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Wickstrom, Alice; Denny, Iain; Hietanen, Joel

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# “Something is missing”: Melancholia and belonging in collective consumption

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/mtq](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/mtq)**Alice Wickstrom** 

Aalto University School of Business, Finland

**Iain Denny**

Uppsala University, Sweden

**Joel Hietanen** 

University of Helsinki, Finland

## Abstract

In this essay, we explore the limits of marketized belonging through Kristeva’s theorization of melancholia and desire. This allows us to problematize “joyful” accounts of societal re-enchantment and how “belonging” through collectives of consumption (such as neo-tribes, subcultures of consumption, and brand communities) is generally seen as a natural response to modernist rationalization and increased individualization. Instead, we argue that the scholarly understanding of collective forms of consumption has been premised upon paradoxical ground due to the notion of the subject-as-consumer as lacking often being implicitly reproduced, albeit theoretically neglected, allowing for the reproduction of romanticized ideals of marketized “communality.” We foreground how tensions between individuality and communality are negotiated within markets and argue that collective forms of consumption feed upon separation, fragmentation, and the suspension of “joy” rather than relationality and belonging. We propose that this allows for a better understanding of the desire to *become* through collective consumption and direct further attention toward questions related to liminality, detachment, loss, and exclusion.

## Keywords

Belonging, collective consumption, desire, Kristeva, lack, liminality, melancholia, psychoanalysis

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### Corresponding author:

Alice Wickstrom, Department of Management Studies, Aalto University School of Business, P.O. Box 21210, Helsinki 00076, Finland.

Email: [alice.wickstrom@aalto.fi](mailto:alice.wickstrom@aalto.fi)

## Introduction

In Kurt Vonnegut's (1968) short story, *The Euphio Question*, a physicist, a sociologist, and a DJ discover a radio signal that, when amplified, causes all those who hear it to experience sheer contentment—a satiation of *all* desires. Keen to capitalize on their discovery, the three men build a device they call the “Euphriaphone” and invite their friends and families to a demonstration. It works perfectly: even tradesmen and police officers who call at the house on business abandon their responsibilities to bask in the warm glow of an utter lack of concern about anything. No one feels in any way inclined to turn it off, everyone simply comes together and “enjoys.” Two days later, a storm causes a power outage and the guests awake from their communal reverie, suffering from severe thirst, hunger, and the early stages of pneumonia. While this story lends itself well to a critique of the 20th century's rapid modernization based on consumerist ideals, we find the inventors' untempered enthusiasm to satisfy everyone at once of particular interest. What is at stake when the forgoing of individuality gives way to unremitted fulfilment? A deadly, yet seductive pleasure of self-loss? A perfected form of communality?

Echoing the “joyful” potential of social cohesion, literature on collective forms of consumption (e.g. neo-tribes, subcultures of consumption, and brand communities) has expended much effort on aiding our understanding of how consumers engage in consumption “communally” and thus on how *belonging* is enacted through market practices, experiences, and meaning-making (e.g. Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Saren et al., 2019; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Tinson et al., 2017). Often, this is understood as grounded in an inherent “need” to belong (e.g. Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Chalmers Thomas et al., 2013; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001)—a natural response to the increased individualization, modernist rationalization, and lack of traditional societal structures or *communitas* (e.g. Maffesoli, 1996; ten Bos, 2003)—which, in turn, has allowed for collective consumption to be theorized as a possible locus of societal re-enchantment (e.g. Cova, 2005; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Kozinets, 2002). This focus aligns with a noted bias in consumer research toward “forward-facing aspects of joining, acculturating, assimilating, and accumulating status and social capital” (McAlexander et al., 2014: 873) *through* consumption (also Saren et al., 2019) as well as the broader scholarly tendency to give precedence to “socially desirable” expressions such as participation and engagement, rather than to questions related to detachment and distance (Candea et al., 2015; Scott, 2018; ten Bos, 2003).

There is, however, a contradiction within the assumed potential of marketized forms of belonging; these consumption collectives are typically either ephemeral, thus making any sense of communality temporary at best (e.g. Cova and Cova, 2001; Goulding et al., 2009; Kozinets, 2002; Schouten et al., 2007), or premised upon the formation of in-groups that contribute to further individualization through symbolic hierarchies and status games (e.g. Arsel and Thompson, 2011; Cova, 1997; Kates, 2002; Schau et al., 2009b; Üstüner and Thompson, 2010). Collective consumption could thus be seen as possibly *enforcing* separation and fragmentation through the production of social, material, spatial, and temporal differences, rather than contributing to a sense of communality where “actions, situations and affects forms a *whole*” (Maffesoli, 1996: 81, emphasis added) and within which one would see an “absence of ranking, class and other social structures” (Cappellini and Yen, 2016: 1263). This implies that there is a tension with regard to how individuality and communality is, and can be, negotiated within capitalist consumer cultures, which has been neglected within existing literature. The extant theorization of collective consumption as a readily available, if impermanent, remedy for a lack of traditional *communitas* and increased societal individualization attests to this shortcoming (Cova, 1997; Muñiz and O'Guinn,

2001; Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Schau et al., 2009b; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) and contributes to the implicit reproduction of an understanding of the subject-as-consumer as *lacking*, that is, as only being able to conceive itself “through the supplement of the outside” (Sheils and Walsh, 2017: 7). Through this, individualist, or even narcissistic, expressions of consumerist desire (Cluley and Dunne, 2012) are readily taken as tokens of social cohesion (see Cronin and Cocker, 2019; Kates, 2002; Tumbat and Belk, 2011; Ulusoy and Firat, 2018, for notable exceptions) while any lack of consumerist communality is treated as a pathology that can potentially be solved through further market immersion (also de Oliveira et al., 2019).

In this essay, we problematize this tendency by further exploring the limits of marketized belonging, as well as the ongoing negotiation between individuality and communality within collective consumption, through Julia Kristeva’s (1987, 1989) psychoanalytic theorizing on *melancholia* and *desire*. Melancholia is here understood as a non-relational state of *becoming* grounded in the backdrop of a wholeness lost with the emergence of desire. As the latter is premised upon demarcation that allows the subject to situate itself as “I” through an Other<sup>1</sup> (also Desmond, 2013; Lambert, 2019; Shankar et al., 2006), it simultaneously forces the subject to perceive itself as different from others. This gives rise to a perpetually liminal subject position (e.g. Cody, 2012; Cody and Lawlor, 2011; Voice Group, 2010) constantly driven by a yearning to become “whole,” which becomes an issue in a consumerist society fueled by commodified distinctions and ephemerality reproduced as “means to belong.” While psychoanalytical perspectives have been increasing in prominence within marketing and consumer research (Chatzidakis, 2015; Cluley and Desmond, 2015; Desmond, 2013; Lambert, 2019; Patsiaouras et al., 2016), the aforementioned tension between individuality and communality and how it relates to and shapes participation and expressions of desire within the tension-laden heterotopia of consumption collectives has yet received little attention.

To further such inquiry, we review existing literature on collective consumption and show that an understanding of the subject-as-consumer as lacking (i.e. a negative ontological understanding of subjectivity) (see Kristeva, 1989; Lacan, 1977, 1988; also Shankar et al., 2006) is often reproduced, albeit theoretically neglected, thus allowing for the construction of romanticized ideals of marketized “communality” as having the potential to satiate *all* desires. Instead, we suggest that further attention should be directed toward questions related to liminality, detachment, loss, and exclusion (de Oliveira et al., 2019; McAlexander et al., 2014; Shankar et al., 2006) and toward sites where consumerism is not necessarily taken as the given point of departure (also Saren et al., 2019). We argue that this might help us develop a better understanding of the desire to *become* through collective consumption and provide further insights into how expressions of individuality and communality are constantly negotiated through markets. This calls for further sensitivity when researching and theorizing collective forms of consumption and for critical attention to be paid to what forms of “belonging” can possibly materialize within capitalist consumer cultures grounded in separations rather than relations: a realm where *something* is always missing.

## **Belonging or becoming?**

Within interpretive consumer research, the idea of “belonging” has often been addressed with regard to various forms of collective consumption (Canniford, 2011; Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001; Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Schau et al., 2009b; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Pongsakornrungrasit and Schroeder, 2011), most notably as a possible remedy for the modernist

rationalization and disruption of traditional societal structures and *communitas* and the subsequent individualization of society (see Frosh, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Maffesoli, 1996). Consumers are then understood as seeking re-enchanting experiences of communality through market interactions (e.g. Cova, 1997; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Zwick and Dholakia, 2006) that allow them to forge "ephemeral collective identifications and participate in rituals of solidarity that are grounded in common lifestyle interests and leisure avocations" (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: 873). These are understood as not only beneficial but "essential for social relations and social cohesion" (Saren et al., 2019: 2). Within this field, scholars have sought to distinguish collectives of consumption in terms of variations in their attachment to particular brands, the nature and intensity of their commitment, their temporal stability, and the geographical proximity of their constituent members. *Neo-tribes* (Cova, 1997; Cova and Cova, 2002; Goulding et al., 2013), *subcultures of consumption* (Kates, 2002; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), and *brand communities* (Carlson et al., 2008; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Muñiz and Schau, 2005) are three particular portrayals of consumption collectives that have risen to prominence within the literature, and they all offer different opportunities and means to belong (Canniford, 2011).

Consumer neo-tribes are depicted as ephemeral groupings that form around kinship, locality, and affectivity, and which are made up of heterogeneous members (Cova, 1997; Cova and Cova, 2001, 2002; Goulding et al., 2013). These groups are thus less about the formation of collective or individual identities and more about shared practices, passions, and emotions in which the "link" is understood as of more importance than consumption objects or stable ties in and of themselves. Although neo-tribes are understood as emerging from a desire for *communitas*, their ephemeral nature makes the question of belonging complex. For example, Cova and Cova (2001) argue that neo-tribes are "open systems to which a person belongs and yet doesn't quite belong" (p. 70), although they also state that "tribal members are never alone because they belong, in fact or virtually, to a vast and informal community" (p. 71). In a similar manner, Goulding et al.'s (2009) note that consumer tribes are "characterized by a 'volatility of belonging' meaning that homogeneous behavior and formal rules are eschewed in favor of inventive bricolage and constant reconstruction" (p. 817). Neo-tribes are thus not groups to which someone can belong in a complete sense but rather a fleeting form of communality that is sustained through an individual's continuous alignment, engagement, and imagination (Bennett, 1999; Goulding et al., 2009) and by affective, communal, and spatiotemporal attachments and assemblages (Maffesoli, 1996; O'Reilly, 2012). This would be most evident in rituals, gatherings, and practices that only provide a fleeting sense of "joy" through the momentary establishment of links which thereby prompt a cyclic repetition and further immersion into specific forms of consumption.

In contrast, subcultures of consumption are defined as distinctive subgroups that self-select "on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity" (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995: 43). These are often understood as relatively stable in terms of expression and formation and depend on hierarchical structures, as well as adherence to specific values and beliefs that guide individual expressions of collective identity (Kates, 2002). Subcultures of consumption also typically find cohesion in being oppositional to mainstream cultural forces (Hewer and Brownlie, 2010; Portwood-Stacer, 2012; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) and therefore contribute to the organization of resistant lifestyles, as individuals are socialized into becoming a part of the group through the accumulation of commodified subcultural capital (Leigh et al., 2006; Sinclair and Dolan, 2015). Low-status members, for example, often seek recognition by adhering to particular values and beliefs in order to manifest commitment, while high-status members are dependent on the "adulation" of other members to affirm their roles in the group

(Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Thus, in comparison with *subcultures* (that are less stable, and not primarily centered on consumption. See de Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan, 2007, for a comparative overview), subcultures of consumption are understood as premised upon their consumption interests and practices. When addressing the former, Hebdige (2007) characterizes the discourse of subcultures as primarily being framed by distinction from an identifiable “other,” which precedes market activities and expressed consumption interests. For example, the punk movement’s deliberately provocative repurposing of both everyday items and “illicit objects of sexual fetishism” (p. 107) as clothing, the “anti-dancing” and open contempt for overt displays of heterosexual interest at shows, and, of course, its music, all displayed the seemingly chaotic disdain for societal norms that punks embraced. This repurposing was thus considered a means to an end rather than the end in itself. In contrast, subcultures of *consumption* can be understood as promoting belonging and communality based on demarcation and recognition from others within and through the market and, more importantly, within one’s own group. The object and act of consumption thereby becomes an end in itself, which allows for both group formation and the expression of identity. Tensions between individuality and communality (also Cooper et al., 2005; Ulusoy and Firat, 2018), as well as processes of socialization (rather than communality itself), should therefore be considered their key marker.

The concept of brand communities was developed from the literature on subcultures of consumption (de Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan, 2007) to better account for the emergence of communal patterns of consumption interests and practices despite geographical distances (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009b). Brand communities are understood as emerging from and being centered on a certain brand or symbol (Stratton and Northcote, 2016). The brand conditions specific rituals, traditions, shared attitudes, and a sense or moral responsibility toward the community itself, all situated “within a commercial and mass-mediated ethos” (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001: 412). Individuals are thus not tied together through communal presence or a place—as within subcultures of consumption and neo-tribes—but through an imaginary element of others: a “knowing of belonging” (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001: 413). While brand communities have been noted as existing in a continuous state of tension between consumers and marketers, they are nevertheless often seen as sites of co-creation where “value” is produced through collective creativity and cooperation (Pongsakornrunsilp and Schroeder, 2011; Schau et al., 2009b). However, it would seem that in brand communities the symbolic centrality of the brand and individualistic attachments to it remain relationally primary (e.g. Black and Veloutsou, 2017; Schouten et al., 2007). As observed by Stratton and Northcote (2016), brand communities “are not necessarily about social relations or even feelings of community, but a sense of collective affiliation and ownership over shared cultural elements, regardless of whether communal interactions are enacted or collectivity imagined” (p. 497). The actual communality within brand communities is thus secondary, although identification with either consumers of the brand or the brand itself allows for self-construction in relation to others (also Carlson et al., 2008). As noted by de Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan (2007), “brand community members feel the need to differentiate their brand of choice from others in the marketplace, thereby using brand as a parameter for a self-induced sense of exclusivity” (p. 199). Thus, just like subcultures of consumption, brand communities are premised upon social distinctions but with the important difference that they generally operate *within* popularized market ideals and discourses rather than against them (e.g. Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001).

Based on this review, it would seem that the implicit centrality of belonging, and its assumed potential and beneficial nature, requires further scrutiny. While relatively sparse, research has

begun to problematize the unifying notion of collectives of consumption and instead explored how consumers, at times, prefer competition and individualism (Tumbat and Belk, 2011; Weijo et al., 2014). Studies have also questioned how subcultures tend to readily reproduce exclusionary hierarchies and subjugation, even between members of the in-group (Kates, 2002), which implies that the general precedence given to matters such as social cohesion and communality tends to be rather one-sided. On a more positive note, such “radical subcultural mosaic” (Ulusoy and Firat, 2018: 21) has also been seen as potentially fostering creativity and resistance through practices that allow a community to “(re)stabilize, reproduce, and reform over time” (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2013: 1010; also Pongsakornrungrungsilp and Schroeder, 2011). What these problematizations share is an understanding of collective consumption as marked by a sense of becoming (process) rather than of belonging (state), which is further perpetuated and complicated by the production of liminal boundaries<sup>2</sup> between individuality and communality (also Cappellini and Yen, 2016; Sheils and Walsh, 2017). While the difficulties with liminal states have been noted (e.g. Arnould and Price, 1993; Peñaloza, 1994; Schau et al., 2009a; Schouten, 1991), emphasis has, however, primarily been placed on “voluntary forms of temporary transformation and interim experience” (Cody and Lawlor, 2011: 211) or the lack of access to material and social resources (Hamilton et al., 2014; Üstüner and Holt, 2007), thus making it a state of exception rather than the rule. These studies also tend to foreground the individual aspect of liminality (e.g. Ogle et al., 2013; Voice Group, 2010) and thereby neglect its collective facet (Cappellini and Yen, 2016) as well as the ontological precondition and grounding for such experiences. To further elaborate on this within the context of collective consumption, we now develop a psychoanalytic reading of these tensions between individuality and communality predicated upon Julia Kristeva’s (1987, 1989) theorization of melancholia and desire.

### **Lack as a precondition of being**

Julia Kristeva (1987, 1989) develops her notion of melancholia by building upon Jacques Lacan’s (1977, 1988, 1992, 1998) psychoanalytic theorizing on the subject’s negative ontology (“lack-of-being”) and its connection to desire. Kristeva’s approach thereby differs from the Freudian understanding of melancholy by situating it as a precondition for being—its “ethos” (Kristeva, 1989: 7; also ten Bos, 2003)—rather than a pathological state.<sup>3</sup> Within post-Freudian, or Lacanian psychoanalysis, the subject comes into being through the Other which is contingent upon socio-cultural ideals that vary across contexts, and accordingly the subject as “I” is thus marked by its potential to perform according to such. This can occur through, for example, adhering to the “ritualistic consumption” sanctioned by a community of Harley-Davidson riders (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) or reproducing narratives of worship toward an abandoned brand (Muñiz and Schau, 2005). In contrast to much of the consumer research literature, such enactments do not, however, originate from an agentic subject (see Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Fitchett et al., 2014; Thompson et al., 2013) but *through* the sociocultural context—that is, the Other (also Gabriel, 2015; Lambert, 2019). Since the subject only exists through its relationship with the Other, its expression of desire “emerges just as it becomes embodied in speech, it emerges with symbolism” (Lacan, 1988: 234). Desire is thus constitutive for being in the world, and the subject emerges as “I” through expressions of desire that follow cues from the Other. However, this is not a passive subject but a productive one. For although it is impossible to desire outside of any Other, the subject constructs its relationship to the Other through fantasy. In search of recognition, the subject asks the Other, “what do you want from me?,” and thereafter tries to satisfy the Other by posing as

an ideal subject. It is, however, neither fantasy nor desire itself that ignites this search for recognition, but rather what is missing *within* the subject, which is access to the Real.

Before constructing its relationship with the Other, the subject is bound to the asymbolic and relational realm of the Real. The Real is not a material space but a register of the psyche that influences how the subject experiences itself and others (i.e. subjects/objects). Within the Real, the subject is “one with the world” as it has not yet learned to demarcate itself from others through language and culture (also Rossolatos, 2018). While the Other constitutes a system of representation and meaning, the Real denotes that which cannot be accessed through speech—an unmediated and boundless being. One can imagine that the Real would be akin to what Maffesoli (1996) described when writing about a sociality outside of alienation as “haphazard” and “hazily drawn” (p. 72). With regard to marketing literature, it denotes something akin to a flow state (Carù and Cova, 2003; Schouten et al., 2007)—momentary, affective, and impossible to encapsulate within a representational frame—possibly as pleasurable as the self-loss caused by Vonnegut’s “Euphoriaphone.” The subject’s early connection to the Real can thus be understood as a middle stage between coming into life materially (being born) and coming into life as subject (identifying with an “I”). When moving toward the latter, the subject must repress the Real as the introduction of symbolism forces it into a non-relational world of ontological negativity and symbolic distinctions (also Elliott, 2005; Fink, 1997; Stavrakakis, 2007).

The negation of the Real renders a void within the subject (a “lack-of-being”) which becomes the locus of an unconscious longing for wholeness. It is thus the beginning of a subjective *becoming*, which is not to be understood as “in-between” expressions that can be easily framed as in relation to consumption ideals or practices (see Arnould and Price, 1993; Peñaloza, 1994; Schau et al., 2009a; Schouten, 1991; Üstüner and Holt, 2007) but rather as the negative, ontological precondition for them. Kristeva (1989) notes that the only way for the subject to temporarily triumph over this state is through full identification with “a father, form or schema” (p. 23). That is, an Other that “ensures the subject’s [re]entrance into the universe of signs and creation” (Kristeva, 1989: 23). This is understood as a constant negotiation of the subject’s identity, driving it to repeatedly transform sociocultural coordinates (e.g. consumption objects or practices) into fleeting markers of the “self” (Belk et al., 2003; Shankar et al., 2006). Again, although these become “temporary and opportunistic carriers” (Gabriel, 2015: 29) for expressions of identity, they are not reflections of agentic ideals and interest but of an “image of perfection” (Graeber, 2011: 493)—a fantasy directed not toward the object per se but toward the promise of wholeness. The inherent lack can thus be seen to stimulate desire, as it drives the subject’s search for recognition by the Other, which in turn directs it toward market offerings, commodified signs of difference, and promises of fulfilment and belonging. This implies that what often has been theorized as a “need” to belong is premised upon, and reinforces, a certain negative, ontological understanding of subjectivity, through which the subject-as-consumer is only seen as being able to conceive itself through an “outside” or Other<sup>4</sup> (see Sheils and Walsh, 2017).

What thus complicates matters is that the subject’s search for wholeness becomes bound up with the Other’s work of meaning-making through demarcation, which makes ontological relationality impossible. The Other will inevitably fail to fulfil the subject’s fantasy (as it cannot provide access to the Real), forcing it to confront the *emptiness of its own being*. The rupture of the subject’s fantasy becomes the site for the cultivation of melancholia, an asymbolic and non-relational state—a lack of belief in the Other. Although the sense of melancholia may be long-lasting or short term, it draws attention to the difficulties of fully belonging or attaining a stable sense of self through the Other. It is this sense of melancholia that Kristeva offers us as a novel conceptual



approach with which to further explore how contentment in consumer culture, even in relatively affluent contexts, seems perpetually unattainable (Shankar et al., 2006). What collective forms of consumption can offer is, however, a structuration of fantasies in the guise of access to the Real: a temporary diversion from its lack of wholeness.

### **Melancholic reflections on consumption communities and lack**

If we return to the literature on collective consumption through Kristeva's theorizing on melancholia and desire, we can further explore the tensions between individuality and communality and thus problematize the general understanding of marketized belonging as a remedy for societal rationalization and individualization. As described above, when consumers engage in collective consumption, they construct a sense of self through the sociocultural ideals offered by a particular Other. This becomes evident in clothing styles, the centralization of specific brands, and collective performative practices (e.g. dancing or surfing). Adhering to these ideals is of importance for being a part of the collective, as they provide a structure for the fantasy that allows for the establishment of an "I," and thus a temporary sense of wholeness. The inherent fragility of such expression does, however, complicate the idealization of these forms of consumption because, as already noted, they are premised upon highly ephemeral social relations (e.g. Cova, 1997; Cova and Cova, 2002; Goulding et al., 2013) or the symbolic production of social distinctions (e.g. Hebdige, 2007; Kates, 2002; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), meaning that they cannot provide a stable sense of communality or identification on an ontological level. This becomes evident when the subject is forced to realize that the Other cannot provide the sense of wholeness lost with symbolization, and the promise of fulfilment shatters (also Shankar et al., 2006).

Let us elaborate on this through Tinson et al.'s (2017) recent work on social belonging by rendering the Other as a consumerist youth culture that manifests itself through the socialized ritual of "the Prom." Attending Prom can be seen as deeply meaningful to individuals, and these meanings arise from the individual's engagement with societal tropes transmitted through (principally) North American culture and media or engagement with one's particular cohort and environment. It is thus made into an event where sociocultural symbols are assembled in a way which allows participants to "transform" who they are, or perhaps rather who they want to be recognized as, in order to attain a sense of belonging. Through the lens of Kristeva's melancholia, the Prom is, however, not an end unto itself but an experience that foregrounds the promise of (future) fulfilment. It becomes a marker of the possibilities of wholeness, conditioned by one's marketized participation and alignment to certain ideals and ritualistic practices. But what happens in the moment when the Prom is over? When weeks or months of excitement, preparation, and perfecting of details dissolves in a flash? Does one still "belong"?

Although the Prom can be seen as an example of momentary self-idealization before others (fellow participants) and an Other (consumerist youth culture), there is a difference in terms of the "opportunities" for belonging as it is an "event" rather than an ongoing path of adulation and/or affirmation. In comparison with the consumption of an object or the build-up toward an event like the Prom, the process of identification can be seen as prolonged through collective forms of consumption due to their fluid nature. Whether one is a part of an object-centered community or a collective which is grounded in ephemerally shared practices or rituals, there is a certain boundlessness to the expression of these as they rely upon an extension of the group itself. Whether this happens through an endless collection of objects, repeated rituals, or the mastering of practices, it is not the collective per se which is centralized, but rather how it continuously offsets its present state

(i.e. buy *more*, become *better*). As noted by Maffesoli (1996), “the community ‘exhausts’ its energy in creating itself. In its very repetitiveness, the ritual is the strongest proof of this expenditure and by so doing it guarantees the continued existence of the group” (p. 17). The struggle is thus for constant becoming rather than belonging, and the objects and experiences become the means of a “transformation, an altered state” (Belk et al., 2003: 335). Collectives therefore come into being through a promise of that which they are not (yet) temporally and through demarcation from other groups spatially. This is almost like the build-up toward the Prom, though they do not (necessarily) end with the lingering question: *was this it?* Instead, they channel desires and sustain individuals in a liminal state. A rather striking, if somewhat implicit, example of this is Scott et al.’s (2017) recent study concerning how the shared consumption of pain does not only denote a straightforward quest for meaningful experiences but show how consumers “also need something to help them forget everything” (p. 39).

Here, Kristeva’s conceptualization of melancholia directs us toward a form of liminality that cannot be “resolved” through consumption practices or meaning-making (also Hietanen et al., 2013; Scott et al., 2017; ten Bos, 2003), as it is rather an incessant, tumultuous state incited by the clashing of the Real and the Other. Thus, in contrary to liminality as a passage between states—which are to be considered as sociocultural expressions negotiated in between different Others—a melancholic liminality would be the interminable limbo between being whole and ontologically tied to others within the Real and being recognized as a subject through differentiation under an Other. It is thus not primarily related to possessions or practices but rather an ontological state of nothingness most notable in times of detachment, dis-identification, distance, and loss. That is, when the promise of wholeness shatters and the melancholic subject loses its belief in its possibility “to become”: a remarkably prevalent issue in a marketized society supposedly filled with endless “opportunities” for fulfilment and self-realization (Gabriel, 2015; Lambert, 2019; Shankar et al., 2006).

Collective forms of consumption would here be understood as phantasmatic structures driven by the constant renegotiation of ties to a certain Other that, on the contrary, allows for the promise of wholeness to be sustained (also Zwick and Bradshaw, 2016). These collective practices then become a sublimated and socially accepted means that allow one to continue “believing” in an Other, which also marks their structural similarity to traditional societal structures or *communitas*. For example, though collective fantasies and narratives regarding brands (e.g. Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001; Muñiz and Schau, 2005), the constant acculturation of subcultural capital (Kates, 2002; Leigh et al., 2006; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), or temporary glimpses of affectivity within sociocultural cracks (Cova, 1997; Goulding et al., 2009; also Scott et al., 2017) may differ in terms of enactment, positioning them as a possible remedy for increased individualization and loss of *communitas* implies a grounding in a negative subject position that is dependent on an outside or Other. From a psychoanalytic perspective, it is therefore questionable if “belonging” through collective consumption could provide any lasting relief from the cyclic processes of desire (e.g. Shankar and Fitchett, 2002; Shankar et al., 2006), as these too only allow for a temporary sense of wholeness granted through membership, norms, rituals, gatherings, and idealized interests and practices. It would seem that collective consumption feeds upon constant separation and individualization, or the cyclic hunt for moments of “joy” through rituals and the perfection of practices, rather than boundless relations as these would require a different ontological ground, that is, the possibility to be without boundaries, a loss of self. The question then becomes whether that would be desirable at all, especially within capitalist consumer cultures.

## Concluding discussion

In this essay, we have explored the limits of marketized belonging through Kristeva's theorization of melancholia and desire. This has allowed us to problematize "joyful" accounts of societal re-enchantment through consumption and how "belonging" to collectives of consumption has commonly been approached in consumer research. We have thereby developed existing psychoanalytic understandings of consumer desire (Belk et al., 2003; Böhm and Batta, 2010; Lambert, 2019; Shankar et al., 2006) within the context of collective consumption by further problematizing how the subject-as-consumer as *lacking* is often implicitly reproduced, though theoretically neglected. Instead, marketized belonging is often theorized as the "natural" mode by which modernist rationalization and individualization is negotiated, and the enactment or expression (object of desire) of consumption has thus been given precedence over the process (ontology of desire) toward such (see Bouchet, 2011). Although the tendency to foreground the object of desire is understandable when seeking out emancipatory potential within consumption communality (e.g. Izberk-Bilgin, 2010; Varman and Vikas, 2007) or when *producing* readily marketable segments of consumers (see Zwick and Bradshaw, 2016), we have questioned whether it necessarily helps us understand the desire to *become* through collective consumption.

By exploring collective consumption through a psychoanalytic lens, we have instead elaborated on how the subject can be seen as driven toward consumption collectives in an attempt to un-do itself—to *be* without boundaries (also Hietanen et al., 2019). However, rather than providing a "means to belong" in a communal sense (see Cappellini and Yen, 2016; Maffesoli, 1996), these collectives function according to a capitalist Other which makes ontological unboundedness impossible. They feed upon distinction and the suspension of "joy," which contributes to the increased necessity of the collective: a structuration of fantasy that temporarily sustains the (future) promise of wholeness and ties to the Other. This perpetuates a liminal subject position, becoming toward *something* to avoid the emptiness of the subject's own being (de Oliveira et al., 2019; Shankar et al., 2006): incessant diversions from melancholia through consumer culture and commodified signs of difference (also Cronin and Cocker, 2019).

While the consumer subject has previously been theorized as inherently narcissistic (Cluley and Dunne, 2012; Lambert and Desmond, 2013; Lash, 1991; Patsiaouras et al., 2016), and even psychotic (Lambert, 2019), the melancholic aspect of consumption has received less attention (Desmond, 2013) despite signs of "misery," lack of joy, and anxiety having been readily noted (Benton, 1987; de Oliveira et al., 2019; Shankar et al., 2006). By foregrounding the tensions between individuality and communality, we would argue that neither consumerism nor marketing is "to blame" for expressions as such (cf., Shankar et al., 2006), as it is rather the aforementioned ontological dependency on an external Other that is the grounds for feelings of lack. Evidently, collective forms of consumption have become more ephemeral than traditional societal structures or *communitas* (e.g. Cova, 1997; Zwick and Dholakia, 2006) while being similarly structured, with both momentarily disguising the subject's lack of being and foregrounding the possibility to *become* (e.g. "more" and "better"). They can thus be seen as the perfect means for sustaining individuals in a liminal state, but only when paired with an accumulative Other. Thus, in contrast to other examples of consumer liminality (Arnould and Price, 1993; Cody, 2012, Cody and Lawlor, 2011; Leigh et al., 2006; Noble and Walker, 1997), this state cannot be negotiated or facilitated through consumption as meaning-making and symbolization always unfolds in relation to an Other which hinders relational wholeness. The impossibility of this equation can only be grasped through the relationship between melancholia and desire. The promise of wholeness can only be mediated

through desire, yet, when recognized as a desiring subject it cannot become whole as the state is premised upon distinction. *There is always something missing.*

Future research that embraces these tensions has the potential to offer constructive insights into movement between various sites of consumption and changing attitudes toward brands and practices as well as questions that relate to detachment and dis-identification (Cronin and Cocker, 2019; de Oliveira et al., 2019; McAlexander et al., 2014; Shankar et al., 2006) without taking consumerism as the given and unquestionable starting point (e.g. Saren et al., 2019). This would require less attention to be directed toward the *meaning* behind the characteristics, practices, and expressions of collective forms of consumption. Rather, such investigation might centralize the (perhaps) “obscure forces” (Gabriel, 2015) through which individuality and communality are constantly negotiated in the market, and in turn better understand how these forces contribute to shaping capitalist consumer cultures.

This is by no means a contention that market exclusion may prompt feelings of despair (e.g. Saren et al., 2019; Tinson et al., 2017), and naturally we do not mean to imply that “belongingness” is therefore not *desirable* in a general sense (also Shankar et al., 2006). We do, however, believe that by positioning marketized belonging not only as a state of normalcy but as an unquestioned potentiality, one fails to acknowledge how the underlying ontological negativity that is often taken as a given point of departure may at the same time occlude conceptualizations of communality beyond mere marketable fantasies or other means of social control (Cronin and Cocker, 2019; Zwick and Bradshaw, 2016). A psychoanalytical view helps us to problematize this further and to direct critical attention toward what potential exists for *becoming* outside of capitalist ideals. This would not necessarily entail “the end of consumption.” Rather, these insights call for alternative ways to approach and narrate subjects-as-consumers that would foreground relations rather than separations, and thus possibly allow for new ways of understanding issues and questions related to liminality, detachment, loss, and exclusion (e.g. Saren et al., 2019; also Candea et al., 2015).

With that, we wish to return to Vonnegut’s story, as it would seem that the Euphoriaphone succeeded in dissolving individual boundaries and providing a communal sense of “joy.” Ironically, the inventors initially failed to acknowledge how this would lead to the death of consumer desire as such and thus ultimately shatter their capitalist aspirations. One of the inventors later recounts the “disastrous” results of their invention during a court hearing and argues that the machine must be banned: “America doesn’t want what we have discovered!” A psychoanalytic reading of this shift entails a deep fear of losing the accumulative Other, which indeed marks a paradoxical tension. That which satiates all desires (a perfected form of communality?) may seem enticingly within reach, yet we cannot imagine ourselves outside of an Other and without desire.

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## ORCID iDs

Alice Wickstrom  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8271-7587>

Joel Hietanen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4512-5627>

## Notes

1. The Other, or Symbolic Order, can be described as a collective structure that steers meaning-making processes (expressions of desire) through culture and language (e.g. formal and informal institutions, norms, social connections, marketing, brands, and ideology). Within post-Freudian, or Lacanian, psychoanalysis, the subject is understood as beginning to establish ties to the Other, and thus identifying itself as “I,” from the age of 18 months and forward (Fink, 1997).
2. The concept of liminality was popularized by Turner (1967), who theorized the notion as a ritually facilitated passage between states and thus as temporary and potentially resolvable. Liminality has previously been employed in the consumer research literature to explore how objects or practices of consumption contribute to the negotiation of “threshold selves” (Cody, 2012; Cody and Lawlor, 2011; Schau et al., 2009a; Schouten, 1991) for understanding rituals and rites of passages within collective consumption (Coskuner-Balli, 2013; Hackley et al., 2012; Sherry et al., 2007) and for investigating how consumption may prompt liminality and feelings of being “out of place” (Cappellini and Yen, 2016; Voice Group, 2010).
3. For Freud ([1917]2005), melancholia is understood as the pathological inability to come to terms with feelings of loss and/or disappointment concerning a love-object (e.g. relationship, person, a certain country or culture), whereas the process of mourning is implied to result in a desirable resolution (the investment of psychic energy into a new object). In an attempt to master this ambiguous state, the subject incorporates the (lost/disappointing) object into its sense of self, which becomes the grounds for melancholic self-hatred as negative feelings are redirected from the (lost/disappointing) object to the subject itself (also Desmond, 2013; Hagman, 2001; Leader, 2008).
4. This is by no means a universal ontological way of perceiving and enacting the world (see Descola, 2013, for overview).

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**Alice Wickstrom** is a PhD student at the Department of Management Studies, Aalto University School of Business, Finland. Her research interests include digitally mediated work and the platform economy, workplace control, and psychoanalytic and affective approaches to employee and consumer behavior. Address: Department of Management Studies, Aalto University School of Business, P.O. Box 21210, Helsinki 00076, Finland. [email: [alice.wickstrom@aalto.fi](mailto:alice.wickstrom@aalto.fi)]

**Iain Denny** is a PhD student at the Department of Business Studies, Uppsala University, Sweden. His research is principally concerned with consumption sociology and consumer culture. Address: Department of Business Studies, Uppsala University, Ekonomikum, Kyrkogårdsgatan 10, Uppsala 751 20, Sweden. [email: [iain.denny@fek.uu.se](mailto:iain.denny@fek.uu.se)]

**Joel Hietanen** is an associate professor at Centre for Consumer Research, University of Helsinki, Finland. His interests include the seduction of authenticity, the dark side of desire in consumption and videography as a research method from the perspective of Deleuze+Guattari and French post-structuralism in general. Address: Consumer Society Research Centre, University of Helsinki, Suvilahdenkatu 3-5 B35, Helsinki 00500, Finland. [email: [joel.hietanen@helsinki.fi](mailto:joel.hietanen@helsinki.fi)]