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Austere Times: Male Experiences of Liminal Vulnerability

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Drawing on anthropological and gender theories, we investigate the liminal nature of male vulnerability within the context of austerity. From depth interviews with 11 males from 5 European countries, we contribute to the vulnerability and gender literature by revealing the effects of liminal vulnerability on male identities and roles.

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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 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 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.

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