pursue a university education. The youngest participant, Jade's account is rife with identifications, failed, disavowed, embodied and desired. Beset with contradictions, changes, and instability, Jade's account sometimes lacks coherence over the timeframe of participation (about a year and a half). Despite referring to herself upon her reflection of participating in this study as: '*a hermit with a ream of mental health problems including social anxiety*', during both interviews she is very open, vibrant, and frenetic in her manner of speaking. And though she espouses many values and identifications throughout the interview process, Jade's strongest identification is with an educated other that she failed to become, acting as a fixed counterpoint to other identifications.

Jade attributes her identification with an educated other to the expectations of her parents. Though neither of her parents are university educated, they cultivated success – described by Jade through capitalistic values of financial gain – through hard work, referring to herself in her written response as '*a child of two hard working, high earning, work heavy parents*'. Jade explains how her father worked his way up through the ranks in the oil and gas industry: '*He started off as an apprenticeship, as a mechanical engineer when he was 16 years old and then he worked up all through all the jobs. Now he's like high, high pay, lots of responsibility.*' This linear conception of success through an individual's hard work is indicative of neoliberal values of agency and self-motivation in achieving upward mobility. Though Jade also describes her mother as successful, she identifies with her more in terms of her less clear-cut career trajectory: '*She's a bit like me. She's never found her thing*', words that confirm Jade's confusion in terms of her own career. But in detailing her mother's career, Jade's description reflects a similar rags-to-riches, linear account: '*She's in marketing. She um, she like started off as an office junior when she was 18 or whatever, worked her way up to marketing manager for a company. When she was at the peak, I would say, she was in charge of America, Australia and Britain for a company. She had to travel like months at a time and stuff*'. Again, a neoliberal conception of success underpins this description, as Jade describes a linear career trajectory that peaked when her mother reached a position of considerable power and influence. Jade's identification with an educated other, then, is formed by the expectations and ideals of her parents who, having toiled to achieve upward mobility, desire their children to start off on a higher rung of the ladder, so to speak, by attaining a good education. Therefore, a pivotal theme in her narrative is Jade's failure to realise the desires of the other by dropping out of university twice, and by her failure to build a career.

In the opening passage, Jade first attributes her failure to complete university to both other people and her naïve expectations, describing the girls with whom she lived as engaged in what could be considered typical undergraduate activities of '*partying and doing drugs*'. In further recounting the experience of quitting university, she first cites exogenous factors such as the course and her living situation and then describes her mental health issues:

> *I went to do drama. They had the acting course- the drama course, the drama course was supposed to be writing, directing, NOT acting. For the whole three months I was there all they did was acting, improv classes and I don't…like, sort of…well, a few…I don't know if this is relative at all but when I was 13,14, I started popping up with all of these mental health problems. Basically like depression, anxiety, all that stuff. I know that happens to a lot of people. So um, yeah, I got that really bad. Then every few years it sort of goes ok and then it flares up again, that's just how it goes. But I think everything that happened when I moved into halls and stuff, triggered it all going wrong. It all just fell apart and so I left.*

After asserting that she was duped into a course that was acting and not writing/directing as she desired, Jade hesitatingly links her mental health issues with her failure to complete university. She thus identifies as a person with mental health problems with the (reassuring?) caveat that it '*happens to a lot of people*', citing this as the accurate, if circumvented, reason that she was 'forced' to leave university. She refers to her mental health issue as outside of her control, as a disease or illness – '*I got that really bad*' – describing it as randomly '*flaring up again*' periodically. Jade's mental health issues have major ramifications for her life course, perhaps most evident in preventing her from becoming the educated other she desires. Like Madison and Katie in Section 6.1, the understanding of these issues as outside of her agency and control alleviates a sense of personal responsibility and failure from Jade, a rationalisation in terms of a neoliberal discourse (i.e., if it isn't my fault then I can't be held responsible and therefore I haven't failed the neoliberal project of the self).

Jade's mental health issues inform much of her understanding of self and lead to a sense of lacking agency or being out of control of the self and life course. She describes the transition from childhood as a rude awakening, bemoaning the lack of support and direction, a failed transition as rather than becoming independent, Jade continues to dependent on others – in particular her fiancé – given her mental health. She describes:

> …*Adjusting from when you're younger, everything you do has a direction and a purpose and you know when you're supposed to do things, why you're supposed to do things, to when you become an adult. It's like literally like: think of something, then do it and then that's... The lack of purpose. That's surprised me the most. The lack of direction. Like the lack of guidance and knowing what you're supposed to do is sort of…going from school where everything is completely mapped out for you to the real world, so …just how everyone is so in their own life and like the world is less of a community than in school and stuff when you're younger. It's all like, "do it yourself, think of it yourself, live for yourself". The lack of um, any deep and spiritual meaning to life it's just like, 'Nope, you were just born, just get on with it'.*

In this instance, 'freedom' and 'possibilities' of adulthood are burdensome tasks compared to the anchored stability of childhood. For Jade, there is a *lack* of purpose and direction in coming to terms with her adult self, reflected in the failure to live out the identification of the educated other. She perceives an inherent desymbolization in the world, lamenting the lack of 'spiritual' meaning in the 'real world', as well as the inherent narcissism (echoing Christopher Lasch's observation: "'[living] for the moment is the prevailing passion—to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity" [1979: 5]). In this world that lacks deeper spiritual meaning, Jade finds herself having to do just that: find herself, or as Dufour (2008) writes, 'found herself'. With one identification failed but indelibly stamped on her unconscious, Jade laments what could have been (a university student) and imagines what might be:

I've had like a billion different career ideas of what to do. Just like: makeup artist and then drama roles, because I was in drama school from age seven to sixteen. Then I crashed advanced higher that sounds bad…I did behind the scenes stuff in the last few years, like lighting, sound, directing. I love writing. I got poetry awards and stuff like that.

Jade identifies as an imagined creative other who she still believes she can become without studying theatre at university as she originally intended. However, she finds herself in a precarious financial position in which '*I just want to be able to pay rent, afford a holiday, afford anything*', a position which does not square with initial naïve expectations of her life and career, shaped through depictions of media-as-'other':

I've always thought I had to do something spectacularly unusual. Like my life is a movie or something and I'm just like…mmm, it doesn't really work that way! I've tried that and you've sort of got to make money and pay rent, council tax, but you don't see that in movies really.

The phrase '*thought I had to*' again suggests the influence of an external other enforcing expectations and ideals, though her reality is the expectations noted by the 'you' at the end of the phrase depicting the need to earn a living and pay bills. Despite the understanding that she might just be 'ordinary', Jade dreams of the possibilities of expressing her creative self through fantasies linked to fame:

I bumped in to someone from my stage school – I went to stage school for 9.5 years – bumped into him the other day walking home from work. And he is still involved in it and he works for the headquarters of Vodafone in London. … And he does lighting for shows and all that. […] And did lots of shows with them and stuff and he, he works for like, like the production company and does like lighting and all that for shows. Like he has done Rihanna world tour and da da da.

In the midst of unstable employment, Jade fantasies about founding herself through the entertainment industry as her friend has done. In fact, by the second interview, she started a YouTube channel and mulls the idea of putting on a show at an abandoned theatre as a creative outlet. However, her dreams of pursuing her creative side full-time are dependent on her fiancé establishing a stable and decently paid career. By the second interview, Jade has moved back to her hometown given financial difficulties after being fired from her job at Pizza Hut for reasons related to her sleep disorder. Upon moving, she begins work as a marketing assistant for her mother's employer and is the breadwinner of her relationship. But Jade pins her long-term career plans on her fiancé eventually getting a 'daddy job' as she terms it:

Jade: What I was thinking about, he was like no way! It's something really weird, but, ahm, that's [his current job] only Christmas. Christmas contract. So we are thinking for him after, ahm, after this contract is up, I said to him – because I struggle so much from my sleep [disorder] and all that – I said like I can, I don't think I can do this for years and years and then I'll never…

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Interviewer: As in being the breadwinner?

Jade: Yeah. And I said I will never get to do my writing either and I said like I don't mind supporting you ehm but at the same time, because what he earns compared to what I earn is like he wouldn't be able to pay like the rent with what he earns, where as I pay everything and... So I said to him 'you know you need to figure out a more, a daddy job'. That's how I describe it because because both of our fathers have really high and high profile oil and gas jobs…

Because of her health problems and her desired identification as a creative other, Jade places responsibility for providing financially on her husband. She describes her plans for him ('*what I was thinking about, he was like no way!*') that she then turns into a 'we': '*so we are thinking for him*'. This indicates perhaps her influence in the relationship and her desire to offload responsibility to him so that she can pursue her desired identifications. She speaks with a sense of urgency, and describes many scenarios – including him becoming a hospital administrator or a police officer – for their future.

Importantly, by the second interview financial security is particularly salient given her desire to have a child shortly after her impending wedding. In the first interview, perhaps given possibilities for becoming a creative, she was not concerned with having children, contending that 26 would be the perfect age for her to get pregnant, using the maternity ages of the women in her family as a reference point. But in a turn of events, her best friend became unexpectedly pregnant and Jade now desires to become pregnant herself. A Freudian reading might suggest that through her friend, an unexpected identification of mother arises, an identification Jade perhaps unconsciously envisions as being able to fill the void of her desired but failed identifications. Her desire to become a mother despite precarious financial conditions and mental health problems, including a serious sleep disorder, are further affirmed by media-as-other. Justifying her train of thought, she cites the show *One Born Every Minute*:

They were saying, you know, like people always assume that having baby older is better, but they are like well actually a lot of the young parents, ahm, who've planned a baby rather than accidental, they deal with it better because they, like when you are younger your body, it doesn't take such a toll on your body. And you are more, like you got more energy and stuff like that so.

Drawing on discourse from this television show, as well as comparing herself to her parents, particular her mother-in-law who gave birth to Jade's husband at an older age, Jade rationalises her intention to become a mother. In this vein, she encourages her fiancé to find a 'daddy job' that emulates her own father's career path. A Freudian reading might suggest that symbolically turning her husband into her father is Jade's way of rationalising her failure to become what her parents' desired. In fact, she notes a Freudian tendency to compare herself constantly to her parents and to her husband's parents:

I do this weird thing, you know the whole theory like Freudian theory or whatever that you go for someone who is like, like I would go for someone like my dad and he would go for someone like his mom? …. I'm constantly comparing myself to his mom be like 'Oh did I do that like her, did I do that like her' and vice versa. It like kind of makes me look a bit mental to be honest with you. But now I realize because [my fiancé] was like 'why do you always compare where you are in your life to where your parents were at that point'.

This, along with encouraging her husband to become the family breadwinner in a job like her father's, signifies that if she cannot emulate her parents' desires, at least her husband might. Moreover, it is also apparent from her account that her father is largely absent from her life. She rarely speaks about him and chides, in the written response, that she *doesn't* desire her husband to be absent from their child's life, like her father was from hers: '*I would so, so sooner have (as a child of two hard working, high earning, work heavy parents) my husband attend my child's football game, than be able to buy them better boots but not watch them wear them*'. However, in the same breath, she writes that in her thirties she expects her husband to experience many promotions in his career in order to provide them with more financial stability. This suggests a conflicted identification with her parents, and what she believes her parents desire: neoliberal success, upward mobility, and financial gain.

By the time I receive the written response from Jade in lieu of the final interview, given that she moved away from Edinburgh and difficulty arranging interview times (she tried to cancel the second interview three hours before, but relented when I told her I was already on the train to the city where she moved, a two-and-a-half-hour journey from Edinburgh, and had purchased a ticket just to come to the interview), almost a year and a half had passed. In the intervening months, Jade writes:

A whole, ridiculous amount has happened! I got married, bought a house with my husband, my husband dropped out of uni and got a full time job, I left my full time job (due to mental health and sleep disorder) but they were really great about getting me to work from home for them so I still work with the company, I am approaching five months pregnant, I moved to a new town, got thirty two more tattoos, had fourteen piercings done (then took some out due to pregnancy), graduated from a small side shaved and half black/half orange hair, to a Mohawk to then getting my husband to shave my head, went vegan with my husband, did a boudoir nude photoshoot as a wedding gift for my husband but ultimately was asked to model for their website and shared it on my Facebook for the world to see, 'broke up' with a best friend and got two pet rats. That's everything I can think of off the top of my head!

The tone of her response is triumphant. In some ways, it is contradictory and confused but in other ways it is a realisation of her dreams in the second interview of her husband beginning a career and becoming the breadwinner, and her becoming a mother. In reference to the identifications she has either failed or disavowed, she declares a new version of success, success at being a mother, described in direct opposition to the educated other:

Being accepted by others used to feel like a success, but now it is much more important to simply accept myself. Being married to the most amazing man I could ask for makes me feel like the biggest success. Already feeling confident in the fact that I will be a good mother, as if it is what I was made to do, makes me feel successful. In fact, whilst I don't believe in fate, destiny or a higher power, I do think it is quite fitting that as the date that I would have graduated from the first university I attended looms, a date which would otherwise crush me, I am now excited for it as it coincides precisely with the time I will welcome my husband and my child in to the world: something that makes me feel infinitely more successful than any education ever has. Simply being able to grow and replicate part of my best friend and spread his heart a little further in the world, feels like I am doing something really worthwhile.

Rejecting the identifications that failed her, and the people who have failed her such as her best friend, Jade revels in her impending motherhood, equating success not with that which has evaded her (higher education, financial success, a career in the creative arts) but with that on which she can depend: her husband and her unborn child. Stated in relation to fate and destiny, Jade explains that 'she will welcome' them both into the world, resonating with the hysterological making of the self extended to those she envelops into her project of identity. This is also somewhat reminiscent of Madison's statement about being the prophet of her own destiny. Moreover, her transforming appearance further indicates the realisation of an identification she can embrace – as expressing herself through body modification and attention to appearance, indicative not only of consumerist values but also of attempts to live out her creative identification through her body. During the first interview, Jade describes how she felt a constraint on her appearance – and therefore the ability to found herself – both because she has to conform for a job (at the time of the first interview she had been working part-time at Pizza Hut) and because she doesn't have enough money. In the following passage she imagines what a full expression of herself might look like:

Jade: I'm quite impulsive. Sometimes, like in some ways. Most of the time I overthink everything. I'm really self-deprecating, over thinking, anxious. But on the other hand, I'm just like…take all my clothes off and jump off a bridge into a river because I feel like it kind of person so. I just like to be different and risky. Even the way I look and stuff. Not right now particularly because I had to tone it down to get a normal job, but if I had my ideal money and freedom to look how I want, it would be like…I would have loads more tattoos. I've got one, but I can't afford any more, so.

Interviewer: They're expensive!

Jade: Yeah. And I want to get the middle of my lip done. I would dye my hair lilac if it did not damage it so much so red is the next best thing. Um, clothes would be pretty out there. I'm wearing a really normal outfit today sort of, but sometimes…my friends always used to have a joke, "I wonder what she's going to turn up in tonight". So just, like I feel less embarrassed about myself the more…wacky…or the more me I look. Like if my hair is really…like normally it's really curly, if it's huge and I have got no makeup on, that's when I feel most confident…it feels like just me.

The passage illustrates Jade's identification with an alternative and risky self (impulsive, different and risky) that she could found through consumption. But she tends toward self-deprecation, over-thinking, and anxiety, dreaming of how she could live out an ideal self through the material, if she wasn't constrained. At this time, perhaps reflective of a failure to found herself as she fantasises, Jade feels most comfortable when she rejects feminine beauty ideals – when she wears no makeup and doesn't style her hair, which was how she appeared during both interviews. However, as noted in Chapter 6, she is able to construct the ideal online through selfies.

By the time of her written response, with more financial stability, Jade is able to express herself through the addition of 32 tattoos and 14 piercings. In this written response, she rejects her previous identification as a materialistic and consumer who spent her disposable income on clothing (see Section 5.2.3), describing her financial situation as quite limiting: '*I used to buy things purely based on what I wanted: now it is much more based on what I need*'. However, she indulges in tattoos and piercings, thereby embracing a desired identification. In this way, by the third interview, Jade seems to rationalise her failed identifications by firstly embracing the subject position of mother and secondly living out her identification as 'impulsive, different, risky' and ultimately creative by modifying her body through tattoos, piercings and extreme hairstyles, evidenced through countless Facebook selfies, as well as photos from the modelling she has done, in which she looks decidedly different than in real life. On a final note, taking analysis to the extreme of Freudian identification theory (Fuss 1995), by ending the friendship with her best friend who initially planted the seed in Jade's mind about becoming a mother, Jade usurps this potentially rivalrous identification: '*After being friends for around eleven years (with many ups and downs, frankly mostly to do with her) she started sending me vitriolic nasty messages for no other reason, except that she was tired because of her baby or she was just grumpy. This, being something I had always accepted before as treatment I felt I was worth, would normally have resulted in me trying to gain her back, but this time I let it go*'. Again, this symbolises Jade's attempted rejection of the identifications that have failed her in the past and her unstable conception of self as, in the second interview, she cited her friends as essential to her life and a major reason for moving back to her hometown. At the time, she spoke of her best friend as a love object: '*We have seen each other probably every week since I moved back…I am like oh I love her all over again like she is still my best friend and yeah that's really nice*'. But rejecting any role in the demise of the friendship, Jade severs ties with the confidence she has gained in identification as mother, which could be read as her taking her friend's place as *the* mother (Fuss 1995).

7.4. Concluding thoughts

This chapter detailed three case studies in order to illustrate the making of the self, or the understanding of the self, as derived through identifications (Fuss 1995; Descola 2013[2005]). From these accounts, rather than an agentically constructed identity formed through drawing on marketplace resources, an understanding of self is formed through identifications, both conscious and unconscious, often conflicting and in tension, and ever evolving but inevitably imbedded in the psyche of the subject (Fuss 1995). A conscious ability to manage the self or the process by which the self is formed, seems an impossibility as 'identity' is experienced as organic and relational – *vis-á-vis* identifications – to the experiences, social milieu and regimes of truth within which the participant finds herself. This chapter thus acts as a provocation: that is, it is not a final answer to how a sense of self is formed, but is intended to illustrate that analysing identity from the position of subject constitution – in this case through the theoretical tool of identification – is more conducive to building a critical account of the subject in relation to potentially subjugating discourses. In the three cases, neoliberal ideals are fostered in a way that demands self-focused and hysterological forming of the self (Dufour 2008). This leaves participants vulnerable to anxiety as they continually rationalise the self in terms of a project, a project attached to (impossible) ideals and expectations. Moreover, observed in this chapter and in earlier chapters, though participants desire affirmation and belonging, they are often alienated from others through their own self-focus and competitive positioning with others against whom they judge the efficacy of the project of themselves (e.g., Jade and her friend). Moreover, appearance is often (over)valued in the expression of the self, particularly as other aspects of the project of the self are lacking, such as career or relationships (i.e., compensatory consumption [Woodruffe 1997]). With this in mind, rather than focus on marketplace offerings and resources the 'consumer' draws on in forming herself (Arnould and Thompson 2005), perhaps we must examine the opposite: the way 'resources' – represented in this study through identifications with discourses – form the self, or a way of being.

8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this thesis was to critically examine the role of consumer culture in the lives of young women. Detailed across four chapters, the findings of this 18-month qualitative study illustrate how postfeminist, neoliberal discourses that impel a culture of consumption inform an anxiety-provoking way-of-being in which the self is treated as a project for which the subject is responsible. As such, the young women of this study experienced a gendered pressure to 'perform' or to perfect the project of the self given demands to 'have it all' (McRobbie 2015), as structural inequalities were often deemed the responsibility of the individual to combat (Rottenberg 2014), discussed in Chapter 4. As demonstrated particularly in Chapter 5, consumerist and gendered discourses are increasingly disseminated through a pervasive and seemingly unavoidable digital space rife. Given its commercial underpinnings, the infusion of the digital in everyday life therefore exacerbated participants' feeling of always being a consumer, a subject position they seemed to grudgingly accept despite finding somewhat shameful, creating a sense of tension and therefore anxiety. A consumption-orientation was particularly propagated by engagement with social media which fostered tendencies of self-surveillance and self-monitoring, tendencies that encouraged reification of both the self and the others (Honneth 2009) to whom participants compared themselves.

These somewhat concerning findings – at odds with much of the consumer research literature that tends to celebrate productive aspects of consumption, eschewing the claims of critical theorists who argue that consumer culture fosters reification (e.g., Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Baudrillard 1981) – led to further interrogation of 'identity' in Chapters 6 and 7. Findings related to identity illustrated how participants experienced the self as a task, or an individual project for which they felt responsible. In this vein, participants conceptualised the life course as linear, often using others to 'benchmark' their progress. Moreover, commodities were often relied upon to bolster the project of the self particularly in cases where participants felt insecure about certain aspects of their lives, such as career or relationships. A self-as-project orientation or way-of-being aligns with postfeminist, neoliberal discourses that demand the individual take personal responsibility for the success (or failure) of the self (McRobbie 2015; Rottenberg 2014; Lemke 2001). From this point of departure, in Chapter 7 the construct of identity was explored through the psychoanalytic theory of identification, a provocation intended to demonstrate the impossibility of 'identity' as a concept. That is, the chapter illustrated how identity was not agentically constructed by participants drawing on marketplace resources as identity tools; rather, it was spontaneously experienced and rationalised to fit expectations and ideals.

These findings present several contradictions to CCT theorisations which tend to assume the productive role of objects in the formation of the self, as well as the agency of individuals as consumers in expressing 'identity' through marketplace resources (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Therefore, a key contribution of this study is the critique of theorising the self as a *project*, rather illustrating how subjects are constituted through dominant discourses (Butler 2005) that encourage the self to be viewed as a project, with ideological effects. In the case of this study, ideological effects contribute to the continued subjugation of women through: a focus on individual agency; an emphasis consumerist tendencies and appearance; and the reinforcement of an anxious way-of-being. Thus, this study adds to a body of research that critiques the overly agentic and neoliberal conceptualisations of identity in CCT (Fitchett et al. 2014; Earley 2014; Cova et al. 2013; Bradshaw and Holbrook 2008; Shankar et al. 2006). Through the findings, I suggest that consumer researchers avoid conceptualising the self-as-project through concepts such as 'identity construction' and 'identity projects', instead examining how marketplace resources and discourses form the subject-as-consumer. Dark-side consequences of a subjectivity grounded in consumer discourse are likely obscured by consumer research's emphasis on individual agency and productive moments of consumption, rather than engaging in critical analysis as in this study. In this light, I suggest – both from a consumer research perspective and more broadly – that a focus on individual agency undermines critical inquiry necessary to interrogate power relations that form certain subject positions and subjectivities in a specific cultural setting (Gill 2008). Therefore, from a theoretical perspective, considering the self as a project – and considering the individual as a consumer – may do more harm than good, so to speak, aligning with and therefore propagating a postfeminist, neoliberal discourse (Fitchett et al. 2014) that ultimately fosters pressure and anxiety given demands on the individual to manage the self and life course. The focus on women's experiences of identity from a critical perspective further contributes to much-needed feminist consumer research (Maclaran 2015; Hearn and Hein 2015; Catterall et al. 2000, 2005). This focus is particularly warranted given the lack of attention to issues of feminism and gender, despite claims that consumer culture is a 'regime of truth' (Foucault 2008; Butler 2005) in which commercially driven discourses provide the terms through which young women come to understand themselves (McRobbie 2008). Moreover, it is increasingly relevant given postfeminist discourses that render the subjugation of women either an individual matter (Rottenberg 2014) or no longer an issue (Tasker and Negra 2007), also discussed in Chapter 2.

With this in mind, I will conclude this study by discussing the subject position experienced by participants as inherently anxious. That is, critical analysis of the findings indicate that participants experienced a sense of pervasive anxiety that can be explained as culturally

intelligible, fostered by a postfeminist, neoliberal regime of truth that appears as common sense or natural to the young women of this study in coming to know themselves. This chapter is structured as follows: First, I discuss the cultural intelligibility of anxiety and the female consumer subject position as illustrated by the data. Then I discuss implications of this work and outline its contributions. Finally, I consider avenues for future research.

8.1. The cultural intelligibility of anxiety

As discussed in Chapter 4, Betty Friedan (1963) observed a 'problem that had no name' in the form of discontent afflicting 1950s middle-class housewives adhering to a cultural script that encouraged fulfilment through being a good wife and mother. Participants of this study experience a 'problem that has no name' in the form of a pervasive anxiety stemming from pressures to 'have it all' or to perfect the self (McRobbie 2015). This is hardly surprising given claims that anxiety is on the rise in western cultures, particularly affecting women argued to be twice as likely as men to suffer from anxiety, at least from a clinical perspective (Remes et al. 2016). As described in the DSM-V (the most recent American Psychological Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual), anxiety is considered a result of the 'anticipation of future threat' and therefore characterised by a variety of physical responses (e.g., trembling hands, feeling hot, heart pounding) interspersed with psychic feelings such as: 'fearing the worst could happen' and 'fear of losing control' and nervousness (Beck et al. 1988). This corresponds with participants' experiences as anxieties were frequently manifested physically (e.g., grinding teeth, panic attacks) and often related to fear of failing the project of the self: the worst that could happen, for these participants, might indeed be losing control of this project in the form of failing to live up to expectations, at least compared to others.

As Laing and Esterson (1970) observe of the study of schizophrenia, clinical work often points to a checklist of symptoms without considering cultural and social influences. However, more culturally oriented scholars and philosophers have long considered anxiety as part of the human condition. Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, for example, first conceptualised anxiety (often translated as *dread*) through freedom, which he conceived of as quite simply possibility, fostered by self-awareness (May 1996). That is, for Kierkegaard, anxiety is present in every situation given a person's capacity for self-awareness and therefore awareness of possibilities. This 'normal' anxiety is contrasted with neurotic anxiety in which individuals become paralysed when experiencing the former, unable to move forward. Therefore, Kierkegaard's definition of selfhood is 'to confront anxiety and move ahead despite it' (May 1996, 36). In this vein, echoed in identification theory described in

Chapter 7, Kierkegaard's (1957, 92) conceptualisation of anxiety is characterised by conflict and inner struggle, as anxiety:

> *…is a desire for what one dreads, a sympathetic antipathy. Anxiety is an alien power which lays hold of an individual, and yet one cannot tear oneself away, nor has a will to do so; for one fears, but what one fears one desires. Anxiety then makes the individual impotent.*

This sense of 'impotence' is implicit in Giddens's (1991) conceptualisation of anxiety as a facet of the late modern human condition in which dealing with certain existential questions is a necessity, rendering the individual 'impotent' when struggling with the answers. These questions relate to heightened self awareness in which the self, unbounded from traditional symbolic moorings, must answer questions for her/himself related to being, mortality and existence (as noted in Chapter 2). Thus, anxiety seems to be theorised – whether from clinical psychological, philosophical, or sociological perspective – as integral to the experience of the self, awareness of the self and a desire to control or at least efforts to manage the self. It is, therefore, not surprising that in a postfeminist, neoliberal setting that fosters acute self-awareness by encouraging individuals to maximise their utility in decision-making and become the impetus of their success (Lemke 2001; Becker 1992; McRobbie 2009), anxiety might increase.

Particularly from the findings of this thesis, anxiety is cultivated by living a consumer subjectivity through gendered ideals, given increased tensions (e.g., being feminine versus feminist; being a consumer versus feeling ashamed to consume) and uncertainty (e.g., about the future; about the self). Uncertainty and tension are underpinned, perhaps most markedly, by a fear of failure; a fear of not living up to expectations or not being good enough (or great enough) compared to others. As Emma commented in Chapter 6, her 'nervousness' is driven by worries over her performance. In her words, she worries: '*that I'm not going to be adequate. That I'm not going to excel*'. This sense of fear is indicative of a postfeminist, neoliberal script of personal responsibility and control in which individuals are encouraged to manage the self as a (successful) project. As depicted by the data, participants felt responsible for controlling or managing the project of the self. In attempting to do so, they experienced anxiety over the impossibility of such a perspective, illustrated in Chapter 7. This disjointedness fostered increasing alienation from the self, given the need to inspect the self in order to articulate it, suggestive of practices of reification (Honneth 2009), as well as the impossibility of founding the self by the self (Dufour 2008), as noted throughout the findings chapters. Therefore, to be discussed further, a self-as-project orientation causes anxiety by fostering an alienated sense of self. Such alienation is further propagated by increasing individualism and

competition with others; feelings of shame and envy; and a forward-looking temporal positioning.

8.1.1. An alienated self

Individual needs of personal autonomy, self definition, authentic life, or personal perfection are all translated into the need to possess, and consume, market-offered goods. This translation, however, pertains to the appearance of use value of such goods rather than to the use value itself; as such, it is intrinsically inadequate and ultimately self-defeating, leading to momentary assuagement of desires and lasting frustration of needs.... The gap between human needs and individual desire is produced by market domination; this gap is, at the same time, a condition of its reproduction. The market feeds on the unhappiness it generates: the fears, anxieties, and the sufferings of personal inadequacy it induces release the consumer behaviour indispensable to its continuation.

- *Bauman (1989, 189)*

As detailed in Chapter 2, in a postfeminist, neoliberal setting, the individual is judged on her/his ability to make autonomous choices. This is particularly the case with young women who are perceived as the 'ideal neoliberal subjects' encouraged to form their identity and seek emancipation through personal agency (Rottenberg 2014). The desire for agency was clearly evidenced in the data as individuals emphasised personal agency in forming their life course (e.g., Abeni's framing of her decision to move to the UK), eager to explain away unfavourable events, decisions or outcomes as outside of their control (e.g., Madison's depression or Katie's body image). These justifications and rationalisations suggest that these young women feel responsible for their life course, and as such must give accounts of themselves in agentic terms, framing their life as under their control and within the bounds of individual agency, despite life events often conspiring in ways that were random or unable to be controlled (e.g., Sophie, Emma and Catriona 'ending up' in certain careers they had not necessarily envisioned). In this sense, the individual could arguably experience separation of the self from the self, or the self as inherently alienated.

Discussed in Chapter 6, Dufour (2008) contends that subjects test 'false selves' in the marketplace, as – like Bauman suggests – marketing forces impel anxiety and then suggest that the answer to assuaging anxiety is through consumption. Thus, alienation is prompted by seeking a (false) self that is separate from the self. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, alienation of the self is also discussed in Chapter 7 in relation to Lacan's observation that selves become divided or alienated in trying to answer to the desires of others which are by nature contradictory and unable to be guessed correctly. In all, I argue that articulations and observations of the self demanded by 'identity projects' further a sense of alienation. That is, by demanding that the self be responsible for its own formation, as postfeminist, neoliberal

discourse contends (e.g., Becker 1992; McRobbie 2009) and as conceptualised by consumer identity projects (Arnould and Thompson 2005), participants necessarily must 'inspect' themselves in order to articulate, or rationalise, the project of the self. For women, this may be magnified given postfeminist claims that they can solve gender equality through personal agency and technologies of the self (Rottenberg 2014; Evans et al. 2010) and therefore should be *able* to 'have it all' (McRobbie 2015).

The inspection and then articulation of the self renders the individual, in a sense, as tending towards a schizo-type subjectivity conceptualised by post-modernists including Baudrillard (1985), Jameson (1985), Fromm (1976), Dufour (2008), Deleuze (1987), and Lacan (1962). In this vein, I draw on Laing's theory to reflect on the schizoid, alienated (Fromm 1976) or reified (Honneth 2008) subject position fostered a neoliberal, postfeminist. In the phenomenological study of schizophrenia, Laing theorises the false self in relation to 'the problem of the particular schizoid mode of being in the world'. As Laing (1960, 112) observed in a clinical setting: 'The schizoid individual depersonalizes his [sic] relationship with himself. That is to say, he turns the living spontaneity of his being into something dead and lifeless by inspecting it'. This somewhat eerily echoes the implication of the self-as-project orientation whereby the individual must first inspect the self in order to articulate it, therefore essentially depersonalising her/his relationship with his/herself. But what is Laing's starting point? If depersonalisation is a schizophrenic way of relating to the self, what is 'normal' or 'sane'?

In this first place, Laing defines sanity in relation to the 'reciprocal recognition' of identity when two people meet. That is: 'I am accustomed to expect that the person you take me to be, and the identity that I recognize myself to have, will coincide by and large' (1960, 36). If one person experiences the other's identity as a 'radical discrepancy' then that person determines the other insane. In terms of a 'false-self system' then, the false self is experienced in relation to what Laing calls an inner self that is 'transcendent, unembodied, and thus never to be grasped, pinpointed, trapped, possessed' (1960, 95). Whilst Laing acknowledges the impossibility of reaching this 'inner' self even by the sane person, the 'mask' worn by 'normal' people is experienced as 'virtually mechanical' and does not 'preclude the emergence of spontaneous expression' whereas in the schizoid character, it is experienced as painfully intense, as a separate existence. That is, in everyday life we should experience our identity as spontaneous and in the *now* without experiencing alienation, or separating ourselves from ourselves. However, as evidenced in the data, this seems increasingly difficult for young women encouraged to live the self as a project in a digital setting which requires ongoing observation and articulation of the self both to the self and to others. In this vein, Laing

contends that the schizoid personality 'dissociates himself [sic] from much that he does', a dissociation nurtured by performing a postfeminist, neoliberal subjectivity that causes anxiety as individuals become separated from the self and (over)reliant on the opinions of others. Take the following passage where Laing (1960, 119) is discussing the consciousness of the self in the schizoid personality:

> *The need to be perceived is not, of course, purely a visual affair. It extends to the general need to have one's presence endorsed or confirmed by the other, the need for one's total existence to be recognized; the need, in fact, to be loved. Thus those people who cannot sustain from within themselves the sense of their own identity or, like Kafka's suppliant, have no inner conviction that they are alive, may feel that they are real live persons only when they are experienced as such by another.*

This suggests an obfuscation of the inner, 'true', or 'real' sense of self, instead leading to a sense of self that must be continually 'endorsed' or confirmed by others, reflected most obviously perhaps by participants' desire to receive 'likes' on social media. By constantly attempting to live out ideals or expectations of others, the self thus becomes alienated from itself. Therefore, the self cannot be experienced spontaneously. It must be constantly scrutinised and enacted upon in relation to the expectations of others, as noted with the participants of this study who constantly rationalise the self and life course *in comparison to others*. Laing (1960, 98-99) links this to conformity, explaining that in the act of conformity or of attempting to adhere to the expectation of others, the self becomes de-personalised, or treated as a thing, which is what critical theorists may term reified: 'The false self arises in compliance with the intentions or expectations of the other, or with what are imagined to be the other's intentions or expectations [...] this consists in acting according to other people's definition of whom or what one wishes to be'.

Though Laing is discussing cases of clinical schizophrenia, his account elucidates the alienation or depersonalisation of the self and how this might be experienced – albeit in less extreme forms – in a postfeminist, neoliberal regime-of-truth that encourages consumerist, entrepreneurial imaginings of the self. This is not dissimilar to Fromm's (1976) conception of the subject of capitalism as an 'egoist' in living a 'to have' oriented subjectivity, compared to a 'to be' orientation in which, as Laing describes above, individuals can 'sustain *from within themselves* the sense of their own identity'. I argue, then, that one risks self-alienation if viewing the self as a project; moreover, consumer researchers risk propagating this position through academic emphasis on identity construction. To assume one can or should construct one's identity is an inherently reifying and therefore alienating positioning. It inhibits the experience of the self as spontaneous or internally anchored, instead encouraging a schizoid subjectivity in the sense that one's relationship with the self becomes separate, depersonalised and disassociated given the need to inspect the self and the ensuing desire for affirmation

from others. To that end, the alienated self is an outcome of living a consumer subjectivity that, for these young women, is also inherently postfeminist in its either the rejection of the need for feminism or basis in individual personal responsibility. In this setting, understanding the self as a project fosters alienation of self and others that leads to a sense of anxiety, further prompted by individualism and competition; shame and envy; and a forward-looking temporal position.

8.1.2. Individualism and competition

The empirical chapters of this study indicate that participants tend toward individualism, which is not surprising given a regime of truth that focuses on an individual taking charge of her or himself (Lemke 2001; Gill 2007). It is also not surprising – correspondingly in light of 'consumer identity projects' – that participants treat the self as a project, an individualised task for which they feel responsible (Rottenberg 2014). Reflecting on the data, implicit in the management of the self is a desire for the project to be 'successful' – or 'maximising utility' – compared to others. This reflects Girard's concept of 'mimetic rivalry' (Desmond 2013) in which 'the subject desires the object because the rival desires it' (Alvesson 2013, 7), or, in light of identification theory, the self seeks to become what the other desires, or to become the other (Fuss 1995). Thus, participants engage in surveillance of both of the self and others – increasingly engendered by the pervasiveness of social media – in an attempt to benchmark the progress of the self (Marwick 2012). As Emily pondered when scrolling on Facebook and seeing the actions of others: '*I wonder if I should be doing that or not*!'

Practices of social comparison and surveillance provoke anxiety stemming from fears about the adequacy of the self, or even the success (or failure) of the self in relation to others, as noted previously in Emma's quote. Pressure mounts from gendered ideals and expectations of attaining 'perfection' or 'having it all', as described in Chapter 4. Similar to participants who drew on the metaphor of 'ticking boxes' in Chapter 6, McRobbie (2015, 9, emphasis added) explains of the ideal of perfection:

> *Various technologies bring the perfect into life, or vitalise it as an everyday form of self-measurement. How well did I do today? Did I manage to eat fewer calories? Did I eat more healthily? Did I get to the gym? Did I achieve what I aimed to achieve at work? Did I look after the children with the right kind of attention? Did I cook well after the days' work? Did I ensure that my family returned from school and work to a well-appointed and well-regulated home? Did I maintain my good looks and my sexually attractive and well-groomed body? The constant calculations and the sense of 'being in control' have the effect of <u>seemingly putting the woman in charge of her affairs</u>.*

Therefore, the project of the self is a gendered construction in which women, supposedly emancipated from traditional roles of woman-as-consumer (described in Section 2.1) feel both

internalised pressure to be everything to everyone including themselves, and pressure to be 'in charge'. As noted both in participant accounts and in McRobbie's passage, many of the boxes that participants felt they should tick relate to the body, or attention to be(coming) through appearance. Furthermore, in reading McRobbie's questions and analysing participant accounts, one necessarily imagines another present. That is, when participants asked themselves whether they have 'ticked' certain boxes, this involved an implicit 'target' by which to measure the success or failure of the self: others. Self-monitoring and self-assessment practices – inherently alienating - are demanded by a postfeminist, neoliberal discourse that encourages the individual to take charge of the self and maximise utility compared to others (Lemke 2001). This thereby emphasises competition with others through practices of social comparison (Festinger 1954; Suls and Thomas 1991). Social comparison, described by Festinger in psychological work as 'a drive to evaluate his [sic] opinions and his abilities' (1954, 117) compared to others, is an inherently rivalrous practice in which individuals desire to measure up to, or be better than, others. A project of the self fosters this self-interested behaviour that pits individuals in competition, rather than cultivating altruistic behaviour that imagines others as part of a community (Bajde 2006; Verhaeghe 2014; Fromm 1976). In the data, social comparison is evidenced in relation to a range of benchmarks, both trivial (Tiffany judging women for having chipped nails) to potentially quite serious (Sophie judging her friend for marrying for the sake of it). Participants also frequently rationalised their positions in relation to others who appear successful – e.g., Catriona guessing that her friend who apparently 'has it all' (flat, boyfriend, job) probably hates working very long hours.

These judgments and rationalisations reflect self-assessment as participants evaluate others based on concern for their own situation. Struggling to appear in control and agentic, participants compared themselves to others, implicitly competing to maintain 'perfection' or the appearance of perfection, in order to cement the efficacy of the project of the self. Constant self-monitoring is necessarily anxiety provoking as participants oscillated between feelings of grandiosity (measuring up or being better than others) and fragility (not being adequate, not excelling) in comparison to others. For example, in Jade's explanation of why she takes selfies (5.2.3), she appeared fragile in comparison to the popular girls who once teased her. However, she was superior in her opinion that she was *actually* popular in terms of having friends compared to the popular girls, who were *actually* hated by others. Despite these oscillating perspectives, Jade still desired affirmation (or recognition) from the girls who rejected her. Whether or not she received desired recognition from the girls, she at least strived to achieve it from others through 'likes' on her selfie posts. This resulted in feelings of inadequacy and shame because Jade only received 'likes' from loved ones, despite that those

who liked her photo are likely the most important people in her life. In this example, Jade oscillated from feeling superior to inadequate in relation to an imagined other. From a critical theory perspective, evaluating the self and others in this way is potentially reifying and therefore alienating: that is, others become instrumentalised in judging the self (Nussbaum 2000; Lambert and Desmond 2013) both in person and online. In order to post a selfie, Jade necessarily must examine herself. Evidenced by the pictures themselves, Jade dressed up and tested out a variety of poses. Thus, to 'sell' herself to this imagined other, Jade must first objectify herself. As she imagined the popular girls from whom she sought affirmation, she in theory used them as instruments in the quest for self-fulfilment. Honneth (2008, 19) describes reification as 'a type of human behavior that violates moral or ethical principles by not treating other subjects in accordance with their characteristics as human beings, but instead as numb and lifeless objects—as "things" or "commodities"'. Thus, competition and social comparison, triggered by managing the project of the self and overemphasising the opinions of others, requires observation of the self and others in a way that is potentially reifying. Moreover, in feeling a lack sparked by failure to live up to expectations or, in Jade's case, failure to attain recognition, many participants emphasised perfecting appearance in a form of compensatory consumption (Woodruffe 1997); e.g., Charlotte trying to become her ideal self by dyeing her hair, going to the gym and tanning bed, 'affording' to be the person she wanted to be. In this way, the participants exhibited tendencies of an 'other-directed' self (Slater 1997, 90; Riesman 1961): 'The other-directed character is driven by a "diffuse anxiety" about measuring up to the transitory expectations of others' (1997, 90). This, Slater argues, turns individuals 'obsessed with preferences, tastes, appearances and norms', something certainly reflected in the data, particularly in cases in which career or relationships had not gone to plan.

Practices of social comparison are underpinned by a need for affirmation from others, particularly in relation to the management of the 'project' of the self and choices made, given that, in a neoliberal setting, the worth of individuals is judged on their ability to make autonomous choices (Rottenberg 2014), or be the 'woman in charge of her affairs' as McRobbie (2015) describes. These practices demand attention to the self, which seemed to encourage not only individualistic but sometimes narcissistic tendencies. Participants often explicitly described themselves as narcissistic, particularly in relation to digital practices such as crafting an 'appearance' on social networking sites, taking selfies, and monitoring posts for 'likes'. For example, upon perusing her profile pictures on Facebook, Emma noticed that a third were selfies and thus felt '*a little bit narcissistic*'. Similarly, Emily was wary of the cultivating of narcissistic tendencies involved in using Facebook excessively. From these examples, participants discuss narcissism in terms of shameful or negative behaviour that

prioritises or gives excessive attention to the self, presumably instead of others. From a psychoanalytic perspective, normal narcissism – or primary narcissism – is central to the formation of ego identity as an instinct for self-preservation, whereas secondary – or pathological – narcissism forms in the case of childhood trauma (Freud 1914). However, many scholars have linked an epidemic of 'unhealthy' narcissism to following cultural scripts in a neoliberal, consumer society (Twenge and Campbell 2009; Giddens 1991; Sennett 1992; Lasch 1979; Layton 2014). Narcissistic tendencies evident in participant accounts included vanity (a focus on appearance), an overemphasis on the opinions of others in relation to the self (a need for affirmation), superiority and illusions of grandeur and omnipotence (e.g., Madison desiring to be a CEO or make six figures by 30), and feelings of vulnerability and insecurity. Though narcissism is often characterised by its grandiose character traits such as illusions of omnipotence and exploitative tendencies (Twenge and Campbell 2009), fragile or vulnerable narcissism is conceptualised as consciously experienced feelings of 'helplessness, emptiness, low self-esteem, and shame' (Pincus et al. 2009, 367) in relation to an ideal self that individuals present and defend. This certainly seems the case with the participants of this study who measured themselves against (impossible) ideals of perfection, presenting themselves as in control of the project of the self but in fact deeply insecure when aspects of the project went awry (e.g., Charlotte believing she should be a CEO by 30, but insecure about the status of her job in comparison to others). Whilst presenting a confident, even arrogant, façade to the outside world, inside participants seemed to suffer from insecurities and feelings of inadequacy, thus constantly seeking validation and affirmation from others: as Emma noted in 6.3, '*I seek approval of others to validate what I've done. […] I get a total buzz off it, like a proper high when someone wants to tell other people how great I've done*'. As such, many participants feel inadequate or fragile until affirmed by the other, further reflecting self-alienation. Kets de Vries and Engellau (2010, 189) explain that narcissism is experienced through 'feelings of deprivation, insecurity, and inadequacy', and beliefs that life is a 'zero-sum game' made up of 'winners and losers'. This is similar to neoliberal scripts (e.g., Becker's [1992] theory of human capital) that judge individuals on their ability to make choices, and therefore are either good or bad decision makers. As Gretchen explains in Chapter 4, women who are unable to be confident cannot negotiate higher pay (losers), but those who express confidence like men can overcome the wage gap (winners). Thus, participants expressed narcissistic tendencies given the focus on the self necessitated by seeking to be 'winners' in the eyes of others, though often feeling insecure within.

On a final note, by displaying the self and seeking self-fulfilment through self-affirmation, Riesman (1961) describes a narcissistic, other-directed self as 'a depthless chameleon that effortlessly adjusts her or his self-presentation to the changing requirements of the

personality market' (Lambert et al. 2014, 38). This is similar to Fromm's individualistic 'marketing character' who, in the quest 'to have', becomes alienated (or reified) from work, from him or herself, from others and from nature. Fromm therefore points to egoism arising from a capitalist system:

> *To be an egoist refers not only to my behavior but to my character. It means: that I want everything for myself; that possessing, not sharing, gives me pleasure; that I must become greedy because if my aim is having, I am more the more I have; that I must feel antagonistic toward all others: my customers whom I want to deceive, my competitors whom I want to destroy, my workers whom I want to exploit. I can never be satisfied, because there is no end to my wishes; I must be envious of those who have more and afraid of those who have less. But I have to repress all these feelings in order to represent myself (to others as well as to myself) as the smiling, rational, sincere, kind human being everybody pretends to be.*

This not only implies an individualistic, competitive stance toward relationships with others, but echoes the 'to have' orientation that many participants express: a possessive attitude in relation to both commodities and people. This is eloquently expressed by Abeni in Chapter 5: '*Even now children are being consumed, you have children because, you have, have a husband, have a boyfriend, have a wife, have a girlfriend, you should have, you should constantly should have…*' or Catriona who mentioned desiring a husband along with a flat and a handbag. It also speaks to the 'hamster wheel' of consumption in which participants find themselves always seeking *more* – e.g., Charlotte noting how she has improved her appearance but could always be better; Catriona reflecting on the never-ending cycle of desire triggered by Instagram; or Simone and Alicja describing success is unattainable. Dufour (2008, 75) refers to this feeling as *narcynicism* which means 'that everyone today tends to practice what Lacan used to call the "politics of the stepladder". This consist basically in the fact that, as soon as you meet someone else, you feel a spontaneous need to move up to the next rung'. Thus, as discussed in relation to social comparison, participants experienced an individualistic, rivalrous desire to be better than what is presented to them. In this vein, Sennett (1992, 8) argues that narcissism must not be confused with self-admiration; rather, narcissism, as a disorder of character, concerns the blurring of boundaries between the self and external world, resulting in a self only concerned with 'what this person, that event means to me'. Berger (1972, 134) highlights the relationship between envy and narcissism, explaining: 'The spectator buyer is meant to envy herself as she will become if she buys the product. She is meant to imagine herself transformed by the product into an object of envy for others, an envy which will then justify her loving herself'. Thus, perceiving herself as the object of others' envy, the subject-as-consumer can rationalize a focus on (and investment in) the self. This begins link the cult of the self and consumer society. As Giddens (1991,172) observes:

Consumption addresses the alienated qualities of modern social life and claims to be their solution: it promises the very things the narcissist desires – attractiveness, beauty and personal popularity – through the consumption of the 'right' kinds of goods and services. Hence all of us … live as through surrounded by mirrors; in these we search for the appearance of an unblemished, socially valued self.

8.1.3. Shame and envy

Desire for an 'unblemished, socially valued self' or a self that is successful in comparison to others not only cultivated individualistic and competitive tendencies amongst participants, but also fostered feelings of shame and envy. As mentioned, narcissistic tendencies are often rooted in shame over the adequacy of the self (Lasch 1979; Giddens 1991; Dufour 2008). This was represented across participant cases in which shame was often expressed in relation to others of whom participants were envious, as described in the example of Jade and the popular girls in school, or Charlotte in relation to a more successful love interest who caused her to feel anxiety over her own career (6.2). As such, participants constantly reconciled the expectations of the ideal self (who I should be) with the reality of the actual self (who I am), prompting shame at the latter when the former was not achieved and envy of the position of the desired other. Thus, the efficacy of the project of the self was judged in terms of others, fostering shame of the self and envy of others when the project 'failed'.

Shame relates to 'unconsciously experienced anxieties about inadequacies of self' (Giddens 1991, p. 65). Dufour (2008) explains that feeling ashamed of oneself has 'replaced' guilt which is mediated through others. Whereas shame relates to self-identity, guilt involves violating taboos, disrespecting others, betraying others. Thus, guilt is a product of modernity in which individuals answered to the Big Other represented by the nation-state, religion and so forth (Giddens 1991; Dufour 2008). But shame emerges in a neoliberal setting in which the self takes precedence and symbolic anchors fade. Participants, in an inherently anxious position with a lack of symbolic anchoring given the hysterological project of the self, experienced oscillating feelings in which they feel either superior (grandiose) or inferior (fragile or shameful) when comparing themselves to others. In Dufour's words: 'What defines the subject in postmodernity is something resembling a feeling of omnipotence when we succeed and complete impotence when we fail' (2008, 81). For example, Charlotte worried about measuring up to an ideal self and life course. She felt omnipotent when she achieved a success ('*For me it's just perfect. It's very different from everything that my friends are doing in law firms, and all that but I think at 23 I'm actually a shareholder and I would never have this anywhere else*') and impotent when she 'failed' ('*I was applying a lot to Brussels, you know, really thinking I would get a job with the grades I had, but because I had no experience, I was seeing nothing. I think it was the first time in my life I felt there was like a limit to my intelligence, or that people were better*'). In

this example, success relates to both achieving uniqueness (being different) and power at a young age (being a shareholder), whereas failure relates to others being *better than* Charlotte, implying her inadequacy. Charlotte envied those who could fulfil her desire – that which she failed – and desired to be envied by others when she achieved a success. Thus, shame emerges from fear about adequacy of the self and performing in comparison to others.

As discussed in Chapter 6, Dufour (2008, 84) notes that with the diminishment of symbolic anchors and the fragility of ego-ideals, marketers and advertisers take the opportunity to create symbolic markers, becoming 'a major supplier of new and volatile ego-ideals which are constantly being reshaped'. This resonates with participants' focus on material goods, commodities, and appearance in communicating an ideal self to others and in seeking answers to existential questions. Shame was not only evident in relation to the project of the self, but also in relation to habits associated with a consumerist way of being. Discussed in Chapter 5, participants seemed ashamed at their focus on appearance and materialism propagated by pervasive digital technologies. This could indicate anxiety with the way-of-being demanded of them from following a postfeminist, neoliberal script. That is, for participants it seemed that consumerist values were at odds with communal values (Fromm 1976). A key part of in-home interviews involved participants showing me pictures of friends and family. For instance, in Tiffany's university room, she had a bulletin board with pictures of her mum, her dogs, and her best girlfriends. We spent some time discussing each picture and her best friends at home. But along with this sense of community, Tiffany often expressed judgment at the actions of others and compared herself to her friends. For example, her interviews frequently involved discussions of her classmates and friends whom she met in Edinburgh. She often positioned herself as superior for knowing how to handle the 'real' world in terms of schoolwork or for not behaving irresponsibly like her hall mates who sometimes stayed up drinking all night in the common area. Moreover, Tiffany's focus on appearance and feelings about needing to work on herself and appearance involved self-monitoring in comparison to others, both in real life (e.g., her peers) and online (on fashion, beauty and celebrity gossip websites and social media). Thus, Tiffany expressed individualistic tendencies of focusing on the technologies of the self and judging the efficacy of her engagement in these tasks based on the performance of others, fostering an anxiety-provoking sense of competition rather than a (desired?) sense of community. Similarly, Sophie valued her friendships, family and intellectual interest in feminism, but felt ashamed of her interest in and love for beauty and lifestyle products. She worried that she could come across as a 'shallow woman' in contradiction with her feminist identification and intellectual interests. Thus, a desire amongst participants to cultivate and treasure non-consumerist, cultural values such as family, friendship, intellectual pursuits, helping others and feeling a

part of community was in conflict with a consumerist, entrepreneurial way-of-being. In a final example, Emma described her ideal scenario as living in a house in the country where she could host parties for all of her friends and their children, someday in the far future. But at the time of the study – i.e., in the temporal 'now' – she was preoccupied with her appearance; moreover, her fantasy also implies the achievement of goals of wealth (e.g., *'I've got the Range Rover to drive around in and the Mercedes in the garage for when it's summer').* Therefore, consumerist practices rooted in commodity flows, prevalent across participant accounts, seem in contention with desire for communion with others as further indicated by the competitive and individualistic tendencies implicit in managing the self through a project, inevitably of consumption.

8.1.4.   Looking forward

As discussed, when living a consumer subjectivity and conceiving of the self as a project, participants imagine constructing a self (e.g., Madison's metaphor of building a house) and the boxes they must tick *in the future.* This implies a forward-looking temporal positionality that is necessitated by a neoliberal conception of cost-benefit analysis of potential future actions (Becker 1992) and planning decisions and choices (Lemke 2001). Moreover, it corresponds with McRobbie's assessment of the postfeminist subject as feeling pressured to attain perfection (2015) or in Gill and Orgad's (2015) estimation, to *appear* confident. In this vein, participants often expressed worry about future decisions, such as: whether and how they will be able to 'tick the boxes' (e.g., Madison and her single status); how they will craft their appearance (Elizabeth's worry about what she will wear the next day); and what others might think of them if they make certain choices (Emma's worry over whether she should be wearing a pencil skirt; Sophie's lifestyle as different to her friends). This future-oriented temporal positioning fosters a struggle to be present, to live in the moment and to focus on the now. For example, Charlotte expressed being overwhelmed with all of the plans she had for the future (work projects and so forth) when she decided to 'go offline'. This was prompted by her observation of her inability to be present and in the moment as she found herself always on multiple screens at once (e.g., watching movies while cooking or scrolling on Pinterest while watching TV). In relation to smartphones, Dufour (2008, 76) comments: 'we are always where we aren't and never where we are'.

More than being physically in multiple places at once, participants seem to live in the future in managing the self. As noted, attempts to live out the project of the self require thinking forward and anticipating any number of outcomes that might occur. But, as indicated in participant accounts, outcomes and plans never quite manifest as expected. For example, Abeni rationalised both her past actions (how she came to be an accountant) and her future

plans (her career timeline). Thus, anxiety is induced from attempting to plan ahead, attempting to control the uncontrollable and envisioning scenarios that may never come to fruition. For example, when Madison envisages without question being married and pregnant by a certain age, she is bound to be disappointed if the outcome to which she is attached does not manifest, though she may rationalise her plans or extend her 'deadlines' over time. Many participants experienced disappointment as their plans sometimes fail to come to fruition, and realised the potential failure implicit in making future plans. But as Charlotte mentioned, the façade of control through planning assuages anxiety in some senses, although in other cases this exacerbates participants' disappointment at unexpected outcomes.

The desire of individuals to forgo future worries and to re-gain the ability to be present is evidenced by the ever expanding mindfulness movement as a remedy for anxiety/depression (Brown et al. 2003). A future-oriented versus present-oriented state of being echoes Fromm's (1976, 90) comparison of the state of 'to have' and the state of 'to be'. If one is oriented towards possession, then one has things to lose, people to lose, a future to lose and even a self to lose. In this sense, loss is associated with adequacy of the self. But Fromm believes that anxiety inherent in the possibility of loss is assuaged or absent altogether for those in a 'to be' orientation:

> *The anxiety and insecurity engendered by the danger of losing what one has are absent in the being mode. If I am who I am and not what I have, nobody can deprive me of or threaten my security and my sense of identity. My center is within myself; my capacity for being and for expressing my essential powers is part of my character structure and depends on me.*

Thus, a state of 'to be' is dependent on a focus of the self or a strong internal anchor in which the individual is impervious to social comparison and shame in relation to others, feeling confident in the self and living *in the present*. This positionality is thus temporally present-oriented as the individual doesn't seek to acquire in the future, but is secure in the now.

8.2. Implications

Anxiety is thus rendered culturally intelligible by postfeminist, neoliberal discourses that encourage practices that separate the self from the self, most prominently in this study experiencing the self as a project. Moreover, the prevalence of commodities as symbolic anchors fosters an appearance-orientation amongst the young women of this study, subjugating them by the pressure to 'have it all' through consumption, with the illusion of freedom through personal responsibility. Therefore, despite readings that might point to the productive role of consumption as emphasised in consumer research literature, consumer

culture, underpinned by a profit logic, oppresses these participants by fostering a pervasive anxiety inherent in the attempt to fulfil gendered expectations and ideals by 'managing' the project of the self.

Are there alternative ways of being? Of course, unless the system in which we are situated (patriarchal, neoliberal capitalism) can change, we will necessarily continue to buy commodities and be encouraged to engage in projects of the self through consumption. Therefore, an emancipatory perspective should not be about *not* buying. Rather, it should focus on reorienting our relationship to commodities in particular, so that we do not emphasise their 'symbolic power', something particularly important for women who are implicated in the construction of the subject position 'consumer', noted in Chapter 2. Moreover, perhaps we should not imagine every act as one of consumption, thereby taking the focus off of commodities. That is, in the example of music, as Saren (2015) observes, perhaps we should focus on listening to (or playing) music produced through the drum kit, rather than 'consuming' the drum kit. In this way, a distinction must be made between the material and commodities. The material is, and has been, important to human beings across history. But commodities, an invention of capitalism (Cluely and Dunne 2012), threaten this symbolic and productive relationship (see, for example Miller 2010) through processes of desymbolisation (Dufour 2008). As described in Chapter 6, Dufour argues that commodities are desymbolising as the market pursues ideals of 'fluidity, transparency, circulation and renewal' to the detriment of historical, cultural values such as 'moral principles, aesthetic canons, models of truth' (2008, 160). It is these cultural values to which a subject can symbolically anchor, whereas marketplace symbols are frenetic, ever-changing and inherently unstable. Thus, we must lessen the role that commodities play in our identity projects by refusing to be susceptible to their depthless symbolism. For example, Madison focused on the role of her Ted Baker jacket in making her 'a better person'. She was ashamed by the example and makes a religious reference that she should not covet a material object. This perhaps implies that she could be a 'better person' by purchasing a jacket for its use value rather than its 'symbolic' value, or even resisting purchase if it fulfils no need other than the symbolic.

In this vein, another emancipatory implication might be to focus on expanding our 'critical faculties' rather than focus on appearances, engaging in pursuits of knowledge and intellect over activities such as shopping or caring for the self. Dufour, for example, envisages a 'psychotic' subject (similar to the schizoid subject) emerging from the lack of critical thought in late capitalism. He describes the subject to be acritical in the sense that s/he is not the Kantian critical subject characterized by Kant's imperative for the individual to 'make use' of

freedom to think – described by Kant (1991: 55) as 'freedom to make public use of one's reason' – thus compelling individuals to use their 'critical faculties', eventually for stimulating scientific/philosophical progress (Dufour 2008, 9). Perhaps, then, resistance to postfeminist, neoliberal discourse is to draw upon these critical faculties (which is said by Kant to have no price, but dignity), instead of preoccupying ourselves with the buying (and selling) of commodities (which all have a price).

Finally, the data indicates that emancipation may be found in strengthening our 'internal compass' by focusing on the present and less on the future and the opinions of others. This is evidenced through participant accounts in which existential purpose is found in career (e.g., Gretchen, Emily) and therefore, confident in themselves, there is less of a tendency to compare the self to others. In this sense, a strong internal compass might also facilitate the strengthening of community, engendering an orientation toward viewing others not as competitors but as allies. This aligns with a 'to be' mind-set in which the individual begins to focus on the needs of the community rather than the need to bolster the ego (Fromm 1976). A strong internal anchor might not only improve relationships with others, thereby potentially decreasing anxiety, but may also increase the efficacy of movements that seek to combat hegemonic forces such as patriarchal neoliberalism, e.g., the feminist movement. Instead of young women viewing feminism as *for the individual* (Rottenberg 2014), a focus on communal action might help unite the movement through common goals, rather than fostering contention and rejection of the movement (Tasker and Negra 2007). In all, as consumer researchers, we might start considering these emancipatory perspectives through critical enquiry focused on hegemonic discourses and the forming of subjects, rather than celebrating individual agency.

8.3. Contributions

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, heeding the call from critical consumer researchers to be attentive to sociocultural formations of the subject rather than focusing on or assuming an agentic consumer (Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Fitchett et al. 2014), this study contributes to a critical understandings of consumer agency and identity. Moreover, heeding the call of feminist researchers to explore women's experiences (Catterall et al. 2000, 2005; Maclaran 2015), this research contributes to understandings of the role of consumer culture in the lives of women. Overall, this study questions conceptualisations of consumer identity projects as agentic, empowering and productive. Instead, this study illustrates that the project of the self and a focus on the material are inherently oppressive and anxiety-provoking for young women who are told they are free to consume their way into being and pressured to be 'successful'. Consumption, although it could certainly be read through this data as

celebratory or expressive of the self, seems to confuse and cause anxiety. In this vein, as previously noted, I argue that consumer researchers should refrain from theorising identity as a project, instead considering considering conceptualisations that problematize power relations in the forming of subjectivities. Whilst the idea of a consumption-oriented identity is fundamental to consumer research (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Giddens 1991), oppressive dimensions of experiences of forming the self through everyday consumption are not often articulated. The concerning findings of this study warrant exploration that does not celebrate consumption and agency but instead fosters critique. Thus, this study responds to the call of Bradshaw and Firat (2007) for exploration of dark-side aspects of consumption. As described in this chapter, a way-of-being emerged from participant accounts, focused on the self and the *performance* of the self in relation to others, particularly for those who perhaps felt more insecure and therefore sought validation from others more frequently. This appeared to prompt a sense of anxiety as social relations become competitive and the self becomes 'oversocialised' (Slater 1997) in its narcissistic focus on the opinions of others. Moreover, in looking to others (real and imagined, peers and media) to understand the self, contradictory identifications and desires intermingled as, for some participants, pressures mounted to be successful in *all* areas (to have it all and be it all), contributing to a pervasive sense of anxiety. Particularly in cases where existential purpose did not appear to be found in the career path, appearance took precedence as a marker for success as participants used objects and material goods to signal to others, both in person and online, the 'success' of the founding of the self. In this sense, commodities became equated to being. This finding resonates with concerns about reification (Honneth 2008) and commodity fetishism/narcissism (Cluely and Dunne 2012) that separate humans from humanity.

In this vein, a second contribution of this study is its reconceptualization of 'identity' through the psychoanalytic construct of 'identification' that illuminates the contradictory nature, and impossibility, of attempts to form one's identity agentically. Detailed case studies in Chapter 7 illustrate how an understanding of the self is formed through identifications, both conscious and unconscious, often conflicting and in tension, and ever evolving but inevitably imbedded in the psyche of the subject (Fuss 1995). Therefore, an agentic process of self-management seems an impossibility as 'identity' was experienced by participants as organic and relational – through identifications – to the experiences, social milieu and regimes of truth within which the participant finds herself. From this basis, the experience of the self as a project that should be able to be managed emerged as anxiety-provoking for participants. That is, an outcome of identifying with neoliberal, postfeminist discourse for these participants was a disjointedness between attempts to manage the self as a project and the experience of identity as spontaneous and unable to be controlled. Therefore, decisions and events that occur

spontaneously must be re-imagined as planned or as reflecting 'well' on the individual who is judged on her/his ability of autonomous choice (Rottenberg 2014). In this vein, rather than experiencing every day in the temporal 'now', participants appeared future-oriented, obliged to articulate themselves to others in terms of productivity and ability, which ultimately contributed to reifying tendencies. These critical observations were facilitated by analysing 'identity' not through the perspective of individual agency but through understandings of subject formation vis-à-vis the construct of identification, further illustrating the need to move beyond the theorisation of identity projects.

A third contribution of this study is its highlighting of the relationship between digital media and consumption in the lives of young women. As digital technologies have become pervasive (Orton-Johnson and Prior 2013), this study shows that that the digital is not just consumed, but also mediates consumption, particularly through social media. Therefore, this study highlights the importance of a digital perspective in studies of consumption whilst also setting forth a 'pattern' (5.2.3) by which the young women of this study used the digital to mediate consumption: by gaining inspiration for real-life online, enacting or personalising these inspirations in real life and then displaying themselves again online. Moreover, this study illustrates the heteronormative ideals reinforced in the commercialised setting of social media. This raises questions as to the role of online spaces in the performing and structuring of gender norms.

Methodologically, this study contributes by documenting the process and outcomes of a longitudinal-type study, illustrating the importance of engaging with participants over time, thereby 'digging deep' to generate rich and critical findings. In contrast to many phenomenological accounts relying on one-off interviews, this study was not only longitudinal, but also generated data from observations, social media and photographs. Engaging in the experiences of participants in this way enhanced the findings by adding a temporal perspective to analysis. This methodology further contributes to a small but impactful body of critical research in marketing (Saren et al. 2007; Earley 2015) that seeks to question and problematize dominant power discourses within the literature and society. It also contributes to feminist consumer research, prioritising the experiences of women which have not been prevalent in the discipline (Catterall et al. 2000, 2005). Importantly, this study shows how critical research can be executed empirically (Harvey 1990; Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009) and the necessity of a critical perspective with emancipatory aims, given the problematic and concerning findings of this study. From a perspective outside of the discipline, Alvesson and Willmott (2012, 130) note: 'marketing has been one of the least self-reflective about its knowledge claims'. Studies that do contribute to a critical agenda are few

and far between, yet necessary to 'raise the profile' of critical marketing research (Saren et al. 2007) and to continue the interrogation of marketing's epistemological production.

8.4. Avenues for future research

This study is specific to the experiences of young women in a particular space and time. Therefore, these avenues for future research reflect important themes unable to be explored in the scope of this project, particularly focused on: gender, generation, socio-economic status and resistance. By conducting this study with young women, I was keenly aware that its focus excluded other genders. I often wondered about the experience of men, particularly given claims that young men are increasingly encouraged to express themselves through consumption (Lambert and Desmond 2015). Therefore, one avenue of future research is to conduct this study with young men, asking, for example, whether men experience similar anxiety in relation to increasingly defining themselves through consumption. This would contribute to understandings of gender relations and the construction of masculinities (Hein and O'Donohoe 2014; Hearn and Hein 2015), and the role of consumer culture in constituting gendered subjects. Also, another avenue of research is to explore the experiences of those not necessarily identifying with a gender binary or with heteronormative ideals, perhaps asking about the role in consumer culture in negotiating gender (non)identity. How might gender be performed or resisted in the context of a neoliberal consumer culture? Another avenue for future research concerns generational questions. This study focused on young women in an 'emerging adult' life stage. But what about other generations, from children and adolescents (e.g., John 1999) to older generations (Schau et al. 2009)? Particularly settings where digital technologies are pervasive, how does consumer culture form an understanding of self? Is consumption mediated through the digital world in the same ways? Are there pressures of social comparison and ensuing anxiety, or is this particular to younger generations who are not yet stabilised as 'adults'? An in-depth study particularly of older women would provide a complementary analysis that could extend this study's findings into understandings of how consumer culture shapes the understanding of self in various stages of the life course (Elder 1994).

A third, very important, research avenue would be to extend the study beyond its inevitable focus on the middle class and Western perspective, discussed in Chapter 3. First, a study might ask, like Belk et al. (2005) and Üstüner and Holt (2007), what is the role of consumer culture in the making of precarious subjects (Butler 2009) who might experience consumer culture in everyday life but do not necessarily have the means to access tools of consumption in the same way as the participants of this study? Secondly, what about other contexts, such as developing countries, in which many of the consumer goods used by the young women of

this study are produced, and by impoverished peoples? Shifting the focus to aspects of production and the effects on the people doing the producing is an important avenue to pursue in seeking emancipation from a neoliberal hegemony or at least exposing its potentially deleterious consequences. Finally, and in this vein, a fourth avenue of research is to search for and examine the possibilities of resistance. Much work has been done on 'resistant' consumers and groups (e.g., Cherrier 2009), but what about developing a further understanding of the individuals who identify with, promote and ascribe to principles of resistance to capitalism? How might these individuals form a sense of self? To which institutions might these individuals refer in understanding the self and what might this teach us about resisting the capitalist system? In any case, I hope that this study provides inspiration to others in the field of marketing to conduct feminist and critical studies of oppressed groups, focusing on emancipation from dominant discourses rather than celebrating the our (over)reliance on commodities through the lens of 'consumption' and the agency of the individual through the construct of 'identity projects'.

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APPENDIX

Pseudonym	Biography
Charlotte	Charlotte is a 24-year-old French woman living in Edinburgh. I met her through a mutual friend– a fellow PhD student. Charlotte is from an upper-middle class (by all accounts), traditional, religious (Protestant) family living just outside of Paris. She considers her (bilingual) family 'very international' given their North African heritage (French immigrants), as well as the fact that they travel often, particularly to the US. Her mother is a homemaker and her father is a GP. She has two brothers, one older and one younger, and a sister who is the youngest of the four. Both brothers also studied law, although one quit to become an artist. All siblings were deemed 'gifted' or high on the IQ charts. Religion was a dominating factor growing up – her parents are devout Christians and her father was even a pastor for a spell. Since she was 13 years old, Charlotte spent her summers with a family in Scotland. She developed a friendship with a son in the family and eventually they embarked on a long-distance romantic relationship during their late teens and through university. Three years into her undergraduate degree at a prestigious university in Paris, Charlotte decided to move to Edinburgh to finish her undergraduate degree (motivated by wanting to be near her boyfriend), and later embarked on a master's degree in international law. Whilst working on her master's dissertation, Charlotte accepted an internship at an Internet start-up native to Edinburgh, and, at the end of her studies when she was unable to find a job related to her law degree (e.g., working for the EU), she took on a full-time role at the start-up, a company she still works for today. Charlotte and her boyfriend broke up about 9 months before her participation in the study and she is single throughout the study. She lives in a flat share with people she found online. At the time of the study, she is contemplating her options for the future including a possible career change and potentially moving away from Edinburgh.
Emily	Emily is a 24-year-old American woman living in Edinburgh. I met her through a mutual friend – a fellow PhD student. Emily is in Edinburgh pursuing a master's degree in social work. When I first met her, she was halfway through her two-year degree programme. Emily is from a cattle-ranching family in the south-western US and grew up in a small town where gendered roles of becoming a teacher (woman) or becoming a miner (man) after high school were the norm. Emily's father is a park ranger and her mother is a librarian – growing up, the family often struggled to make ends meet. She attributes her drive and ambition to her parents, who wanted their children to fulfil their own (unfulfilled) dreams of gaining an education. In fact, Emily is the first person in her family, followed by her younger brother, to attend university. Growing up, Emily felt isolated from her small-town peers. But attending a private Christian liberal arts university in the Pacific Northwest provided her opportunities she previously did not consider. This prompted a realisation that she did not want to go back to her home state. Instead, she decided to move to the UK for graduate school, given her British roots, as her grandmother grew up in England and emigrated to the US during WWII. Emily is single at the time of the study and she prioritises her career and self-development over a love life. A final note to mention about Emily is that she is deeply religious, stemming from her

	parents and family who are also very religious. However, she doesn't like to associate with the term 'religious' given negative connotations and instead prefers to state that she is inspired by Jesus and the way he lived his life through helping others.
Tiffany	Tiffany is a 28-year-old American woman living in Edinburgh. I met her through a work colleague. At the time of the study, Tiffany was pursuing a master's degree in management. For Tiffany, the degree programme abroad was a bit of a respite from a rather tumultuous year in which she was divorced from her husband of two years. Tiffany felt that her life was in a bit of a rut before she left for Europe – she was in a job in corporate America for five years that she did not like much. At the same time, she decided to leave her husband who, nine years her senior, wanted her to conform to his way of life. She felt that, growing up as an only child with a single mother and then moving directly in with her ex-husband, she did not have much of a chance to be independent in her life so she decided to pursue a master's degree abroad. Tiffany is an only child and her father left her mother when Tiffany was four years old. He is Filipino and works as a carpenter in the same city where she grew up (in the Pacific Northwest). Whereas Tiffany is not very close with her father, her mother, who works in HR, is her best friend and confidant. She notes that her closeness with her mother made up for her father's absence throughout her childhood. Tiffany is not religious. She doesn't fancy herself the scholarly type and the thing she dislikes most about her time abroad is studying. Tiffany frequently mentions friends from home and has many photos in her flat of her long-time friends in the US. In the UK, over the course of the interviews she switches friend groups multiple times, first close with her housemates but then developing friendships with some of her course mates. She also begins a relationship with an Englishman studying for a masters in medieval history very early in the semester. The relationship grew quite serious over the course of the interview process.
Catriona	Catriona is a 26-year-old Scottish woman who I met through a mutual friend. She grew up in a small town in Scotland. Catriona is an only child. Her mother is a homemaker and her father works on oil rigs, in a job in which he works alternating months. Catriona was unsure what she wanted to do after her undergraduate degree and worked as a pharmacy technician for a time whilst she saved money for graduate school. She received a postgraduate degree in marketing and hoped to pursue a career working in marketing or PR for a big brand, a dream which was temporarily fulfilled when she secured an internship with a reputable footwear company in London upon completing her master's degree. However, at the end of the internship she was not offered a full-time position and returned to Edinburgh. A few months upon her return, Catriona secured an administrative position in the court system, a job she took whilst continuing to look for a marketing position in Scotland, given that she was ultimately happy to move away from the stressful life of living in London. About six months after the interview process, she told me that she got a job as a policy writer. Catriona is single and dates quite a bit throughout the study. Although raised Christian, she is not very religious.
Sophie	Sophie is a 34-year-old woman from Edinburgh. Sophie has worked as an administrator in a university for six years. We met through a mutual friend. She has lived in Edinburgh all of her life except for attending university in another Scottish town where she also worked for a year. Sophie studied history and literature. She began her career in marketing and quickly realised this wasn't the career path she wanted. She then transitioned into a university environment. Sophie is an only child. She is very close with her mother particularly but

	with both parents, who are both scientists. Sophie is very social and has an extensive network of friends. She is currently single after parting with a boyfriend of over ten years.
Alicja	Alicja is a 25-year-old Polish woman who I met through advertising on the Facebook Scottish Feminist Network page. She contacted me and was keen to participate in the study, particularly given her interest in qualitative research cultivated during her undergraduate degree in anthropology at a prestigious Scottish university. At the beginning of the study, Alicja had just moved back to Scotland from Poland in order to join her boyfriend who had a job in finance in Edinburgh and was also studying for his master's degree. At this time, she was unemployed, living with her boyfriend who was partially supporting her, and unsure about her future. She expressed interest in continuing to pursue a career as a social researcher, but was also unsure about the applicability of a social research degree to the practical side of NGO and charity work. In terms of family, Alicja is the oldest of two sisters. She describes her mother as a career woman who works in economics. Although her mother and father were never married, they remained together until her father's sudden death during her undergraduate degree. She describes her relationship with her mother as difficult and tenuous. She is close with her sister but notes that she is overly attached and dependent on her mother. Alicja has a large family in Poland and is very close with her cousins as well, having lived with them between graduating from university and moving back to Scotland. By the end of the study, Alicja worked in a costume shop to gain an income and was training as a volunteer for a citizens' advice organisation.
Sierra	Sierra is a 26-year-old American woman who I met through a tutor at the Business School. She is from Hawaii originally, but lived in California whilst pursuing her undergraduate degree and then in China, where her mother is a Christian missionary, a for a time in high school. Sierra is an only child and her parents split up early in her childhood, mainly prompted by her father going to prison for drug-related charges. Therefore, her childhood was troubled, and she found solace in her relationship with her grandparents and cousins, to whom she remains extremely close. Inspired by her mother's missionary work and devotion to Christianity, Sierra is very religious and aspires to pursue a career in charity and missionary work, with an ultimate goal of starting a children's charity in Brazil. She describes her teenage years in China both as solitary, as the only student in her year at a new English school, and as being away from her family in Hawaii but also as inspiring her to continue mission work. Although she had a bad experience living in California as an undergraduate, feeling as though she did not fit in and not very happy with the area itself, she decided to pursue a masters' degree in order to gain business experience to pursue her goals of helping others through entrepreneurial charity work, like her mother has done by opening a Hawaiian restaurant in China. Sierra is single: she has never dated anyone and remains a virgin, something important to her Christian identity. Although she desires a relationship and to have children one day, she feels certain that God has a plan for her to meet the right person. A final note is that Sierra suffers from anxiety and depression, taking anti-anxiety and depressants at the time of the study, though keen to get off of the medication as soon as possible so that she does not become dependent.
Madison	Madison is a 27-year-old American woman who I met through a colleague. Like Sierra and Tiffany, she is also pursuing a one-year masters' degree in a management-related discipline. Madison is an only child of divorced parents. She describes her parents' divorce when she was 17 as startling and life changing experience, going from a close knit family to having separate relationships with two parents.

	However, over time, she has retained closeness with both parents, but particularly her mother who also lives in the same city, whereas her father moved away. Madison chose to undertake the degree abroad because she did not study abroad as an undergraduate and felt that was an important life experience within her peer group. Both of her parents are very successful in their careers in industry and have instilled in Madison a strong work ethic and drive to become successful as well. She is particularly inspired by her mother as a strong black woman able to surmount the challenges inherent in her race and gender in a business setting. In fact, she notes that at times, her mother was more successful than her father which strained their relationship. Given her parent's attention and ambitions, Madison was educated in a prestigious private school and then went on to study in a prestigious liberal arts university. She was recruited to the university based on her athletic ability and joined the women's lacrosse team. After graduating from university, Madison got a job at an elite advertising agency and described the experience working there as painful but necessary to establishing herself and creating a career trajectory that would propel her to upper level management. Upon deciding to pursue a graduate degree, she was recruited to a middle management position at a large tech company. However, she decided to attend graduate school, hopeful that she could retain her position upon her return. Aside from career ambitions, Madison has dreams of a husband and a family, and wants to raise her children how she was raised, in the same city and attending the same private school. However, she is single at the time of the study. She has had two serious relationships, one in university and one just after. While in Edinburgh she dated frequently but not seriously. There are two other biographical points to note: first, Madison is very religious attributed to being raised as a Christian. Second, Madison suffers from clinical depression which began around the time of her parents' divorce. She has been on low-dose antidepressants for ten years.
Simone	Simone is a 27-year-old woman from New Zealand who I met through a mutual friend. Simone moved to Edinburgh for an internship at a festival one summer and was so taken with the city that she decided to pursue a postgraduate degree. Simone's family is rather complicated: she was born in New Zealand to a German mother. Her father is a farmer and she has seven half-siblings. Her parents were never married and when she was a child, her mother moved back to Germany. Perhaps the most formative experience in Simone's life was the suicide of her brother when she was nine. She ascribes her love for heavy metal to coping with his death, inspired by his love for heavy metal. Simone describes herself as alternative compared to her friends in New Zealand who have tended to follow a more traditional path of getting married and having children quite young. She, on the other hand, has travelled the world, been to university and decided to move to the UK. When I interviewed Simone she was in the midst of her degree in marketing at a nearby university. She was particularly keen to pursue her passion of the creative arts through managing music festivals. Simone struggles quite a bit with clinical depression and anxiety, which she believes is derived from a troubled childhood, difficulties in the family, and the deaths of her brother and some of her close friends. She seeks refuge in the heavy metal community in which mental illness is often discussed through the songs and experiences of the bands and fans. In terms of relationships, Simone is single when I first meet her but has dated a lot in the past. During the interview process she had two different short term relationships and dated quite a bit.

Katie	Katie is a 25-year-old Scottish woman from Edinburgh. She is the daughter of a previous work colleague from a small Scottish charity. At the time I met Katie, she had been working as a temporary psychiatric nurse in a local hospital, unable to find a full-time position. She had recently graduated from nursing school and moved back in with her mother. Katie has two brother who are much older. A pivotal moment in her life was the sudden death of her father when she was in her teens. This death along with some other family issues contributed to her struggle with anxiety and depression. Katie has a long-term boyfriend who she met through Elizabeth's partner. She lives with her mother at the time of the study.
Elizabeth	Elizabeth is Katie's best friend. When I contacted Katie to participate in the study, she requested that her friend join her. Elizabeth is originally from Edinburgh as well and the two have been best friends since high school. Elizabeth lives at home and studies speech therapy at the local university. Her mother is a homemaker and her father works in oil and is gone for months at a time. Elizabeth was inspired to study speech therapy because of her older brother who has severe autism and is therefore permanently hospitalised. Elizabeth has a long-term boyfriend who she wants to move in with soon.
Jade	Jade is the youngest participant in the study (age 21). She is Scottish, and ismarried her high school sweetheart and five months pregnant at the end of the interview process. I met Jade twice, once when she was living in Edinburgh and once after she moved back to Aberdeen, and connected with her about a year and a half after the last interview in which she provided a written response to a shortened version of the questionnaire. Jade is from a less privileged background compared to most of the participants of the study, indicated by family background (e.g., neither she nor her parents have an undergraduate degree), financial situation (quite tenuous at times including bouts of unemployment), social expectations (marrying young – engaged at age 19, and falling pregnant at 20) and living situation (she lives in a low-income area). Jade describes her parents as self-made, driven and career-oriented. Her mother works as an account manager in marketing and her father is in the oil and gas industry. Both Jade and her brother attempted to gain a university education but both dropped out for various reasons. Upon dropping out of university, Jade moved back home to live with her parents, and was separated from her boyfriend (now husband) who attended university in Edinburgh. She eventually moved back to Edinburgh to live with him and supported herself through a part-time job at a restaurant. At one point, her boyfriend decided to drop out of university as well and the pair moved back to their home city. By the second interview, she had moved and had attained a position at her mother's firm. By the time I received her written questionnaire a year or so later, Jade was married and five months pregnant. She quit her job at her mother's firm, though still worked for them on a freelance basis. Her husband quit his undergraduate degree in favour of a steady administrative job to support Jade and the baby. Very early on in the interview Jade mentions that she struggles with mental illness (depression and anxiety) and later explains that she has a sleep disorder which makes having a regular job difficult. Jade is also politically active and attentive to issue related to feminism and animal welfare. Something she notes with pride in the written response is that she and her husband are now vegans.

Emma	Emma is a 27-year-old Scottish woman who works as a university administrator. I met Emma through a work colleague. Emma is an only child of a single mother. Her father is not very involved in her life and growing up Emma was very close to her mother. Emma has been married for two years and met her husband in high school. He is a few years older than her and when they met he was studying to become a plumber. She maintained the relationship during university and after seven years of being together, they were married despite Emma's worry that perhaps she was getting married too young. Emma has worked as a university administrator for four years. After university she was unsure of what career to pursue and worked in a temporary job before getting a job with the university. She has been promoted twice since. Emma and her husband bought a flat in Edinburgh two years ago.
Abeni	Abeni is a 28-year-old Nigerian woman who has lived in the UK for nearly ten years. She decided to move to the UK from Nigeria to pursue her A-Levels and university. Upon graduating, she got a job in a big four accountancy firm and pursued a career as an accountant before quitting to pursue a PhD in management. When I meet Abeni she has just finished her PhD and has begun working as a post-doctoral research fellow. Abeni has one brother who she is very close to. She is also close with her mother who lives in Nigeria. Her father passed away when she was younger. Abeni is single at the time of the study. She had many long-term relationships in the past but is currently focused on her career and mentions her disillusionment with traditional marriage, particularly in a Nigerian context, during the interview. A big turning point in Abeni's life was a sudden illness during her PhD programme in which she was incapacitated for six months and had to return to Nigeria to recover.
Gretchen	Gretchen is a 29-year-old German woman who I met through a friend. She is studying for an undergraduate accountancy degree. Gretchen previously studied as a social worker in Germany but was disillusioned with the job that involved a lot of administration and long working hours. She therefore decided, after travelling Europe and working as a bartender for a few years in Edinburgh, to pursue a degree in accounting upon working briefly at an accountancy firm in Edinburgh. Gretchen is extremely career oriented and is very committed to scholastic achievement. After a successful internship at an accounting firm, Gretchen was promised a full-time job when she graduates. She lives with her long-term boyfriend who is Scottish and another couple. Gretchen was brought up in rural Germany on a farm with two sisters in which the family business was producing goats cheese. A major event in Gretchen's life was a paragliding accident that left her physically scarred when she was in her teens.

Ideals

1) Tell me about "the good life". What does that mean to you?
2) What does success mean to you and when would you consider yourself successful?
3) Describe your role model. Describe a friend who is a role model.
4) Describe a compliment you have recently received. What made it special?
5) What does the age 30 mean to you?

Gender

6) Complete this statement: It's a woman's lot to be….
7) How important is being a woman to you?
8) Tell me about how your life might be different if you were a man.
9) What does feminism mean to you? Do you consider yourself a feminist? Explain.
10) What do you think about gender?
11) Can women 'have it all'? What do those words – Have – it – all – mean to you?

Appearance/Body Image

12) What are your likes and dislikes about yourself?
13) Let's talk about your body. What about your likes about your body? What do you dislike about your body?
14) What do you want your body to do for you over time?
15) Do you consider yourself fat or thin? Tell me about that.
16) Let's talk about your appearance. Which parts do you like and/or dislike?
17) How important is your appearance? Tell me about your earliest memory of noticing your appearance.
18) Describe your image role model.
19) Do you know anyone who's had plastic surgery? Tell me about them. Is it something you would consider? In what circumstances?

Stuff

20) If there was a fire in your flat and you could grab one thing, what would you grab and why?
21) How often have you been shopping in the past month? Online or offline? Is shopping a social activity or solitary? Is shopping an occasion or squeezed in? How recently have you bought something new, or wanted to buy something new, related to your appearance (e.g., clothes, makeup, etc)? What about unrelated to your appearance? Do you shop for yourself or others?
22) How much money is "enough" for you? Would that change, if so how? What would make your life better, more money or more time? What would you do with the money? What would you do with the time?
23)
24) Do you consider yourself a 'political' person? In what ways, or why not? Tell me about your beliefs or ideologies.
25) Do you have experience with volunteer work, either formal or informal? Are there charities or non-profit organisations that you support? In what ways, describing both direct or indirect?

Well Being/Relation to Others

26) Let's talk about anxieties. What are your levels of anxieties? What makes you more anxious? What makes you less anxious?

27) Tell me about times when you feel down or low. What makes you feel more down? What makes you feel less down?

28) Do you like to be on your own or with others? If you went to a party alone and you did not know anyone, what would you do and/or how would you feel? Would you say you are the life of the party?

29) Who do you go to for advice?

30) In what instances would you say you influence others? In what instances would you say others influence you?

31) As a consumer, are you similar or different to your family members? To your friends? Do you strive to be similar to them, or do you strive to be different?

Final question:

32) Reflect on your experience in taking part in this study.

Coding List
Being a woman
CONTROL
Anxiety-rationalisation
Chance
Decision making - methodical or going with the flow
Lack of AGENCY
Managing choices, image thru framing
Maximising potential
Personal Responsibility
Self awareness, self monitoring, conscientious
DIGITAL
Communicating (to the world)
Digital outlets changing habits
Managing impressions
Media influence
Permanence of digital life
Struggling for control
Surveillance of others
Digital life changing or different from real life
Digital making life easier-filling time
Desire

RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS
Conformity v uniqueness
Ideal of Community
Individualisation-independence
Inferiority- different
Influence of (influencing) others
Managing relationships with others
Pressure from others
Seeking recognition from OTHER
Social comparison
Superiority - judging - critical of others
The other is LIKE ME
Untrusting of others

Interview 4 – Sophie; 'I' stands for 'Interviewer' and 'P' stands for participant

I: Complete the statements and if you need me to clarify, let me know. It's a woman's lot to be…

P: ohhh…. everything. (laugh)

I: I like that good answer. Explain. Describe.

P: yeah ehm Well, I guess modern woman, we are told that we can do whatever we want but then you do have societal pressures to settle down, have kids and have a family, a car, a job, you know a house, whatever ehm you've got to be—you're judged a lot more on how you look, how you are in meetings how you are… in every part of your life I think so putting, a woman has to be lots of different things I think.

I: You think that's more so than a man?

P: Yes.

I: yeah. In what sense?

P: Well, I guess men put themselves under pressure as well and look at their peers and friends and think oh he's earning more than me and like I think its more in that kind of sense rather than "oh I better settle down now" you know, or I better… walking down the street they don't think that people look at them and—I don't think they get that sort of feeling that you know… you just got a bit more, I don't know they've got it easier.

I: Yeah. Do you think you have to be single? Do you think your single guy friends are getting the same pressure as you and your single?

P: No! Definitely not.

I: Like not at all?

P: No. No.

I: um How important is it to be a woman, being a woman to you?

P: oh it's… good. It's great. I mean I want to have a daughter, I eh my friends that have had kids, have daughters YES! coz you know girls are good, they're fun and interesting and yeah really difficult being a woman but I'd much rather be a woman than a man.

I: That's interesting.

P: Yeah.

I: Um so, how might your life be different if you were a man?

P: I don't have a clue. Yeah…. I don't think it would be different in terms of…. school or university or anything like that. That was pretty equal.

I: Yeah.

P: But, going on from that I think it could have changed a lot.

I: In what sense?

P: I probably wouldn't have taken as much money off mum and dad as I have! (laugh) I don't… I really don't know. I would've been more confident earlier on maybe.

I: You think so?

P: I know a lot of men that aren't confident or it's just a front and they are not. But, I always kind of think they've got a little bit more than some woman. And I'm a bit of a scaredy cat

you know I would have maybe done things differently maybe move to London or done a bit more travelling because I wouldn't be as scared.

I: Do you think like when you see your friend moving to the alps or something like that do you think about making big changes like that ever or is it not something that--

P: No I'm much more—I *really* wanted to move to London when I graduated um and I did not and now I feel like it's not my, I'm not. I don't want to be there anymore but that would be the only place I would have really gone.

I: Yeah.

P: So, I'm not really bothered about that.

I: What was that decision like of not going?

P: A boy, stuck in a bad job, you know that kind of thing.

I: But now you're quite set obviously?

P: Yeah.

I: Quite content.

P: Yes, much more.

I: Nice to hear. um okay, well no this is um—well, I can ask you this question but this one's out of order, in my new copy, listen to this. It's not about gender. Um What is the next step and do you think there's a next step in life for you? What is the next step?

P: Just stuff I've sort of already covered like maybe a new job or hopefully some kind of change in job at some point but I'm not gonna put any time limit on it coz… no but yeah a new job and just yeah sharing my life with someone.

I: Which we've covered.

P: Yes. A lot.

I: I don't want to focus on, well we can focus on it but up to you. um the next one and we've talked about this one as well.

P: Okay.

I: In our first interview actually. What does feminism mean to you?

P: Eh It means to me….. a lot more than used to it.

I: Really?

P: Yeah.

I: Explain.

P: I did not…It was always—I said before I was always interested in women's part of a uni, the history the, you know stuff like that I always gravitated towards women.. stuff um but yeah in the past couple of years it has meant a lot more to me when I've heard my friends say that they're not feminist and I just don't understand that and I've got a lot of debates about it and you know I see more stuff in the news now that maybe I don't know if it's getting older, it affects you more or if I'm just more open to things. I don't know. Yeah eh I think it's really important to… let everyone be aware of that feminism is not about… burning bra and hating men, it's about just wanting equal opportunities and being good to people, being good to everyone and letting everyone have anything they feel.

I: Yeah, absolutely. Um and I guess this is a rhetorical question cos you've already answered it. If you consider yourself a feminist and you'd openly say that too.

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P: Yeah. Uh huh. Definitely and got into many a pub argument, you know with friends, not with strangers! (laugh) eh Yeah about that yeah.

I: How do you think you've been received in these conversations? Do you think people generally agree with you or generally disagree with you?

P: um I think some people find it funny. Like a lot—you know I've got male friends that'll say something and I'm like "don't say that' and they'll be like oh getting on your feminist high horse' ehm but it's just rude and it's ugly and you know I don't find this funny you know um so yeah. and then with my best friend who said she wasn't feminist, we had a few discussions about that.

I: So this is your best friend?

P: Yeah. She's identified now a feminist but before...

I: You swung her!

P: She did not and she was like I've had all the same opportunities as a man and she's a, she's a manager of a company. You know she's got balls and um… and I and I don't think that we are the same with men I think eh men can do different stuff from us. And it was just like

I: So, how did you um sway her to the other side?

P: So I just presented a few different arguments it was not about physical strengths or about you know what man can do, and woman can't. It's about an ideal and… an opportunity for woman that you don't know, you've never met, being nice to women, you know, it's not about tiny little topics that you know there's no point on focusing on them.

I: Yeah yeah that makes sense. and so eventually you chipped away?

P: Yes, yes.

I: That's funny. So, next question um what do you think about gender in general? Have you thought about it? Does it mean anything to you?

P: Not really, no. I mean I read the stuff in the newspaper about people bringing up their child as a genderless child and I think that's a bit odd. I wouldn't do that and if my friends were doing that I find it quite difficult to deal with.

I: In what sense?

P: Well just look at the baby you think if it's a boy or a it's girl and I don't know maybe I'm just too literal for that. I don't know.

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