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Multiple Embodiment Relations: Sense-Making in Dissociative Experiences

Abstract: In response to a call for new conceptualizations of the self that avoid mind/body dualisms, recent research has introduced more flexible and fluid theorizations of personhood. This paper takes a phenomenological approach to examine the perceived shifts in body ownership and distribution of agency which underpin such theorizations. We focus on two dissociative experiences, namely, spirit possession and virtual reality, explicating how consumers can experience changes of perspective by disconnecting from the mainstream of their conscious awareness, allowing for a controlled ‘letting go,’ resulting in therapeutic gains. We highlight how consumers create a larger assemblage of the self beyond single viewpoints for a new kind of experiencing. We argue that existing work has treated embodiment in a fairly symmetrical manner, insufficiently considering the inherently somatic characteristics of consumer experiences as an articulation of a multiplicity and distribution of embodiment and agentic relations, both human and non-human.

Keywords: embodiment; disembodiment; dissociation; agency; virtual reality; spirit possession

Introduction

Although the bounded, indivisible, individual self emerges from Western concepts of personhood (Belk, 1988), the anthropological literature has long shown that this conceptualization is largely fictional (Dumont, 1970). Indeed, although most marketing research takes the individual as its starting point, several Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) studies have called for new theorizations of the self (Firat, Dholakia and Venkatesh, 1995; Scott, Martin and Schouten, 2014; Scott, Cayla and Cova, 2017) to allow for more fluid and

flexible understandings of a porous and sociocentric self. In their recent study of permanent liminality, Appau, Ozanne and Klein (2020) theorize a nondualistic concept of personhood, the in/dividual. The in/dividual subsumes two versions of the consumer: the consumer as an agentic, stable and bounded self, drawing largely from the psychological literature, and the multi-authored consumer with permeable boundaries, more in line with CCT perspectives. Significantly, however, they note that the dividual goes beyond CCT perspectives of the fluid self in its most extreme manifestation as a “personhood that lacks a sense of self” (15). In concrete terms, the shift from individual to dividual entails that we do not have a single coherent person performing different roles as demanded by changing contexts but rather, a different person differently constituted in each of their interactions with others who takes on different identities in different contexts (Ram, 1994).

As Appau et al. (2020) show, there is clearly a continuum of personhood at play, and our contemporary digital society increasingly relies on the promise of more fluid, yet also compartmentalized, identities. These varied alternative digital selves are primarily conceptualized as disembodied and transcending the body (Belk, 2013), reproducing what Boler (2012) calls a new ‘digital Cartesianism.’ Corporeality is therefore still assumed to be self-contained, any intersubjectivity portrayed as the discrete interaction of encapsulated beings rather than as the result of a relational openness to the bodies of others. The Western ‘duelling’ dualisms characterized as inherent in Cartesian categories of self/other, inside/outside, mind/body (Butler and Dunne, 2012: 31) prevent a fuller understanding of what a dividual consumer experience entails. We take a phenomenological approach, drawing on dissociative experiences to understand these perceived shifts of personhood.

The term dissociation has been defined in psychology as “reported experiences and observed behaviors that seem to exist apart from, or appear to have been disconnected from, the mainstream, or flow, of one’s conscious awareness, behavioral repertoire, and/or self-

identity” (Krippner, 1997, 8). As a form of divided consciousness with separate systems of ideas and memories, and sometimes even a separate sense of identity or selfhood, the in/dividual can, under certain circumstances, behave or develop and demonstrate abilities, skills or talents involuntarily, in some instances without being aware of doing so. Split off from the main consciousness and focus of attention, ideas may be limited to isolated sensations or be aggregated into systems, revealing previously unknown facets of identity (Krippner, 1997). In this way, multiple consciousnesses can coexist in the same physical body without awareness of one another. However, generally there is a scale of dissociation, that is, dissociative experiences can be partially or fully ‘disconnected’ from consciousness and awareness.

The psychology literature tends to take an objectivist conception of dissociation as a pathological disorder, a form of mental illness, the result of a fragmented self (Igreja, 2018). This reductionist approach ignores the social and cultural construction of experience: indeed, scholars have suggested that common, everyday absorptive activities such as daydreaming, reading, watching a film, yoga and meditation can result in lightly altered ‘dissociative’ states of consciousness which can lead to improved wellbeing (Butler, 2006; Maraldi, 2014). Our study examines the complexity of embodied relations across spaces, objects and bodies that result in dissociative experiences, and show how a more holistic approach to dissociation, which accounts for the body, as well as the mind, can result in therapeutic benefits. This has significant implications given the rise of therapeutic servicescapes (Higgins and Hamilton, 2019) in a context where consumers are seeking tranquillity, detachment and decelerated experiences (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019).

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty (1962), we show how body and mind are self-constituting as body-subject. We focus on two dissociative experiences to do so: first, spirit possession rituals, often described as a situation where one’s body can become (or at least be perceived as becoming) the object of an external agent’s intentions and manipulations; and second, virtual

reality (VR hereafter), described as the process wherein a physical body can extend into a virtual realm and take control of other (virtual) subjects' bodies. We argue that, although at first glance demonstrating twin processes, both of these experiences are bi-directional moving both outwards into the world and inwards into the body and the result of multiple embodiment relations. By conceptualizing multiple embodiment relations as consumers extending themselves into the world through certain material objects and tools and related body techniques (Murphy, Patterson and O'Malley, 2019) for a perceived shift in body ownership and experiencing a more distributed agency, we show how consumer experience is always located, contextualized and mediated by the body as both object and subject. This allows for a wider reconsideration of dissociation within the consumer research literature by opening up new ways of knowing and reconceptualizing disembodiment. That is, experiences such as taking on an alternative digital self (Belk, 2013) or meditating (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019; Matko and Sedlmeier, 2019), which have been primarily thought of as cognitive, we show are in fact embodied modes of being.

We follow Min and Peñaloza's (2019) recent study which demonstrates how disembodiment and re-embodiment are crucial in the construction of a new maternal identity. However, while Min and Peñaloza – and much of the marketing literature – theorize a disjunction between body and mind as problematic, we show how dissociation allows for multiple embodiment relations (rather than actual disembodiment and re-embodiment), resulting in, at times, radical but positively perceived shifts in perspective and new forms of experiencing. We propose that embodiment is primarily a relational phenomenon whereby multiple embodiment relations can occur at the same time so that we can feel both inside and outside ourselves. This more complex, 'messy' conceptualization of embodiment is better suited to the multiple, unintegrated selves of the dividual (Appau et al., 2020). While dissociative experiences can therefore be transformative, as we will show, human experience

is rarely about simply transforming from one identity to another. The identities or roles we play do not necessarily need to be integrated, in contrast to Orazi and Van Laer's (2022) theorization of the ways in which consumers return to their everyday identities after role playing performances. Indeed, Min and Peñaloza (2019:291) suggest as much by mentioning a "layering of embodiment." In theorizing multiple embodiment relations, we explore this relationality to ask, how can dissociative experiences allow for the individual, providing a welcome detachment through shifts of consciousness?

Theoretical Background

Theories of Dissociation: Integrating cultural and psychological perspectives

Although much of the academic literature on dissociation is primarily concerned with pathology, a high proportion of our daily mental activity is spent dissociatively. Butler (2006) posits that up to half of our mental activity, for example, is spent in some form of daydreaming (see also Heath and Nixon, 2021). This type of normative¹ dissociative experience involves a "telescoping of the attentional field to concentrate on a narrow range of experience and the concomitant exclusion of other material (internal or external) from awareness" (Butler, 2006:45). This typically involves changes in feelings of relatedness of self to the world (as environment and personal contexts are diminished, for example) and perceived disturbance in agency (e.g. loss of self-awareness); think, for instance, of a long-distance drive (highway hypnosis), being engrossed in a film or book, or even meditative states. Due to this state of absorption, suspension of reality constraints and critical judgment, and reductions in self-consciousness, dissociative experiences can, at times, even enhance performance in skilled activities (e.g. sports or artistic performance) and enhance creativity (Butler, 2006). In this

¹We follow Butler (2006) in using the term normative dissociation to designate the presence of normal dissociative processes.

sense, dissociation can be deliberately provoked or even required for certain situations, for example, to engage with and enjoy arts experiences (Venkatesh and Meamber, 2008), in which cases, dissociation is pleasurable.

There is therefore a spectrum (see Figure 1) between normative and pathological dissociation which ranges from daydreaming to disorders such as dissociative identity disorder. Dissociative symptoms are extremely varied, both in terms of the type of experience involved (absorption, amnesia, feelings of unreality) and the degree of intensity (Butler, 2006). Seligman and Kirmayer (2008:2) suggest that dissociative experiences take place in three main contexts: “(1) in response to acute stress or trauma [as observed in psychological studies which assume a dominant Euro-American ethnic context]; (2) in socially sanctioned rituals and healing practices that are associated with religious meaning systems or in artistic performances [as observed in anthropological studies, largely in the Global South]; and (3) as spontaneous fluctuations in ordinary conscious experience that often go unrecognized or unmarked unless they resonate with local systems of meaning.”

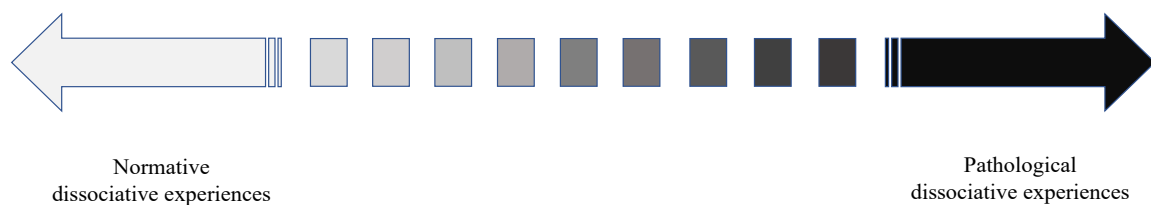


Figure 1: Spectrum of dissociative experiences

Despite much focus on the experiential in the marketing and consumer research literature and many studies of what could be considered (but have not been defined as) dissociative experiences (see Appendix A for an overview), dissociation has gone largely unnoticed. We posit that dissociation allows individuals to suspend their normal self and accompanying social constraints, enabling the self to express novel thoughts, feelings, desires

and behaviors (Seligman and Kirmayer, 2008), and thus creates new discursive and rhetorical opportunities to consider consumer experiences and identity. As a cultural technique of the self (Leistle, 2014), dissociation can bring together a diverse range of studies on consumer experiences. Previous research has shown that the concept of a unitary self is fallacious but so too is an entirely disjointed, fragmented self (Appau et al., 2020). These different ontologies of the self create particular ‘body-scapes’ (Geller, 2009) with corresponding physiological and perceptual realities. In bringing them together, we seek to shed light on the embodied phenomenon of dissociation to understand how certain consumer experiences can further draw out the ‘dividual’ (Appau et al., 2020) and allow consumers to ‘let go.’ Given that “normative [dissociative] experiences are not only common, but pervasive; they are not simply a diversion from everyday experience, but a central feature of it; and they are not incidental in the stream of consciousness, but integral to it” (Butler, 2006:53), we make a case for dissociation as a useful lens through which to reconsider consumer experiencing. This is particularly important as the marketplace becomes increasingly permeated by technologies that layer realities or produce a hyperreality that encourages multiple embodiment relations.

We follow Seligman and Kirmayer (2008) in taking an approach that integrates both the neuropsychological consideration of underlying mechanisms of dissociation as alterations in brain states with the sociocultural process of the narrative construction and social presentation of the self. In bridging these approaches, we argue that both are complementary, and that by taking an embodied perspective (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), we can avoid the dichotomy both paradigms assume, and rather, posit an integrated mind and body. In assuming dissociation is always a response to trauma, psychological studies run the risk of reducing the complexity of the social, cultural, cognitive and biological dimensions of dissociation (Butler, 2006). Similarly, anthropological studies have rarely sufficiently foregrounded the body in their understanding of dissociation (Seligman and Kirmayer, 2008). In accounting for the

interaction between biology and psychology within the social context we can consider the complexity of dissociation as “a culturally and neurobiologically patterned regulation of attentional mechanisms” (Seligman and Kirmayer, 2008:24).

Dissociative Experiences in the Marketing Literature

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the dominance of psychological perspectives in the marketing literature, in the few cases where dissociation has been noted to exist, it has been presented in a primarily negative light. For example, Longstreet and Banerjee’s (2016) paper on virtual-physical consumers considers the depersonalization and derealization inherent in dissociation, whereby a sense of reality to the external world is lost. While they acknowledge that dissociation varies in intensity, and that in mild dissociation individuals can comfortably switch between multiple selves as the context requires, they suggest that it is problematic when selves “get so fragmented that subjects have difficulty integrating their memory, sense of identity and aspects of consciousness into a continuous whole” (292) – for example, when inattention or oblivion leads to dangerous scenarios (e.g. highway hypnosis). Studies such as Merlo et al. (2020) have noted that although much research has investigated the negative emotions resulting from dissociative activities such as mind wandering², few studies have considered the positive externalities. Indeed, they echo Butler’s (2006) findings that dissociation can be complementary to regular conscious cognition in arriving at solutions to problems that cannot be resolved in other ways. The detachment provided by dissociation can afford less restricted thinking and may provide temporary escape from personal concerns. Furthermore, in offering distraction and diversion, dissociation can reduce stress and improve mood (Maraldi, 2014). Even pathological dissociation is thought to have some benefit in allowing for a detachment from past traumas (Butler, 2006).

²Although Merlo et al. do not specifically use the term dissociative, mind wandering has all the characteristics of normative dissociation.

These more positive outcomes of dissociation are however, we argue, visible in much of the consumer research literature: for example, in the imaginative pleasure of daydreaming (Heath and Nixon, 2021), in the use of repetitive music, dancing and drugs as a “potent means to induce a loss of self, a transcendence of the body and an experience of extreme pleasure” (Goulding et al., 2009:767), in the painful yet thrilling embodied experiences of Tough Mudder which present a “ritualized shattering of the self” (Scott et al., 2017:18), in the absorption and immersion needed in motorcycling (Murphy et al., 2019) or in reducing social inhibitions by temporarily becoming someone else through cosplay (Seregina and Weijo, 2017). Appendix A selects and summarizes some examples of what could potentially be classified as dissociative experiences in the consumer research literature; we note, however, that this is declaredly partial due to space limitations and thus the categorizations presented are non-exhaustive.

Through our overview of this existing literature a few characteristics of dissociative experiences emerge. First, much of this literature demonstrates how, through the dissociative experience, individuals feel they can ‘switch off’ and are allowed to ‘lose it’ (e.g. Goulding et al., 2009; Heath and Nixon, 2021; Merlo et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2017). Indeed stress-relief is found to be a central motivator to engaging in dissociative experiences (Jones, Cronin and Piacentini, 2020; Kerrigan, Larsen, Hanratty and Korta, 2014; Kuo, Lutz and Hiler, 2016). We suspect this is due to a shift in sense of body ownership. Second, individuals can transcend or temporarily escape their normal social categories and dissolve their individual self through these dissociative experiences, experiencing some kind of self-loss (Orazi and Van Laer, 2022; Seregina, 2019). This allows individuals to try out or rehearse alternative selves and scenarios (Hewer and Hamilton, 2010; Jenkins and Molesworth, 2018) in order to re-craft a life narrative as a more fulfilled individual for a transformative and therapeutic outcome (Venkatesh and Meamber, 2008). This, we posit, is due to a shift in the perceived loci of agency whereby agency is distributed between various agents. Third, these experiences require skilled corporeal

learning and are therefore primarily embodied (Kuuru, 2022; Murphy et al., 2019). Despite the breadth of this literature, a clearer understanding of the processes through which dissociation provides a controlled form of losing control and facilitates an altered state of consciousness is missing.

In taking an embodied approach, we seek to show how dissociative experiences can avoid the negative consequences noted by Banerjee and Longstreet (2016) and how, with the corporeal know-how to detach safely from their self-awareness by unlearning certain embodied competencies and acquiring new skilled body techniques, these experiences can even be intrinsically creative and pleasurable. In the right circumstances and with proper training, dissociation can be a satisfying and desirable state. Orazi and Van Laer's (2022) analysis of 'bleed' as consumers return to their mundane lives after live action role-playing focuses on the friction between the normal self and the character played, highlighting the tension involved in individuals losing their selves in different roles. They position this in contrast to the shattering of the self experienced by mudders in Scott et al.'s (2017) study of pain. We take a more integrated approach, demonstrating that both of these phenomena are actually two sides of the same coin, both part of Merleau-Ponty's (1962) mind-body system.

Dissociative Experiences as Embodied

Merleau-Ponty's (1962) concept of the 'body-subject' stresses that the body is both the channel through which reality shapes our inner experience and the window through which we access external experience. The body is therefore active, always engaged with its environment (extending outwards), and the form of that engagement is derived from a repertoire of cultural skills and techniques which the body takes up and uses. In other words, the body is an agent of cultural praxes and conversely, cultural praxes are the work of an active body-subject. Our experience of perception is structured through our practical involvements, so a footballer surveying a pitch does not 'see' grass and bodies but rather 'openings' and 'opportunities.'

There are thus different culturally styled ways of being-in-the-world. Simultaneously, our corporeal schema can be modified to include the tools that we use (embedding inwards). When we drive a car, for example, we tacitly incorporate its potential for mobility, its size and acceleration potential into our judgements. This is practical, embodied know-how and mastery (Murphy et al., 2019).

We thus experience our self as being inside a body and more specifically, a body which feels ‘ours,’ which generally moves according to our expectations (Murray and Sixsmith, 1999). Dissociation is thus an atypical form of embodiment which ‘disrupts’ our sense of self (Phipps and Ozanne, 2017) and seemingly shatters Merleau-Ponty’s ‘mind-body-system’ (1962). However, as our analysis will show, dissociative experiences are inherently embodied phenomena – the body is the medium of the physical and psychological experience. To examine dissociative experiences, we draw on cultural phenomenology, which examines culture and self in terms of embodiment (Csordas, 1990) and is therefore a useful lens in focusing on ways of experiencing the world. Min and Peñaloza (2019:272) have previously adopted a cultural phenomenological perspective in recognizing that any change in the relationship between the body and the world can result in a “person’s sense of themselves [being] profoundly shaken.” Dion, Sitz and Rémy (2011) also do so in conceptualizing the embodied imaginary, where the lived body is projected through certain stimuli, transporting individuals to certain times or places. In examining dissociation as a bodily tool which facilitates a bi-lateral process through which we simultaneously extend ourselves outwards and embed the world inwards into our bodies, we provide a more holistic understanding of normative forms of dissociation which are central to consumption experiences, both imagined and experienced.

Due to the double ontological condition of the body as both subject and object, states of disembodiment and re-embodiment (Min and Peñaloza, 2019) have been observed. The

possibility of getting stuck in the liminal or transitional space at the intersection of these states (Appau et al., 2020) has also been raised. The literature acknowledges the potential of this liminality in allowing individuals to explore alternative roles and channel identity reconstruction (Orazi and Van Laer, 2022). Yet, much of the marketing literature tends to frame these states negatively, assuming that when consumers lack control over their bodies (due to pregnancy, for example, see Min and Peñaloza, 2019), they lack agency. Indeed, this may also be why much of the literature positions dissociative experiences as problematic (Longstreet and Banerjee, 2016; Orazi & Van Laer, 2022). However, this trade-off is not always experienced. For example, in dissociative contexts such as out-of-body experiences, the subject gains a sense of agency and control while relinquishing sense of body ownership (Wilde and Murray, 2010). Meditation is thought to operate in a similar way in combating stress (Matko and Sedlmeier, 2019). Sense of body ownership is therefore not binary, but flexible, and at times one's reference point can become completely disconnected from a body and shift to another body. However, one is never just a pure object; as Merleau-Ponty (1962) makes clear, we are always an embodied subject and this embodied experience exceeds cognitive bodily awareness, as in Merleau-Ponty's famous example of phantom limbs where previous embodiments continue to be felt. What is required, then, is corporeal learning, skilled body techniques and certain culturally styled ways of being-in-the-world to make sense of these seemingly disembodied experiences whereby sense of ownership over the body can be adjusted according to the surrounding conditions, perceived as a disturbance in agency.

We trace how individuals can experience this sense of disembodiment and re-embodiment with attention to the dynamics of such bodily experience in two very different dissociative experiences, which together serve to illustrate the process through which consumers can disconnect from the mainstream of their conscious awareness. These experiences, spirit possession and virtual reality, demonstrate how the body can extend

outwards into the world as part of a larger assemblage of self through a perceived out-of-body experience and how this opens up new perspectives through a more distributed agency. Both experiences have been shown to be transformative (Maraldi, 2014; Stepanova, Quesnel and Riecke, 2018), allowing for longer-term identity exploration. Our aim is not to paint a complete picture of all dissociative experiences in consumer research but rather to integrate key insights from existing studies on both mundane and extraordinary experiences which allow for mental escapes or disruptions of consciousness. This complements Min and Peñaloza's (2019) recent account of disembodiment and re-embodiment as negatively disrupting one's established identity by presenting scenarios where it positively does so.

Dissociative Experiences: Spirit Possession and Virtual Reality

As Igreja (2018) argues, cultures differ in their attribution of the cause of dissociative states, as well as their tolerance of actions attributed to extrinsic agencies and the radical shifts in perspective accompanying altered states of consciousness. We therefore examine two forms of dissociation which are culturally constituted. The first is spirit possession, where the human body becomes host to other immaterial agents (Seligman, 2014) by 'letting go' of both ownership of the body and its agency. Mediumship, the supposed ability of an individual to serve as an instrument of communication (and at times action) for a "powerful, immaterial being – a spirit, god, ancestor, or demon" is frequently viewed as a form of dissociative experience (Seligman, 2014:5; Maraldi, 2014). The second is a slightly more traditional consumption experience, namely that of VR as a medium for entertainment. VR in particular has been linked to dissociative experiences due to the use of three-dimensional computer graphics technology to generate artificial environments that afford real-time interaction and exploration and provide the user with an impression of being present or immersed in this computer-generated world (Murray and Sixsmith, 1999). While physically in one place,

individuals can also be phenomenally embodied in virtual representations. Although there are many uses of VR across various industries, we focus specifically on first-person entertainment forms of VR as they have been shown to lead users to feel like they actually are in the game/film, even when only loosely connected to offline selves and realities (Snodgrass et al. 2011; Slater et al., 2010). For further details on the specific dissociative experiences see Appendix B.

We acknowledge that our two chosen experiences are extremely different, however they both demonstrate the significance of the culturally elaborated ways in which we interpret somatic modes of attention (Csordas, 1999). We therefore draw on both of them to show a range of possible experiences which can facilitate dissociation. Significantly, both experiences have been primarily focused on as cognitive rather than embodied phenomena. It is by understanding how dissociative experiences are embodied that we can understand how they cannot be isolated and extracted from the social reality through which they are experienced. In this paper, we focus on how our bodies as intersubjective anchors of experience (Csordas, 1999) make sense of the world through an entanglement of social relationships and material surroundings, building on numerous investigations of embodiment in consumer research. We observe the process by which altered states of consciousness emerge, cementing new corporeal knowhow via repeated physical enactment (Murphy et al., 2019), to open up a more complex, multiplicitous form of embodiment.

We do not suggest that all dissociative experiences (including spirit possession and VR) are the same: quite the contrary, each experience is culturally rich and unique and indeed these experiences could be endlessly picked apart into a range of different dissociative behaviors depending on the socio-cultural, psychological and psychobiological factors at play in any given case. However, we find that our two cases neatly illustrate how dissociative experiences allow for detachment through shifts of consciousness. In our analysis, we seek to highlight how

both modes of being require both objectification and subjectification which in turn leads to a shift in sense of body ownership and distribution of agency, allowing for new forms of experiencing.

Methodology

Multiple case studies contribute to theory through “rich, empirical descriptions [...] of a phenomenon” (Eisenhardt and Graeber, 2007:25; Eisenhardt, 1989). Through a dual-case exploration of dissociative experiences, we are better equipped to theorize how consumers detach through an altered state of consciousness. Following other processual accounts of consumer behavior (Valtonen et al., 2017), our study focuses on the process of embodiment in both of our dissociative cases, which affords an “enriched understanding and explanation” of the phenomenon (Langley, 1989:704). Through process theorizing we aim to capture the corporeal and cognitive changes felt by our participants as they dissociate.

The spirit possession data emerges from a study conducted in São Paulo, Brazil by the first and second authors from 2016 to 2019, during which period the second author was resident in Brazil. The authors undertook participant observation of religious services across two mediunic Afro-Brazilian faiths, namely Candomblé and Umbanda, which rely heavily upon the embodiment – and disembodiment – of spirits. Our ethnographic account of spirit possession is based on our fieldnotes, videos and photographs recorded during fieldwork (Van Maanen, 1988) as well as seventeen phenomenological in-depth interviews (in participants’ native Portuguese) with spirit mediums who physically incorporate entities, including religious leaders of Afro-Brazilian churches, lasting from 30 minutes to three hours. We focus here on data from six participants in particular, whose descriptions of possession best evidenced dissociation as a shift in sense of relatedness to the world and disturbance in agency.

The VR data comes from a longitudinal study conducted between 2019 and 2021 by the first and third authors with 81 young people (aged 16 to 30) based in the UK. All participants, who came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, were provided with their own Oculus Quest VR headset for home use for a period of three to five months. For all participants, this was their first opportunity for an extended engagement with VR. They were asked to record their use through journaling (see Patterson, 2005 for qualitative diaries methodologies) and in the case of 55 participants, to respond to open-ended questions in weekly questionnaires. These methods allowed us a sustained and yet naturalistic and holistic understanding of users' mental and emotional processes as they engaged in VR. Once the participants had returned their headsets, we conducted 39 semi-structured in-depth interviews ranging from 45 minutes to 2 hours, and 9 focus groups, in both cases selecting those that had raised particular issues in their diaries that we wished to explore in more depth. We focus here on 19 participants whose accounts reflected examples of dissociative experiences, drawing on their reflective writing in diaries and their statements in interview or focus groups.

Both studies were carried out with ethical approval, and pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participants' identities (see Appendix C for details of all participants cited in this paper). As with Valtonen and Närvänen's (2016) study of sleep, our focus on dissociation posed methodological challenges as our participants were not always fully aware of their experiences. However, we relied on triangulation of our observations as well as participants' own accounts (through interviews and/or diaries) to overcome this hurdle. For each data set, two of the authors jointly analyzed the data thematically. Making sense and building theory of process data, nevertheless, is challenging, where data from these culturally rich, detailed accounts are inherently "messy" and thus hard to analyze (Langley, 1999:691). If process phenomena are thought to spread across space and time, our dissociative experiences presented the added challenge of traversing various planes: the material, the digital and the

spiritual. To overcome the seemingly “boundaryless” nature of processual phenomena (Langley, 1999:695), we “anchored” our empirical material to the corporeal learning and embodied relations experienced by our spirit mediums and VR users, so that, from the proposed sensemaking strategies for process data (see Langley (1999) for overview of strategies), a grounded theory strategy was found to be best suited to our study.

Thanks to its theory-building ethos (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), grounded theory process theorizing encourages the systematic comparison of data (of both our dissociative cases) followed by the construction of categories and category systems (grounded in the empirical data) that encapsulate the phenomena under study. Through constant comparison (Gibson and Hartmann, 2014) we connected the dots of our data corpus, organizing our process coding (Saldaña, 2021) into structured systems of categories to formulate new theory (Charmaz, 2006). An iterative approach allowed us to navigate raw data, emerging themes, and theoretical constructs from the pertinent literature (Thompson, 1997). Process coding (Saldaña, 2021) enabled us to foreground the embodied, affective and cognitive changes experienced by our participants, which led us to axial coding as a means of “reassembl[ing] fractured data” to “give coherence” to the emerging analysis (Charmaz, 2006:60). In our analysis, we paid close attention to the corporeal and cognitive changes recorded by our participants, focusing on the actions (or gerunds) (see Saldaña, 2021 on process coding) of these lived experiences of dissociation. In highlighting the multiple embodied relations taking place in both cases, our study fleshes out how these experiences enable a dividual.

Findings

Our examination of spirit possession rituals and VR use as dissociative experiences follows Valtonen et al. (2017:520) in theorizing shifts in one’s ‘onto-epistemological stance’ regarding embodied knowing. By fleshing out how our participants’ embodied competencies

become ‘disrupted’ in these dissociative experiences (Phipps and Ozanne, 2017), we reveal an onto-epistemological transition where, rather than losing control in letting go, our participants gain control through detachment in sense of body ownership and a more distributed agency. Taken together, our dissociative cases illustrate the embodied processes necessary for the ‘sensory entanglement’ (Valtonen et al., 2017:521) between differing realities or dimensions: between the material and the spiritual, and the material and the digital. We now consider how, through perceived disembodiment and re-embodiment, our participants learn to let go of taken-for-granted embodied competencies and acquire new bodily practices that enable them to inhabit new forms of experiencing through dissociation.

Perceived Disembodiment through Shifts in Body Ownership

Min and Peñaloza (2019) record the disembodiment felt by pregnant women, defining disembodiment as a “phenomenon in which persons experiencing chronic, agonizing pain distance their sense of themselves from their body as an object using the words ‘it’, ‘the’, and ‘this’” (Min and Peñaloza, 2019:275). In this sense, disembodiment provides a means of distancing oneself from one’s own corporeality. In both the dissociative experiences under study, we see a perceived disembodiment reported, to the extent where dissociation is often felt as an out-of-body experience.

The sensation I had during my first incorporation... I have never had a sensation like that. They played [the music] and I felt like this: my ears were blocked – you can’t hear. Yeah, you can’t hear anything anymore. Your vision goes tiny. You don’t have any strength left. So, your vision closes in and your ears get blocked. And then I was there... as if I were 5 metres tall. Very high up. And I could see all the people in the *terreiro*, and I was looking back on myself (...). I felt as if my body was coming and going ... as if I were in a circus, walking on stilts.

(Cibele, spirit possession)

I experimented with the [headset's] hand-tracking capabilities and it provided this strange out-of-body experience. It just felt very odd to see my hands moving in real-time in the virtual space and I almost felt like I was actually gripping things when I picked them up. It was a very strange sensation and it honestly freaked me out a little bit. So just seeing my hands, like seeing a real world thing moving in real time as I moved, it just felt really, really strange.

(Paul, VR)

Clearly, initial encounters with both the digital and spiritual worlds induce a sense of corporeal dissonance, where participants feel unsettled or even “discombobulated” (Leo, VR) as they experience acute ‘disruptions’ of their embodied competencies (Phipps and Ozanne, 2017):

You do suddenly get a sort of sense of panic, of feeling like you don't really know how to make it stop or change it. And I must admit that first sort of step forward you take virtually, (...) it sort of triggers you to lurch inside internally. Because your eyes are telling you, just move forward but your body gives no sense of motion. So, it sort of jars you a little with a disconnect between your eyes and head. (...) But it does take some getting used to this movement, losing that connection to reality.

(Fergus, VR)

Some other person gets into the car and wants to take over the steering wheel and drive, and you say to them ‘No, that's my car!’, that is your body as a medium. ‘I want to drive,’ so you have an aversion that is unconscious, that is subconscious, of not wanting to let him do whatever he wants with your body, so that fight, it's interesting because it happens in all incorporations, you really have to show a lot of trust... incorporating is also a loving relationship, of you trusting the entity.

(Afonso, spirit possession)

We can see how in both of these examples, although to different extents, fear arises due to a lack of understanding as to where the body's boundaries end, that is, where the sense of body ownership lies (Appau et al., 2020). Learning to operate the 'new' body, that is, a virtual body in a digital world or a body momentarily 'taken over' by a spirit, requires asking "can you completely go against everything you've taught yourself as a human being?" (Oscar, VR). Letting go of certain taken-for-granted embodied competencies results in an urgent need to acquire new skilled body techniques which can be deeply unsettling.

Phipps and Ozanne's (2017) account of disrupted practices paves the way for thinking about the cognitive impact that obsolete embodied competencies have on consumers, whereby a shift of embodied practices generates an ontological state of unease. This fits in well with the literature on disembodiment which has tended to characterize such experiences as negative. For example, in the Min and Peñaloza (2019) study, their participants referred to their changing bodies as "extraneous", "indomitable", or "beast[ly]" (282). However, rather than disgust or hostility toward the body, after the initial disorientation, our data point to a sense of empowerment. We see how subjects, through the use of material and technological embodiment, "can extend their sensory, cognitive and motor functions" (Flavián, Ibáñez-Sánchez and Orús, 2019:550), and in this way become more (not less) physically enabled, "fulfilling desires the real world can't provide" (Jim, VR). Possession, according to Csordas (1994, ix) is about the construction of a kind of self through embodiment of particular sets of dispositions and habits. The process of incorporation provides sensations and answers that the medium did not have beforehand, it is a form of corporeal learning resulting in new subjectivities: "[spirits] change something within you as well" (Afonso).

As in other accounts of embodiment (Murphy et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2017), spirit mediums and VR users must learn the "laws and rules of [their new] world" (Adeel, VR).

Novices in both experiences need to train their bodies to “channel energies” as a medium (Aurora, spirit possession) or to operate virtual representations of their bodies. This requires a more messy embodiment, with multiple lines of intersection, fluidity and interconnectedness. Rather than individualised corporeality, this form of embodiment requires an openness to other bodies or actors (virtual and spiritual). Over time, mediums learn to adjust their corporealities “until the entity can fully take over [your body]” (Cibele, spirit possession) and VR users become more “relaxed and in control of [their fantasy] surroundings,” so that once “surreal” experiences start to feel more trustworthy: “the more time I spent using the headset, the more ‘real-life’ it felt” (Dorothy, VR). Over time, mediums build up the corporeal knowhow to “keep control” and “give permission” to the spirit to enter their mind to “create a symbiosis (...) I allow him to communicate through my body” (Afonso, spirit possession), just as VR users become more experienced at handling their digital bodies and new personas. Much as Murphy et al. (2019) observe with motorcycle riders, these new bodily reorientations eventually become second nature.

As the body readjusts in transferring or transposing itself into new realms, instead of fear or apathy, we witness the emergence of a new sense of body ownership: “for a few brief minutes I could try and concentrate on a single objective and think of my body as a unified force rather than the disparate collection of bones and flesh I usually think of it as” (Charlie, VR). As the body readjusts in transferring or transposing itself into new realms, the result is not alienation (Breuer, 2020) but, through corporeal training, a “narrowing of focus” (Butler, 2006:46). Due to the perceived loss of body ownership and resultant objectification (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), the dissociation allows for detachment but also paradoxically results in an extended self-in-process who is closer to others. For example, Adão, a spirit medium, explains how “[he] didn’t used to have anyone” but now identifies a long list of entities who have been brought into existence through his body. Similarly, Devesh discusses how with VR he feels

more “emotionally attached rather than distant [and] get[s] some idea of how [the character] feels.” In this sense, what we witness is a larger assemblage of the self, which extends beyond the singular body into new worlds through other spirits, objects and technologies.

Much as in Cheded and Liu’s (2022) account of gendered (un)becoming in the workplace, where one needs “to undo [life’s] actuality as fixed givenness [...] to be capable of a new or different elaboration” (Grosz, 2005:11), in the process of acclimatizing to their ‘extended’ bodies, VR users and mediums need to adjust to new corporeal references, as physical cues from their material world no longer make sense in the digital or spiritual realm. In order to achieve immersion in these worlds, body ownership must shift outwards. Indeed, the VR literature shows that the body ownership illusion can even result in a whole alien body being felt to be one’s own when visual, tactile and proprioceptive information match (Petkova and Ehrsson, 2008; Slater et al., 2010). Similarly, mediums must develop their relationship with the spirits (Seligman, 2014) in a more controlled manner. Paloma elaborates on how mediums “reconcile [their] energy with the energy of the [spirit] guide” which can feel “a bit different, even a bit strange, at the start, then you start matching your energies to the spirit and vice versa, the spirit starts matching itself to our energies, to the way we are”. The corporeal learning is therefore, in fact, an attunement to this external scaffolding or ecology of the self and it therefore requires multiple relations of embodiment so that you become more than the sum of your parts. There is a need to come to terms with having multiple bodies in parallel: Jack describes how “placing you in another circumstance [in VR] almost physically helps you to understand and experience things you haven’t necessarily before.”

The self which emerges out of dissociative experiences thus outstrips the boundaries of consciousness, and although both experiences are typically described as passive and disembodied they require an active body – indeed, they are intensely physical experiences. VR is characterized as “intense” and “demanding” (Thomas) leaving users “hot and flustered”

(Anusha) while Cibele, a spirit medium, explains that spirit possession is “tiring (...) I feel spasms...”. What is significant here is that in both cases, we see not a case of the mind becoming freed from the body, but rather that the experience of spirit possession or VR brings its own embodiment with it. In both cases as the body ownerships shifts outwards, new embodied relations with both others and objects means that their skin is no longer the border of their agency. We turn to this distribution in agency now.

Perceived Re-embodiment through Shifts in Agency

Through body techniques and the embodiment of particular cultural practices (Luhmann, Nusbaum and Thisted, 2010), certain sensations, thoughts, behaviors or emotions (preobjective in Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) terminology) are felt as outside of the subject’s control. Goulding et al. (2009) consider how repetitive music, dancing and use of drugs can allow consumers to switch off and ‘lose it.’ In doing so, these consumers transcend their normal selves, merging into the collective consciousness of the crowd. They suggest that clubbing therefore serves to ameliorate the boring qualities of everyday life as a “controlled and enjoyable de-controlling of affect and emotions” (Elias and Dunning in Goulding et al., 2009). In both our dissociative experiences we see that subjects feel they have “completely blocked the outside world” (Paul, VR) and have “forgotten about everything” (Lily, VR) as they are “living a different life for a minute” which is “detaching” (Fergus, VR). Kaito reported “having more vivid dreams since the start of using the VR headset, where I have more control over how I operate rather than being a passenger in my own dream”. Mediums describe their own consciousness as being ‘asleep’ during possession and emerging from possession as ‘waking up’ (Cibele): “spirit possession is an enchantment (...) you are in a trance.”

The dissociative experience, our data shows, directly produces new relationalities: incorporating means much more than becoming a temporary vessel, you “see the world through

the eyes of the spirit” (Adão) and after possession, the entity’s “presence lingers” (Noemi). VR users place themselves in the subjectivities of their virtual selves: “[the experience] put me in their shoes in a way which no other medium could” (Sarah); “I felt personally invited into someone’s world” (Vanessa); “you’re in that person’s head” (Leo), sometimes even being “changed” in the process (Elijah). Compared to other accounts of disembodiment and re-embodiment or disruptions to our corporeal know-how, for instance in the case of pregnant mothers ‘mourning’ the loss of their pre-pregnancy bodies (Min and Peñaloza, 2019), or consumers forced to shift their embodied competencies when facing adverse climatic conditions (Phipps and Ozanne, 2017), the users in our study do not feel out of control when the experiences go well, i.e. with proper training for mediums and onboarding and offboarding for VR users. Rather, through a shift in their sense of body ownership they ‘let themselves go’ to gain a new form of agency and control over their sense of being-in-the-world. Much as is the case in Scott et al.’s (2017) study of tough mudders, these subjects can re-craft a life narrative as a more fulfilled individual as a result of their experience. We argue that this is due to dissociation, in temporarily detaching from their conscious awareness. Furthermore, although these embodiment relations may linger on, the selves they belong to can remain isolated to the dissociative experience.

In the aftermath of disembodiment, understood as a disruption of blocking of identity, Min and Peñaloza (2019) envision re-embodiment as a reconciliation with a new, altered body which the subject reluctantly ‘inhabits’. Within this theorizing, we see how an estranged body is thought of as constrained or thwarted in its actions and there is a feeling of compromise when conforming to a changed corporeal self. Rather than lacking agency, our data shows a more distributed agency at work where the performance of actions is not restricted to just human bodies but involves material mechanisms and symbolic media, modifying the individual’s ability to experience and broadening the scope of action, not thwarting it. Just as Merleau-

Ponty (1962) argues that the cane for the blind person is no longer an object, but an extension of the realm of the senses, in spirit possession, material objects (see Seligman, 2014) are key to the spirit's incorporation. Material offerings equip spirits with the symbolic tools to manifest themselves through a process of ontological transference (Espírito Santo, 2015). It is through the material culture that mediums are able to “draw closer” to these entities and become “more wrapped [up] in that energy” that they bring (Cibele). Different spirits manifest differently and each require their own accessories and forms of embodiment in their manifestations, for example to become *Preta Velha* (an old black slave spirit), Cibele needs her ‘props’: a knotted wooden cane, rosaries, straw hat and antique-looking pipe. In the case of VR, the VR hardware also serves this purpose: “it felt like the controller was an extension of my hand” (Charlie) – the user can extend themselves into the body of a virtual other and simultaneously embed those properties into their own body. Through this ‘phenomenological osmosis’ (Kujundzic and Buschert, 1994), the body allows instruments to melt into it as it adapts to new sensations, so that VR users’ corporeal schema becomes modified by technology.

In both experiences, then, material objects facilitate the embodied experience much as market-mediated tools in other identity-transformative experiences do (Cheded and Liu, 2022; Seregina, 2019). This more distributed agency broadens subjects’ perspectives, enabling them to reach previously unimaginable embodied competencies: “feeling like you’re in control – fulfilling desires the real world can’t provide” (Jim, VR), “you move and the world moves beyond what belongs to the normal realm of what you can do” (Adeel, VR), or as Afonso, a medium, suggests: “the process of incorporation provides sensations and answers that the medium did not have beforehand, it is a form of corporeal learning resulting in new subjectivities: spirits “change something within you as well.” Rather than one locus of agency, there are many; rather than one actor, there is a hybrid constellation which creates a collective

actor external to the self but also internalized. As a result of the experience of multiple bodies or selves, subjects are “in better sync with [others]” (Cibele, spirit possession).

My mood was definitely much calmer when the video finished. During the experience, I felt a strong feeling of ‘sonder,’ which I didn't anticipate – ‘the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own.’

(Saira, VR)

When you incorporate a Caboclo, you do not only incorporate the spirit of an Amerindian, you incorporate the values of that culture, of those people, a love for nature, for things that... When you incorporate the Old Black Slave, you incorporate a love (emphasis) for all that is black, for black culture, for Africa. When you incorporate a child, you incorporate a love for something that is now lost, for your innocence, your purity. So that changes who you are, it gives meaning to your life. (...) You cannot dis-incorporate an experience, a value, a love.

(Adão, spirit possession)

The mediums interviewed were clear that spirit possession is not a process of being “taken over” but rather “a partnership” (Adão). For the experience to be meaningful it requires “internal transformation. [The medium] needs to be humble to be able to receive [the spirit]” (Adão). Similarly, in VR, agency is shared or distributed among actants (human users and non-human technologies) toward a single course of action or goal (Enfield, 2017). As the (human) agency becomes multidimensional and distributed (Knockelman, 2007), new perspectives emerge. Rather than losing agency then, through the shift in body ownership (being in partnership with spiritual forces or technology), subjects regain agency in their lives by accessing other perspectives. These brief, temporary escapes through dissociation thus provide new forms of ontological security, allowing VR users to acquire new tacit knowledge when they return ‘re-embodied’ (Phipps and Ozanne, 2017).

Discussion and Conclusions: Let it Go!

Multiple Embodiment Relations

It is only by doing, through embodied action, that the self can construct itself and expand its engagement with the social world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Csordas, 1999). Although generally reported on as a mental disorder, dissociation is a highly embodied phenomenon and by focusing on how it is embodied, we highlight how it can have therapeutic benefits (Maraldi, 2014) as a normative experience, part of a controlled ‘letting go.’ In characterizing dissociation as such, we bring together the psychological and anthropological perspectives on dissociative experiences. By positioning the self as in the middle ground between these two poles we call for a broader ontology of the self. Rather than being disembodied or re-embodied then (Min and Peñaloza, 2019), we propose multiple embodiment relations.

Min and Peñaloza (2019) note a layered sense of embodiment in focusing on the difficulties in transitioning into a new body (and resultant identity) due to pregnancy, yet they still seem to operate on the assumption of an individual self (Appau et al., 2020) in that the layers eventually become re-integrated into a whole through re-embodiment. In focusing on normative dissociation, we show that a temporary shift in body ownership and a more distributed agency is not necessarily felt as a loss or framed negatively, as long as it fits into a culturally available narrative template of the self (e.g. spiritual or virtual in our examples) which is more open to fluidity and interconnectedness. Crucially, in the experiences we focus on in this paper, the body does not actually experience any long-term physical change which explains why any shift in body ownership and agency can be experienced much more positively. However, we also note that rather than a shattering of Merleau-Ponty’s mind-body system, disembodiment and re-embodiment are still centred on the body and therefore only perceived. Furthermore, what is perceived as a primarily cognitive process, that is, the shift of

consciousness brought about through dissociation, is experienced through the body by extending into a wider assemblage of the self through use of material objects and tools resulting in multiple loci of agency, in turn allowing for a widening of corporeal and cognitive perspectives of the self. Significantly, we show that re-integration is not required afterwards: as per the *dividual* (Appau et al., 2020), these various selves can remain separate, allowing for a detachment which is not pathological but instead liberating. Although we cannot do justice to the richness of both experiences here, we bring them together in order to provide an exploratory perspective on how shifts in sense of body ownership and distribution of agency can allow for at times radical alterations in outlook.

We contribute to the embodiment literature by arguing that in dissociative experiences, through the body, new perspectives are made possible as new forms of experiencing emerge through alternate, embodied frames and roles. Much of the experiential consumer research literature has already shown how consumers can escape temporarily through embodied activities (Goulding et al., 2009; Kerrigan et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2017), particularly through identity play, taking on alternative personas, for example in LARPs or cosplay (de Mello, de Almeida and Dalmoro 2021; Orazi and Van Laer, 2022; Seregina, 2019; Seregina and Weijo, 2017). However, there has been an assumption that the embodied processes of detachment are experienced negatively, as in the concept of *bleed* (Orazi and Van Laer, 2022). Our examples show that this is not always the case. By introducing the notion of multiple embodiment relations we highlight that it is this very detachment which is positively experienced. Rather than re-integrating the different ‘layers’ of embodied selves, therefore, it is the learning and unlearning of new forms of embodiment relations that allows for dissociative shifts of consciousness.

In answering our research question, we show that dissociative experiences can allow for a welcome detachment through shifts of consciousness by enabling a shift in body

ownership and distribution of agency, both are required for dissociation. Our participants experience a sense of catharsis and stress-relief by relinquishing sense of body ownership through an embodied and cognitive meditative process (for example, trance or meditation which require significant absorption and focus) and through a more distributed agency (for example, through cultural and material objects such as technological tools) whereby hybrid constellations become a collective actor which surpass the individual body. As both body as subject and body as object (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), through multiple embodied relations individuals can feel both inside and outside of themselves simultaneously. In seemingly relinquishing control, our participants go through a sense-making process that allows them to re-interpret their self/ves in a more detached way, gaining some sense of distance and perspective. Multiple embodiment relations represents both a temporary shattering of the self (Scott et al., 2017) and a loss of the self (Orazi and Van Laer, 2022) which can be experienced positively. Just as Woermann and Rokka (2015) show that the perceived temporality of an experience is the result of finely tuned bodily routines, we show that so too is the flow of one's conscious awareness. Indeed, given that one's sense of time is also disrupted when engaged in a dissociative experience, it is likely that there is considerable overlap between shifts in temporality and consciousness. Further research is needed to explore this in more depth.

Altered States of Consciousness in Consumption

In focusing on dissociative experiences, we contribute to the consumer research literature by bringing together a wide range of previous studies on consumer experiences and bridging psychological and cultural perspectives. We argue that dissociation as a normative, embodied phenomenon is central to many of our mundane (reading, running, dancing, imagining, sleeping) and extraordinary (fantasy, role-play, clubbing, etc. – see Appendix A) experiences. We foreground dissociation to highlight it as a productive arena in which to formulate new concepts of the self. As a temporary loss of the sense of personal identity and

full awareness of the surroundings, dissociative experiences represent a “qualitative departure from one’s ordinary modes of experiencing” (Cardeña in Butler, 2004:58). At their most extreme, dissociative experience can lead to a fundamental reinterpretation of the self (Csordas, 2002; Seligman, 2005). Multiple embodiment relations shows how the self can be simultaneously experienced as both fragmented and whole, building on Appau et al.’s (2020) in/dividual. Divided consciousness is therefore not always a hindrance; it can be helpful in stepping outside our usual self/ves and experiencing a different state of being, taking alternative perspectives which emerge through dissociation and undergoing a sanctioned form of loss of control. Under certain circumstances, dissociation liberates abilities that would not have been manifested otherwise (Maraldi, 2014).

There have been few studies focused on altered states of consciousness in marketing which do not take a primarily psychological and experimental approach. Valtonen and Närvänen’s (2016:372) study of sleep as a culturally mediated form of bodily existence which implies a “partial withdrawal from the social world and the self” and consciousness is an exception. However, we note that through normative dissociation, consumers may benefit from a therapeutic sense of detachment (Butler, 2006; Maraldi, 2014). Given that the recent marketing literature has drawn attention to the accelerated pace in which most consumers live and their need to find ways to temporarily switch off (Higgins and Hamilton, 2019; Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019), further consideration of dissociation as exactly that ‘switch’ is desirable. Our findings highlight that while dissociative experiences can be off-putting and distressing, when part of a learnt, embodied and sense-making process, they can also be relaxing and enriching.

Marketized forms of dissociation are already in existence and indeed, increasingly popular with the rise of, for example, more spiritual practices and the focus on mindfulness and self-care. While spirit possession rituals are unlikely to go ‘mainstream’ in the near future

(although a growing popularity of mediunic healing, Rodner and Preece, 2019, has been noted), given that finding focus is an increasing problem in our attention economy, these types of absorptive experiences may be worth exploring further in line with meditation practices, stress relief and the wellness industry. We draw attention to the culturally patterned forms of narrative that dissociative experiences require for a meaningful and enjoyable dissociative experience. Rather than out of control, our findings show that these dissociative experiences are in fact, a way of regaining control over one's life narrative and expanding life narratives through shifts in perspective. In the West, at least, a broader onto-epistemology of the self could reduce the stigma around dissociation.

Indeed, despite evidence that imagination, fantasy and daydreaming are all important creativity and problem-solving skills (Butler, 2006) and central to the functioning of the market in stimulating consumer desire (Heath and Nixon, 2021), there is still a sense that they are perceived negatively, as not serious and an avoidance of the real world (Calleja, 2010). This is most obvious when considering video gaming, for example: although a booming market, gamers are still often pigeonholed as 'nerds' who spend too much time in their basements (Goldman, 2017). There is a need for further recognition of the significance of being able to play out alternative scenarios through dissociative experiences. Further attention to the body as not left behind or disembodied but rather agentic could, perhaps, provide this recognition. Although culturally constituted views, from an emic perspective, may at times interpret dissociation as 'leaving the body', for example in certain spiritual realms, from an etic perspective, we show that this is not the case. Our findings also show a need for further (marketized) training of the body within dissociative experiences to ensure a pleasant rather than distressing experience. We caution against techno-solutionist discourses focusing on the promise of the digital to transcend the limitations of the flesh – the body is not abandoned so easily. In VR, for example, this means proper onboarding and offboarding and instructions

within the experiences. Furthermore, there is a need for appropriate atmospheres of consumption, to allow for the focus and absorption needed for these experiences. There are therefore considerable implications as to how these existing markets could be enhanced and grown.

It is therefore essential to move beyond narrow, Western Cartesian logics, further considering alternative forms of consciousness and states of mind and how these can generate new ways of knowing through embodied competencies (Valtonen and Närvänen, 2016). In moving beyond dualistic approaches to disembodiment and re-embodiment (Min and Peñaloza, 2019), our exploratory study demonstrates the multiplicity of embodied possibilities of the body as both subject and object. We present shifts in body ownership and a more distributed agency as a promising avenue for further consumer research. Understanding dissociation requires further examination of the embodied interactions of social factors (race, class, gender, ability, social and physical environment), psychological and psychobiological factors (emotions such as anxiety, stress, dissociative tendencies, patterns of physiological reactivity) and cultural factors (Seligman, 2005, 2014). Indeed, individuals' backgrounds may contribute to their motivation and ability to perform such behaviors (enter trance, spend hours in VR). Having said that, there are clear ethical implications in terms of identity play and it is important to adopt a more holistic approach to sensorial engagement and consider the bodily experience of diverse populations, guarding against the risks of spectacle and body tourism. The consumer as dividual (Appau et al., 2020), self-constituting mind and body through experience, is thus fruitful territory for further exploration.

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Appendix A: Examples of dissociative experiences in the marketing literature

Experience	Dissociative dimension	Examples in Marketing Literature
<p>Daydreaming / fantasy</p>	<p>Shifts in attention from the external world to internal thoughts; mental escape that departs from reality; mental journeys through events, memories or creatively constructed future projections; the ability to mentally experience events which are otherwise inaccessible; a spontaneous, unintended activity</p>	<p>Merlo et al. (2020) on mind wandering: triggers include internal prompts such as such as emotional states, feeling overloaded, and boredom at work, as well as external prompts such as auditory or visual stimuli. Conclude that mind wandering may facilitate performance at work by providing a mini-escape, particularly if the individual has cognitive control in how and when to engage in mind wandering.</p>
		<p>Heath & Nixon (2021): study of imaginative pleasure/fantasizing through daydreaming. Daydreaming found to provide a highly engaging, sensory experience. Pleasurable daydreams can be highly immersive, providing sensory stimulation and bodily responses such as mouth-watering, heart-racing and crying. Daydreamers have a substantial degree of control over their daydreaming.</p>
		<p>Jenkins & Molesworth (2018): stimuli may direct attention away from paramount reality and towards spontaneous daydreams. Imagination as the ability and compulsion to experience things in our mind in the absence of their material presence, varies in type and strength of emotion. Imagination can provide compensatory pleasure and the imagination can be used to regulate what we feel about the things we do and about our lives. The rehearsal, planning, learning and decision-making processes of imagining offer more direct motivation for action as preparation for 'real' life, providing a sense of control.</p>
<p>Night dreaming</p>	<p>Partial withdrawal from the social world and from the self; outside of consciousness, will, and control and therefore a vulnerable state; the sleeper is both present and absent; helps dreamers 'grapple' with concerns and unfinished business</p>	<p>Valtonen & Närvänen (2016): focus on sleeping as an embodied, cultural skill and technique. The sensations felt in a dream may provide experiences that feel real and may even last.</p>
<p>Arts consumption / production</p>	<p>Producers and consumers of art engage in creative processes that are liberating and fulfilling; art becomes an autonomous enterprise, constituted by its capacity to promote aesthetic experience separate from daily routines; immersive experience; hypnotic, trance-like effect; induces loss of self-awareness; can cause</p>	<p>Venkatesh & Meamber (2008): enjoying aesthetic work for its therapeutic and relaxation value.</p>
		<p>Jones, Cronin & Piacentini (2020): introduce the concept of 'surrealist disruption' in their study of binge watching to describe ontological discontinuities that disrupt the common-sense frameworks normally used by consumers and that impact upon their ability to suspend their disbeliefs and experience self-loss. Stress relief as a key motivator for escape into inner worlds; escape as a sense-making activity in times of crisis - how things 'could' be.</p>
		<p>Goulding, Shankar, Elliott & Canniford (2009): study of clubbing develops a biosocial conceptualization of pleasure. Focus on how the shared experience of music and dance, the organization of space, and the</p>

	<p>anxiety as well as hedonic pleasure; restorative and socially productive</p>	<p>effects of the drug ecstasy combine to produce a highly sought-after, calculated suspension of the rules and norms of everyday life. Subjective experience of pleasure through ‘losing it’ which can result in transcending the social categories that normally define the consumer, a dissolution of the individual self.</p> <p>Kerrigan, Larsen, Hanratty & Korta (2014): consumers escape their mundane lives through musicalization and running, operates as a form of stress relief which is both pleasurable and painful. In escaping ‘inwards’ consumers transcend the Cartesian dualism of mind/body. Skilled corporeal learning for a transformative goal.</p> <p>Hewer & Hamilton (2010): identify how dancers feel a fleeting sense of elation and liberation when their bodies move spontaneously and innovate around the rules of the dance. They suggest it is a temporary blotting-out of the self and a suspension of the real. Results in transformation and transcendence and can allow for discovery of new aspects of the self. Can be transported to another place and time.</p>
<p>Sport/Adventure</p>	<p>Allows for escape from reflexivity and self-awareness; diverts attention through focused attention; a form of corporeal learning and skill; ability to craft new life narratives; self-shattering of identity; mindful bodies; specific timeflows associated to body techniques</p>	<p>Scott, Cayla & Cova (2017): focuses on the body and on painful extraordinary experiences as regenerative escapes from the self. By flooding the consciousness with unpleasantness, pain provides a temporary relief from self-awareness. Pain helps consumers create the story of a fulfilled life.</p> <p>Murphy, Patterson & O’Malley (2019): focus on body techniques and skill acquisition needed for motorcycling that emerge as a result of culturally specific ways of learning. Embodied know-how needs practice, repetition and intense focus to narrow the experiential field.</p> <p>Kuuru (2022): considers what insights yoga can bring to understand how embodied knowledge shapes customer experience. Significance of body movements and ways of being in a body, need to turn ‘inside’ as a skill acquisition. Expansion of body affectivity through the technology of the screen (watching yoga) results in a transformative experience which radiates outside the boundaries of individual embodied experiences into daily life.</p> <p>Woermann & Rokka (2015): consider the temporality of experiences, describing the slowing down or speeding up of perceived time. Forgetting time (in optimal temporal experiences) is due to the perfect alignment between bodily routines, the situational setting, and the teleological or affective state that is being achieved during performance.</p>
<p>Cosplay and live action role-playing (LARP)</p>	<p>Spatiotemporally bound safe havens which can allow for liberation, distraction or escape; bodily performance which requires certain material configurations; transformative experience which allows for separation from the self - can be someone else for</p>	<p>Seregina & Weijo (2017): cosplay as an intrinsically pleasurable form of immersive and improvisational play. Despite the improvisation, there are implicit rules and understandings and it requires skill and embodied learning to become the character. Cosplayers also take care to have persona separation so as not to allow their cosplaying to spill into other parts of their lives.</p> <p>Seregina (2019): individuals can ‘undo’ gender through engaging in direct, bodily performance of the gendered other in LARP, can experience a pluralism of identities, thus re-defining their own selves. Involves an extreme change in physical appearance and new mannerisms which require preparation. Learn to operate in new ways but need to contain these performances so they don’t bleed into the self, clear differentiation. The duality of self and body is broken.</p>

	the day; provides new perspectives and a better understanding of the self; trade-offs and threats exist as engagement deepens	Orazi & Van Laer (2022): theorize the ‘bleed’ or tension in returning to normality after an extraordinary experience (in this case LARP). For a brief time, consumers are liberated from social constraints and can explore alternative perspectives and selves which in turn, can bring to light new aspects of their own self. However, the traces of these alterative perspectives and selves linger on. Dissociation bleed is the difficult in letting go of a character. In some cases, retrospective integration is needed to make sense of the experience and start a process of transformation of the individual’s ordinary frames and roles.
Virtual consumption	Potential for enchantment, reflection, creativity and positive transformation as well as negative emotions such as exclusion, boredom and dissatisfaction; possibility of resisting normative social pressures; allows for switching-off and de-stressing; suspends disbelief; can cause tunnel vision; mental absorption – a state of complete sensory engagement with a stimulus; dissolving of boundaries between users, social others and objects - virtual content integrated into the self	Belk (2013): the digital extended self examines the de-materialization of our possessions as well as our re-embodiment into digital characters. Traces how people identify with and embody their avatars through immersive gaming: naming, gendering and kitting them out so that they represent ideal, possible, aspirational versions of themselves. Through re-embodiment, Belk argues, online gamers experience improvements in their physical world, becoming more confident, sociable, active, empathetic, and reflective.
		Denegri-Knott & Molesworth (2010): digital virtual spaces offer the actualization of consumer daydreams/fantasy and experiences of achievement and skill. These provide a seductive terrain for experimentation, operating between the imagination and the material.
		Kuo, Lutz & Hiler (2016): active escapism through fantasy and role-play (in multiplayer online role-playing games) as a means of coping when consumers are confronted with external stressors that threaten either their sense of identity or control. Consumers experience ‘mediated’ realities online which can result in self-affirmation, the maintenance of self-integrity and self-worth.
		Banerjee & Longstreet (2016): when in dual (online-offline environments), individuals either dissociate from one of the environments or integrate both environments. Absorption can result in elevated levels of concentration and intrinsic enjoyment but can also cause tunnel vision or inattentive blindness with dire consequences when multi-tasking. Dissociation framed as a problem when problem when selves get so fragmented that subjects have difficulty integrating their memory, sense of identity and aspects of consciousness into a continuous whole.
		Miao et al. (2022): avatar/characters serve as a means to explore fantastic and/or idealized selves in alternate realities.
		Scholz & Duffy (2018): augmented reality has potential impact on consumers’ sense of self due to use of their environments and bodies, may even give rise to new types of self. Technology infiltrates into consumers’ intimate life rhythm and ‘me-time,’ private time and space. Perceived as relaxing by consumers.
		Javornik, Marder, Pizzetti & Warlopan (2021): use of AR to create an augmented self, conceptualized as a change in consumers’ self-concept when they are faced with the hybrid representation of a virtual overlay on their physical self.
	Temporary escape and relief from urban malaise. Achieved through	Higgins & Hamilton (2019): emplaced, market-mediated therapeutic servicescapes allow for spiritual revitalisation in enabling emotional suffering.

Religious/Spiritual consumption	spiritual practices and ritual performances characterized by embodied affective suffering which allows for slowing down, restoration and healing.	Husemann & Eckhardt (2019): conceptualize deceleration as a slowed down experience of time achieved through slowing down bodily, technologically and simplified experiences such as reduced consumption.
		Rodner & Preece (2019): theorize religious mobility as syncretic spiritual consumers move across multiple faiths in search of healing through a variety of experiences including spiritual consultations, spiritual cleansing rituals, spiritual surgeries, and exorcisms.

Appendix B: Focal dissociative experiences

Dissociative Experience	Characteristics
Spirit possession	<p>Spirit possession is an embodied form of mediumship which can take many different forms and has been identified around the world, manifested in ritual practices and everyday life (Seligman, 2014). Although experienced individually as a dissociative state, it is culturally constituted (Igreja, 2018) and is thought to meaningfully influence the life of the host (Castillo, 1994).</p> <p>Mediums report many dissociative symptoms including temporary anaesthesia, partial immobility, out-of-body experiences and sudden and seemingly unjustified mood swings or fluctuations of the usual sense of identity, one's personal identity often being replaced by another one entirely. Maraldi, Machado and Zangari (2010, 189) define mediumship as a "way to veil or unveil identity." Whereas (spirit) possession in the West, particularly in Christian contexts, generally has negative connotations (Seligman, 2005), in many cultures spirit possession is socially valued. Research shows that mediumship affords therapeutic and curative gains, helping improve mediums' self-esteem, offering coping strategies, expanding social networks and providing fulfilment (Maraldi, 2014; Seligman, 2005).</p>
VR	<p>Snodgrass et al. (2011) anthropologically theorize gamers' experiences of immersion and argue that dissociation accounts for how players identify with and embody their virtual 'second selves.' Indeed, they find that mild dissociation is required for enjoyment of gaming – players expect to be able to escape their normal offline selves and realities and can only do so by dissociating away from real-life and into the game.</p> <p>VR has been celebrated for its facility in allowing users to experiment with different roles via various avatars. Identity in VR is often played with, subverted and even foregrounded as a construct; manipulating body representation virtually is effortless (Kilteni, Groten and Slater, 2012). VR technologies are increasingly becoming all-embodying with haptic suits substituting sensory information. This substitution of sensory information is conceptualized by Murray and Sixsmith (1999) as necessary for a compelling VR experience. At its most extreme, self-presence in VR has been shown to create some types of identity or reality confusion (Lee, 2004).</p> <p>Dominant discourses about VR reinforce Cartesian duality by treating the body as being left behind while the mind wanders into cyberspace; however, in reality, although seemingly characterized by a disembodied gaze projecting oneself into an optic panorama, users must map their sense of corporeality directly onto the represented virtual forms (Murray and Sixsmith, 1999). This is what Penny (1994:242) calls the "split body condition" or the "double Body."</p>

Appendix C: Additional Participant Data

VR participants:

Spirit Mediums:

Participant	Gender
Adeel	Male
Anusha	Female
Charlie	Male
Devesh	Male
Dorothy	Female
Elijah	Male
Fergus	Male
Gordon	Male
Jack	Male
Jim	Male
Kaito	Male
Leo	Male
Lily	Female
Oscar	Male
Paul	Other
Saira	Female
Sarah	Female
Thomas	Male
Vanessa	Female

Participant	Gender	Role
Adão	Male	Priest of Umbanda, medium for 25+ years
Afonso	Male	Priest of Umbanda, medium for 15+ years
Aurora	Female	Spiritual consultant of Umbanda, medium for 15+ years
Cibele	Female	Priestess of Umbanda and Candomblé, medium for 30+ years
Noemi	Female	Priestess of Umbanda, medium for 45+ years
Paloma	Female	Priestess of Umbanda, medium for 25+ years