Liminality in Recessionary Times – The Male View

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Abstract
As an environmental factor contributing to consumer vulnerability (e.g. Baker et al., 2005), the recession is an appropriate context in which to explore the temporal impact on European austerity-burdened consumers. In view of the scant attention in the marketing discipline given to consumer vulnerability in the context of austerity and the particular lack of focus on male vulnerability, this study aims to explore the liminal vulnerability experienced by male consumers affected by austerity. Using a purposive sample of 11 European male respondents taken across a range of demographics including age, income and lifecycle, this qualitative study uses the theory of liminality (Turner, 1974; Van Gennep, 1960[1906]) to explore the nature of male vulnerability. Preliminary findings indicate that psychological and financial vulnerabilities are experienced throughout the stages of separation, transition and re-aggregation which impact upon male identities, responsibilities and expectations. Such liminal vulnerability experienced through austerity also leads to feelings of alienation and “outsiderhood”, and communitas involving solidarity and comradeship with others affected by austerity. This research advances our understanding of both vulnerability and the nature of liminality experienced by European males.

Consumer Vulnerability and Liminality
Consumer vulnerability has come to be associated with several different concepts including scarcity (Smith and Cooper-Martin, 1997) illusiveness (see Ringold, 2005) and marketplace inequality (Jones et al., 2007; Smith and Cooper-Martin, 1997; Wolburgh, 2005). In recent years, a more widely accepted definition of vulnerability relates to a multi-dimensional (see Hunter-Jones, 2010) state of “powerlessness that arises from an imbalance in marketplace interactions” (Baker et al., 2005, p.134). It is also increasingly acknowledged that everyone has the potential to be vulnerable at a given time (Dunnett et al., 2014; Shultz and Holbrook, 2009) and vulnerability is not just a state confined to the young, elderly, female, low-income/disadvantaged, racial or ethnic groups (Ringold, 1995; Smith and Cooper-Martin, 1997). Hence, adopting a societal focus rather than a market-centred focus, the dynamic interpretation of vulnerability offers a powerful tool to investigate the social consequences of consumption (Baker et al., 2005; Baker et al., 2007; Davies et al., 2007) and provides greater insight on vulnerable consumers’ consumption practices and their multi-faceted interactions with the marketplace (Jafari et al., 2013; Shultz and Holbrook, 2009). As environmental and/or situational factors are regularly acknowledged as contributing to consumer vulnerability (Baker et al., 2005; Baker, 2009; Baker and Mason, 2012), austerity represents a significant if temporal economic pressure impacting on many for whom a particular liminal vulnerability may surface.

Liminality is constructed as a new identity state to be contrasted with the ‘normal’ or previous state (Baker et al, 2005) and is often associated with times of grief or other major life challenges. In this state, people are often thought to be more vulnerable and need to develop coping strategies (Baker et al. 2005; Voice Group, 2010). Within an anthropological context,
liminality has long been associated with rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1960[1906], Turner, 1974) where transition rites mark changes in a person’s state or social position and consist of three phases. Firstly, Separation involves some kind of removal from the stable identity or “an earlier fixed point in the social structure” (Turner, 1974, 232); secondly, Transition is when the liminar (or passenger) finds themselves in an ambiguous, betwixt and between situation which divorces them from the past and their future and thirdly; Reaggregation is the identity that emerges from the state of liminality and may be seen as better and different to the previous identity. Through the process of liminality, communitas (a bonding over and above formal social bonds) can spontaneously emerge through a comradeship of those involved. However, an element of “outsiderhood” may also occur where the passenger is ‘situationally or temporarily set apart’ (Turner, 1974, 233). Therefore, austerity is a fitting context to explore liminal vulnerability in the recent European economic downturn and its social impact upon male consumers (Anderloni et al., 2012; Cappellini et al., 2014; Peterson, 2013).

**Austerity and Male Consumers**

Since 2007/2008, many EU countries have adopted varying programmes of austerity, particularly Greece, Portugal, Ireland, Spain, Italy and the UK. These austerity measures have also resulted in significant political, economic and social problems including increased unemployment in Spain, where youth unemployment has exceeded 50% (Chang, 2012), increasing levels of personal bankruptcy in Portugal (Lopes and Frade, 2012) and increased health problems and number of suicides in Greece (News and Views, 2012). While the UK and Ireland are relatively less affected, Irish consumers have experienced increased income tax, levies and charges and reduced employment benefits and tax reliefs (Keating et al., 2013; Kennedy, 2011), while, in the UK, job insecurity and fears of individual indebtedness have fostered many into nervous, cautious and financially vulnerable consumers (Gritten, 2011; Quelch and Jocz, 2009).

Despite the wide media focus on the economic and political effects of austerity, Cappellini et al. (2014, p.1598) highlight the lack of academic attention within the marketing discipline around the impact of the economic crisis on the everyday lives of consumers. Rather than focusing on a fixed state of poverty (Elms and Tinson, 2012) as is explored in previous vulnerability studies, it is the temporal aspect of vulnerable behaviour during austerity which is of particular interest. Furthermore, while gender is one of the individual variables along with race, age, income and education that can affect consumer vulnerability (Hill and Dickenson, 2005), there has been a distinct lack of a male perspective in vulnerability studies in general and in austerity studies in particular. Given the evolution of the concept of modern masculinity (e.g. de Visser, 2009) and the changing roles and identities of men in modern society (Harrison 2008; Gentry and Harrison, 2010), it is particularly timely to explore how men are experiencing vulnerability within the context of austerity. Hence, in view of the scant marketing literature around consumer vulnerability and austerity and the particular lack of academic attention given to the effects of austerity on male vulnerability, this study aims to explore the nature of vulnerability and the process of liminality experienced by male consumers from austerity-burdened European countries.

**The Study**

This research forms part of a larger qualitative study which employed a practice-based theory lens (e.g. Shove, 2003) through which to explore consumer responses to austerity across a range of European countries. Taking an interpretive approach, phenomenological interviews were conducted using a purposive sample of 32 consumers from Ireland, UK, Spain, Portugal and Greece across a range of demographics (e.g. age, gender, lifestage and income including unemployed people). For this paper specifically, only the data from the 11 male interviews
are analysed. Using vulnerability and liminality as theoretical concepts, the analysis involved thematic coding firstly on an individual basis amongst the research team and subsequently collectively to facilitate inter-coder agreement.

**Preliminary Findings**

Recognising the significant if temporal impact of austerity as an economic force upon our respondents, the findings, which are work in progress, are presented using the theory of liminality (Turner, 1974; Van Gennep, 1960 [1906]) using the stages of Separation, Transition and Re-aggregation. For each of the three stages, the nature of vulnerability experienced by our respondents is explored followed by a discussion of the forms of communitas which emerged. In the Separation stage, respondents reported feeling detached from their old life, with some experiencing a change to their social condition (Van Gennep, 1960). As an example, Antonio, a 38 year old unemployed Spanish commercial director states how separated he feels from his old life: “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”. The vulnerability experienced here is both sociological and psychological and directly affects Antonio’s perceptions of self-worth where he feels he no longer enjoys the same class or position in society and is experiencing “outsiderhood” (Turner, 1974, p. 233). The Transition or Liminal stage involves being betwixt and between the old and new life (Turner, 1974). Several respondents reported the burden of shouldering financial responsibility for the family but also the anxiety and worry of failing in their role as provider. Manuel, a 53 year old Portuguese casual worker describes it as his “mission to provide my kids with a better life”. However, he emphasizes that he feels “controlled” and trapped in a difficult work situation when trying to support his family: “today if you want to work you have to accept whatever they offer you”. Failing to realise his children’s happiness is at the core of Manuel’s anxiety and psychological vulnerability which he carries throughout this liminal stage and there seems to be little short- or even medium-term chance of him exiting the tunnel.

Interestingly, a number of our respondents had reached the Re-aggregation stage and had “learned” and “adapted” to austerity while others took a proactive and strategic approach to navigating austerity, bypassing liminality altogether. Nikolaos, a 41 year old Greek entrepreneur believed it was best to “take my [his] destiny into my own hands”, and left his job to set up his own business and through a process of “self-assessment” and “self-improvement” he has made significant changes to his life and that of his family. While his position continues to remain financially uncertain, he feels “vindicated” as he correctly anticipated the financial crisis and therefore was prepared. Being fully re-aggregated, he has already made his decision to leave Greece if his business does not succeed. Throughout the process of liminality, there was evidence not only of outsiderhood but also communitas where our male respondents identified with and sought support from others who were similarly experiencing various forms of vulnerability. This communitas ranged from a sense of “solidarity” with others in similar or different circumstances to actually drawing on family, friends and community for support and help. This was effectively exemplified through Rory, an Irish 38 year old public servant who had formed strong community bonds with “a network of Dads in the area” with whom he enjoyed a deep comradeship and sharing of skills, knowledge and materials. Such communitas appeared to have helped our respondents cope with their vulnerabilities and adapt to societal change through the different stages of liminality.
**Concluding Thoughts**

This study traces the process of liminality and the nature of vulnerability experienced by male consumers. It contributes to the vulnerability literature by acknowledging the relevance of gender and the liminal vulnerabilities experienced by modern men in regard to their identities, responsibilities and expectations as fathers and providers. As much of the austerity literature focuses on impoverished consumers, an added contribution relates to the focus on the less-well-known consumption practices of the middle-classes (Cappellini et al., 2014) which enable us to shed more light upon the liminality of vulnerability experienced by various social classes.
References


van Gennep, A. (1960 [1906]). *The Rites of Passage.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press