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[to cite]:

Helen Woodruffe-Burton, Sue Eccles, and Richard Elliott (2002) , "The Effect of Gender on Addictive Consumption: Reflections on Men, Shopping and Consumption Meaning", in GCB - Gender and Consumer Behavior Volume 6, eds. Pauline Maclaran, Paris, France : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 239-256.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15725/gender/v06/GCB-06>

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The Effect of Gender on Addictive Consumption: Reflections on Men, Shopping and Consumption Meaning

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ABSTRACT

Addictive consumption is an area which has attracted increasing attention in the literature (e.g. Scherhorn, Reisch and Raab, 1990 O'Guinn and Faber, 1989, Elliott, 1994, Eccles, 2000) with the focus largely on women as addictive consumers. Indeed, research studies, including some mentioned above, have repeatedly indicated that addictive consumers are predominantly women. Here, however, a richly contextualised account of the experiences of a number of male consumers who identify as addictive consumers (or who exhibit addictive consumption behaviours) is presented and analysed in the light of the existing literature and new perspectives developed. Directions for further research are also proposed.

This paper derives from two separate but interconnected studies conducted by the authors over several years in the UK on consumption. Both studies have focused on shopping behaviour as their primary field of inquiry and have examined the experiences of both male and female consumers. Initially, a key objective was to study differences in male and female behaviour but findings emerged which highlighted not only differences (and certain

similarities) in behaviour between the genders but specific aspects of men's consumption experience which we felt were hitherto not recognised or explored in the literature. Interestingly, this almost serendipitous development resonates closely with the experience of US researchers Otnes and McGrath (2001), who decided to focus on researching male shopping behaviour only after their initial research into the differences in men's and women's shopping behaviour highlighted specific areas of interest in aspects of men's shopping behaviour: "As a result, we designed Wave 2 of our study to focus more on the male shopping experience..." (p.113)

Within this paper issues relating to gender and consumption are examined, with a particular focus on addictive consumption and the nature of consumption meaning. Taking on board Costa's (2000) assertion that, in marketing and consumer behaviour studies in general, "Scholars continue to be satisfied with a finding that 'men and women behave differently', with little reference as to how or why" (p.272), this paper attempts to begin to redress the balance somewhat. In this paper, therefore, we focus exclusively on the findings which emerged from the experiences of a number of men who

participated in the research. Aspects of their addictive consumption experience are examined and interpreted in order to inform the wider understanding of gender and consumer behaviour within the context of the notion of consumption meaning.

AN OVERVIEW OF GENDER INFLUENCES ON ADDICTIVE CONSUMPTION, SHOPPING AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

Various terms such as “*compulsive buying*” (e.g. Valence et al., 1988 and O’Guinn and Faber, 1989) and “*compulsive consumption*” (Shoaf et al., 1995) have been used to describe the phenomenon that we are referring to. However, addictive consumption is distinguished from compulsive consumption by Elliott (1994) who asserts that this behaviour is more accurately described as an addiction because it involves the extension of normal behaviour into a pathological habit, rather than a compulsion which involves unwelcome pressure to do something against someone’s will and it is this definition which we use in our discussion.

A key question which emerges when studying addictive consumption is why it appears that it is predominantly *women* who become addicted, and why it is frequently the *shopping experience* that they become addicted to, as opposed to, for example, alcohol, gambling or drugs. Indeed, as stated above, research has shown that addictive consumers are predominantly women; Scherhorn, Reisch and Raab (1990) state that twenty-two out of twenty-six of their sample were women; O’Guinn and Faber (1989) had a sample comprising 92% women. Scherhorn, Reisch and Raab argued that:

“This particular form of addiction seems to fit perfectly to the needs of many women: Because of their role-specific socialisation, women develop more passive and more emotional ways of coping with stress and conflicts. [...] Buying can remain an isolated and secret activity, shopping for this is socially acceptable and even desirable. [...] Shopping ‘has to be done’, it belongs to the housewife’s role...” (1990; p. 356)

As Barker (1997) points out “*gender influences our lives from the moment we are born*” (p. 292). Women are traditionally treated as more passive, caring and dependent, whilst men are seen as more aggressive, self-reliant and protective. Thus women are given the roles of mothers, homemakers, sex objects and assistants, and social training (in, for example, dress, physical features, behaviour and activities) which will encourage these limited roles. Barker continues that “*in some areas, women have greater and more persistent [mental health] problems than men: certain anxiety states, depression...and aspects of social relationships figure strongly in this respect*” (p. 294). He acknowledges that this is due, in many cases, more to the social upbringing and position of the individual rather than being a function of biological or personality sex differences. Costa (2000) also notes that “*it most often remains the women’s responsibility to control or influence consumption within her family*” (p.270), although she acknowledges that social and economic changes are contributing to significant changes in existing patterns of gender and consumption.

Shopping is described as “*both women’s work and women’s identity*”, according

to Williamson, 1992 (p. 106). For most women, shopping takes the form of routine provisioning as described by Miller (1998), where their role as homemaker includes buying food, clothes and household goods for the whole family. Indeed, as Miller points out, there is a strong tendency amongst men to *'distance themselves from identification with the act and the concept of shopping'* (p. 39). He also argues that even those men who do take some role in the shopping activities *'expect to obtain (and almost always actually receive) far more credit than would a female who merely shops out of conformity to traditional expectations'* (p. 39). This links in with the concept of men as 'WIMPs' (Well-Intentioned but Mainly Passive) described by Eccles (1992), where the overall *responsibility* of domestic labour is still very much in the woman's domain, and that any male intervention rarely relieves her of that obligation in the medium/long-term.

In terms of consumer behaviour, Fischer and Gainer (1991) argue that *'there are important differences in the way men and women experience, rationalise and enact consumption.'* Furthermore, *'our understanding of male/female differences has been constrained by the persistent tendency to focus analyses on the objects consumed or the outcome of the purchase decision'* (p. 350). Although not the first paper to address this topic (e.g. Hirschman, 1987, and Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988, also explored gender issues in relation to consumer behaviour), Fischer and Gainer conducted research that demonstrated that women use shopping not only for routine provisioning, but also as a means of self-expression and as *'an important cue to their self-definitions as women'* (p. 356). The range of 'feminised' shopping experiences

available to women can be used to construct and reinforce their self-identities and this has been the subject of extensive discourse elsewhere (see, e.g. Eccles and Woodruffe-Burton, 2000, Nava, 1996). There exists, however, very little by way of a corresponding discourse on men and shopping in the literature, although Otnes and McGrath (2001) suggest that *"the discussion of gender and shopping has become more salient to scholars of consumer culture"* (p.111) and some articles have focused explicitly on aspects of men's shopping behaviour (e.g. Woodruffe-Burton, 1998 and Otnes and McGrath, 2001).

EXPLORING CONSUMPTION AND CONSUMPTION MEANING

Firat and Venkatesh (1993) suggest that a key element of marketing in post-modernity is the use of transformational propositions in the form of simulated situations in persuasive advertising and other communications to promote the possibilities of how products could fit into consumers' aspired lives. McCracken (1990) describes western society as being *"profoundly connected to and dependent on consumption."* He goes on to suggest that consumer goods have become key instruments through which modern societies represent culture:

"The meaning of consumer goods and the meaning creation accomplished by consumer processes are important parts of the scaffolding of our present realities. Without consumer goods, certain acts of self-definition and collective definition within this culture would be impossible." (McCracken, 1990, p.xi)

Thus it can be argued that understanding of consumption goes beyond the idea of use value, of what consumers do to objects; it incorporates the notion of how

consumers interact with objects, of the consumption experience and of the meaning consumers attach to objects. As Moorman (1987), points out, individual consumers, through their own personal motives and goals, assign 'meaning' to consumption activities (buying, using and disposing – Nicosia and Mayer, 1976) which otherwise would be devoid of meaning and this has been considered by researchers such as Hirschman (1979) who notes that much has been done to conceptualise how individuals derive meaning.

Moorman's (1987) notion of "*Consumption assumptions*" suggests that meaning is derived in each situation from the application and operation of individuals' consumption assumptions which suggest that certain outcomes will result or certain values be realised through products, services and consuming behaviours:

"assumptions provide consumers with some reason to believe that their values can be met by the consequences that result from the consumption experience." (Moorman, 1987, p.207)

As Moorman points out, McCracken (1985) expresses a similar idea:

"Goods represent tangible objects of the phenomenal world in which principles can be invested and which can then serve as the tangible representation of intangible values." (McCracken, 1985, p.22)

Later in this paper, we examine some of these aspects of consumption meaning within the context of addictive consumption. Specifically, the discussion will draw on theories of symbolic self-completion (Gollwitzer and Wicklund, 1984) and symbolic

meaning (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993), the notion of '*possessions and the extended self*' (Belk, 1988) and anticipatory consumption experiences (e.g. Fournier and Guiry, 1993, Lury, 1996).

METHODOLOGY

As stated at the outset, this paper has been developed from the findings of two research studies conducted by the authors over several years. Although conducted separately, the studies shared general methodological characteristics, as follows:

- Both studies were exploratory, characteristic of interpretive research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), and employed techniques based on the existential phenomenological interview as the main tool for engaging with lived experience (Thomson et al., 1989)
- Sample decisions were based on purposive methods as characteristic of qualitative research where individuals are sought for whom the processes being studied are most likely to occur (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and where the sample should be information rich (Patton, 1990). Volunteers were solicited through the use of personal networks, appeals in the local press and via word of mouth.
- The interviews were conducted in a warm, friendly, informal manner. The interviewer started the conversation by asking an initial prompting question but, from then on, the dialogue or conversation flowed around the stories or incidents recounted by the interviewee.
- The interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed. The interviewees were offered the opportunity to read the transcript of their interview if they wished.

- The resultant phenomenological descriptions were interpreted in line with the criteria noted by Thompson et al. (1989) and interpretation was conducted via a form of iteration described by Hirschman (1992) and Thompson et al (1989). The iterative process takes the form of a back-and-forth procedure between each interview and the entire set of interviews following the analysis of each single interview where the back and forth is between passages in the interview and the entire interview (Spiggle, 1994).

Thus, individually, we generated extensive empirical material in the form of hundreds of hours of transcribed interview material. For the purposes of this paper and in order to extend our understanding of men's addictive consumption behaviour, we then focused on the experiences of a small group of male respondents, eight in all. There are various matters concerning sample size within qualitative research which attract attention in the literature; Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that it is not possible to base decisions of sample size within multiple case studies on statistical grounds. Rather, they propose that a conceptual approach to the issue which considers how many cases may be needed to give confidence in making analytic generalisations is the preferred approach. Morse (1994) suggests using at least six participants in studies where one is trying to grasp the essence of experience, as we are doing here.

On reflection, when we looked back on our research and realised that we wanted to focus on men's consumption behaviour, we were confronted by what Gergen and Gergen (2000) term

"surprises" in our research endeavour. According to Gergen and Gergen, reflexive researchers seek ways of demonstrating to their audiences their historical situatedness, their personal investments in the research, acknowledging various biases they may bring, revealing *"their surprises and 'undoings' in the process of the research endeavour"* (p.138). What we have attempted to do, in revisiting our findings and developing this paper, is to engage reflexively with the research and with each other; acknowledging our roles in shaping the research (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998) and recognising the value that we could jointly bring to developing our interpretation, whilst ensuring that phenomenological descriptions were interpreted in line with the criteria noted by Thompson et al (1989); the text of the interview was treated as an autonomous body of data (p.140) where a person's descriptions are considered in their own terms, without attempting to apply some form of external verification and the interpretation rests solely on the evidence provided by the transcript (thus conjecture or inference is not imposed upon the interpretation).

FINDINGS

In this section, a selection of excerpts from the interviews are reproduced to illustrate some of the key themes emerging from our research and these are discussed in some depth in the following section. All names have been altered to disguise individual identity and protect participants' anonymity.

This excerpt from Graham's account of his shopping addiction highlights some of the characteristics associated with addictive behaviour, including excitement and feelings of being out of control:

“Having to come back and justify a purchase in almost an obscene way is almost a bit of a strange thrill. That you’re going to spend £100 pounds on a piece of clothing, or a pen, or 4/5 CDs knowing damn fine that you need to buy something for home...and you think, what on earth are you doing spending money like that frivolously when it’s required to fulfil part of the budget. Again having to go of down the road of escapism thinking about how on earth am I going to justify this when I get home and get told off sort of thing. To hell with it I’m going to do it anyway. I don’t know it’s quite strange...I used to have extreme sports a long time ago I don’t have it anymore, this may be a different bizarre way of fulfilling the excitement of things like that, extreme sports maybe”.

Neil explains how his introduction to internet shopping helped him satisfy his cravings for shopping when asked how he would cope if he was physically unable to shop for some reason, e.g. having a broken leg:

“Previously (i.e. before internet shopping became available) I would have been extremely cheesed off. I would have missed something from my life but over Christmas I couldn’t sleep, it was 3 o’clock in the morning and I was just in the mood and I said to myself I really fancy shopping and at the time I really did. So I got on the Internet at home and I spent £60 on books. I was quite happy...I wouldn’t necessarily buy clothes though but things like books and CD’s. But I like just seeing something and going ‘yes I’ll have that’”.

This excerpt from John’s interview provides his personal, reflexive account of his addictive consumption:

“I’ve felt as if I’m just existing really, I haven’t felt happy or anything and when I spend money, what I find so strange is, that it doesn’t particularly make me happy, which I thought...particularly now it doesn’t, perhaps at first it did.”

Interviewer: So why do you think you do spend a lot of money on buying things?

“Well, I suppose a lot of it is, it gets out of hand. It’s like science fiction...I’m very much a Doctor Who fan, Star Trek, and this sort of thing so whenever any sort of videos of those come out, oh God, I’ve got to go and get them straight away otherwise they’ll spoil the set, or however you like to put it, and perhaps it doesn’t stop at that - I’ll go and pick up two new Doctor Who’s, and then I’ll look round and I’ll pick something else up and before you know where you are, there’s fifty quid gone. And I tend to do that with other things - if I go in a shop perhaps with the intention of buying a magazine that’s £2.50 or something, I might see something else that make’s it up to £4 and I think, ‘Well I haven’t really got enough cash to afford that at the moment. Let’s look round for something else, build it up a bit more and then use a card,’ as you don’t really like to use a credit card for three or four quid, you know. That’s the way I think and so that...it becomes a snowball really and the more you think about it, you think, ‘Well I’d like that, I’ll just go and get that and then I’ll put the cards away, so I won’t use it again,’ or whatever.”

Paul describes the physical excitement that accompanies his shopping and post-shopping activities:

“Yeah I get a buzz out of it definitely. When you see something you know you really want even if you go round and have a look somewhere else before you buy it, and then you're thinking that was it, that's it so you go back and hope that they haven't sold it or anything. So you get it put it on the counter get your switch card out or whatever and pay for it, you look in the bag straight away don't you...Oh yeah, it's the whole process of getting it and it's like when you pay for it and they folded it up and put it in the bag and you look in the bag soon as you get outside. So the next step for me is that I can't wait to get home or back to my girlfriends and try it on...It's pretty sad but it gives me a good feel...I think sometimes, it's like when you're on the pull because if you eventually pull a girl it's quite exciting, but it's not as good as the thought of pulling her. I think sometimes when you buy clothes, it's pretty similar because I'll go in and I look around and this is great and that is great and the fun is like looking at them and trying them on”

In several instances the men saw themselves as collectors of a particular type of product, as in John's description above of his need to add to his science fiction collection whenever anything new comes out. Graham describes himself as “discerning” and “a connoisseur of fountain pens” and he spends a lot of time and energy tracking down “the ultimate in a writing fountain pen”:

“I suppose it's a mental journey in trying to find a particular purchase. Pens in point of fact is quite a good one, because not all large stores or pens stockists will carry full complements of ranges of manufactured pens, and so it can be the sweet and sour of going to a particular shop that you would expect to have a new pen as advertised. I actually had one in January, because in Good Housekeeping Journal for Christmas there was a new Cross pen (a fountain pen) advertised in that particular journal. And so in January when I knew I would have to be going up to Scotland, I arranged in my mind sometime in that actual trip to go to Jenner's pen shop and be able to purchase this pen...I tried the pen, it's absolutely wonderful and at some point in the future I will buy one of those pens”

Neil has been an avid follower of fashion since his teenage years:

“There was a new shop up in Tunbridge Wells called Harringtons, I was only 18 ...it had Ralph Lauren, Timberland, Boss all the nice labels... on my first trip in there I spent £90 on a pair of shoes and then I would go back in every couple of weeks. On average I would probably spend about £80 on each visit”

He admits he is a “total snob” when it comes to shopping:

“I'm a total snob when it comes to shopping and there are only 2 shops that I will shop in and that's Joseph's and Dr Kruger ... I don't buy clothes that show the label, anything I'll wear you'll never be able to tell what it is unless you know what you're

looking for, but I feel happiest knowing myself that I've got good quality clothes on."

Ivan is also very involved in fashion consumption:

"I was at the British Vogue Party for Fashion Week two weeks ago and I had a Moschino jacket on and I felt because there were lots of people from the fashion industry and you know that you feel good and you know that people know it's a designer even though there are no labels on it...you can get a buzz out of that... because I was at a party for Face magazine and John Michelin came up to me and said that he hadn't even got the template for the jacket anymore. So that's a real buzz...and for the designer to come over and say it looks really good and I'm glad you're wearing it, is a nice buzz."

Henry lives on his own in a small cottage crammed with books, paintings and sculptures - all extremely tasteful and obviously chosen with care. He is extremely intelligent and knowledgeable about his collection and derives great pleasure from it.

Interviewer: So, you've obviously got literally hundreds, if not thousands of books. I mean, is it just books or...?

"I don't think it's books so much, although I sometimes worry that, er, a lot of the books I do buy, I don't, um, sell as often as I should. And perhaps I worry about the motives with which I tended to buy in the first place. But, unlike a lot of other good books, I do get rid of them and I do look at my collection, so there

is a feeling...It's not an obsession as it is with some people who can't get rid of books. And, as I say, I often ask myself, "Why did I buy them?" I go back and look at books that I've read and sometimes ask myself, "Well, why did I buy it?" Was it a compulsion? Was it an obsession? How much did that book have a quality which I must have felt appealed to me at the time and I can't understand it. So there is this, I suppose, appreciation."

Stephen also buys books and sees himself as a collector, with evidence of this beginning in childhood:

Interviewer: So what do you buy?

"Books."

Interviewer: Just books?

"Well there has been other stuff in the past"

Interviewer: To what extent? How often do you go and buy books?

"The last few years I've been keeping a fairly careful record. Quite a number of occasions I have actually tried to stop and cut down. I buy mostly second hand books which are not quite as expensive. Currently I spend about two hours a day in the bookshop. Previous to books it was records, this is going back to when I was about ten, I collected stamps and coins first."

Another aspect of the men's consumption behaviour which may be linked to this idea of being a collector, or a discerning consumer, was reflected in the way they interacted with the products they bought, either immediately after purchase or once they got home. In the quote from Paul earlier, he described how the excitement of the purchase continued once he had the bag in his hand and could get home to try the item on with *"all your different trousers*

and jumpers and shoes, do the total combination thing even with my bloody socks". Here, Paul describes this post-purchase behaviour in more detail, right down to the way he stores and cares for his clothes:

"Then it is a matter of getting it home and trying it on with all your different shirts ... if I get a new shirt then I will go back and try it on with all my trousers... I've only got 15/16 pairs of trousers/jeans so I'll go back and try them on and ...just try it on with different shoes, see what is the better look, similarly with jeans I'll put all different shirts on and jumpers etc. And I do that all the time, full length mirror. Well at home I've got one wardrobe with all my long sleeve collared shirts. Second wardrobe I've T-shirts hanging up, I've got nice T-shirts with collars, round neck T-shirts...then my other wardrobe, because I've got three, I've got all my trousers hanging in there, and they're in order of expense, don't know why I put them like that, just the way they are...my mum is the only one that washes anything because I trust her. My mum knows how much the shirts etc. mean to me and she washes them really carefully.....Last time my mum and dad went on holiday and I was at home, I had to write a list of every individual shirt and my mum wrote on how she washes each one. That's terrible isn't it."

Neil also looks after his clothes very carefully:

"Oh yeah I look after... Suits all hung up in suit bags, trousers all hung up on hangers, shirts all on hangers and ironed and folded that sort of thing... not here, (at

University) but I do at home. Like I have a certain drawer for white t-shirts and a certain drawer for coloured t-shirts and then I'll have all my white shirts in one part of my wardrobe and coloured shirts in another part."

Ivan describes what he does when he gets his purchases home:

"I get home and try them all on with other clothes that I've got and then I hang them up in my wardrobe and see how they all look...when you open your wardrobe door you want to be able to see a nice long rail of clothes"

Other examples of this enjoyment of the display of the goods once they are home include David, who describes himself as a "collector" and who buys mainly books and DIY tools, especially gadgets. He searches the stores for any new tools which come onto the market and all his (substantial quantity) of tools are uniformly displayed in racks in the kitchen and the garage of his house.

In several instances the men talked about their very strong involvement with their purchases, particularly clothes, often using emotional terms to describe their feelings:

(Ivan)

"I've had clothes, I once had a jacket - Gaultier jacket - which was a bomber jacket and it was a present and I loved it, it was just really really gorgeous, just black and white stripe. Anyhow I was once really really wrecked in a club and I left it on the floor and I woke up the next afternoon and obviously it had gone from the club and I cried all afternoon about this jacket, I just cried... There are certain things that I no

longer have that I was really attached to.”

(Paul)

“Well there are certain clothes which are tied up to certain nights out, or certain memories, or certain times ... (once) this lad came round and he was quite a good friend and I lent him this shirt which I never really wore anyway it was a Valentino one. He borrowed it and I kept having to ask him for it back, which really annoyed me... well I didn't need it because I hardly ever wore it, but it was the point... it's not just somebody borrowing it and then not returning it, it's like somebody borrowing it and someone else seeing you in it. Clothes are a part of your personality.”

Another interesting aspect of this involvement with fashion and fashion brands emerges from Paul's reaction to people who wear copies of designer brands:

“...people on our floor have got copies of Ralph Lauren which annoys me anyway because it's not how it should be, it devalues people who wear the originals. That really annoys me”

Neil, describing his feelings when he couldn't buy a suit he had set his heart on, and which he described as “sex in fabric”:

“I was clenching my fists. If I could have punched through the window of Harrods I would have done because I was just that stressed at it”

Ivan highlights the financial difficulties which can accompany addictive consumption:

“ (Once) at Christmas when I had the choice of paying my electricity and gas bill or buying... and I picked up this Versace shirt and it was a choice between paying my bills or buying the person I was seeing this Versace shirt, and the shirt won. I just cried a lot to British Gas and Electricity Board in January and said I've been in hospital for a month and I haven't seen any of my bills could you give me another month to pay please. I just staggered from one bill to the next.”

Graham also identified his addictive consumption as contributing to major financial problems affecting himself and his family:

“...maybe the household budget hasn't been able to afford it, but still I've been and purchased pens, and clothes and particular clothes for the boys and briefcases. I'd basically rolled myself into a situation where the bank were getting very stroppy with me because I had no money in the account and I was spending more than I was earning. And I suppose it gets to a point where the bank says it has to stop, you cannot continue to overspend and continually go into debt.”

In John's case, the problems caused by his spending had led to quite serious mental depression and he was prescribed Prozac by his GP:

“I think my problem is a piece of plastic. If I've got £50 in my pocket, I'm less likely to spend £50 on videos than I am with a bit of plastic, because I'm thinking, 'Well that £50 has got to last me x, y or z.' The Prozac, as I say, seems to have given me a more rational way of looking at it, perhaps I've got a better insight

into it, and I think to myself, like I said to the wife today, 'You'll have to have this card back because I can't control using it'...I mean it's almost like I've got to be a little boy and be given pocket money"

DISCUSSION

The interview transcript material presented above will be discussed and interpreted in this section.

SYMBOLIC SELF-COMPLETION AND SYMBOLIC MEANING

Labels and bags are images or symbols to which we attach meanings in our constructed realities:

"The tendency is for social groups to seek to classify and order their social circumstances and use cultural goods as means of demarcation, as communicators which establish boundaries between some people and build bridges with others."(Featherstone, 1991, p.63)

According to Firat and Venkatesh (1993) the *"ability to recognise images and attach meanings to them is at the heart of the marketing culture"* and this highlights the transient nature of signs and symbols in fashion (Craik, 1994). This came through as an important aspect for Ivan, Paul and Neil who classed themselves as being able to recognise non-label designer wear. The acquisition and display of symbols in the form of fashion is an important part of self-concept for men such as Ivan and Paul and can form part of self-definition. According to the theory of symbolic self-completion (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982), the symbols associated with any given self-definition serve a communicative

function and such symbols may consist of acquiring materials or objects appropriate to the self-definition which:

"signal to the community or society that one does indeed possess the self-definition: this indication of having attained a positive self-definitional status firms up one's sense of completeness." (Gollwitzer and Wicklund, 1984, p.65)

In the excerpts from the interviews presented there was evidence of this linking to other areas besides fashion. In order to bolster his self-definition as a *"connoisseur"* of pens, Graham not only bought pens but also followed the pen market very closely, knowing specialist stores and consulting various publications.

An important issue in relation to this concept is that it is not necessary to act out one's self definition, only to acquire the relevant artefacts to signal to others what the self-definition is. For example, an individual may identify as a jogger; they do not need to go out jogging but may construct their self-definition solely through buying and wearing jogging gear. In David's case, he actively sought new gadgets and tools to match the idea of a DIY expert and displayed them in his home and garage – yet, by his own admission, they were rarely, if ever used,

The importance of self-concept and self-definition in respect of product symbolism is emphasised by Solomon (1983) who studies the role of products as social stimuli and focuses on symbolic interactionism which is predicated on a number of basic postulates including the ideas that a consumer's self-concept is based on perceptions of the responses of others and that self-concept functions to direct behaviour. In the case of the some of the

men discussed here, self concept does direct behaviour; it governs the choice of clothes to buy and wear and it actually restricts this choice to a narrow range of designer fashion which would suggest a very specific self-definition, certainly in the cases of Ivan, Paul and Neil. As Solomon (1983) suggests, evaluations of the person's roles are dependent on the appropriateness and quality of the symbols that accompany that role – factors which these men emphasise are important in their choice of clothes. Further, Solomon mentions the significance of “*preening in front of a mirror*” (p.324) – an activity these men actively engaged in - thus symbolic consumption may be very solitary in nature and may not require the physical presence of significant others for reflexive evaluation. Solomon suggests that this means that:

“the members of the ‘dyad’ who send and receive symbolic communication may in fact be the same person” (p.324)

In the case of Ivan and Paul, this appears to illuminate what is happening in their accounts of self-evaluation and their repeated affirmation that it does not matter if other people do not recognise the brand or label, they do themselves and that is what is most important. They appear to have reached an advanced level of self-definition and the same is probably true for Neil.

POSSESSIONS AND THE *‘EXTENDED SELF’*

For the men who were addicted to consuming fashion, ownership of the clothes and the subsequent trying on, wearing and admiring the clothes was the object of the spending. Belk (1988) suggests that this is a key characteristic of possessions representing the

‘extended self’. In particular, the care and attention lavished by Paul on his clothes and also mentioned by Ivan and Neil suggest an involvement and interaction with the clothes themselves which fit this perspective. Belk suggests that a relationship may exist between incorporation of an object into one's extended self and the care and maintenance of the object:

“Generally, then the more an object is cathected into one's extended self, the more care and attention it tends to receive.”
(p.158)

A further aspect of possessions representing the extended self is the consequence incurred by loss of possessions. If possessions are viewed as part of self then it follows that an unintentional loss of possessions should be regarded as a loss or lessening of self (Belk, 1988, p.142). This came over very distinctly in Ivan's account of how he reacted when his jacket was lost and this was reinforced again in his interview when he made the point that sometimes he refused to take off his jacket when he went out, even if it was hot and there was a cloakroom, for fear of it going missing.

Paul's account of his friend misappropriating his shirt (through borrowing it) also showed this element of possessions and loss of self as he sees clothes as *“part of your personality”* and, as he said, it was not so much the borrowing of the shirt but rather the feeling he would have if other people then saw him wearing it as well which detracts from the meaning of the shirt for him. In that particular case, he ended up selling the shirt to his friend as he would not have worn it again and he says he will no longer lend clothes to friends. This typifies the concern noted by McCracken (1986) that the meaning of goods can be transferred, obscured, confused or even lost when goods

change hands and that “*goods must be emptied of meaning before being passed along.*” (p.80) Henry reflected on the fact that he doesn’t sell any of his books as often as he felt he should, he found it difficult to part with them and yet, in his own analysis, he found this puzzling.

Interestingly, examples of the way in which this sense of ‘*loss of self*’ in relation to possessions being stolen or lost came through in more subtle ways in the interview with Paul more than once. In the instances he described, the object was not physically lost but its meaning to him - the wearer - was lost or stolen when someone else wore the same item such as when Paul mentioned his new Paul Smith shirt being “*completely killed*” for him when he saw someone in the same shirt only one week after he had bought it. Paul’s annoyance with people wearing copy designer clothes which he felt “*devalues the people who wear the originals*” also reflects this idea very graphically as he does not say that it devalues the brand but that it takes something away from the people who wear that brand. A similar subtle example relating to loss of self, this time when the possibility of owning the item was lost before it was even bought arises in the story told by Neil about the suit that he ended up not being able to buy. His dramatic descriptions of the intensity of the emotions and his distress at the point where the possibility of buying the suit (because it was a dinner suit which he had not realised) was taken away from him led to him feeling heart-broken.

ANTICIPATORY CONSUMPTION EXPERIENCES

For these men, often the excitement of the shopping experience itself, the anticipation, seeking out just the right

item, such as Graham’s “*mental journey*” to find the perfect pen, or John’s urgent desire to seek out any new science fiction releases is an important part of the experience, while Stephen claims to spend, on average, two hours each day browsing in the book store. This concurs with the view expressed by Babin et al. (1994) that shopping can produce both utilitarian and hedonic value.

Paul’s use of the sexual metaphor in describing the ‘*thrill of the chase*’ and the excitement of the anticipation links in with the romantic ethic described by Kent (1995) which is “*not the desire to acquire objects as such, but the desire to experience in reality the pleasurable dramas that people have already enjoyed in imagination*”. Fournier and Guiry (1993) and MacInnis and Price (1990) are writers who have focused on pre-acquisition phenomena such as anticipatory consumption experiences and the idea of ‘*longing*’ which also appear to hold relevance for some of the men, for example, Graham’s pre-purchase excitement. However, John, who always feels he has to go out and get new releases straight away, has reflected on this issue and finds it strange that spending money doesn’t make him happy, although he thought it would. Lury (1996) points out that this longing will never be satisfied, thus reinforcing the idea that consumption becomes an endless quest:

“Consumption expresses the romantic longing to become an other; however,, whatever one becomes is never what one wants to be. This is because the actual consumption of goods becomes a disillusioning experience. The actuality of consumption fails to live up to the dream or the fantasy. This persistent cycle of pleasurable expectation and disappointment explains the never-

ending, insatiable character of ...consumption". (p.73)

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The behaviour of the men discussed in this paper indicates that they share some key characteristics of shopping addiction (see, e.g. Elliott, 1994). Aspects such as the overspending demonstrated by Ivan, John and Graham and their almost reckless attitude at times toward debt, and the lengths to which they go – travelling long distances for example - to satisfy their need to acquire certain goods are characteristics associated with shopping addiction. They also engaged in “*frequent buying of more than can be afforded*” (Lane Benson, 2000). In their own descriptions of their shopping activity, they are very focused and goal-oriented, however, the feelings of excitement and anticipation which they express when discussing their purchasing appear to be an essential part of the overall experience, the ‘*buzz*’ or the thrill. Furthermore, their very existence is not widely recognised, if at all, in the literature; men who not only enjoy shopping but are intensely involved with the whole process and for whom shopping plays a significant role in their lives, to which substantial personal resources are committed in terms of time, energy and money do not appear to have captured a great deal of attention from researchers within marketing and consumer behaviour. In line with Otnes’ and McGrath’s (2000) call for further attention to be directed towards men’s shopping behaviour, we propose that this whole area is one which merits detailed further investigation.

In contrast to descriptions in the literature of characteristics associated with both compulsive and addictive

shopping, these men did not lose interest in the items once purchased, on the contrary, of paramount importance to them is the acquisition and subsequent display of particular goods. The literature contains several references to the lack of interest in items following purchase where compulsive or addictive shopping behaviour is concerned: “*in the most extreme cases, items were not even removed from their packages or brought into the house*” (O’Guinn and Faber, 1989), with the importance of the shopping experience outweighing the purchase itself. For Paul, Ivan and Neil, in particular, the post-purchase behaviour which took the form of extensive trying on sessions and the actual wearing of the clothes and the reactions they received were clearly important parts of the experience. We propose that further research into the nature of addictive consumption be developed to explore this apparent discrepancy with established models of addictive consumption.

Natarajan and Goff (1992) identify a range of perspectives on compulsive consumer behaviour that includes using, possession, hoarding and collecting which may provide a fuller picture of the way these men engage with the clothes they buy, especially, for example, as expressed by Paul when he describes trying on his clothes and even admiring them when they are hung up on the wardrobe. The findings from this research do appear to highlight a key difference between male and female addictive consumers - the former tend to consider themselves as ‘*collectors*’ or ‘*hobbyists*’ rather than shoppers, and are more likely to use the products and gain great pleasure from them; men frequently describe their addiction to consumption in terms of being a collector or expert in books, videos, music, fine arts etc. rather than shopping *per se* and, again, we suggest that further

research be directed at gender differences and the role of consumption in people's lives.

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