

Socialised Consumption

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Dr Karl Petrick and Brendan Sheehan

a) Introduction

All acts of consumption have social and cultural dimensions. The economic aspect of this statement means that all spending by consumers is subject to a process of socialisation. Socialised spending in other words is determined, to a greater or lesser extent, by powerful social and cultural influences.¹

Socialised consumption is not a homogeneous category, it has many guises. The category includes individual-based choice subject to social and cultural influences, encompasses ritual-based consumption, with and for others in groups, and incorporates group-based conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption. These multifaceted versions of socialised consumption allow the significant insights of writers such as Veblen, Bourdieu and Katona to be incorporated into the analysis of consumption. All of the versions of socialised consumption act as key drivers of ever greater spending in abundant capitalism.

To analyse socialised consumption a new conception of the consumer is required based around the epistemological insights of George Herbert Mead. The consumer is a socialised individual who has personal agency, but whose thoughts, feelings and actions are subject to a range of social and cultural factors. Socialised consumers act collectively with others in groups. The desire to belong to a group, and to think and feel and act collectively, is a very strong human urge. Social and cultural influences on the consumer are stronger, purer and more focused in a group setting.

In the economy socialised consumption is a dynamic driver of abundant consumption that must be managed by the institution of marketing. The institution has the task of amplifying the urges of socialised consumers and channelling them into ever-expanding socialised consumption. To reinforce this process the institution engenders a dominant morality of consumption and a shared customer mindset that are essential for expanding socialised consumption.

This chapter begins by outlining three key propositions on which the subsequent analysis of the socialised consumer is based. The three propositions can be summarised as (1) society exists prior to the individual; (2) the socialised individual conducts generalised interaction with other people, the general environment and the institution of marketing; and (3) the society and culture of interest is that specific to the abundant capitalist system. The key propositions mark a profound methodological break with mainstream economics.

Section c examines the emergence of the socialised consumer. It notes the crucial development within the consumer's mind of self-consciousness. Section d considers how the socialised individual becomes aware of both the separate existence of others, and how others perceive him/her - a state of reflexivity. Crucial to this state is that the individual consumer takes on the generalised attitudes of significant others and groups about how one ought to think, feel and act. In the realm of consumption the dominant influence on the generalised attitudes of consumers is the institution of marketing. The institution perpetually provides consumers with a multiplicity of continually evolving "oughts" in order to persuade them to buy on an escalating scale. Section e explains the urge of socialised consumers to think, feel and act collectively in groups that share a common bond. Social and cultural influences on the consumer are stronger, purer, more focused in a group setting because of the urge to interact, to belong and to conform. The section also explains the relationships within (intra) and between (inter) groups of consumers and the scope for inter-group rivalry and switching in the realm of consumption.

Section f is the most important section of the chapter as it introduces the key concept of socialised consumption – requiring a radical shift in the academic mindset for analysing consumption decisions. Socialised consumption is multi-facetted in character. In one version it relates to how all individual consumption decisions are subject to, and ratcheted up by, strong social and cultural influences. In another version it involves ritual based consumption, which covers collective acts of consumption, with and for others, derived from or expressing cultural rituals in groups. Another version includes conspicuous consumption which covers dissimilar inter-group patterns of consumption, and inconspicuous consumption which relates to similar intra group patterns of consumption. Both conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption are ratcheted up through the dynamic of emulative spending. Section g outlines the many ways in which the institution of marketing amplifies the urges of socialised consumers to interact, to conform and to belong, and channels these urges order to ratchet up socialised consumption. Moreover it outlines how the institution engenders both a morality of abundance and a shared customer mindset that provide essential underpinnings for the growth of socialised consumption.

b) Three Key Propositions

Before explaining the concept of the socialised consumer it is necessary to set out three fundamental propositions on which are based all subsequent arguments. The three propositions can be summarised as follows. (1) Individuals are born into and develop within a wider social context. (2) These individuals conduct generalised interaction with other people (often in a group setting), with the broader environment and with the institution of marketing. (3) Individuals develop and interact in a society and culture that is historically specific to abundant capitalism; the consumer society and consumer culture give priority to consumption.

(1) Society exists prior to the Individual.

The first proposition is based on the epistemological insights of the social psychologist George Herbert Mead (1964). Mead proposes a simple but profound change in the treatment of the individual and society. In mainstream psychological and economic analysis it is usual to begin with the individual agent as the fundamental unit of analysis, and only then move on to consider society. Society is viewed in a degraded form, as an aggregation of autonomous individuals. By contrast Mead argues that the appropriate method of analysis of an individual is to suppose that *society and groups exist prior to the individual*. This first proposition means that the individual must be conceptualised as being born into and developing within an already existing society, with its groups, social structures, classifications, shared meanings and collective ways of thinking, feeling and acting. Therefore the mind and sense of self of an individual consumer must evolve in this social context. Hence the behaviour of the individual consumer is best explained as part of a prior social whole. As Mead explains:

“The whole (society) is prior to the part (the individual) not the part to the whole; and the part is best explained in terms of the whole, not the whole in terms of the part or parts”.

[Mead, 1964, p 121]

The importance of the first proposition cannot be over estimated. It marks a fundamental break with the tradition of mainstream economics. But once the methodological switch is made and the individual consumer is seen as evolving within a wider social whole, it becomes feasible to effectively analyse socialised consumption and the influence of the institution of marketing. Without breaking with the mainstream method it is quite simply impossible to fit the square peg of socialised consumption into the round hole of rational economic man.

The Meadian method of course does not deny the existence of an *inner space*ⁱⁱ of the individual consumer - both cognitive and subjective. But it views this inner space as developing through the interaction of an individual with external influences. Social and cultural influences establish broad and fuzzy boundaries to what is acceptable, and within those limits the individual has scope for personal agency. Put succinctly the individual has *constrained discretion* about how to think, feel and act. Moreover although society may be a strong influence that moulds the individual, the individual, or groups of like-minded individuals, can reformulate society and its culture in new ways. But the starting point of the Meadian method is always society. The individual consumer may be a mix of outer social influences and inner space, but the method of analysis works first from the outside in, and only then from the inside out.

(2) Generalised Interaction

Given society's prior existence the relationship between people and groups of individuals must play a pivotal role in the analysis of the socialised consumer. Certainly it is common for social psychologists and sociologists to concentrate on human relationships and the reciprocal influence of people and groups on one another. They refer to this as social interaction. But social interaction is limited to a vast array of human relationships. It says little about other human interactions, especially commercially based relationships in the realm of consumption.

Therefore the second key proposition of the analysis of the socialised consumer is that a *broader definition of interaction is required, what is here referred to as generalised interaction*. Social interaction forms an important category of generalised interaction, but the latter includes two further elements. First is the interaction between people and the broader environment in which they live and operate. Second it includes the vital interactions in the realm of consumption between consumers and the institution of marketing. The latter interaction also interlaces with both social interactions and interactions with the broader environment.

Social interaction is a wide ranging and diverse concept. First it includes face to face relationships, say between family members, friends and work colleagues, where there is direct reciprocal influence of one person on another (Goffman, 1990). It includes what the eminent Rogers (1967) refers to as "relationships". That is the more formalised social interactions between those of a parent and a child, a teacher and a pupil, and a therapist and a client. Once again this usually involves face to face interaction. Human relationships can occur over great geographical distances. Hence social interaction includes more indirect interaction between people, for example by the exchange of letters, or today more commonly through electronic forms of communication.

Face to face and less direct forms of human relationships are both included in the definition of social interaction used by social constructionists, like Gergen (1991) and Burr (2003). But the latter authors also incorporate a third element, the interaction between a person and the wider community and specific groups. This widens considerably the definition of social interaction, allowing "structural" features, such as a cultural milieu, class perspective, workplace relations, and social rules, to enter into human interactions. These structural influences create a frame of reference, a view of the world, which influences the way individuals interact with each other as members of groups. Consequently members of a society or group are likely to think, feel and act in similar, collective, ways.

Individuals have a connectedness with the broader environment in which they live. Such interaction includes the influence on the individual of the sights, sounds, colours, aromas and textures of the natural environment in all its rich diversity and the influence of the individual on this natural world. It also includes human interaction with the humanly constructed environment such as cities, roads, specific buildings and objects. In what follows all these interactions are categorised as environmental interaction.

Environmental interaction is extremely important to the development of human experiences of the world, and the way individuals come to understand these experiences. It can have a deep impact on the specific interests of a person that may in turn bring out idiosyncratic talents (e.g. for science, poetry, sports, or painting). Moreover individuals will usually have some subjective connection with the environment, which stimulates intense emotional commitments within the inner space. The individual may find that for idiosyncratic reasons that they are emotionally drawn to a colour, a sound, a vista, a smell, an image, an animal, a building, even a retail store. The individual and the environment in which they live are not separate, sealed containers, but perpetually interacting phenomena.

Moreover social interaction and environmental interaction cannot be separated. All social interaction occurs within some environment. The latter must influence the former, and the former influence the latter. The romantic ambience of a Valentine's Day dinner, for example, will depend on its location - whether it is in a French restaurant or in a fish and chip shop; and the individual's perception of the environment will depend on whether he/she has just fallen in or out of love. Social and environmental interactions are inherently intertwined.

In the realm of consumption the most significant interaction takes place between the individual consumer and the institution of marketing. This relationship will be referred to as the consumer-marketing interaction. This is not a concept to which psychologists, in all their guises, give sufficient attention. For this interaction is *essentially commercial in nature*, it is initiated and perpetuated in order to seek profit.

In the realm of consumption the consumer-marketing interaction relates to all the times when individuals are addressed by the institution in their role as actual or potential consumers. This interaction is multi-layered and sophisticated. The interactions span diverse situations, such as when a person interfaces with a barrage of commercial messages whilst shopping in a store, or when perusing a choice of branded products, or when reading a magazine advert, or when considering a celebrity endorsed product, or when they are responding to commercial text message.

In an era of abundance the consumer-marketing interactions are so all pervading that they straddle and infuse the two interactions already discussed. In terms of social interaction this is not surprising as the institution of marketing have long since realised that the best way to communicate commercial message is to “construct” social interactions. An exemplar of this technique is the celebrity endorsement of branded products. Celebrities communicate persuasive messages to consumers in ways an inanimate product cannot do. And consumers react to the celebrities at a human level and associate the perceived attributes of the celebrity with those of the product. Such constructed social interactions are extremely effective in persuading large numbers of individuals to think, feel and act similarly by purchasing the endorsed product. In the process the consumer-marketing interaction is humanised, giving it the appearance of another social interaction, when in reality its *raison d’être* is solely commercial.

The institution of marketing incorporates environmental interactions to communicate its persuasive commercial messages. The most obvious interaction is between the consumers and branded products - the consumer-product interaction - which is an important subset of the wider consumer-marketing interactions. In an era of abundance the scope for interactions between a consumer and branded products are vast. Consumers see products everyday, the products become the possessions of the consumers, and the products surround consumers in everything they do.ⁱⁱⁱ

Consumer-marketing interactions, however, go further still in straddling other interactions. This commercial interaction fuses together both social and consumer-product interactions. This happens when branded products are themselves embedded with people with whom the consumer can socially interact. Entertainment based products such as films, the theatre, fashion, music, and sports events are exemplars of such embedding. Films and plays have their stars and directors, fashion has its designers and models, music has its composers, bands and singers, sports has its coaches and players. People are embedded within the product. Through this fusion these products considerably strengthen the power and influence of the consumer-marketing relationships.^{iv}

It would however be quite wrong to think that the consumer-marketing interaction is one sided - flowing from the business sector to the individual. Certainly the institution of marketing initiates the commercial interaction by communicating persuasive messages. But the consumers are not passive receivers of messages; they have a considerable degree of constrained discretion. For the messages to “work” consumers must be active decoders; this often requires the consumers to apply some personal knowledge to the message to make the interaction effective. Consumers select from the glut of information those

messages to which they will give attention. Consumers then consider and evaluate the messages selected, and choose the messages and branded images to which they want to respond, making the choice of whether or not to buy. This is consumer sovereignty. Put another way consumers are not the manipulated victims of the institution of marketing. They have the personal agency to choose which interactions will succeed. The interactions that are successful will be repeated and reinforced; those that don't succeed will be re-evaluated and changed. In this way genuine interaction occurs between consumers and the institution of marketing.

(3) “Society” and “Culture” is Specific to Abundant Capitalism

Laudably non-economists emphasise the relationship between the individual and society. Yet collectively they are less than clear about the character of the society to which they make perpetual reference. If it is accepted that society has an important influence on the individual, this is a serious omission. “Society” becomes an analytical black hole, with no shared sense of what is meant by the concept in different academic disciplines. The result is conceptual drift. This is a fault which must not be repeated. Therefore the third key proposition of this analysis is that it is *specific to an individual who lives in a social and cultural setting founded on, and perpetuating, the abundant capitalist system.*

Abundant capitalism has a massive capacity to produce huge varieties of branded products every day. Abundant capitalism is never static, but is driven on by an imperative to grow. Economic growth is fuelled by the realisation of ever-greater corporate profits. Furthermore economic growth requires the creation of an ever larger productive capacity, fed by ever greater volumes of energy and resources.

Of course to realise the profits from this vast productive effort requires large numbers of individuals to think of themselves as customers who are able and willing to buy. Yet past abundant consumption leaves a breathtaking cornucopia of previously purchased possessions and experiences. Put simply then the economic problem for abundant capitalism is how to convince the massive numbers of the most affluent people in the world to keep consuming on an ever expanding scale?

If this is the priority of the economy this too must be the priority of society. This system requires a society that prioritises consumption, whose citizens sees themselves primarily as consumers in the way they think, feel and act. A society of consumer-citizens inevitably colours the types and contexts for generalised interactions.

Each society has an associated culture. In general terms a culture can be thought of as providing a “lens” through which the everyday world and social actions can be observed and interpreted by its individual members. Put another way it provides a “structure to meanings” about the “world” which the members of a society experience. The cultural setting therefore provides each member of society with a blueprint for understanding and participating in general interactions with others who share that cultural blueprint (McCracken, 1990). A more specific “take” on culture is that its members have shared ways of thinking, similar ways of feeling and collective ways of acting. The culture moreover provides a blue print for the shared ways of thinking about feelings; it provides shared sets of feelings about different ways of thinking; and it even provides shared ways of thinking and feeling about different ways of behaving. In addition a specific cultural blueprint provides its members with shared ways of thinking and feeling about and acting towards “outsiders” - those from other cultures who have a different cultural blueprint.

The culture of a society that rests on the foundation of abundant capitalism is often, but vaguely, designated by non-economists as a “consumer culture” (Fine and Leopold, 1993). A consumer culture is historically specific to the abundant capitalist system. It provides a lens for interpreting the structures for meaning in the realm of consumption. This culture breaks down abundant consumption into various cultural categories - such as branded products, product classes, and the managed market-place - and establishes cultural principles (or ideas) that reinforce these categories - such as norms of consumer behaviour, modes of thinking (i.e. consumer sovereignty), even a morality of generalised abundance.

At a practical level the consumer culture provides a template for its members to act as energetic, powerful, moral consumers in everyday life. Indeed the acts of shopping and buying become the iconic cultural rituals of practical life. At a macro-level the culture views acts of consumption as the central social activity. It glories in the affluence and variety of the choice society enjoys. It conditions those who share the dominant cultural perspective on consumption to interact increasingly in the setting of the managed market-place, and less in other settings. In a consumer culture, temples of consumption replace places of God where people congregate and commune.

The institution of marketing, the key institution of abundant capitalism, promotes, fosters and encourages the perpetuation and dominance of the consumer culture. The institution implicitly conditions people in society to increasingly think of themselves as consumer-citizens. A sophisticated form of social control is applied, not through coercion, but by individuals exerting self-control in order to act as the culture requires and the economy demands - as good consumers. ^v It is not enough, however, for the institution of marketing to create a consumer culture. It must continually reformulate and disrupt the accepted cultural lens

and the everyday routines by which people understand the realm of consumption. This is done for one reason: to provide new reasons and justifications for more spending by affluent consumers. As McCracken says the consumer culture must be “hot” - that is perpetually evolving. Heating up a culture requires the constant refocusing of the lens used for observing and interpreting everyday life and the perpetual amendment of the blue print for general interaction. Put another way, heating up the culture requires the continuous reshaping of shared ways of thinking, feeling and acting. Culturally “hot” societies are the perfect breeding grounds for ever greater abundant consumption.

By heating up the culture the institution of marketing also allows abundant capitalist societies to move beyond rigid mono-cultures. A consumer culture is culturally diverse, made up of a multiplicity of sub-cultures. These sub-cultures have divergent agendas and manipulate ideas and symbols to further these agendas (Besnier, 1995), which influenced by the institution of marketing are themselves evolving and adapting. The realm of consumption is the meeting point for these divergent, and not necessarily compatible, cultural perspectives. In everyday life what people buy, where they buy it, how they finance the purchase, where they consume, and who they conduct consumption with, increasingly defines their membership of any specific sub-culture. Any possible tensions between sub-groups are relieved through divergent consumption patterns. Indeed the vast array and diversity of products which the abundant capitalist economy produces allows these cultural sub-groups to enjoy their own distinct patterns of consumption without unduly threatening the consumption of other groups.

It is wrong to “blame” the existence of culturally hot societies solely on the institution of marketing. Consumer-citizens, acting with constrained discretion, heat up the culture as well. For example culturally hot societies allow dissatisfied individuals and sub-groups to challenge dominant cultural norms and practices, not through demonstrations and protest but via distinct patterns of consumption. Burr provides the example of lesbian groups who sought to identify themselves by wearing what had until then been thought of as workmen’s cloths, thereby reformulating the cultural categories of fashion. Hot cultures also allow *avant-garde* individuals - fashion leaders and trend setters - to demand new cultural mixes that fuse together distinct cultural categories and principles.

Therefore consumer citizens use personal agency to enact cultural change and adapt the way the society, of which they are a part, views the world. If a sufficiently large and affluent enough collection of individuals share this new perspective, the economic system will respond. It will design and market new branded products to meet these new collective desires. But it should be noted that a consumer culture still conditions “radical” individuals who are unhappy with

existing cultural blueprints to think of social change in terms of changed patterns of consumption. The use of war or political revolution to enact social change is thought of as beyond the pale, for such things threaten the perpetuation of the economic abundance that all members of society enjoy.

c) The Emergence of the Socialised Consumer

A socialised individual does not emerge fully formed from the womb. As Rogers rightly says a person is not born with a sense of who they are, or of what they are striving for, in a social setting. In addition Mead claims a person is not born with a fully formed reasoning mind, or a fixed sense of self, or even a complete state of self knowledge. These things only emerge and develop through the experience of generalised interaction, from childhood through all the various stages of adulthood. As a consequence the best way to think about the emergence of a socialised consumer, especially in an era of abundance, is as a complex *work in progress*.

Mead sets out how a person's mind and sense of self begin to emerge through childhood. For Mead the mind of a socialised individual does not evolve introspectively, but through generalised interactions. Through these experiences individuals start to apply their cognitive capacities. They start to think, reflect, evaluate, plan action and very importantly communicate with others. Hence generalised interaction allows a thinking individual to emerge. As Mead notes:

“it is absurd to look at the mind simply from the standpoint of the individual human organism; for although it has a focus there, it is essentially a social phenomenon...”

[Mead, 1964, p 195]

Once a person begins to apply his mind and communicate with others, a further stage of cognitive development occurs, that of *self-consciousness*. This happens when the individual can perceive the existence of a separate entity called the “self”. The individual can then step outside the “self” and think about and act towards this “self” as he/she might think about and act towards another object. The self can be inspected and judged, and its possibilities can be directed. The individual can moreover decide the motivations and desires of this self, designate to it specific attitudes and consider how it might beneficially interact with others. The individual does all this by means of an “internal and implicit conversation” (Mead, 1964, p159) within the inner space.

Once all of this has occurred Mead claims that a separate mind – with developed cognition - has come into existence. But this separate mind, and its personal agency to make decisions, does not operate in a vacuum. The thoughts it has, the arguments it conducts with itself, the goals it set itself, the evaluations it

makes about itself etc, are all heavily influenced through generalised interaction. To illustrate these abstract points consider the case of a consumer in abundant capitalism. The influence of the consumer-marketing relationship and the dominant consumer culture provides the individual mind with a lens for interpreting the realm of consumption and a blueprint for thinking about branded products. It provides the “language” of shared meanings with which to think about consumption. It provides a framework about how thoughts may be expressed through consumption. Finally it defines the context for what an individual will think is important, giving priority to the act of buying. Essentially from a Meadian perspective, introspective thinking about consumption begins from the outside and moves inwards. But the developing self-conscious mind of a consumer can reflect on these external stimuli and evaluate how to use the opportunities provided by the realm of consumption to his/her own advantage. Put another way, the mind of the self-conscious consumer begins to work from the inside out.

d) Society’s Representative in the Consumer

A critical point in the development of the socialised consumer occurs when the thinking self conscious person begins to appreciate the importance of other people as separate thinking entities. Mead sees this formative process emerging in children’s play activity that allows the child to perceive the world as others see it. And from this it is but a short step for the child to start to judge himself/herself by the way others view him/her. A child’s sense of self, for example, is heavily influenced by the responses and reactions the child receives in interactions with parents, siblings and friends. But this is not just true for a child. All people at different stages of the life cycle tend to judge themselves by how they perceive others judge them; for example people think themselves successful if and when others tell them that they are successful and act accordingly.

Mead claims that once an individual becomes self conscious, able to modify how he/she acts towards others, and once a person can view himself/herself from the perspective of others, the individual mind has attained a state of *reflexivity*. A reflexive consumer is a “thinking” self-acting individual, but within the context of a wider social process. Moreover as the importance of the opinions of others matures within a consumer’s mind this inevitably leads to the individual taking on the values, beliefs, attitudes and opinions of others with whom he/she interacts. In other words through interaction the reflexive individual picks up a generalised attitude, a community perspective, that provides a blueprint about how to think and feel about oneself, about other people and about the numerous actions in which groups of people engage. This generalised attitude is what Mead refers to as the *generalised other*, or “society’s representative in the individual” (Strauss, 1964, p xxiii).^{vi}

The generalised other is made up of two dominant influences. The first influence is the impressions made on the individual by “significant others”. Significant others according to Gergen (1991) may be called “invisible guests” who occupy parts of the mind of the socialised individual. Significant others may be a parent or grandparent, a close friend, a religious figure, a famous intellectual or a fictitious character from literature, with which the individual has had a real or imagined relationship. The institution of marketing provides a throng of celebrities that act as significant others for consumers. It is the values, beliefs, attitudes and opinions of the invisible guests that contribute to the individual’s internal conversation about how he/she ought to think, feel and act. The invisible guests act as role models, defining appropriate ways of thinking and feeling and establishing acceptable standards for behaviour.

The significant other is also determined by wider and explicit social and cultural forces. The values, beliefs, attitudes and opinions that are shared within say religious, educational and political institutions will strongly influence the generalised other of a socialised individual. Of course in the realm of consumption the most powerful social and cultural force is the institution of marketing offering values, beliefs, attitudes and opinions that give priority to consumption. Mead refers to these shared values, beliefs, attitudes and opinions within any group or community as *organised social attitudes*. The sharing of the organised social attitudes greatly facilitates group-based communication and cohesion. An exemplar of this in the realm of consumption is a consumer wanting to communicate to others their own high status and membership of a specific social milieu. The person chooses a Rolex watch as the sign vehicle for the intended message. But for this communication to be effective there must be an organised social attitude about the high status of the Rolex, relative to other branded watches. The value of the Rolex as a sign vehicle comes from it being a socially accepted marker of high status, not from any asocial, introspective judgement by the individual. Of course in this case the mass messaging of the institution of marketing provides the necessary shared meanings not just to the individual, but to all within and without that social milieu.

A consumer who is a member of an abundant capitalist society will have a generalised other that is subject to perpetual change.^{vii} The active instigator of this change is the institution of marketing. In its restless efforts to persuade people to buy it constantly offers individuals new “oughts”, changing the guides for action – through new fashions, new celebrities to emulate, new product features to purchase, even new reasons to become a consumer. Consumers living in an era of abundance are as a consequence:

*“...bombarded with ever increasing intensity by images and actions of **others**; our range of social participation is expanding exponentially... [and] we absorb the views, values and visions of **others**.”*

[Gergen, 1991, pp 15-16; my emphasis]

This swirling and extensive social participation initiated by the institution is what Gergen calls *social saturation*. The socially saturated consumer has as a consequence a huge variety of competing generalised others from which to choose. This is what Gergen calls “the burden of an ever increasing array of oughts” (*ibid*, p 80). But the ever increasing array of generalised others offered by the institution will rarely be consistent with each other and will express contradictory organised social attitudes. For a socialised consumer this makes the task of constructing an individual identity more challenging; the work in progress becomes more complicated. But Gergen, citing Billig, notes that individuals have a capacity to cope with these contradictions. In other words an individual can simultaneously hold opposing viewpoints that guide their actions.

“People can feel their prejudices are justified, yet it is wrong to be intolerant; that there should be equality but hierarchies are also good; and that we are all basically the same, but we must hold on to our individuality”.

[*ibid*, p 72]

In the realm of consumption the array of competing oughts and the capacity for contradiction is a huge boon. The consumer has a powerful propensity to experiment with generalised others, in order to find at any one time the unique configuration that is fit for purpose. Such experimentation usually involves new and more varied patterns of consumption.^{viii}

But even when consumers’ make a choice about which ought fits them best, the work of the institution of marketing does not cease. For it will constantly offer consumers new configurations of oughts - and different patterns of consumption - from which to choose. Keeping consumers consuming is a never ending task.

e) Groups of Consumers

Socialised individuals act collectively with others in groups (Tajfel, 1981). The desire to belong to a group, and to think and feel and act collectively, is a very strong human urge. Groups of individuals want to think, feel and act in terms of “we” and “us”, and “us” and “them”, rather than “I” and “me”.^{ix} Acting collectively in groups requires shared ways of thinking and feeling about those within the group, about those outside the group and about general interactions. *The social and cultural influences on the individual are stronger, purer and more focused in a group setting.*

Groups of individuals come together for a variety of reasons.^x But what is common to all groups is that membership is based on some *common bond*.^{xi} The common bond can be defined in a multiplicity of different ways; the bond may be that the members all share a family genealogy; are all parents; share a gender or sexual orientation; have a common personality trait; share a set of beliefs or a religion; have the same ethnicity or nationality; have a shared cultural heritage; love the same person; support the same sports team; consume a particular branded product; seek a mutually consistent lifestyle; or have graduated from the same university. This is just a selection of possible common bonds. There are very many others.

In some cases the person is born into a group, for example being a family member or a citizen of a nation. But more often a group is self selecting, that is the group only exists because its members decide that they share a common bond, or alternatively other people categorise a group of individuals as having a common bond and hence assign them to a particular grouping (Hogg *et al*, 1995; Thoits and Virshup, 1997). A consumer, for example, can decide to become a member of a wider group of customers of a specific branded product, or product class, through responding positively to a sales promotion campaign and making a purchase. Conversely an advertising agency conducting research on a promotional campaign can decide to profile the customers of the product on the basis of a shared demographic characteristic.^{xii}

The common bonds associated with different grouping will inevitably vary in strength. For example the emotional ties associated with the common bond of being married partners will be far stronger than the fact that you share with others the desire to purchase Nike shoes. Moreover groups are not monolithic structures in which all members are identical. Within each group, for example, the group-orientated commitment of its members can vary quite considerably. In a group of supporters of the same football team, for example, there will be season ticket holders who attend all home matches, whilst others might only attend one or twice a season but purchase the monthly club magazine. Hence all groups will have within them sub-groups, of “insiders” who are very strongly

committed to the group and its thoughts, feelings and activities, and “outsiders” who are rather less involved.

The detailed character of consumer groups is worthy of further consideration. It should be noted at any one time an individual will not just be a member of one consumer group. He or she will have simultaneous membership of an array of disparate groups. For example a consumer might simultaneously be one member of a married couple, a Manchester City supporter, a middle of the road music lover, a member of a specific golf club, an owner of a specific brand of car, a customer at a specific branded store, and a resident of Leeds. Membership of some groups does not exclude membership of other *non-competing* groups. But the selection of a consumer group to whom an individual feels he/she belongs must exclude membership of *substitute* groups. Each choice of a consumer group membership means the rejection of its substitute group. Hence the consumer making the previously choices noted above must exclude himself/herself from competing grouping – those who are divorced, who support Manchester United, or who love RAP music etc.

As Hogg et al (1995) and Thoits and Virshup (1997) explain in social psychology this is referred to as the categorisation of in-groups and out-groups. Hence a member of an in-group can identify or define their membership of a specific group both by the common bond shared with other members of that in-group and by comparison with an out-group with whom they do not share a common bond. Moreover, as Tajfel notes, common to all groups is a feeling of perceived superiority shared by those in a specific in-group in comparison to those who align themselves in other out-groups. Therefore in-groups will identify some common characteristic (i.e. chic, stylish, hardworking, trustworthy, working class, sensitive, loyal) which will make its members feel better about themselves and less good about other out-groups who are perceived not to share the characteristic. Perceived superiority is critical to group-based patterns consumption. Through either shared consumption of a specific branded product or shared patterns of consumption, the perceived superiority felt by members of an in-group can be communicated to out-groups members implicitly, *sotto voce*. Abundant consumption provides a rich, sophisticated and nuanced vocabulary for such intra and inter-group communication.

The organised social attitudes of a group provide the essential components of the generalised others - the shared values, beliefs, attitudes and opinions - of its individual members. The social attitudes of groups provide a context and guide, a list of oughts, which makes it easier for a socialised individual to know what to think, how to feel, what to say, how to socially interact. Group memberships are very useful for the socialised consumer, for they help define what is appropriate or desirable to buy. That is to say the individual thinks, feels, interacts and

consumes in a similar way to others with whom they share a common bond, and in dissimilar ways to those with whom there is no common bond.

Membership of any group will rarely remain static over time. All groups, however they are defined, are permeable and in a constant state of evolution, none more so than consumer groups. That is a person can stop being a member of one in-group and become a member of another, which by definition changes what he/she regards as an out-group. This obviously happens over the life-cycle of each generation of people, who develop through childhood and into adulthood, joining new groups and leaving old ones as they age and take on responsibilities. But even in those groups previously thought to be innate and unchangeable - such as gender - inter-group switching is now possible. Inter-group switching is a constantly changing process in society.

Social psychology, heavily influenced by Tajfel, focuses on the adverse consequences of inter-group switching, such as inter-group conflict and competition. A classic case of such social conflict occurs when members of a subordinate group seek to gain membership of a dominant group - as occurred in the struggle of black people in South Africa to obtain democratic and legal equality with the white minority. But in the realm of consumption inter-group conflict and competition that engenders higher spending can be viewed quite differently. This point will be examined further in the next section.

f) Socialised Consumption

The concept of the socialised consumer is merely a prelude to a radical shift in the analysis of the economic aspect of consumption; for socialised consumers conduct socialised consumption. Socialised consumption recognises that all acts of spending have important social and cultural dimensions. This insight requires a fundamental shift in the frame of reference for understanding what drives consumption spending and how it can be cultivated by the institution of marketing. It follows that socialised consumption cannot be effectively analysed using the techniques of mainstream economics which neglect the role of powerful social and cultural forces.

Socialised consumption can be divided into a number of versions. The weakest form of socialised consumption refers to *individual-based consumption which is subject to social and cultural influences*. That is the type of spending which an individual consumer conducts to satisfy their own personal demand. But a socialised consumer never operates in a social vacuum. When making individual-based consumption decisions the consumer is still a social animal operating in a broader social and cultural context. The context provides a shared lens or blueprint which socialised consumers use to think about individual spending decisions. In addition the reflexive socialised consumer conducting an internal conversation about individual-based consumption choices will be strongly influenced by the attitudes and values of the generalised other –

society's representatives in the consumer. What this means is that the socialised consumer cannot make atomistic, asocial introspective spending decisions. To pretend otherwise makes no sense if consumption decisions are to be understood.

To illustrate how individual-based consumption choices always have a social and cultural dimension consider the exemplar of a woman considering buying an item of clothing for her own use. No one else will wear the item so the choice is clearly individual-based. Obviously the cognitive and subjective inner space of the consumer will play a role in considering the choices available. But the "individual" spending decision must have a wider social and cultural context. To begin with the categorisation of items of clothing for women, as opposed to men, will be largely culturally determined. The suitability of combining items of clothing to create an "outfit" will be heavily influenced by cultural forces and the experiences of social interaction with others. Moreover the design – the cut, style, textures and colours - of the items of clothing have heavy cultural influences, especially what is socially perceived as "fashionable". Furthermore the consumer will want to conform to the values of a significant other or a group-based organised social attitude. Put succinctly the female consumer will want the "individual" choice to meet with the approval of significant others and comply with group-based opinions about what she "ought" to buy. But this is just an exemplar of a far more general trend in individual-based consumption decisions. All such decisions have a social and cultural dimension. The socialised consumer cannot make decisions any other way, and the treatment of consumption by economists must recognise this fact.

But the consumer is not a manipulated victim of wider social and cultural forces. For social and cultural influences only set broad, fuzzy boundaries for what is acceptable. Within these broad parameters there is considerable scope for individual discretion about consumption choices, and the abundant capitalist system provides a rich variety of choices of products that fall within broad boundaries of acceptability. So the consumer has considerable discretion over specific consumption acts and over the particular configuration of a pattern of consumption. The consumption of an individual consumer will undoubtedly have similarities with others with whom he/she interacts and shares organised social attitudes, but no pattern of consumption will be identical. The consumer therefore has the personal agency to express a considerable degree of individuality. This is best seen in the consumption choices of so called leaders of fashion who show considerable personal agency by pushing at the boundaries of what is socially acceptable, changing various organised social attitudes and revising various "oughts".

Socialised consumption as a category goes well beyond individual-based spending influenced by external forces. It also includes a variety of categories of

spending that are fundamentally group orientated. Therefore a second version of socialised consumption relates to what can be called *ritual-based consumption*; that is acts of consumption derived from or expressing cultural rituals in groups.^{xiii} Ritual-based consumption relates to spending decisions by which group members symbolise and cement the social ties with others inside a group – reinforcing the common bonds and mutual obligations they share. As a by-product ritual-based consumption also symbolically communicates in-group membership to others outside the group. Acts of ritual based consumption are by definition shared, collective, forms of consumption. Consumers acting out rituals in a group setting will *buy things with or on behalf of others, and allow others to buy things on their behalf.*^{xiv} When a person provides a gift for a significant other or a group of others the gift givers can be said to be consuming vicariously (Veblen, 2005). That is the gift giver spends so that others can be deputed to enjoy consuming products. The gift giver gains both through both experiencing others enjoying themselves and by accumulating the social prestige of being the dispenser of largesse.

The types of ritual associated with these shared acts of consumption can be broadly defined. The ritual can be community wide and large scale, such as collectively celebrating Christmas or Ede; or the ritual can be one that is significant but more specific, such as celebrating a family birthday or an anniversary. But in reality the vast majority of acts of ritual based consumption are small scale, conducted in everyday social interaction, such going on holiday, using a leisure club, attending a sports event, seeing a new film, visiting family, going on a shopping expedition or enjoying an evening out with friends. For completeness it should be noted that ritual based consumption includes spending that act as *ritual adjuncts* (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996); that is the spending supports, or is integral to, the enactment of some more important ritual – so buying a card acts as a ritual adjunct for attending a birthday party. Moreover the shared acts of consumption can become the ritual and become ritualised – for example the ritual of going to a bar with friends on the weekend, ritualised by each friend buying a round of drinks. Whatever the type of ritual involved, they are all “celebrated” through shared acts of consumption; the consumption is a form of communion, requiring shared participation by group members.

Ritual based collective acts of consumption only have meanings in a group setting. They are important as a form of glue that binds groups of people together and facilitate social interaction between them. If one has any doubts about the crucial importance of ritual based consumption to socialised consumers consider the strong subjective responses they evoke. The possessions bought for or by significant others within the group – a mother, grandfather, partner, best friend etc engender powerful emotional attachments in people, which are best observed when the possessions are stolen or lost (Belk, 1988).

A third version of socialised consumption also has a strong group-based dimension. This version covers *the shared patterns of consumption which symbolise shared organised social attitudes within groups of consumers*. There are two key aspects to these shared symbolic patterns of consumption – first *conspicuous consumption* and second *inconspicuous consumption*.^{xv} Veblen (1994) first famously noted the phenomena of conspicuous consumption in the late nineteenth century which applied predominantly to a rich leisure class.^{xvi} What has changed since Veblen is that the success of abundant capitalism means that generalised abundance has spread to all social classes, and all social classes have become incorporated into a generalised but differentiated leisure class.

Essential to all acts of conspicuous consumption is the symbolic communication of distinctiveness. Put another way acts of conspicuous consumption are markers of separateness between groups. More specifically members of one group (of higher social status) will distinguish themselves from other (lower social status) groups through separate different patterns of consumption.^{xvii} In an era of abundance conspicuous consumption is an increasingly important driver of spending. Consumers are increasingly prepared use their leisure time to develop the necessary tastes, knowledge and skills – what Bourdieu (1996) calls cultural capital - to both conspicuously consume and to plan future acts of consumption that communicate just the right messages of separateness.^{xviii} Bourdieu broadened the concept to allow lower status groups to invest in cultural capital to distinguish themselves through consumption from those of higher status. The modern generalised leisure class is extremely differentiated. It has a vast array of sophisticated and complex graduations that allow a multiplicity of in-groups to symbolise separateness from out-groups through conspicuous consumption. Under the influence of the institution of marketing the opportunities available to in-groups to use consumption to communicate distinctiveness are never stationary for long and constantly evolving. Whatever the precise nature of the group distinctions, conspicuous consumption focuses on communicating *dissimilar inter-group* consumption patterns.^{xix}

This has implications for the pricing of branded products which are often overlooked by economists. For with conspicuous consumption an important common bond of a high status in-group is often is a willingness to symbolise distinctiveness through paying higher – premium - prices. High prices act as barriers to lower status, lower income out-group members emulating high status consumption patterns; out-group members faced with high prices are either unwilling or, more importantly, unable to afford the purchase prices of prestige high status branded products. High prices are an extremely effective way of hindering inter-group permeation.

Veblen's and Bourdieu's ideas are widely accepted within the academic community, although not in mainstream economics. Less widely recognised is the related concept identified by Katona (1960) - the idea of inconspicuous consumption. Inconspicuous consumption relates to *similar intra-group* patterns of consumption. That is members of a social group use similar patterns of consumption to communicate a shared common bond with other members of the group. Inconspicuous consumption demonstrates the wish of group members to *conform* to the organised attitudes of the group. Put another way acts of inconspicuous consumption are markers of likeness between group members. Such consumption is conducted so that group members do *not* attract attention. The intention is to symbolically communicate an essential "sameness" with other members of an in-group. A classic example of this is the dress code of a cohort of University students. All demonstrate human agency in having made distinctive fashion choices. But at the same time they all dress in exactly the same way - as young, educated undergraduates.

Because both conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption are about symbolically communicating messages to others the consistency of the meanings associated with spending patterns is threatened by inter-group conflict and competition about what is consumed. The possibility of inter-consumer group permeation means that members of every group are forced to constantly check to see if existing patterns of conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption are communicating appropriate social meanings. But the effort to guard against permeation by other lower status consumer groups is always ultimately unsuccessful in abundant capitalism. For the rising affluence that capitalism generates requires and facilitates the constant upgrading of patterns of consumption, with lower status groups being able to afford higher status branded products.

The key dynamic however to both conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption is that consumer groups of lower repute seek to *emulate* the lifestyle of higher status groups. A lower stratum of society will therefore always "accept as their ideal the decency of the scheme of life in vogue in the next higher stratum, and bend their energies to live up to that ideal" (Veblen, 1994, p 84). When such emulative spending occurs there is inter-group permeation of patterns of consumption, and inter-group conflicts emerge. But they are easily resolved. For the higher status consumer group threatened with permeation will define new distinctions by which its members can be distinguished in order to retain group coherence. This will initiate new rounds of conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption. In the process products that were originally thought of as luxuries to be enjoyed by the few, become decencies purchased by the many, and are eventually categorised by all as necessities of life.^{xx} Hence both conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption are ratcheted up through the dynamic of emulative spending. For Veblen emulative spending is a dynamic force that never ceases. It explains in large measure the dynamic character of socialised consumption.^{xxi}

Once again in the group setting of socialised consumption consumers are not manipulated victims but have considerable discretion to express personal agency. First the individual consumer has wide discretion to self select the groups to which he/she wishes to belong, and how through acts of consumption to reinforce social ties and communicate group memberships. Second shared patterns of consumption by members of a group, moreover, do not require that the patterns of all members are identical. Consequently within such broad boundaries the individual consumer has considerable discretion over the precise character of patterns of consumption that communicate either group difference or group sameness. Finally the individual consumer has considerable discretion about the extent to which he/she actively engages in inter-group rivalry, and then discretion about the precise character of emulative spending that may be conducted.^{xxii}

g) The Institution of Marketing and Socialised Consumption

Socialised consumption in all its guises is a significant and dynamic driver of abundant consumption. It is too important a source of demand to be left unmanaged. The institution of marketing consequently applies huge effort in order to amplify the human urges to interact with others, to belong and to conform and to channel these urges into ever-expanding socialised consumption. This is a dominant characteristic of much of the mass of persuasive messaging, both explicit and *sotto voce*, produced by the institution.

The institution of marketing manages individual-based socialised consumption through its role as the dominant social and cultural influence in an era of abundance. Through its perpetual messaging aimed at consumers, from the age of two upwards, the institution conditions the emergence of socialised consumers. Through the all pervading consumer-marketing relationships emerging consumers are socialised into the consumer culture, with a specific lens for interpreting the realm of consumption and a blueprint for thinking about branded products. The institution provides the “language” of shared meanings with which to think about consumption, provides a framework about how thoughts may be expressed through consumption and defines the context which gives priority to the act of buying. Put more succinctly it provides consumers with shared ways of thinking, feeling and acting in the realm of consumption which is critical to the way social and cultural factors can influence consumption.

The institution seeks to manage the social and cultural factors that influence the internal conversations of the reflexive consumer. It provides an army of carefully selected significant others – through the cult of celebrity – who communicate positive consumer attitudes and values. The institution validates existing organised social attitudes that are consistent with ever-greater consumption (e.g.

freedom of choice, individuality, self definition). It will even *organise* the organised social attitudes and disseminate them to consumers in order to promote socialised consumption (e.g. you should buy the cosmetic product because you are worthy of it). In the process the institution proposes a vast array of “oughts” to consumers that share a common theme – the oughts require acts of consumption.

Social and cultural influences on socialised consumption are never static in an era of abundance. The institution of marketing is perpetually heating up the culture in order to create new reasons for consumers to embark upon new and greater rounds of individual-based socialised consumption. The interaction between the institution and the fashion industry is an exemplar of this heating up of culture in order to ratchet up spending. The fashion sector, working with and within the institution of marketing, propose ever changing “seasons” that refocus the lens relating to the socially shared view of what is “fashionable” and reformulate the blueprint of what must be bought in order to avoid the ignominy of being thought of as “old fashioned”.^{xxiii} The two work together to perpetually change the existing design of products that are “in” fashion – the style, the length, the fabrics, the textures, the colours, the accessories – and create new novel “must have” accessories. To keep up with these culturally validated changing fashions the socialised consumer is enjoined to keep buying, and to keep buying more every season. This exemplar is, however, representative of a much wider trend in abundant capitalism. In sector after sector the institution heats up the culture in order to create a dynamic environment that promotes ever greater individual-based socialised consumption.

The institution also seeks to manage the group-based versions of socialised consumption, ratcheting them upwards where possible. Consider ritual-based consumption in groups. Clearly people have a strong urge to develop social rituals that symbolise and cement the common bonds within groups and communicate group membership to others. But the institution cannot rely on spontaneous human urges to generate rising spending on a sufficient scale to keep busy the massive, but ever growing, productive capacity of the abundant capitalist economy. Therefore the institution of marketing must manage social and cultural rituals in order to stimulate ever more consumption. To do this Twitchell (1996) notes how the institution “colonises” existing cultural, often originally religious, festivals - Christmas, Easter, Ede, St. Patrick’s day, Halloween, Thanksgiving, New Years Eve – draining them of much of their original overtly religious meaning. The institution layers new meanings over these cultural rituals to emphasise that the rituals must be celebrated through spending with and for others. The institution only retains the original sentiments and beliefs when they are useful for promoting ritual-based consumption. Consequently at Christmas the sentiment of “peace and goodwill to all men” is

retained because it allows the institution to propose that goodwill is best demonstrated by buying cards and presents and sharing huge meals.

It is not just the big and grand rituals which are colonised. Twitchell notes how the religious concept of breaking a fast became colonised by the institution for the purpose of creating a daily ritual involving branded breakfast cereals. In the early twentieth century much marketing effort was invested by the institution and breakfast cereal producers persuading people that breakfast was the most important meal of the day. Today it is a recognised custom that involves massive ritualised consumption. But the institution is not just content with colonizing existing rituals. It must keep the culture hot by proposing new rituals to ratchet up socialised spending. Twitchell notes two such institution induced rituals that have today become the accepted consumption norm. First is the ritual of the “eleven’s”, that is drinking coffee with friends at eleven o’clock; the second is the “cocktail hour”, a time of the day for drinking collectively with friends and colleagues. Institution induced rituals quickly become embedded in the social and cultural fabric of a consumer society, with most people having no memory that the institution created them in the first place. This is a significant persuasive success for the institution.

The institution of marketing invests considerable time and effort ratcheting up the other components of group-based socialised consumption – namely conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption. This effort is easy to appreciate, for working on the powerful dynamic of emulative spending the institution can over time generate spectacular results in terms of ever higher levels of socialised consumption. It does this in a variety of ways. First it offers consumers a vast array of possible branded common bonds around which groups can symbolically coalesce. For “humans yearn to become sociable to tell stories and share feelings. Brands facilitate this process (Twitchell, 2005, p 21). That is self-selecting *brand communities* emerge that share the consumption of a specific branded product or range of same brand products, an exemplar of this being the owners of Harley-Davidson motor bikes.^{xxiv} The consumption of the specific branded product therefore provides the group with coherence and provides the way to symbolically distinguish between others who do not share that common bond. In an era of abundance the institution offers an endless variety of possible consumption communities with which consumers can align.

Second, the institution keeps the culture hot by constantly proposing new ways in which groups of consumers can symbolically distinguish their separateness from other groups through an array of conspicuous patterns of consumption – covering a vast array of product classes. Take as an exemplar a key element of family patterns of consumption - the annual family holiday. Of course this category of spending is driven, in part, by ritual. But this type of spending is also driven by powerful conspicuous motivations. A grouping of families sharing a perceived common bond – say being middle class – will conspicuously distinguish themselves from other groupings – working and upper class - by its

holiday choices. Distinctiveness can be defined on a number of criteria - such as the type of holiday experience, the holiday destination, the type of accommodation, the duration of the break, the number of holidays each year and most importantly the amounts spent on these holidays. Given its powerful conspicuous character this is a very fruitful area for the persuasive efforts of the institution. Marketers actively, relentlessly propose new novel and most importantly more lavish holiday options for specific in-groups of consumers; and in so doing provides new symbols in which in-groups can communicate their distinctiveness from other out-groups and counter the threat of inter-group permeation. These techniques are, of course, vigorously applied by the institution across a vast array of product classes and consumption patterns in order to ratchet up conspicuous socialised consumption.

Third, the institution also keeps the culture hot in order to propose new ways in which group members can symbolically communicate a sense of sameness with other in-group members by more varied patterns of inconspicuous consumption. An excellent exemplar of this technique occurs in the area of fashion, which is an important category of any pattern of consumption. As noted earlier fashion choices include individual-based consumption subject to strong social and cultural forces. A very strong group-based influence on the individual choice in a group setting is the urge to communicate conformity with group norms; when making "individual" fashion choices an important driver on individual consumers is the desire to remain inconspicuous by dressing similarly (but not identically). The urge to remain inconspicuous is a powerful driver on the fashion choices of younger people, but is influential on all age groups. The institution of marketing is continually providing new reasons for consumers to symbolically conform to group norms through inconspicuous consumption. The institution therefore makes strenuous efforts to regularly change what is fashionable for a range of groups, and then makes equally strenuous efforts to convince members of these groups that to remain inconspicuous they must keep buying to conform to the group fashion norms. These techniques are not confined to fashion, but vigorously applied by the institution to an array of products classes and consumption patterns. In each instance socialised consumption is ratcheted up so that group members symbolically communicate a sense of sameness with each other.

Finally, the institution keeps the culture hot by perpetually proposing new ways in which inter-group switching can occur through consumption; that is how lower status groups can seek to emulate parts of the patterns of consumption of higher status groups; it then proposes ways in which higher status consumer groups can respond to this permeation from below by transforming spending patterns. In the process the institution amplifies the powerful forces of inter-consumer group rivalry and emulation in order to ratchet up socialised consumption. The institution is like a farmer who cultivates a crop to increase its yield, rather than leave it to spontaneously grow in unmanaged and unexpected ways.

Any discussion of the way the institution of marketing drives social and cultural forces is deficient without recognising how its persuasive influence shapes two vital aspects of the consumer culture in which socialised consumption operates. First there is the dominant morality of consumption that pervades a consumer culture. The second is the shared mindset whereby people increasingly perceive general interaction from the viewpoint of a customer. The dominant morality of consumption and the shared customer mindset are essential underpinnings for abundant consumption. They validate and perpetuate ever greater consumer spending without which abundant capitalism would cease to exist.

The institution of marketing persuades people – through all-pervading commercial messages – to channel their urges into ever-greater consumption of branded products. Most consumers however, are not just wanting animals, they are also moral animals. Consumers instinctively need to feel that their consumption is justified, operating within a system of beliefs that defines right from wrong. This means that it is not enough for an economic system to be successful, it must also be generally perceived to be moral in its outcomes, and permit its citizenry to act in ways they deem to be moral.

Yet on the criteria of morality, the very success of abundant capitalism in fashioning generalised affluence works to threaten its continuation. For as affluent consumers perpetually buy more, as they surround themselves with the white noise of possessions, they can become open to an older ascetic morality, a morality that sees abstinence, humility and a respect for the natural world as virtues. Ever greater spending then causes these consumers to feel a strong moral repugnance with such acts – based on guilt, revulsion and disgust. That is guilt at having so much, revulsion at wanting more and disgust with its triviality and environmental damage (Levine, 2006). But this means that those with the greatest ability to spend might become the most unwilling to do so. This is a threat to abundant capitalism as it *constrains* consumption. It raises the spectre of lower profits, unused productive capacity and slower economic growth.

Therefore the institution of marketing has sought to communicate a morality that is consistent with abundant socialised consumption. This can be described as a new hedonism for the masses in the realm of consumption - an *indulgence morality for generalised abundance*. This distinct morality is characterised by an acceptance, even a promotion, of indulgent consumption that is not restricted to a rich elite but experienced by all. Twitchell, in typically popularist style, sums it up succinctly.

“[C]apitalism requires people to be pious in the workplace...to be Calvinistic in the assembly line, [but] it survives by encouraging us to be raving maniacs at the cash register...The other side of work, work, work is spend, spend, spend...”

[Twitchell, 1996, p 110]

With a Mandevillian twist the indulgence morality transforms vices into virtues (Packard, 1961; McKendrick *et al*, 1982; Leiss *et al*, 1986; Schudson, 1993; Ewen, 2001). Consequently it is a morality that releases desires rather than repressing them. Desire in all its forms is a virtue and the more intense and more insatiable the desire, the greater the virtue. It praises people for being wanting animals and encourages them to want more. It is a morality that values material things. It extols the pleasures and comforts of possessions and entices people to accumulate many more. In this moral framework the more you possess the better your self esteem and the higher your social standing. The abundance morality also places great value on appearances. It is a morality of the image. It measures people by their personal grooming, by what they wear, by where they shop, by what they buy, by where they eat, by what they drink, by where they travel. It is a morality of perpetual gratification, of jam today *and* tomorrow, and it lauds as virtues the spending and borrowing that finances such gratification. It is a morality of freedom, where people are free to choose how to indulge without any religious, political or educational leader saying “thou shall not”. The morality of indulgence is best represented by abundant consumption. It values people by what they consume, and the more indulgent the consumption the greater the social status of the consumer.^{xxv}

The cultural dominance of the abundance morality is found in the propaganda disseminated by the institution of marketing over many decades and centuries. The constant “daily ideological instruction” (Schiller, H.; quoted by Twitchell, 1996, p 109) by the institution has slowly but irrevocably changed how socialised consumers view indulgence. It has been a process of evolution not revolution. An evolution made easier by amplifying the existing urges of socialised animals. But the institution does not explicitly communicate the morality of indulgence to socialised consumers. As Twitchell (1996) notes the propagation of the new morality occurs whilst the institution is doing its real job – persuading consumers to buy branded products. In the process of its all-pervading effort to persuade people to buy, the institution communicates, *sotto voce*, powerful cultural meta-messages about the abundance morality. It is not, therefore, a corporate conspiracy that has caused this moral framework to be widely accepted. It is simply the *spontaneous* result of a multitude of decisions made by hundreds of thousands of people doing jobs throughout the global institution of marketing.^{xxvi}

The steady flow of propaganda from the institution of marketing aimed at people of all ages not only creates a dominant morality of abundance. It spontaneously creates something else: a *customer mindset* that is widely shared in a consumer culture. That is with the priority given to consumption in abundant capitalism, and the huge efforts made by the institution to get people to buy, most people increasingly come to see themselves less as workers, electors, pupils, worshippers or community members, and more as customers. The customer mindset ideally sees the consumer as one who is to be served, who is free to make choices, who others seek to satisfy and who has personal agency. The ideal mindset also sees the consumer as the one to be treated with respect, the one who is in authority, and the one who is never wrong. Finally the customer mindset accepts the general commercialisation – through marketing and branding - of social life, and its expansion into areas of human activity previously thought to be independent of the realm of consumption.

This customer mindset may in reality be unfulfilled in various ways, but as an ideal it is extremely powerful, especially as the institution spontaneously inculcates it from an early age. By the time people reach adulthood they are firmly acculturated into the mindset. In the process a society of consumers, who share a common perspective, is indirectly and spontaneously created by the institution of marketing. Clearly this sustains people in their role as consumer citizens located in a wider consumer society, with a shared consumer culture.

The creation of a dominant morality of abundance and a shared customer mindset can be seen as the institution working at the “macro-level” of persuasion, creating the optimal general conditions, the most conducive environment, for aggregate consumption. This favourable general environment then allows the institution to work most effectively at the “meso-level” of persuasion. At the meso-level the institution perpetually heats up the culture to provide new reasons and justifications for further bouts of socialised consumption. Moreover meso-level persuasion amplifies the human urges to interact, to belong and to conform, and channels these urges into greater group-based socialised consumption. Within this favourable meso-environment the institution refines its messaging even further by targeting specific groups of consumers to promote the socialised consumption of specific branded products. This is the institution working at the “micro-level” of persuasion. The institution is most successful in giving priority to consumption when the three levels of persuasion – macro, meso and micro – act as complements that reinforce each other.

It would, however, be wrong to suggest that the institution inevitably succeeds in all its messaging, or to imply that groups of consumers are manipulated victims of unseen forces. For just like the farmer whose crop fails, so even the most carefully designed commercial message can fall on stony ground. The institution

can only propose ways in which the collective urges of humans can be satisfied through socialised consumption. It is consumers, individually and collectively, who are the final arbiters of which persuasive messages succeed. This personal agency, this consumer sovereignty, makes the work of the institution that much harder. But when the messaging of the institution is sufficiently persuasive the profitable fruits of its labour are plentiful. For it convinces not one but many consumers to collectively buy similar, if not identical, branded products.

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ENDNOTES

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ⁱⁱ I have borrowed this phrase from Craib (1998).

ⁱⁱⁱ The interactions between consumers and products occur in the consumption environment; it includes the products consumers see, the products they peruse, the products they consider buying but do not and the products they actually buy. Moreover once purchased the interaction between consumer and product are strengthened. For the consumer can interact with the products for a vast array of purposes - to do a job, express a social status, achieve a sense of self-esteem, experience a strong emotional state, and even to symbolise a unique sense of individuality. Of course the interaction between people and the branded stores and out-of store environments in which clusters of branded stores are located is another influential component of the way consumer-marketing interaction straddles environmental interactions.

^{iv} Nowhere is this more obvious than when a person becomes an iconic celebrity-based branded product, who can endorse his/her own branded product ranges.

^v Community control exerted in this needs little explicit monitoring and control systems (e.g. police, courts, work supervisors, state regulators etc). The socialised individual self-censors their own actions in order to conform. In short, social control is achieved through self control (Foucault, 1991, Burr, 2003; Blumer, 1998). The Meadian conception of social control through self control has similarities with Foucault's idea of disciplinary power. Perhaps the link between Mead and Foucault is not yet sufficiently developed.

^{vi} How does the generalised other originate? The sense of a generalised other begins to form from a very early age. For Mead the process begins when child development moves from play to organised game. Formal games have rules, which must be obeyed by all who play. The child can demand a response from others who play the game and others can demand a response from the child. In this simple process a sense of right and wrong and of acceptable action is formed in a social setting.

^{vii} Not only are new configurations of "oughts" made available to the individual, but the individual will demand new configurations as they move through the cycle of life. The generalised other, for example, that an individual aged two will think acceptable clearly will not be the same as the one which they use when they are twenty-two, or forty-two or sixty-two. As a person develops through life they are subject to new events, new experiences, new influences, new social and economic roles, and all these must impact on the generalised other to which they make reference. Put succinctly the generalised other will evolve as the individual develops.

^{viii} Experimenting with possible oughts is most easily observed in the actions of younger people who are seeking to more clearly define their own unique sense of self. Through the influence of the institution of marketing experimentation with oughts is spreading to more mature sections of the population.

^{ix} It is by contrast rarer for a socialised individual to satisfy completely selfish desires, wholly independent of social or group influences.

^x Safety needs is one important justification for operating within groups. The individuals urge for security, stability, protection and freedom from fear is achieved in groups i.e. safety in numbers. A second reason for group activity is the urge of individuals to belong and to love and be loved, and to avoid the perils of ostracism and friendlessness. A third reason may be the desire of individuals to

obtain the esteem of others in order to bolster their own self-esteem. These are just some of the reasons for the urge of individuals to form groups and act collectively (Maslow, 1970).

^{xi} I have borrowed the term common bond from the credit union movement. A credit union is a co-operative financial institution run on democratic lines offering low interest loans. To become a member of a credit union a person must demonstrate a common bond with its other members. I use the term in a broader sense as to referring to the characteristics shared by members of any group.

^{xii} Obviously a group is not restricted to sharing one common bond. Some groups have multiple common bonds that fuse together. A married couple, for example, may share the common bonds that they love each other, they have had children together, have had a common history and shared experiences, they have jointly purchased a house and other possessions etc. Fusing together of multiple common bonds will strengthen the salience and importance of a group to each of its members and enhance the desire to act collectively.

^{xiii} This is a classic example of what Blumer (1998) refers to a joint act, where one person fits in their own wishes to those of others.

^{xiv} A group is defined in a simple manner as constituting a collective of more than one person with a common bond. This means a group can stretch from face to face relationships between two people (e.g. marriage, friendship) through to large-scale groups with vast numbers of members (e.g. nations, sub-cultures, social milieu, customers of a global branded product). A group think, feel and act collectively, that is as a “we” and an “us”. This definition of group is wider than that commonly used in other academic disciplines, but it is sufficient for the analysis of abundant consumption.

^{xv} Mainstream economists ignore the symbolic communicative element of distinctive *patterns* of consumption. Instead mainstreamers refer to *bundles* of consumption goods.

^{xvi} But it is important to appreciate that even in the late nineteenth century Veblen did not restrict the category of conspicuous consumption to the rich elite but recognised that it applied across the social spectrum. “No class of society, not even the most abjectly poor, forgoes all customary conspicuous consumption...Very much squalor and discomfort will be endured before the last trinket or last pretence of pecuniary decency is put away” (Veblen, 2005, p 58)

^{xvii} Veblen actually distinguishes between conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure; in industrial society he suggests that the former increasingly replaces the latter as a communicator of pecuniary status and differentiation (Veblen, 2005). Actually in a consumer society the two are complements. To conduct a range of acts of conspicuous consumption requires large amounts of free, leisure time. Members of groups with the highest status have the largest amounts of leisure time in order to conduct the greatest volume of differentiated conspicuous consumption.

^{xviii} It is important to mention that there alongside conspicuous consumption is conspicuous investment. Conspicuous investment is conducted both by private corporations and the Government the sector. It is investment spending that seeks to communicate distinctiveness and status in addition to any utilitarian purpose. An exemplar occurs in the top branded retail sector where huge amounts are spent on new stores to communicate just the right messages of prestige and status to niche consumers. The same is true of the money invested in high prestige headquarters of top multinational corporations and government spending on top departmental buildings.

^{xix} Of course conspicuous consumption and ritual based consumption must interact. Veblen noted how the conspicuous consumption can be conducted through rituals with family and friends by the “giving of expensive presents and expensive feasts and entertainments” (Veblen, 2005, p 49). Certainly part of this consumption will cement social ties and mutual obligations. But the vicarious

consumption by the less affluent will mean they witness the distinctive superiority of the more affluent provider of the largesse.

^{xx} The classic exemplar in recent times of this flexible categorisation of luxury–decency-necessity is the mobile phone. The categorisation of luxury – decency – necessity is of course borrowed from McKendrick *et al* (1982).

^{xxi} Conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption and the dynamic of emulative spending can also be categorised as joint actions.

^{xxii} All this is consistent with Blumer's idea of joint action with personal agency; the individual has some discretion to decide how specific organised social attitudes and group prescriptions "fit" with any particular activity.

^{xxiii} The statement that the fashion sector works both with and within the institution of marketing may at first seem confusing. But part of the fashion industry is definitely separate from the institution – in particular those involved in the manufacture of garments and accessories. By contrast the designers of fashion items are both employed by the fashion industry and form a part of the institution in the sense that they share its common mindset of designing products to sell. From this comes the idea of a fashion industry working both with and within the institution of marketing.

^{xxiv} The Harley-Davidson brand community creates very strong group feelings and shared ways of thinking. Harley-Davidson owners are known as "Hogs" as are the machines. The group insiders are known to tattoo the brand logo onto parts of their bodies and even use the owner's manual instead of a Bible for marriage ceremonies (Twitchell, 2005).

^{xxv} As exemplars of the change in attitude that the new morality has engendered compared to the older ascetic tradition consider three cases – debt, repair and lust. Perhaps in economic terms the most important is the changed attitude to debt found in the new morality (Packard, 1961; Heinze, 1990). Most authors have noted that the ascetic morality dissuaded people from going into debt to finance spending. The new morality, whilst subtly changing debt into credit, actively encourages people to borrow to pay for things today rather than wait. The virtue is to be found not in waiting but in borrowing to be gratified now.

Packard ably shows the change in attitude to repair versus replacement after World War Two. Consumers in the USA were increasingly throwing away damaged or faulty products and replacing them with new items. The ascetic moral framework would have praised the virtue of repairing the product rather than buying a new one. The newer morality, by contrast, asks where is the virtue in making do with something second rate when you afford something better.

Last but not least the new morality has a more relaxed attitude to sexuality – one of the most potent of human desires. The ascetic morality was suspicious of sexual indulgence and sensuousness. In Christianity it was one of the seven deadly sins - lust. The eastern ascetics were especially distrustful of such urges praising the virtues of complete abstinence in most circumstances. The new morality sees the release of sexual desire as both healthy and a source of demand. Lust is life affirming, invigorating and enjoyable; it is a virtue not a vice.

^{xxvi} There is, however, nothing inevitable about fact that most people accept the indulgence morality. Consumers, individually and acting in groups, have the personal agency to reject it, and the associated affluent lifestyle it justifies, without being excommunicated from society. They can choose to a lifestyle that is guided by an more ascetic morality. To illustrate this point it is possible in the epitome of a consumerist society – the USA - for groups such as Mennonites to live in liberty from desire. In abundant capitalism no one is forced to consume. Anyone can reject the powerful, persuasive corporate messages, if he/she chooses. Finally it is important to appreciate that because a person accepts the indulgence morality in the realm of consumption this does not mean they reject

all other moral frameworks in other parts of their life. As Plumb elegantly says “[t]he minds of men [and women] can carry contradictory ideas, even contradictory hopes, with consummate ease.” (Plumb in McKendrick *et al*, 1982, p316) It is perhaps more accurate to say that abundant capitalism allows a plurality of morality to co-exist within a broad consumer culture, just as long as the morality of indulgence dominates