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Austere Times: Male Experiences of Liminal Vulnerability

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Since 2008, many European countries have suffered recessionary pressures that have led to an increasing vulnerability for some (Allen and Synder, 2009). While studies on the topic of low-income/disadvantaged consumers (Hamilton, 2012) focus on a more '*fixed state*' of poverty (Elms and Tinson, 2012), we explore experiences of austerity from both working-class males and the less-well-known consumption practices of the middle-classes (Keating et al., 2013) which enables us to shed more light around the liminality or transitional nature of vulnerability. As consumer researchers have largely focused on women in vulnerable situations (Cappellini et al., 2014; The Voice Group, 2010), this study aims to redress this balance with a focus on male vulnerability by acknowledging the relevance of gender in appreciating the construction of identity in relation to the allocation and assumption of responsibilities and expectations during austere times.

Vulnerability is commonly referred to as a multi-dimensional *state* of 'powerlessness that arises from an imbalance in marketplace interactions' (Baker et al., 2005, p.134; Peñaloza, 1995). Research suggests that gender can impact on consumer vulnerability (Hill and Dickenson, 2005). The traditional concept of masculinity has been challenged with recent studies calling for a rejection of hegemonic masculinity embodied by the notion of 'a man's man' to a more pluralistic identity embodying both male and female characteristics (de Visser, 2009, p.367). Hence, given the evolution of the concept of modern masculinity and the particular lack of academic attention paid to the effects of austerity on male vulnerability, we respond to previous calls to advance our understanding of the 'consumption behaviours of liminal people' (Banister and Piacentini, 2008; Cody et al., 2011; Schouten, 1991, p.422).

Liminality is constructed as a new identity state to be contrasted with a 'normal' state and is often associated with major life challenges (Baker et al., 2005). In addition, liminality has long been associated with rites of passage (van Gennep, 1960[1906], Turner, 1974) and therefore viewed as formalized transitions, consisting of three core phases. The first phase is '*separation*' and involves some removal from the stable identity (Turner, 1974). Secondly, there is the '*marginal*' stage which describes when the liminar (or passenger) finds themselves in an ambiguous, betwixt and between situation which divorces them from their past and their future (van Gennep, 1960[1906]). Finally, '*reaggregation*' is the identity that emerges from the state of liminality and may be seen as better (and definitely different) to the previous identity. From liminality, *communitas* (i.e. a bonding over and above formal social bonds) can spontaneously emerge through a comradeship of those involved. However, there can also be *outsiderhood* where the passenger is 'situationally or temporarily set apart' (Turner, 1974, p.233) from others.

Given the cross-cultural aspect of the study which was conducted by a team of European researchers across five countries, face to face in-depth interviews were chosen as an appropriate form of social enquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Using a purposive sample (Patton, 1990), 32 consumers from Ireland, UK, Spain, Portugal and Greece across a range of demographics (e.g. age, gender, lifestage and income including unemployed people) were interviewed. Of this, 11 interviews were conducted with

European men to explore the effects of austerity in terms of changes to everyday consumption practices and experiences, both prior to and during austerity. The interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours and reached a deep level of richness and insight. The interviews were firstly transcribed and if applicable, translated to English. Coding was carried out by all members of the research team, followed by cross-checking of interview transcripts (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Key findings (see Table 1) related to vulnerability and liminality which led the researchers to engage with van Gennep (1960 [1906]) and Turner's (1974) rites of passage and are illustrated under the themes *separation*, *transition*, *reaggregation* and *communitas*.

Overall, our findings (see Table 1) revealed varying levels of financial insecurity and vulnerability as a result of austerity. Their rites of passage through austere times had also affected their identity, expectations and aspirations. While austerity is a temporal economic force, the application of liminality theory shows, particularly for those in the liminal/transition stage, that it may take time and be a difficult process to make the transition to the reaggregation stage. Through examining transition states we can recognize the different macro and micro-forces affecting those experiencing liminality as well as illustrate the forms this takes alongside the ultimate reaggregation for some. The levelling that liminality brings about is deeply felt by these men in their multi-faceted vulnerability which has affected their personal relationships, identity and economic stability resulting for some in a sense of *outsiderhood*. But, for some men, the positive *communitas* experienced with others and for others has had benefits which have supported these men through the liminal stages.

This paper has made contributions to understanding vulnerability in three ways. Firstly we have advanced the concept of liminal vulnerability. In so doing, we have followed van Gennep (1960[1906]) and Turner's (1974) three phases of transition rites which have been examined elsewhere (Baker et al., 2007) but which bear greater scrutiny given their potential for understanding how people in different situations cope with 'rites of passage'. Secondly, we have examined this concept from the perspective of male vulnerability which is an under researched area. Finally, we applied this to a current situation of potential vulnerability, the economic recession in Europe. Through this exploration of liminal vulnerability, the research reveals that the participants often held deep-seated traditional roles of male provider, family man, and father which were greatly affected by the vulnerable states. Our study therefore points to a reinforcement of gender stereotyping similar to that identified in Cappellini et al.'s.,(2014) research on women and austerity, evidenced through the deep engagement by many of our participants with traditional male roles. While the research reveals that the temporal nature of this liminal vulnerability may result in positive reaggregation, it is inevitable that the humiliation, levelling and '*ordeal*' of liminal vulnerability will be significant and enduring for many men.

Table 1 Findings and Discussion

Themes	Findings	Participant Quotes
Separation	For Yiannis, austerity has had a significant effect in the form of salary reductions and higher taxes. Coupled with his new role as a father, he reports feeling a <i>'sense of hopelessness, the sense of not feeling certain about anything'</i> . Yiannis is separated from his previous life of activity and is emotionally vulnerable as a new father. Both of these life changes represent ordeals (Turner, 1974) which signify the loss of his previous roles and its impact on his identity. Similarly, Antonio's perceptions of self-worth are affected; he feels he no longer enjoys the same class or position in society and is experiencing outsiderhood.	<p><i>"If we were at a better financial situation, I think I would try to steal some time to go with Anna for a walk, a stroll followed by coffee...consuming very simple things...These are the things I would like to do, if we were better off financially...but we have cut down on all indulgence in this gloomy situation"</i> (Yiannis, 38, Greek, University Academic).</p> <p><i>"I feel terrible, worthless...before you put on your suit, you go to the company...you feel important and now...you get into the bus with a lot of different people...back to school...it's a huge step back"</i> (Antonio, 38, Spanish, Unemployed Commercial Director).</p>
Transition	Luisme is typical of the high percentage of young Europeans in austerity-burdened economies whose financial vulnerability means they are unable to make the transition to the next stage of their lifecycle and financial independence. While in a different lifestage, Manuel, as a 53 year old father of two and sole breadwinner, also finds himself in the transition stage of liminality. His financial vulnerability appears centred on not having <i>'a salary that we can count on'</i> and the prospect of an uncertain future.	<p><i>"I don't contribute economically in the house...I wish I could own a house, have children and get married. I'm thinking of leaving the country if I don't find the proper job in the next 2 months."</i> (Luisme, 27, Spanish, Part-time Student/Unemployed).</p> <p><i>"If you want to work you have to accept whatever they offer you...I'm working for a month already without any days off... I don't have an alternative because I have a family to care for"</i> (Manuel, 53, Portuguese, Unemployed Construction Worker).</p>
Reaggregation	David has travelled through the separation from his previous life as a business man and the liminal stage of being a mature student and is now envisaging his next step. Through his ability to adapt as a mature student during austerity, he believes that he has become a more <i>'rounded person'</i> and that his life experience and being connected to young people has instilled in him something unique and valuable which he hopes to put to good use upon returning to work. Similarly, Derek who is prepared to continue to work part-time beyond retirement age displays adaptation and creativity in his reaggregated stage.	<p><i>"Adapting can be a difficult process... I feel that this has been a process that I'm glad I've gone through because I feel that at the end of the day, I'm hoping that I am a more rounded person..."</i> (David, 60, Irish, Mature Student).</p> <p><i>"There's always been dips and lulls, even back in the good times...there's been plenty of troughs and valleys, and throughout my whole working life...I'm happy to keep on working for as long as I can...we're very diverse and...adaptable to situations whatever they might be in years to come"</i> (Derek, 64, UK, Self-employed Carpenter).</p>
Communitas	Robert describes the <i>communitas</i> he has with his neighbours and local community and identifies his neighbours <i>'as being in the same category'</i> and increasingly draws on them socially and for support. Another aspect of <i>communitas</i> presented relates to the empathy and sadness for the plight of others. Some participants' identified with those of a lesser social status, and felt empathy and <i>'solidarity'</i> (Filipe, 60, Portuguese, Doctor). While many felt aggrieved by their own drop in status and	<p><i>"Some things you can't [fix]...and you need to call in somebody...I'm lucky in that I've a good network of Dads in the area... I put out the text to three or four friends...that same night; the three of them came over and helped for an hour and a half. You know, we'd have a bottle of wine in the kitchen afterwards...there is a good network of people now who are willing to help each other out"</i> (Robert, Irish, 38, Public Servant).</p>

	security, several shared examples of those whom they perceived as worse off.	<i>“It is so sad, you see the news and I feel so bad. I never imagined this crisis in my life...I’m so sorry about these situations. And I feel close to them”</i> (Bernado, 46, Spanish, Orthopaedic Surgeon).
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