‘There’s just nothing stable anymore’: A sociological examination of the relationship between social media consumption and youth identity in an age of uncertainty

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the relationship between young people's identities and the consumption of social media in a time of economic crisis. The research is designed to examine the role of self-branding in young people's relationship with consumption and what this means for the notion of self in a digital world. In practical terms, it explores the social transformations that have emerged in an uncertain world through a comparative research between Greece and the UK focusing on young people's consumption of social media between the ages of sixteen and thirty years old. The research is underpinned by a qualitative analysis based on primary data captured by a triangulated three-stage process. Specifically, data capture entailed: focus group discussions; photo-elicitation interviews; and a period of observation of young people's use of Instagram online. The data indicates that young people seek a way out from everyday lives affected by the Global Financial Crisis either by emigrating or escaping into the digital world in search of what they hope to be a better life. The thesis reflects on the online branding practices adopted by young people as they compete in this new frontier of marketised space and proposes that social media provides them with a key means by which they can construct their identities and in doing so creates an environment for profile curation. The thesis discusses the implications of the relationship between economic instability, social media, youth identities and the intersection of consumption and production of a digitally *augmented* brand of the self that is essentially *ephemeral*. It further reflects on the sociological significance of social media consumption as a performative space in which young people can assert a coherent sense of identity, while simultaneously tying them to the very society that obliges them to do so.

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Σας ευχαριστώ.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis is concerned with the changing nature of young people's consumption/production decisions, and what it means to be a young person, in a digital, increasingly chaotic and uncertain, socio-economic environment. The implications of this research are, if anything, more pertinent today than they were when the research began. When I refer to the 'crisis' or the 'Global Financial Crisis' in this work, I refer to the financial crisis which first impacted on the global economy in 2007/2008. Notwithstanding the impact of this crisis on young people's lives, this thesis may begin to enlighten us as to the likely impact on young people of the current and ongoing global Covid-19 crisis (or crises) which began in 2019. The challenges that young people have to deal with on their everyday lives are enormous. The suggestion investigated in this thesis is that social media consumption represents a primary arena within which young people face such challenges.

There has been much interest in the literature regarding the study of young people's identities (Roberts and Parsell, 1994; Bynner, 1997; MacDonald, 1997; Buckingham, 2008; Woodman and Bennett, 2015). However, it is noticeable that, in recent years many scholars have adopted either a consumption-oriented perspective (Kjeldgaard, 2003; Deutsch and Theodorou, 2010) or a digital-oriented perspective (Buckingham and Willett, 2013 [2006]; Barron *et al.,* 2014) as a way of understanding the process of identity formation. This thesis is concerned with the contexts in which the nature of consumption is changing and, in turn, with how young people construct their identities in a digital world. The

argument explored in this thesis is that social media constitutes a particular kind of experiential space for the construction of young people's identities through consumption. In short, this is a thesis about young people's experiences and the means by which consumption is displayed, and therefore ideologically reproduced, in the digital arena with which young people engage.

Over the last thirty or forty years, scholars have argued that the role of consumption is crucial in the construction of identities (Friedman, 1994; Warde, 1994; du Gay, 1996). Consumption has increasingly "moved" online since the mainstream acceptance of (so-called) social media, and now appears to be on the threshold of society's digital transformation. The number of choices that consumers, particularly young consumers, are compelled to deal with on a daily basis are immense. Social media consumption occurs at the intersection of the socio-economic conditions that impact young people and the way youth actively construct their lives. This thesis will focus on to what extent young people are aided in developing and exercising agency in an uncertain world through the use of digital and social media. Through the complementarity of consumption and social media, the self may appear unconstrained, but in the end, agency may remain ephemeral.

1.1 Background to the thesis

Young people try to establish their identities in a complex globalised socio-economic environment in which new ecological and technological challenges have emerged. For too long sociologists have relied on youth transitions and cultures in order to analyse young people's everyday lives (Furlong *et al.,* 2011). Of course, young people's experiences are diverse and they are clearly related to class, gender, and race. However, recent transformations also bring new

challenges to social researchers. In this light, youth researchers need to reconsider the frameworks that they use to reflect upon young people's experiences. This is something that I tried to take into consideration during this project, as I will demonstrate in this thesis.

Young people's everyday experiences are complicated and meaningful. Young individuals may construct their personal identities in a fragmented world by seeking affirmation from their peers. It is within this context that the discussion of belonging gains importance. Young people do not seek only a sense of belonging from traditional physical spaces. As I will demonstrate, the digital space becomes crucial in any attempt to frame contemporary analyses of youth lives. In order to build lives in an online environment, young people may need to search for a sense of belonging. It is not only the expression of the individual that matters but also his or her acceptance by their peers. In the digital world, young people engage in the "marketplace" of identity in which identities are demanded and supplied.

Consumption can be considered to be a means by which youth identities are established. In effect, consumption is a useful resource for the construction of youth lifestyles (Miles, 2000). According to Gabriel and Lang (2008: 330), 'consumption becomes substantially a consumption of images or a consumption for the benefit of generating images'. It is thus the spectacle that is related with a re-enchantment of the world in spaces of consumption (Ritzer, 1999). However, what is significant for this thesis is how it is that young people's experience of the risks associated with economic constraints on consumption intensifies the power of consumption to frame who and what it is they are.

Young people face a number of challenges in their life choices and experiences. For example, it is the conditions of an 'endemic uncertainty' (Bauman, 2007: 4) in everyday life that makes it imperative for sociologists of youth to try to shed light on youth lives in a challenging world. This risk pre-dates the Global Financial Crisis. In reflecting upon this cycle of socio-economic risk, I will draw upon Kundera's (1986, cited in Bauman, 2007: 6) statement that 'there is nowhere one can escape to'. Since the onset of the crisis, the digital arena may provide some form of escape to young people; however, ultimately, we need to question whether this is indeed the case and what price might need to be paid as a result.

The emergence of the internet has brought with it a profound social transformation in young people's life experiences. The way that youth interact, construct their social world and express themselves is increasingly mediated digitally (Mesch, 2009). As we shall see, young people's attempts for both offline and online biographical planning are increasingly individualised and yet paradoxically standardised. However, all these digitally-mediated expressions cannot stay fixed for long in a globally connected world defined by "destruction" (sometimes creative, sometimes not) – and mediated by corporations who boast of disruption, for example that they "move fast and break things". The relationship between consumption and the construction of youth identities in a digital world still remains underexplored. In short, it appears that youth cultures and lives are characterised by ever greater complexity in a digital, media-rich context, and it is this complexity which I analyse through the course of this thesis.

Social media appears to be an alternative stage for consumption quite different to those that were experienced by previous generations. What is important is whether it functions as an arena, as it were, of prosumption (i.e. where production

and consumption intersect). The goal of young people here might not be so much to establish an identity, but to achieve a relatively more stable identity through affirmation via its peers. By contrast, non-conformity is not “liked”. Social networking sites, filters, “likes”, “hearts”, hashtags, captions, comments and photo- and video-sharing applications provide young people with the means for the demonstration of a curated and intensified sense of self.

The paradox here might be that the ways in which young people pursue their individual identity through the prosumption of “likes” may lead to a homogeneity of self-expression, even amongst those sceptical of the process. While the digital space has become one of the most advanced ways of mediating youth sociability and lifestyles, it may constrain individuals regarding the extent of their social media consumption and the extent to which they are able to evade the logic of the market. Thus, young people’s lives and identities are explicitly impacted by - and highly linked to - digital experiences. This produces a new and fundamentally distinct form of social experience.

Even if some young people are facing difficulties participating in the social media-oriented consumer society, it might be considered as a norm for many young people. In the social media world, this process of performing in the everyday is magnified. In a spectacle-rich environment (Debord, 1994 [1967]), as it is the digital world, the way young people’s lives are constructed around images and representations becomes even more prominent. When participating in social media, that is, when online, young people may become part of the spectacle and not just its’ passive spectators. It is exactly this process that this research will understand through the lens of social media consumption, and in doing so, tries

to shed light on the nature of this intensity and its implications for young people's identities and consumption more broadly.

Social media and digital forms of consumption offer the consumer a broad range of experiences. It is important to explore whether social media provides an arena in which everything becomes about perception rather than authenticity. Thus, it is this question which is at the heart of this project, as an attempt to understand the nature of the relationship between consumption and identity. The power of this logic is based upon the premise that to survive in this world young people are obliged to aspire to a kind of celebrity, promoting what they do rather than who they are.

Social media consumption is ideological from the moment that it defines the self as a vehicle of consumption. On the one hand, it celebrates liberation, but, on the other, it penalises difference. In order for someone to be a young person in this consumer society, and participate in this digital world, he or she has to consume, be seen to consume and hence allow their online identity to be "consumed". This thesis will explore how young people cope with ongoing social changes in a digital world in which social media is the primary means of consumption-based identity construction, and the wider conclusions can be drawn from this.

1.2 Aims of the study and overall research question

The main aim in this thesis is to consider how the performative nature of young people's engagement with social media leads to a reinvention of the relationship between consumption and identity.

Essentially, I am interested in how social media consumption forms young people's identities, and how this impacts upon their experiences. This is

contextualised by the consideration of the current period as an age of ongoing and increasing uncertainty and hence leads to a wider understanding of the impact of what it means to be a young consumer in a precarious world. Ultimately, I will focus on youth self-presentations on social media and whether they play a key role in the management of increasing risk, the challenges this brings, and the obstacles which young people may face in establishing their membership in this uncertain world. As a means to facilitate this, I will develop a triangulated qualitative framework.

1.3 Situating the research in two countries

This research is situated in two countries, Greece and the UK and the data was gathered in, and relate to, what we may term the inter-crisis period of 2008 to 2019. Examining young people's consumption in two different settings is particularly important as it can reveal hidden aspects about sociality, and at the same time, function as a starting point of new research inquiries. It further provides a comparative context within which I can reflect on geographically specific elements of how the crisis is experienced, while also reflecting on how young people's experience of the crisis is ameliorated by consumption, in places where the impact of the crisis could be said to vary. At the time of collection, in 2018/2019 both Greece and the UK had recently faced a financial crisis that impacted young people's lives. More specifically, this research focuses on the North West of England and Greater Athens. I study my research questions through the lens of young people's experiences in these two research settings.

The crisis in Greece is one that is socio-economically related, while, the UK's instability, though rooted in the 2008 crisis of globalisation, is now more politically-related after the imposition of austerity and the referendum to leave the EU, which

took place in June 2016. However, both crises have resulted in increased uncertainty in the everyday lives and experiences of youth. Since the period of data collection, the world has been convulsed by yet another crisis. The current economic and pandemic crises that started in 2019 can only intensify the feeling of existing uncertainty. The impacts of these new crises make this study more relevant than ever, given that the *post*-Covid-19 era might not be the exemption, but rather the capstone, of a new normality in which temporal and spatial elements of human connection are radically reconsidered.

There are a lack of studies which concern both youth and consumption studies in comparative European countries. Youth studies have explored the impact of the crisis in youth identities and employment prospects, but few studies have focused on the comparative experiences of young people in European countries. There is, similarly, a dearth of comparative research in youth consumption in the context of the rise of digital media.

This is a gap I address, emphasising how the intensity of uncertainty and the changing nature of consumption are experienced by youth, and discussing what this means for their construction of identity and transition to adulthood. Such research, investigating different socio-cultural contexts in terms of how young people deal with increased uncertainty and the transformations of digital media and an exploration of how young people experience such social changes, potentially offers a more rounded understanding of this process. This thesis adds to the agenda exploring the effect of uncertainty on youth identities from a comparative perspective.

Being Greek and living in Greece during the crisis years means that uncertainty has been a constant characteristic of my own experience. My own aspiration was to relocate, live and study abroad since the time I was a high school student, and before the beginning of the financial crisis. During and after my undergraduate and postgraduate studies, my decision to relocate to the UK was postponed more than once due to personal and crisis-related issues. Near the end of June 2016, when I was just about to accept a place to undertake doctoral studies in Manchester, leaving behind Greece's economic risk, at least for a while, I had to reconsider my plans in the light of the Brexit referendum result, which was in favour of leaving the EU. After careful consideration, and acknowledging the risk of ending up in an economically precarious setting in Manchester, I decided to continue in my plan to leave Greece and move to the UK.

The Global Financial Crisis of 2008 affected not only economic data but also social and political dimensions in everyday life. Of course, since the period 2008/2009, the Greek economic crisis and the long-term socio-political turbulence has made Greece a unique case study. Greek youth have experienced high unemployment rates, low paid jobs and zero-hour contracts that led to high levels of insecurity, both professionally and personally. While the particularities of the Greek crisis are not at the heart of this project, it is essential to acknowledge its impact on young people's lives and discussions, which overwhelmed many of the conversations with my participants.

Other nations youth have also experienced such effects. However, Greek youth have suffered acutely from the crisis and austerity measures. During the period 2008-2016, Greece lost around 26% of its Gross Domestic Product. Unemployment rates increased from 7.8% in 2008 to 27.5% in 2013 (ELSTAT,

2015). In particular, the youth unemployment rate (that of people aged between fifteen and twenty-nine years old) in Greece rose from 16.2% in 2008 to 48.7% in 2013 (ELSTAT, 2015). In February 2020, the unemployment rate in Greece was 16.1% as a whole and 14.5% in the region of Attica, the region of Greater Athens, where my primary data is captured (ELSTAT, 2020). The total population of the Attica region is around 3.82 million people. Greek youth has experienced extreme levels of precarity (Kouzis, 2017) and what has emerged is effectively a youth underclass (Kretsos, 2011).

During what I may now call the inter-crisis years, young people's lives underwent a radical restructuring (Douzinas, 2013). As we shall see, international mobility, or emigration, is an aspiration many young Greeks share, particularly in the light of the impact on the Greek economy of the crisis of 2008. Yet, as we shall also see, simply to move overseas is not to escape the impact of a global crisis. Many young people in the UK face the same challenges faced by young people in Greece. It was during the 1970s and 1980s that the transition from a relatively secure industrialised labour market to a service-oriented and consumer-driven economy occurred in the UK (Bauman, 2005). Thus, young people in England have faced four decades of challenging socio-economic circumstances. The North West of England, where the primary data capture took place in the UK provides a useful insight into the difficulties faced by young people, not least as regards questions of poverty, marginalisation and migration.

In the last four decades, a great number of manufacturing jobs have been lost in Northern England. Some of these have been replaced by less well-paid labour markets related to services, call centres, leisure and hospitality (Shildrick *et al.,* 2010). Young people in the North of England, many of whom will be restricted in

their life ambitions and restricted to working in low-paid service jobs, are acutely aware of the everyday labour market difficulties and the absence of attachment with their employers (Lloyd, 2012). More specifically, in Greater Manchester, many young people and their families have to find ways to cope with extreme conditions of poverty, lacking access to sufficient resources to cover the costs of food and energy (Batsleer, 2016).

The exacerbating effects of the 2008 global crisis and the uncertainty created before, during, and after, the (so-called) Brexit referendum of 2016 further complicates this situation. As we shall see, Brexit and its potential impact on employment and the economy more widely represents a major concern for young people (Henn and Sharpe, 2016). The total population in the North West of England was around 7 million in 2011 (ONS, 2012). The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in the UK between December 2019 and February 2020 was 4% and 4.3% respectively in the North West of England (ONS, 2020). Youth are, however, even more adversely affected by unemployment than the average would indicate. From December 2019 to February 2020, the unemployment rate for young people (those aged between sixteen and twenty-four years) in the UK was 11.8%. Although Greece was more much affected than the UK by the euro-zone crisis which followed the Global Financial Crisis, meant that the socio-economic outlook in the UK is also poor for youth if perhaps less urgent. Both research settings share similarities in relation to high levels of uncertainty, poverty and unemployment, and low levels of realisable aspirations of youth; related both to the financial crisis, euro-zone crisis in the case of Greece, and the Brexit referendum result in the UK.

In the context of the twenty-first century's second global crisis, that of 2019/2020, both countries' socio-economic and political trajectories remain fluid. Thus, youth face an even more uncertain and risk-infused world resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, which it is expected to inevitably result in a further financial crisis. It is imperative for social researchers to try to understand what all these social transformations mean for youth identities and experiences. This is particularly true as regular global crises may well become more frequent in future due to, for example, an ever more integrated world economy, and financial and ecological stress.

In seeking to address the above concerns, fieldwork was implemented in two different places in order to gather data that would be utilised in comparative analysis in two settings with similar levels of uncertainty, contextualised by different socio-economic and political conditions. This research project aspires to break new ground in further understanding the interaction between social media, consumption and youth identities in a time of ongoing social and personal risk.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is comprised of nine chapters, in short: Chapters 2, 3 and 4 comprise the conceptual foundations upon which this study is based; Chapters 5 to 8 contain the empirical analysis and the findings of this research.

In Chapter 2, I outline the historical context in which consumption has emerged as an important field of sociological analysis, before reflecting on how understanding the relationship between consumption and identity helps to comprehend consumption's role in society and social transformation. I argue that an understanding of the notion of prosumption (i.e. the integration of production

and consumption) is particularly prominent for the nature of consumption, and its relationship with social change, as we have moved into a digital society.

In Chapter 3, I argue that the nature of consumption cannot be completely understood without reference to technology and digital forms of consumption. Here, I emphasise the rise of social media as one of the key arenas in which young people try to construct their identities through consumption. The process of prosumption creates its own market online, and I discuss how the processes of self-management and self-branding put extra pressure on young people to demonstrate the best possible version of themselves in an increasingly digital world within which they struggle for a sense of belonging. In particular, attention will be paid to the role of Instagram as an example of self-branding and an arena of identity manipulation.

Chapter 4 argues that young people are at the forefront of risk in an uncertain world. After reviewing theoretical contributions in the context of the question of youth identities, I provide a more detailed examination of key issues in young people's lives: risk society, uncertainty and individualisation. From this basis, I explore young people's experience of social change at the intersection of consumption and social media in order to understand the impact of digital forms of consumption on young people's identities. In short, I discuss the extent to which young people are actors in the drama of their own lives on the social media stage, or acted upon by forces beyond their control.

In Chapter 5 I lay out my methodological considerations and formally pose my research questions. I bring the above discussions together by contextualising the fundamental issues that are addressed in the empirical chapters of this thesis.

The chapter also situates the study within qualitative research and provides details about the research design. Before moving on to explain my data collection methods, I describe the key ethical challenges I dealt with as well as my sampling strategy. After discussing the processes of transcription and translation during this research, I reflect upon my role as a researcher in the specific research setting.

Chapter 6 is the first of the three findings chapters. Specifically, in this chapter I present the problems that youth face at a time of global crisis. I go on to describe the impact of uncertainty on youth and their expectations. Issues such as unemployment, aspirations, family, the and the global crisis. The impact of successive Greek euro-zone economic crisis and Brexit are discussed in-depth. I consider emigration as a form of escapism in a way that functions as one way of responding in young people's daily challenges in the world.

In Chapter 7 I consider issues related to the transformation of consumption in the context of uncertainty and social media. Suggesting that consumption is ever-changing, I argue that the shift towards digital forms of consumption has had an especially profound impact. In this context, I focus on the effects of the financial crisis on young people's experience and their perceptions of consumption. I go on to discuss young people's experiential consumption, emphasising in particular, the question of its relationship with youth identities.

Chapter 8 deals with digital media transformations and how they have affected young people's engagement with social media and youth identities. The chapter addresses the role which social media consumption plays in young people's everyday lives. I present the notion of emigration into a digital environment, rather

than to another nation. The chapter focuses on young people's self-presentation and self-marketing practices in the digital world by providing details about youth insecurities, the digital alternative way of escapism, and self-branding. Chapter 8 focuses on the emergence of an augmented but ephemeral self, arguing that social media plays a key role in the transformation of the nature of consumption; the nature of consumption is increasingly performative.

Chapter 9 draws the above discussions together by highlighting that young people's identity construction and its relationship with consumption is a significant issue that needs to be seen through the lens of digital media. The chapter outlines the limitations of the study, discusses the wider implications of the findings in the field of sociology of consumption and makes suggestions for the direction of future research.

The argument throughout the thesis is that the nature of consumption is undergoing a transformation. At times of crisis (now recurrent crises) the emergence of social media and other digital forms of consumption have had a profound impact as much on consumption as the notion of self. This impact has been such that young people's practices and experiences of digital spaces have become the major driver of the construction of youth identities. As the physical world continues to disappoint youth aspirations, this migration into the online arena, an arena in which competitive prosumption is carried out, is likely to continue.

Digital spaces are what and where young people produce and consume and it is arguably at this intersection that they find themselves given that how they do so represent what it is they are to their peers. Social media are becoming spaces for

consumption and identity construction. This research will discuss the role of social media consumption in self-presentation. It will outline why young people engage in particular practices of self-branding and the associated incentive structure, that is, what engagement with social media provides to their sense of control.

This thesis produces a grounded and sociologically aware discussion of youth consumption in a time of ongoing crisis against the backdrop of a brave new digital world. We must remain critical of the way in which social media consumption appears to determine young people's relationship to the notion of self. This can only be done, as we shall see, in a way that takes into consideration both the pressures with which young people have to deal and the nature of the digital consumption/production experience.

Chapter 2

Consumption

2.1 Introduction

It is well-established in the literature that consumption has a key role to play in the construction of identities (Tomlinson, 1990; Bocock, 1993; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Corrigan, 1997; Ritzer, 1998). This chapter aims to reconsider the nature of consumption in a changing world while illuminating how digital forms of consumption shape consumer practices during uncertain times. The thesis will propose that the nature of consumption is indeed ever-changing, founded on the notion that the shift towards digital consumption has had an especially profound effect in consolidating such change. In this chapter my main concern is therefore to provide a preliminary literature review of some key theoretical concepts that help to position this thesis.

First, it is important to recognise that consumption is a complex phenomenon. It is one that needs to be understood from a variety of scientific angles. According to Dunn (2008: 1), consumption includes 'a vast range of human practices and mental and feeling states (shopping, buying, acquiring, using, possessing, displaying, maintaining, collecting, wasting, desiring, daydreaming, fantasising), all of which involve complex relations and attachments to an infinite variety of objects and experiences'. While the significance of inter-disciplinary academic endeavour into consumption is unquestionable, there is also a need for a sociological approach to underpin the framing of key research questions and to provide critical insights into contemporary consumer society and its members.

The rapid changes that have occurred in contemporary society, especially from the beginning of the twenty-first century, suggest that the experience of consumption in how people lead their everyday lives is as important now as it has ever been, and perhaps even more so. In the above context, the digitalisation of consumption, as will be discussed thoroughly in Chapter 3, necessitates the usage of an alternative conceptual framework such as prosumption (i.e. where production and consumption intersect). This will be discussed extensively in section 2.9. Of particular importance in recent studies is the notion of "self-work". By "self-work", I mean a process of 'making the self' (Maguire, 2008: 72) focusing on the meaning people 'assign to each of their own identities' (Spencer, 1987: 141). Thus, individuals need to labour within the digital space as part of their consuming experience, which in turn, is affecting the form of consumption.

Before I go on to discuss the element of consumption in socio-cultural relations, it is important to consider the historical development of the concept. In this chapter I will concentrate on discussing the importance of consumption in terms of identity and the construction of meaning. I will then emphasise the value of consumption as a symbol of status construction, notably in the context of debate around conspicuous consumption, for which the work of Thorstein Veblen (2005 [1899]) is particularly informative, before moving on to discuss consumer lifestyles and their significance in everyday life. Having considered the effects of socio-economic crises upon consumption, I will move on to discuss the notion of hyper-consumption in the contemporary digital world, and the role of hedonism in the nature of consumption, before concluding with a more in-depth examination of what prosumption means and why its relationship with identity is especially crucial.

2.2 The emergence of the consumer society

Before analysing the role of prosumption in identity construction, one must critically consider the historical context in which digital consumption emerged. McKendrick *et al.* (1982) suggest that it was long before the twentieth century that people became involved in types of competition over their levels of consumption. For Trentmann (2012), the history of consumption does not start just after the World War Two, but during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. However, the exact period that signifies the transition to a new consumer revolutionised society is debatable (see Fairchilds, 1993).

In many sociological analyses of consumption, it is not uncommon to find a section that highlights how scholars tended to put more emphasis on production, rather than consumption. Of course, production-orientated thinking and analysis have long been dominant in sociological analysis. Such arguments, in most cases, are related to Marx's (2007 [1867]) own analysis of the production of commodities and the way they impact the meaning of human relations. In this context, the notion of exchange-value was particularly significant because it highlights the relationship between commodities as forms of labour power. Indeed, it is this exact exchange-value that makes the object exchangeable on the capitalist market.

It is also important to consider, as Karl Marx (2007 [1867]) illustrates, that it is commodity fetishism that marks and mars social relations, allowing capitalism to be regarded as "natural". Indeed, due to the increased specialisation of production, people are obliged to engage with the market in order to buy products and cover their essential needs. However, it could be argued that Marxists, by analysing the relational impact of the market, have signalled its inevitable

acceptance and, in that way, have neglected to go beneath the surface of the complexities of the consumption experience. For Corrigan (1997: 33), ‘it is likely, then, that the Marxist emphasis on the exchange-value of commodities has retarded the development of a sociology oriented to actual consumer practices’. As researchers of consumption have moved beyond the notion of the commodity as an abstract social force, the field of consumption is no longer the mere by-product of production.

Modern criticisms of consumption emerged, based at least to some extent, on the notion that advertising creates false needs (Packard, 2007 [1957]). The question that is important in relation to this study is how we can proceed understanding social media and the digital sphere. One way is to consider that social media is an expression of the mass culture that standardises youth masses in alignment with the critical theorists Horkheimer and Adorno (1973). Horkheimer and Adorno were members of the Frankfurt School, and extended Marx’s critique of commodification to consumer culture. Horkheimer and Adorno (1973) were particularly interested in the role that the “culture industry” plays as a means of repression and domination. At the core of their argument was the role of a mass society in which capitalist culture reinforces conformity by standardising the products being offered. From this point of view, pleasure and consumption are considered as a form of control:

> Pleasure always means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even where it is shown. Basically it is helplessness. It is flight; not, as it is asserted, flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance. The liberation which amusement promises is freedom from thought and negation. (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1973: 144)

The posts on social media could in this light be considered as an expression of the standardisation of mass consumption even though providing a space for individualised expression. For instance, it could be argued that “likes” on social media are a way to standardise young users’ reactions. However, we need to remain critical of any oversimplification in this context and try to understand the meanings that young people endow in the digital culture. Even if the work of the Frankfurt School has been criticised as lacking empirical substantiation, it is important to acknowledge that their contribution is in some senses far-sighted. It highlights the ideological power of capitalism and culture. It could be argued that consumption and its digital forms manifest individual’s relationship to a powerful mass culture. We should be cautious about overstating the role that power has to control individuals, but at a minimum, we need to consider the nature of this power.

The relationship between individuals and consumption is particularly crucial in digital space as an arena in which the relations between subject and object have become even more complex. Even though Georg Simmel’s (2011 [1971]) contribution was not fully recognised until long after its publication, it could be argued that his work is still valuable to discussions about how individuals participate in society and interact with each other. For Simmel (2011 [1971]), consumption functions as a significant platform in which subject and object relations are played out. Consumption promotes interaction among members of the society. In contrast to personal transactions in pre-modern times, the centrality of money in the modern world has profound implications for socio-economic relations and the transformation of consumption (Simmel, 2011 [1971]). For Simmel, it is the role of money in transactions that leads to social

life's objectification, namely the quantification of products and subject-object relations. In turn, it is the objectification of products that puts consumers (and producers) at a distance from the end product. In this context, individuals are obliged to endow products with symbolic and material meanings in order to be able to declare objects their own (Holt and Searls, 1994) and it is through this process that the role of consumption in young people's lives becomes a topic of such sociological fascination.

The material and symbolic qualities of a product are translated in marketable terms. Goods, and as a result, consumer experiences, are quantified through their monetary value. In this way, consumption appears to be more mechanical and less connected with consumers' life projects. In the context of this thesis it is important to understand that consumption offers a sense of belonging and at the same time a desire to "stick out" (Simmel, 2011 [1971]):

> The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and techniques of life… (Simmel, 2011: 324 [1971])

According to Simmel (2011 [1971]), it is the social space of the metropolis that reflects the transformations of the market economy in which individual meanings and the style of life is cultivated and extended. The contemporaneous question that comes to mind here and one that I will address in this thesis is the role that social media consumption might play in the ways young people's meanings are cultivated and the extent to this process is intensified in the digital space.

2.3 Consumption and identity

Although consumption is significant, since it offers a sense of belonging to a group, it is equally important in so far as it endows meaning. I will argue that the relationship between consumption and meaning becomes even more critical in the context of what we might call the digital society. One of the most useful theoretical perspectives in our understanding of consumption in the nature of social change is perhaps the shift in the literature towards a comprehension of the consumption and identity relationship. The cultural turn, a crucial moment in social sciences, influenced new theoretical approaches around consumerism (Storey, 1999). For Nava (1987: 209-210), 'consumerism is a discourse through which disciplinary power is both exercised and contested'. At the same time, the freeing-up of the study of consumption from production created new methodological and theoretical complexities that needed to be debated.

One of roles of the cultural system of commodities is to communicate social meanings (Appadurai, 1986). In the 1970s and 1980s, consumer culture studies started gaining attention by examining social relations as a source of creativity and meaning. This put emphasis on the celebration of choice while postulating liberty of the individual. In practice however, this emphasis undermines both choice and liberty, as it pressures the individual to conform to changing social norms. In *The World of Goods* (1996 [1979]), Douglas and Isherwood consider goods to be an "information system", and a key element of cultural analysis. This helps emphasise mundane consumption practices which can be considered to be powerful rituals of symbolic communication capable of facilitating social life. From satisfying needs, the acquired value of goods is changing to make sense and maintain meaning. For Douglas and Isherwood (1996: 37 [1979]),

consumption is ‘the very arena in which culture is fought over and licked into shape’. In this way, consumer goods are, at least, temporary carriers of meaning. The question is whether in the digital arena not only products but also representations of consumption are carriers of meanings.

This world of consumption opened the way to link the representation of objects with what people are and their social relationships. The centre of the discussion was mainly the end-user of products who pursued higher and more experiential wants and desires. The question that is significant here is whether the emergence of a digital society plays a role in this process. The “marketplace” has become ever more digitalised. For instance, the contemporary power of consumption can be seen in social media consumption, e-shopping, the online consumption of music and films, and so on. It is in this context, I would argue, that digital consumption comes to play an influential social role in contemporary society.

It is McCracken (1986) who further analyses how the cultural element exists in the consumer world, and how mobile meanings pass from the ‘culturally constituted world’ to products, and finally, to individuals. He focuses on the meaning of goods and the relationship between individuals and possessions by highlighting the fluidity of cultural meaning in society. By focusing on cultural meaning, McCracken (1986: 71) sees consumers and objects as ‘the way-stations of meaning’ and in that way sheds light on the ‘structural and dynamic properties of consumption that have not always been emphasised’ and to ‘phenomena as advertising, the fashion world, and consumption rituals as instruments of meaning movement’. However, the modern role of the relationship between consumption and identity is related to the way in which experiences have come to penetrate individual’s everyday lives. It is within the context of this

thesis that I am interested in the role of the meaning of the experience of consumption.

The question I am concerned with is whether or not digital consumption somehow intensifies this process of meaning-making. Whether consuming places (Urry, 1995), goods or services, the role of consumption has not only got an economic relation, but also a cultural one. Yet, Miles and Miles (2004) go one step further. They note that consumption plays a significant part in the construction of meanings in the context of the city life. It is individuals segregated in cities, that engage with playful post-modern lifestyles (Featherstone, 1991). The spatial expression of this process may be particularly pertinent. For example, it could be argued that for individuals who can afford to buy consumer goods, being in a shopping mall is part of the experience, while for those who cannot afford to buy, the simple experience of being seen to be an active consumer may provide some sense of belonging. In other words, the feeling or sense of attachment to the realm of consumption and its experiential aspects may be more crucial than the concrete realities of their ability to consume or otherwise, and this is a core concern of mine throughout this thesis. Thus, both consumption and experiences play a vital role in the moulding of meanings in contemporary society.

I would contend that this construction of meanings takes place no longer, or at least to a less extent, through malls (as the Covid-19 pandemic so graphically demonstrated), but via digital space. According to Corrigan (1997: 181-2):

> [T]he virtual mall promises almost all that the real mall can deliver, and at far lower costs to the purveyors of goods and services: the latest from major retailers, spaces for play, the thrill of gambling, opportunities to hear and see the most recent products of the music and video industries.

> Missing, of course, is the social dimension of the public spaces in which embodied consumers actually, if temporarily, dwell.

It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that what has changed is where people, especially young people, *feel* they belong. In the post-modern world, as described by Featherstone (1991), there has been a transition from consuming goods to consuming meanings of goods, facilitated by the advertising and cultural industry (Klein, 2000). What is put at the centre of the subject's attention is the spectacular, the aesthetic and the senses (Debord, 1994 [1967]). It is not only use-value and exchange-value that are implied by the commodity. Each and every commodity implies a number of uses or 'signifying or symbolic use-value(s)' (Corrigan, 1997). In this sense, commodities are fetishised according to their symbolic power. In this study, I am particularly interested in what the symbols of consumption may say about one's self.

It has been argued that it is the introduction of brands in modern society that reinforces the nature of the symbolic meaning that is attached to goods (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). Brands play the role of social badges, even though the power of symbolism is likely to wear out over time. Yet, despite the emphasis on branding oneself, it is the individualisation of choice that consumption so celebrates. Popular culture is blurring the boundaries between art and everyday life. This is also evident today with Photoshop and social media applications (Instagram, VSCO, Snapseed, etc.) in which social media users try to emulate photographers' and art directors' techniques. The significance of the symbolic power of consumption lies in the fact that it seems trivial. In reality, it is not. Consumption has a more profound impact than even this argument suggests. It is a means of holding society together (McCracken, 1986). According to Corrigan

(1997: 178), ‘goods can work in a very conservative way – they hold things in place. They may also recuperate protest, and transform the potentially destabilising into one more piece of evidence and continuity’. In this way, consumption facilitates forms of transformation in society and at the same time offers some sense of continuity.

Shopping can often be regarded as a pleasure-seeking activity; however, it cannot be disputed that even if consumers have the freedom to pick and choose products that they want, interpretations regarding their status still exist. For instance, one possible way to indicate social standing is a person’s clothing. Signalling the public character of the individual, clothing can be interpreted as a means for signalling personal characteristics. It could be argued that social changes in a digital society have a knock-on effect. So, for example, clothing is somehow less important today than it used to be in this immediate sense. Instead, its importance is expressed in other ways through social media (see Chapter 3). In this sense, social media can be characterised as an experiential space for the construction of identity.

2.4 Status and consumer culture

Veblen’s [2005 (1899)] theory of consumption focuses on the status system and the nature of needs. To this extent, goods constitute status symbols and provide a means of social emulation from the moment that wealth accumulation became significant as a signal of a person’s place on the social hierarchy. In his work Veblen considers consumption to be related to status position. This is demonstrated either in the form of conspicuous leisure or conspicuous consumption. In this context, individuals possess consumer goods that demonstrate and reinforce their social position. It is my contention that the role of

consumption and of status can only be fully understood if it is considered in the continuously changing socio-economic, cultural and political context of the present day, and that this process is currently undergoing a radical change given the new spaces that the digital world implies.

It is the perception of status that exercises a hidden pressure to consume. In this way, acquired objects function as carriers of a specific status. For the purposes of this project, it is worth examining the relevance of social status and conspicuous consumption in digital space. Although sharing daily experiences on social media, like going to a football match, gigs, bars, and holidays may be a significant source of prestige for many young people, they are less likely investigated through the lens of status. In this sense, it is interesting to explore whether experience-led consumption practices function as carriers of status as well. In this way, I would argue both consumer goods and experiences potentially provide the means by which an individual can corroborate one's status in digital space.

In many respects, contemporary society is dominated by a culture of display and appearance (Dicks, 2004). The notion of consumption as a form of display is by no means trivial, even if it is mundane. In fact, the consumption process is crucial to this thesis with respect to how the spaces in which consumption is enacted have changed over time. Trentmann argues (2012) that status-seeking, while universal, is not something that is fixed but is rather something that is negotiated within a cultural context. In this sense, the culture of display is intensified within the social media spaces that a digitally oriented society constructs. Marwick's (2010: 14) consideration of status within the social media context is particularly important in this respect given that 'status is what your peers think of you, whether

they hold you in esteem or contempt, and the privileges that accord from this position'. In the social media sphere young people use social media posts to compete for, affirm, and communicate their status.

Even if we allow the arguments about the decline of materialism, the transition to a new world of post-materialism, and how luxury materialistic consumption has come to be depreciated (Inglehart, 1981), it does not necessarily follow that status is not fundamental to young people's social relations. The idea of social status is sociologically important because it is defined by, and at the same time, defines our social relations. Although it might appear that access to social media signifies a democratisation of conspicuous consumption, it is important to consider whether or not the kinds of ostentatious display implied by social media compels individuals to engage in a competitive accumulation of social prestige. What is significant about consumption is not so much its general acceptance, but whether and how it is changing in relation to socio-economic transformations, and specifically, those engendered by the digital society.

As we shall see later in Chapter 7 and 8, the social media space has re-established and reinforced pre-existing status hierarchies. For the purposes of this project, it is interesting to investigate the extent to which not only consumer goods but representations of moments of consumption on social media may also function as symbols. For example, many people follow the 'Rich Kids of Instagram' online (or 'Rich Kids of the Internet') where there is a clear documentation of luxurious ways of life (Hoffower, 2019). This is particularly significant as a manifestation of wealth and conspicuous consumption. All lifestyles under these conditions are contextualised and evaluated by wealth and success.

2.5 Consumer lifestyles and identity

Consumer lifestyles, especially young people's lifestyles, play a significant role in understanding social change. For Corrigan (1997: 46) lifestyle is 'a whole combination of different objects and practices'. To that extent, lifestyle has been linked to consumption (Chaney, 1996). Corrigan suggests a material-oriented explanation of lifestyles in which what we purchase has become paramount. For Zestanakis (2018: 2), 'in Greece, lifestyle came to describe media discourses that emphasised changing consumption patterns and marked the increasingly commercialised mediascape'. While, Featherstone (1987: 55) notes, 'within contemporary culture [lifestyle] connotes individuality, self-expression, and a stylistic self-consciousness'. As Miles (2000: 16) argues, 'lifestyles, then, are an active expression of not only the relationship between the individual and society and structure and agency, but also people's relationship to social change'. In this project, I am interested in the digital-oriented expression of lifestyles in which how young people present themselves and what display online becomes significant. What I mean by lifestyle is closer to notions of lifestyle as an active expression of a digitalised 'way of life'.

In a digital world where individuals spend increasingly more time online, it is essential to try and understand the effect of the social media arena on the nature of consumer lifestyles. The emergence of a digital society in recent decades necessitates an investigation of digital lifestyles, particularly digital youth lifestyles, through a sociological lens. In light of the above discussion on status, it is important to focus on how social status can be expressed in contemporary societies through digital lifestyles. It is furthermore important for sociologists of consumption to bridge the gap between offline and online consumer lifestyles,

and hence come to terms with the changing challenges that young people experience in contemporary society. Investigating digital forms of consumption *per se* is not enough. There is a clear need to position any such explorations in the context of generalised uncertainty through comparative projects that can shed light on the differences and similarities of young people's experiences.

The discussion of consumer lifestyles is related with one of the most significant debates in sociology, namely, the complex relationship between structure and agency. In the context of this thesis, the importance of this debate is to emphasise the key role of daily social interactions in the construction of the world, while at the same time, recognising the role of broader social contexts that determine such interactions. One of the most influential contributions to this debate, that has had a significant impact on discussions around lifestyle, is Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration. For Giddens, the concept of structure is both constraining and enabling. It is these conditions that provide individuals with the necessary resources to construct and reproduce society. In this sense, individuals draw on such resources by negotiating lifestyles on a daily basis. For the purposes of this study, it is important to investigate whether young people's identities are to an extent a product of a negotiation between the expression of individualistic aspects on social media and a sense of conformity in social groups.

If we recognise that the digital sphere had an impact on the relationship between lifestyles and culture it is also worthwhile shedding light on digital lifestyles as a way to reproduce social hierarchies. Bourdieu's (1984) work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* is significant to the discussion of lifestyles. His notion of habitus plays a key role in understanding the everyday experience. Bourdieu identifies habitus as the way in which individuals interpret the world and

as a mechanism through which they structure their social lives. The notion of cultural capital is vital, as it reflects how different social classes are educated differently, and how that education is operationalised in order to assert a person's social position. In this light, the role of social media consumption is particularly important as it can be seen as a way of constructing differences between social groups. Thus, an individual's digital lifestyle is structured by what each social group identifies as culturally legitimate behaviour.

The most important point here is that digital lifestyles are linked to social hierarchy through different levels of access to cultural and economic capital, and in doing so, maintain these hierarchies. Digital space opens up and necessitates a new focus on lifestyle through the wide range of products and services that it puts on offer. Digital transition can be evident in the emergence of e-shops, e-games, e-sports, social media applications, live streaming services, the emergence of digital-only newspapers, magazines, and TV channels. In this way, more and more everyday activities that characterise an individual's life are documented online. It is in this way that identities are potentially constructed in a digital context. It is within this context that the negotiation of the construction of the individual and group relationships takes place.

What is interesting to investigate here is how the documentation of lifestyles online appears to become a digital expression of a self-identity. Due to the individual's apparent willingness to construct their own lifestyles in an online world, digital forms of consumption fulfil the role of some kind of resource in this regard. Arguably, individuals' increasing engagement with digital space has become even more significant in the context of a wider process of social change. In this thesis, I am more interested in young people's role in this process, due to

their increasing exposure to digital cultures. In any attempt to understand the notion of consumer lifestyle there is a need to address how people construct meanings in an everyday digital context, especially in the social media landscape. While the concept of lifestyle denotes individuality, it also includes elements of the individual's connection to others (Reimer, 1995). In the digital context, the sense that the individual is both liberated and yet somehow controlled is intensified. It could be argued that it is not only possessions that function as a means of expression, but also experiences. For the purposes of this project, I consider whether the social media arena fuels an intensification of consumer lifestyles as a resource for identity construction.

2.6 Crisis and consumption

Changes in consumption during times of crisis can help social researchers monitor how young people, in particular, cope with such crises (see Chapter 4 for a discussion on young people and uncertainty). Work by scholars such as Ang (2001), Bentolila and Ichino (2008), Kaytaz and Gul (2014) demonstrate the significance of crisis as a factor that affects the process of consumption. Such theoretical and empirical investigations may range from an economic perspective, in the case of recession that implies an increased rate of unemployment and private debt, to a more psycho-social perspective: whether and how an individual or the whole society is affected, and what the effects are of such a crisis. In the context of this thesis, I am interested in whether and how the Global Financial Crisis and the inter-crisis years have impacted the nature of consumption.

Before we move on to discuss the relationship between crises and consumption in any more depth, it is important to frame what is meant by the term "crisis".

Kutak (1938) suggests that a crisis is unanticipated and that people are unaware of its danger. Kutak argues that a crisis is likely to cause a collapse in how life is organised, leading to unforeseen challenges. In this way, financial crises, wars and pandemics have parlous effects on life, economy and consumption. The significance of understanding the effects of crises in the nature of consumption is that, in turn, we can understand how the relationship between consumption and the construction of identity is affected in a period of crisis. Koos *et al.* (2017) pinpoint a need for a thorough examination of the major disruptions of consumption. However, this section is less concerned with understanding everything that needs to be known about the relationship between crisis and consumption and more with the specific effects of the Global Financial Crisis and the austerity of the inter-crisis years in young people's lives. In this context, the experience of consumption in a crisis situation can be regarded as a barometer of aspects of social change.

It is not uncommon to observe periods of time in which people alter their consumption patterns upon facing the weakening of the welfare state; rising unemployment, a decrease in wages, a reduction of household resources, and so on. The question here is how the experience of consumption is affected, aside from the actual volume of sales. In order to understand the impact of a crisis on consumption, it is necessary to consider the nature of its societal impact, forecast and time (Koos, 2017). For Koos (2017: 365), 'crises, thus, have the potential to undermine the innate belief in the stability and structure of our life world, the trust in the very institutions enabling human conduct, and therefore increase uncertainty about the future'. What I am suggesting is that consumption is not

static and herein lies its significance. In this way, the role consumption plays in consumers' lives changes over time.

My intention is not to focus on the durability of any quantifiable change of consumption, what I will argue is that the impact of uncertainty affects consumption by carving its indelible marks into the nature of consumption. Alonso *et al*. (2015) argue that one way to understand the impact of the financial crisis is to focus on the socio-political discussions of people in relation to the generation of meanings and the sphere of consumption. They found that some Spaniards blamed the excessive consumption habits of "others" in the past as the cause of the economic crisis. Such findings are useful and related with the themes that this thesis will engage. However, I am specifically interested in investigating the role of the socio-economic crisis in young people's lives.

For Alonso *et al.* (2015), such drama unveils that the criticism against consumerism and excessive lifestyles is the product of economic constraints, without any substantial focus on the logic of consumption or concerns about sustainability. It is exactly such criticisms of excessive consumption that renders imperative to discuss particularly the notion of excessive consumption, that is, hyper-consumption. This is something that I will address in the next section. In short, informal attempts to theorise the crisis have involved criticism, not of the financial sector, but rather of irresponsible individuals and nations who lived beyond their means. This could signify the creation of "others" as scapegoats who have been spending considerable amounts of money irresponsibly rather than those who encouraged them to do so through cheap (and as it turned out unsustainable) credit. One of the key challenges is to shed light on young

people's perceptions about consumption and understand the contemporary role of consumption in their lives.

It is important to shed light on whether the Global Financial Crisis has had an impact on the "brand" of consumption, and what this means for its nature. This might be a reconsideration of the role of consumption, or a shift towards a more environmental attitude towards consumption. But perhaps what is more important is a state of affairs in which consumption is arguably reinvented, while maintaining its status as a form of escape. Alonso *et al*. (2015) suggest that most people have been affected by the economic crisis of 2008, even those more affluent who are more inclined to window-shopping in the streets. And yet this process of window-shopping appears to be escape-related even if does not entail the actual act of purchase; an idea that I shall revisit throughout this thesis. What I would argue, in this context, is that young people may be looking for a place where the financial pressures of today can be offset or relegated to future consideration; a place where, things do not feel so bad for the moment, and where they can assert their sense of belonging. In the context of this thesis, it is important to comprehend whether young consumers need to at least *appear* to consume.

2.7 Hyper-consumption

In the previous section, I discussed the relationship between consumption and crises and the effect on consumption. Criticisms about the relationship between irresponsible individuals and excessive consumption necessitate an understanding of hyper-consumption or else overconsumption. According to Håkansson (2014) the concept of overconsumption is a relatively complex notion that has not been defined in a straightforward way. Håkansson suggests that it is related with the consumption of hedonic goods and individuals characterised by

low moral personality traits. As Håkansson puts it, overconsumption constitutes an oxymoron for classical economic theory as it implies a negative effect for the consumer. However, for consumer culture analysis it may be a source of meaning. In the context of this thesis, it is important to understand the effects of the crisis on the notion of hyper-consumption and its relation to how the “brand” of consumption is affected. The notion of hyper-consumption implies an intensification of consumption. In the context of this thesis, it is important for two reasons. First, I am interested in how young people perceive the notion of hyper-consumption and its role during the inter-crisis years. Second, I argue that it is significant to investigate the effect of social media consumption on the notion and whether or not the digital arena encourages excessive consumption or just reinforces a sense of it through the representations of moments of consumption online.

For Lipovetsky (2005), hyper-consumption celebrates excess, impatience and overindulgence. In this context, consumers buy whatever they desire in an attempt to obtain instant gratification. In contrast to the post-materialistic theoretical stream that suggests that consumers might have been overwhelmed by the consumption of goods, the key question here is whether social media consumption and the digital society has intensified this process. Hypermodernity can be considered as the experience of intensity and urgency, as Nicole Aubert (2005, cited in Gottschalk, 2010) puts it. It could be argued that hyper-consumption may offer some sense of entertainment to the subject. However, what we need to ask is whether this has delivered the promise of progress to establish an independent sense of self that deals convincingly with the challenges of globalisation.

We need to ask how long a consumption-driven form of pleasure-seeking can last. However socially related consumption appears to be, it is the idea of self-gratification that prioritises the wants and desires of the self. Perhaps the shopping experience has been transformed due to the constant availability of e-shops. In this way, it becomes even more important to consider whether 24/7 access to shopping and social media accentuates a thirst for hyper-consumption and ostentatious display. One of the key challenges of consumer studies, therefore, is to shed light on the effects on the contemporary self. In this context, the discussion about the power of capitalism – how it coerces people to construct particular identities while at the same time presenting itself as a mechanism of entertainment – remains fundamental to debates in consumption studies, and in turn, for this thesis.

The relationship to gender is a good example of how the experience of consumption is intensified in a world where spatial and temporal boundaries are lifted (Milestone and Meyer, 2011). Choices appear to be freely undertaken, and resulting from individual preferences, however it is important not to neglect the role of advertising in this process. In their research about representations of women and modes of consumption in advertisements, de Laat and Baumann (2016) describe how adverts depict mothers engaging in ‘caring consumption’ for their children to achieve their (socially acceptable) parenting goals. While, from the opposite perspective, females without childcare responsibilities were presented by advertisers to be driven by a strong desire to consume for their personal benefit and self-indulgence. Both advertising and marketing play a role in the construction of a consumer culture mentality. It could be argued that in this way consumption is becoming increasingly performative.

The notion of hyper-consumption has been widely criticised. Albinsson *et al*. (2010) draw attention to the fact that even twenty years after the fall of Berlin Wall, East Germans adopt anti-consumption practices in an attempt to reject the logic of hyper-consumption and unnecessary spending. In this regard, Albinsson *et al.* suggest that although East Germans define themselves by material goods, to an extent, they consider that those possessions decrease their level of social connectedness. Indeed, the effect of the financial crisis in young people's perceptions of hyper-consumption and whether this may or may not lead to anti-consumption practices is of particular interest. Schulz (2016: online) meanwhile argues that 'hyperconsumption and overconsumption refer to the central role played by the acquisition of goods and services in structuring the lives of individuals, the dynamics of social organisation, and processes of ecological degradation affecting nature'. For the purposes of this study, it is important to investigate whether elements of hyper-consumption are related to the dynamics of sociality in digital space and to what extent this affects young people's experiences.

It is Campbell (2014) who puts emphasis on the relationship between hyper-consumption and sustainability. While, for Ritzer (2012) hyper-consumption comes hand in hand with the indebted individual. When they reach excessive levels, market-mediated lifestyles may affect both individuals and society in challenging sustainability on both ecological and financial grounds. Campbell (2014) argues that the role of hyper-consumption is not to fulfil actual needs but instead to reflect a process that is happening for its own sake. Despite its connection to individualisation, he argues that it is naïve to consider hyper-consumption as a mere representation of an individual's passion for the novel

and their incapability, in the face of advertising and technical socio-economic pressures, to control themselves when it comes to high-tech products, fashion and materials. Campbell argues that it is the shared responsibility between producers, consumers and governments that led to new technologies and hyper-consumption: it is the shortening of products' life-cycle; technological advancement; fast fashion and aesthetically-driven consumption that boost the phenomenon of hyper-consumption.

For Campbell (2014), it is the expansion of new technological advancements in relation to price reductions in the markets that renders hyper-consumption possible and desirable. For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to reflect upon how digital space and social media consumption impact the notion of hyper-consumption. However, such processes can only be understood as part of a much more fundamental transformation in which digital spaces might become especially significant at times of crisis. Specifically, they may provide an arena of escape at times when consumers' (unrealistic) expectations are that they can purchase whatever, whenever and wherever they want, even when challenged by austerity and financial restrictions. The question that remains here is what effect is being had on the young consumer.

2.8 Hedonic consumption

Hedonic consumption, relating to how consumers try to pursue pleasure, has received more attention in marketing than it has done among sociologists (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Alba and Williams, 2013). For Hirschman and Holbrook (1982: 92, emphasis in the original) '*Hedonic consumption designates those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multi-sensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one's experience with products*', focusing on the idea of

historic and fantasy imagery. It is the digital space that may facilitate the process of historic imagery through saved moments as posts in social media. In this study, I am not interested in young people's hedonic consumption of consumer goods *per se* but I seek to understand the role both of social media consumption and the representations of experiences online in relation to young people's construction of a fantasy-driven space in which the effects of the crisis are ameliorated. At the same time, such space may provide the user with the necessary tools to produce a curated imaginary sequence. In this sense, individuals directly seek a sense of pleasure through the digital world. Individuals, especially young individuals, may thus be persuaded through the illusion that this curation could provide, that they have all the power to reshape their own everyday lives.

Consumption has moved from a utilitarian-based social action about meeting individual needs to more desire-oriented hedonistic explanations of social action (Campbell, 1987). In his attempt to provide an adequate theory for the nature of modern consumption, Campbell argues that the "consumption ethic" was likely to be a characteristic of the early industrial society. Nava's (1987) suggestion here is particularly important. According to Nava (1987: 209), 'consumerism is far more than just economic activity: it is also about dreams and consolation, communication and confrontation, image and identity'. In a sense, the power of digital space lies in its connection to images and to the realm of fantasy. This is especially important in the context of a digital life in which the individual is exposed to a broad range of senses. Engagement with what may appear to be just hedonic social media consumption, prompting individuals to assume that they could somehow be completed via their own lifestyles, could in fact also reflect a

wider need to belong in a complex world. Thus, it is significant to focus on the role of the socio-economic nexus in young people's relationships as a way that contextualises the consumption experience.

One question that arises here is whether the absence of some senses (e.g. scent, touch feeling) in the digital world is partially replaced by a previously lived multisensory imagery that may function as a kind of "database". We need to ask whether such a sensory database could produce fantasy-driven and emotional experiences. The role of representations of fantasy-driven moments of consumption may well be crucial in order to enable a deeper understanding the reinvention of consumption in our digital world; a consumption built upon the thirst for illusion. But the question that lies here is whether such an illusion of choice is it all what it seems. What is particularly important here is that the receipt of experiences through senses is an active process whereby consumers receive, decode and react in a form of experience (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). This may reflect people's - not least young people's - turn on their "right" to experience.

At one level at least, the world of consumption, especially social media consumption, is by its very nature a world of feelings. Lipovetsky (2005) suggests that during the 1990s, consumption underpinned a profound transformation in relation to both experiences and emotions. However, it is important to consider the extent to which the pleasure of hedonic consumption is instantaneous. Consumers at least seem to be actively participating in this process due to the fact they are more than willing to experience any satisfaction that consumption may offer. But, of course, above all consumers' participation in hedonic consumption is not a process of undiluted free choice. Rather it is an ideological process: an ideological process driven by the relentless determination of

consumer capitalism to reproduce itself. What is important here is the extent to which digital spaces for consumption provide an arena in which individual's search for sensation is expanded. It could indeed be argued that consumption has taken on a more significant emotional dimension (Illouz, 2009) and that these emotions are played out in the digital arena to the extent that consumers feel that they have a semblance of intense control in this space (see Chapter 3). It is an intensity that they need to feel in order to get a sense that they belong.

2.9 Prosumption

Before any attempt to understand the changing nature of consumption and its relationship with social transformation, there is a need to shed light on the notion of prosumption. Prosumption is the process by which the boundaries between production and consumption are being digitally reshaped. The question of the production process, considered as the centre of capitalism, has long been at the very heart of debates regarding the competence of capitalism. According to Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010), societies have long been directed by prosumption (Toffler, 1980, cited in Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). For Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010: 14, emphasis in the original), '*Prosumption* involves *both* production and consumption rather than focusing on either one (production) or the other (consumption)'. It is through this digital redefinition that prosumption becomes even more crucial insomuch as material actualities have ceased to limit, at least to an extent, the potential ways in which production and consumption may be connected (Zajc, 2015). In this thesis, I am particularly interested in understanding how such connection is manifested in the social media arena and its relationship with young people's experiences.

There is an argument for saying that the performative nature of consumption is intensified by the emergence of prosumption. The process of prosumption has its roots in materialistic elements and may be seen in the contemporary expansion of production into the consumer roles in innovations such as the introduction of automated teller machines, self-service checkouts in supermarkets, drive-through fast-food chains and coffee shops and the prosumption of “atmosphere” in events such as sport spectatorship (Andrews and Ritzer, 2018). In their analysis of prosumer capitalism Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) suggest that exploitation occupies social relations in the form of “free” labour and abundance of “free” services (mostly Internet-based). The inception of prosumption as a dynamic explanatory concept resides at least partially in the increasing role of the Internet in general and social media in particular; and especially in users’ involvement and collaboration in it. Recent technological advancements in digital media, notably in the form of smartphones and tablets, and increased usage of social media, can clearly have an impact in the intensification of prosumption. Indeed, while prosumption and capitalism have been examined (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Ritzer, 2015), young prosumers’ experiences are somewhat neglected in theoretical developments. Key here then is the active role that the young social media consumer plays in this process and how such understanding may or may not inform theoretical discussions about the relationship of consumption and youth identities.

The concept of prosumption has previously been implicitly discussed by scholars under the label of value co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Grönroos, 2011) and co-production (Ramirez, 1999; Etgar, 2008). However, prosumption is clearly reinvented in the age of the Internet. As Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010: 20)

put it, '[Web 2.0] is currently both the most prevalent location of prosumption and its most important facilitator as a "means of prosumption"'. In the twenty-first century, new digital companies have emerged, such as Amazon, Google, Facebook, and Twitter that are changing the prosumption landscape that existed previously. It is within such spaces that young people construct their identities. At the same time, with the use of modern technologies, work offices are being replaced by homes as the centre of economic activity (Bloom *et al*., 2015). In this way, it becomes the focus of attention how consumers (or prosumers) relate to a new world that it is increasingly defined by the 'interrelated process of production and consumption' (Ritzer, 2015: 408). The expansion of digital media, especially social media, has rendered prosumption a powerful tool in our meaning-making processes and identity construction.

Ritzer goes further to suggest that it is not only the Web 2.0 but the new 'smart prosuming machines' that will change the very nature of prosumer capitalism (Ritzer, 2015). Individuals are engaged in daily activities for which it is less clear whether signify moments of production or consumption, because boundaries are being dissolved through the rise of "self-work", particularly on social media. In seeking to investigate the relationship between prosumption and identity, the notion of "self-work" is fundamental. In this way, it is crucial to explore the performative nature of young people's "self-work" on social media and its effects on the notion of the self. Some of the most prominent digital examples of prosumption can be considered those that relate to social media engagement and user-generated content such as "following" other users, the act of publicly demonstrating approval of (aka "liking") others' photos and videos, and the commenting on, and sharing of, others' messages. Some other highly engaging

cases of prosumption are web-based commentary and amateur journalism (aka “blogging”), “vlogging” (video blogging) and reviewing of others’ content. But does this constitute what is in effect a new world in which young people are expected to create and curate their notion of the self, online?

Prosumption sits at the core of any kind of a feeling that the digital consumer can be in control of his or her own fate. It is indisputable that the proliferation of consumer products and services, as well as new spaces for consumption (Miles, 2010) tied to marketing and advertising have expanded consumption’s role in the construction of identities (Friedman, 1994). However, it could be argued that it is not only what people consume but also what they *prosume* that it may be a vehicle in the construction of the notion of the self. What is interesting to investigate is whether prosumption provides a rich resource to young people to somehow construct their identities. This is something that I seek to explore further and I will return throughout this thesis. In particular, I am interested in how young people may or may not feel that they have more resources given the fact that they can potentially construct their own resources through “self-work”.

Young users contribute to a number of websites and social media platforms without getting paid for the work they do. In the context of traditional economics (in which production occurs as people seek payment or access to resources), it is not clear what this unpaid labour might provide for the self. It would appear, capitalism has succeeded in its blurring of the boundaries between leisure and work. Some users may get some semblance of belonging from their engagement with social media platforms or feel empowered by expressing their views and making their voice heard, while others may see it as a vehicle to advertise themselves. Prosumption apparently frees up the individual who proactively

engage with the consumption experience. Nevertheless, it concurrently ties him or her to the responsibility that this process demands. Indeed, it seems likely that this type of unpaid work can potentially offer prosumers a sense of liberation and a mechanism by which they can choose how they want to present and perform themselves. This relationship between social change and technology intensifies the demands on people, especially youth, to appear to deal effectively with that change. In this thesis, I will argue that even if we consider identity as a project (Giddens, 1991), those particular identities are increasingly fragmented and *ephemeral*.

Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010: 29) suggest that 'the goal for most Web 2.0 companies is to create, and later enhance, the "value" of their site (by, for example, turning it into a well-known brand)'. It is my contention that this exact logic of prosumer capitalism not only governs companies but controls users. I will argue that in this new world of prosumer culture, young prosumers try to enhance the "value" of their profile online, thereby turning it into a successful brand. During these times of limited financial resources, new forms of self-presentations online have a far-reaching impact on consumption, transforming photo- and video-sharing social networking sites to the 'mini-cathedrals of consumption' (or prosumption) (Theodoridis *et al.*, 2019). In seeking to understand the impact of social media on young people's everyday lives, we need to investigate further how social networking sites emerge and how social processes unfurl.

In developing such an argument further we might ask whether the freedom offered to the consumer through social media constitutes any kind of freedom at all or whether the freedom to prosume is no more than the freedom to be of use and to maintain and reproduce the status quo in order to accede to the requests

of the consumer society. In other words, prosumption surfaces as a central point, a battleground, as it were, for the negotiation of identity in a digital world. My intention is to consider the suggestion, by investigating the consumption of social media, that this may not be as liberating as it first appears.

2.10 Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the changing nature of consumption and, in effect, its relationship with social change. It is arguably more difficult today than it has ever been in the past to explain and describe what constitutes consumption and social media is perhaps the key player in perpetuating such ambivalence. A crucial way of understanding this change is through the notion of prosumption – a process that appears to give the consumer some sense of control over his or her consumption but which in reality may well take that control away. The question that emerges here is whether the consumer wants and can really be liberated by consumption.

An understanding of the relationship between crisis and consumption can offer invaluable insight about the role of consumption in people's lives. It is within the context of the Global Financial Crisis and the impact of austerity that this becomes especially significant. Criticisms around the notion of excessive consumption have played a key role to shed some light on the notions of hyper-consumption and hedonic consumption. It is within the digital context that we need to examine further the role of these notions. Although hyper-consumption or excessive consumption might be the "recipient" of the negative feelings around consumption, it is the notion of prosumption that can offer a better understanding of the contemporary social media landscape.

This brings us back to the question of how digital forms of consumption have transformed what it means to be a consumer. One of my concerns in this thesis is: what does this process mean for the nature of consumption, as well as the nature of identity? Consumption has a key role to play in maintaining social relationships among people both in the offline and online environment. The way in which people prosume their social media environment is ultimately a combination of freedom and control because they are simultaneously the consumers and producers of that environment.

However, much of the time and effort prosumers spend engaging with social media is not spent fully in control of the process. Digital forms of consumption appear to offer young people more control and a sense of security, and yet arguably, these very things are taken away by this consumption. Perhaps they reinforce those uncertainties that young people try so hard to surmount. It is this paradox that is at the heart of my thesis. In the next chapter I will discuss how and why the study of social media in everyday life is so important given how young people live not just a digital life, but their life more broadly in a digital bubble, that is itself the product of a particular socio-cultural context.

Chapter 3

Social Media and Identity

3.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2, I established that consumption plays a significant role in people's everyday lives and that consumer lifestyles are a key means by which human beings cope with socio-economic change. More specifically, I considered the ubiquitous role of consumption in everyday life and its changing nature in a world of uncertainty. I will argue in this chapter that transformations in the field of consumption can be linked to the digitalisation of consumption and understood further by comprehending people's engagement with social media and in doing so I will go as far as to argue that the social media arena is the quintessential manifestation of the changing nature of consumption.

The dominance of social media has a significant impact both for the construction of selfhood and the nature of consumption in contemporary society. We live in a society where the rise of social media typifies an era where information and knowledge are positioned at the core of the socio-economic and political world. In effect, social media platforms have become symbols, and where brands specifically, leading to wide transformations in the knowledge economy. Brabham (2015: 1) argues that 'social media researchers can turn their attention to the everyday realities of social media and grapple with more complicated study designs to make more sophisticated claims about the role of social media in society'. For the purposes of this thesis, a focus on the digitalisation of consumption and social media will allow me to consider the effects of these

changes on young people's identities, and in turn, develop key questions that need to be answered in this regard.

Our social media profiles constitute what and where we prosume (see Chapter 2, section 2.9). As I suggested prosumption lies at the core of the social media world and, as such, social media platforms lie at the very heart of what it means to be a prosumer of the society in which we live. But what do such social changes mean for our identities? Beyond what the emergence of social media means for our everyday lives, this chapter is concerned with the reinvention of self that social media implies. The chapter aims to address the impact of social media on how we imagine and experience the self in a changing world.

Each section will consider key dimensions or aspects of the social media arena in relation to self as a space for production and consumption. I will begin with a discussion of how the social impact of technology has long been debated. Major contributions in terms of defining social media will be outlined and the implications for the construction of identities. The effects of these transformations are highlighted through a discussion of the notion of self-branding, that has emerged as a performative practice: prosumers are inclined to execute in order to manage their presentations. I will motivate the consideration of Instagram as the (current) ultimate arena of self-promotion.

3.2 Technology and the digitalisation of consumption

Before going on to reflect upon the particular effect of social media as a vital feature of the consumer society, it is worth considering the role of technology in our society and its impact on the digitalisation of consumption more generally.

Technology is significant because it enables users to create a world of their own making. As Rattle (2014:122) puts it:

> At the consumption end, Internet and communication technologies facilitate access to a new universe of opportunities to satisfy the consumer culture: online shopping, access to information that can be used to imagine identity through trends, fashions and new outlets, and a vast universe of personal, professional and social contacts that can be used to enhance and express identity.

But the impact of technology on consumption signifies something more than just a transition from traditional material consumption to online shopping. It is more about transforming how consumption facilitates imagination and provides reassurance. In this context, it is significant to shed light on the effect on the nature of youth consumption. Of course, younger generations seem to spend more and more time in the virtual world exploring new opportunities to construct their identities. However, the question that remains is the extent to which this increased exposure to the virtual world is 1) liberating young people and 2) reinventing consumption.

According to Ekström and Glans (2011: 153), 'technology has played a major role in blurring the borders. The market is present at home through the computer and the home is present in the market through the mobile phone'. This picks up themes that were introduced in the discussion of prosumption in a way that the world of technology is not only blurring the boundaries between the home and the market but also between work and leisure. Thus, technology obscures the limitations between production and consumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). In the broader sense, this boundary blurring intensifies not only the process of labour but also the way consumers *feel* consumption. For example, people work

whilst checking their personal email or their Twitter feed. Others searching for a new job may use social media websites such as LinkedIn to find a new position. People may not realise they are consuming; however, they are prosumers from the moment they consume LinkedIn's networking services to find a job. Reflecting back on Rattle's (2014) argument, we could ask whether new digital technologies are not only providing a source of opportunity to celebrate consumer culture but also a source of restraint that serves to disenchant the consumer. Paradoxically, it could be tentatively argued that technology is a sphere within which young people may feel unchained but within which the risk of confinement is intensified.

According to Castells (2000: 9), 'technology as a material tool, and meaning as symbolic construction through relationships of production/consumption, experience, and power, are the fundamental ingredients of human action – an action that ultimately produces and modifies social structure'. In the contemporary society, time and space are fragmented and thus become a series of temporal and spatial streams (Castells, 2000). Therefore, the foundations upon which a person constructs a sense of belonging is increasingly eroded.

For Lehdonvirta *et al.* (2009) virtual consumption does not signify unsubstantial consumption practices but a new computer-mediated social sphere that entices the consumer further towards the fantasy of contemporary consumer culture. In the fantasy world that digital consumption compels the consumer to engage with, capitalism's financial constraints are superficially abrogated. For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to shed light on whether such a semblance of liberation or empowerment of self is in any sense "real". In this regard, the key to understanding the role of digital technology in a so-called Network Society (Castells, 2010). Its impact on individual's identity construction lies in the question

of why elements of the self are played out through the spaces that digital technology enables. Given the fact that social media are so powerful and offer the consumer a plethora of choices, it is imperative to consider the nature of the relationship between social media and an individual's identity construction.

3.3 Social media

3.3.1 Defining social media

Social networking sites, or else social media (Papacharissi, 2015), consist of a broad series of online user generated activities, including the exchange of information and daily interactions (Baym *et al.,* 2004). From here on in, and throughout this thesis, I will use both terms interchangeably. Social media is the social arena in which many young people appear to be obliged to play out their identities in a rapidly-changing world (see Chapter 4, section 4.7). Before proceeding to review literature about the relationship between social media and identity in the context of everyday life, it is important to shed some light on what social media really signifies.

For Ellison *et al.* (2007), social network sites (SNSs) (another term widely used in the literature) facilitate users' expression and presentation of social networks either by constructing new relationships or cultivating existing ones. In addition, boyd and Ellison (2008) define social network sites as:

> web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (boyd and Ellison, 2008: 211)

On the one hand, social media, for some, are a recombination of previously existing forms of communication. One attempt at defining social media as a remediation of older forms of communication is provided by José van Dijck (2013), who argues that all media are social and all forms of sociality have been mediated by some kind of technology. However, she argues that social media differ in their level of acceleration, density and scale of data. Social media are defined by key platforms due to their participatory and collaborative user-created content and even in the very beginning 'set the context and shaped the contours of phenomenon rooted in the social, technical, and business dynamics of that would become Web 2.0' (boyd, 2015: 1). In an attempt to define the notion of platform, I turn to Gibbs *et al.* (2015: 257) who argue:

> each social media platform comes to have its own unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics, which can be considered as constituting a 'platform vernacular', or a popular (as in 'of the people') genre of communication. These genres of communication emerge from the affordances of particular social media platforms and the ways they are appropriated and performed in practice.

Nowadays, new opportunities for social interactions are so powerful, engaging people daily with digital popular brands such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram. While social media platforms facilitate and promote certain social activities and interactions, they implicitly discourage others. As such, 'expression and exchanges visible on social media ought not therefore be analysed and interpreted solely without context or without consideration of their symbolic and affective dimensions, whether originating in humans or machines' (Jones, 2015: 2). It could be argued that sociality and interactions on social media

have become increasingly complicated (Jones, 2015). As Gillespie (2015: 1) argues, we might:

> see our information as only raw material from which platforms assemble an information product for us: a feed for which some content is chosen, some is given prominence, some is disregarded, and some is expelled. That is to say, platforms intervene, and the public culture that emerges from them is, in important ways, the outcome.

Thus, social media platforms are not passive, but are rather dynamic (Gillespie, 2015). What is significant here is the recognition that the freedom social media promises resembles a falsity. What people receive is already algorithmically filtered and it is within these predetermined parameters that young people's identities are negotiated. Thus, social media platforms offer the "illusion" of dynamism to young people to construct their identities in the digital space.

The significance of social media in everyday life is undeniable, but there is no consensus on scholars' approaches to what constitutes social media. In this regard, Postigo (2015: 1) cautiously argues that, 'one cannot say unequivocally what social media mean for everyone in some sort of unified cultural theory of meaning'. As a result, I will try to avoid such a temptation by considering Shah's (2015) suggestion that media have always been imagined and conceived as social, but that digital media seems to have reframed sociality in a way that is different to traditional media. Shah argues that social media constitute a new kind of sociality in a way that challenges normative structures and older models of mediation, constructing what is in effect, 'a new imagination of the social' (Shah, 2015: 2). The key argument here is that the feeling we access from engagement in a social media network is that we are not alone; it provides us with a sense of

belonging. For the purposes of this thesis, social media, in a sense, constitutes an alternative consumer world in which young people's identities are re-established and reimagined.

In the context of this project it is important to focus on the dynamics of sociality (that is, the making of the social interactions that constitute society) online but also the discussions that people decide to leave outside such platforms (that is, what they refrain from posting), especially in the case of Instagram. For instance, in the analysis of young people's sociality and experiences, it is important to identify their selections and deletions, both implicit and explicit. In short, there is a need to consider both social media users' present and absent social interactions. This is important because it helps us to further understand the tensions that young people need to deal with, as well as the nature of the world social media consumption provides.

3.3.2 Social media, consumption and identity

The question of identity lies at the heart of debates regarding the everyday effects of social media. In seeking to explore the relationship between consumption and identity, the role of social media is significant. Social media's success as a way of communication relies on its relationship with our everyday lives (Couldry, 2015). However, in any attempt to understand social media's position in the negotiation of identity, what is actually at stake is the way our self is presented in this social media-saturated world. In this regard, a global shift takes place as users increase their engagement with the media and others: from mass communication to mass self-communication (Castells, 2010). This transition lies at the heart of the relationship between the changing nature of consumption and identity.

It is clear that social media have an important role to play in the construction of identities. Being in the social media world provides space to a greater or lesser extent in which individuals can choose the content to reflect their own beliefs, perceptions, customs, likes, and interests. However, this reflection is also influenced by the reflections of users' peers or their desired audience. Leaver (2015) suggests that an analysis of social media should not be about the individual per se, but about ways individuals come together and form families, groups, communities, and other networks. According to Deuze (2015: 2):

> Our constant communication about the self therefore is just as much about projecting a true self as it is about living up and through the multiple versions of our selves that exist in the eyes and minds of others

If this follows, we need to ask whether there is a "true" self, or whether multiple versions of ourselves can exist simultaneously, and if so, how they may be constructed. Deuze (2015) goes on to argue that social media have become part of our daily experience of a lifeworld characterised by self-expressive individualisation, providing to many people the opportunity to present but also to consume their own living. In the social media world, individuals produce and consume their own products either textually and/or visually, and in many cases, these are personal moments that they present to the public. One way of putting this is that the individual has become a negotiator of communication between the private and public realm. But it is equally important to reconsider the individual as a negotiator of his or her own existence between a "real" and a virtual (which is to say, an acceptable) persona. As such, social media practices are not only significant for understanding young people's identity construction and self-

actualisation, but they are also vital in gaining insight about the changing nature of consumption.

There are a number of social media platforms that promote the construction and negotiation of human interactions. Of course, Facebook has a predominant position in the social media sphere (Moore and Tambini, 2018). Despite its appeal, Facebook's leading position is challenged by other recently emerged platforms which are more popular among the younger generations, such as Snapchat and Instagram (Anderson and Jiang, 2018*).* Twitter is another social media micro-blogging network that is examined frequently by scholars (Larsson, 2017). Some other popular social network platforms include Tumblr, LinkedIn, Pinterest and YouTube. The main point here is that all the aforementioned platforms enable interconnectivity among users and in doing so facilitate the creation of a networked self (Papacharissi, 2011) which is essentially performative. The literature about social media is inter-disciplinary and extensive, therefore, for purposes of this literature review I do not intend to present a breakdown of the attributes of each platform. Instead, I use a variety of examples in my attempt to contextualise the individual's digital self-production and self-consumption as performance. Before my concluding comments, in section 3.5 I will focus specifically on the case of Instagram as an arena of identity manipulation.

As many of the performative acts of self-expression online are visually-based, it becomes important to focus on the role of camera phone practices and their effects on identity construction. Second-generation camera phone practices are characterised by social media sharing applications (so-called apps) like

Instagram and Snapchat. This has led to a proliferation of images and videos with people sharing moments of their daily lives. For Hjorth and Hendry (2015: 1, emphasis in the original) ‘camera phone practices *in* and *as* social media link us to earlier remediated media and social practices (pinning on the bedroom wall) as they do lead to emerging visualities’. Pictures and videos captured on a modern smart-phone are edited in apps that can then be shared almost simultaneously through multiple platforms. Photo and video sharing apps provide the means by which prosumers can easily produce and consume the self.

Second-generation camera phone practices through photo editor apps (e.g. polaroid filter) can give the users the ability to transform their nostalgia of the past into a new experience. Thus, the actual time/age that an image was taken becomes irrelevant or less important when such filters are applied and another time is presented (for example a recent picture can be filtered and shown as a picture taken in 1998 from an analogue camera) (Bartholeyns, 2014). This is important because it serves to blur the borders between the “real”, that is, the actual, and the illusory in the virtual world. This process might provide some semblance of agency to individuals.

Another feature of photo and video sharing platforms is geotagging, that is, “linking” the image to a fixed time and geographic location (Pink and Hjorth, 2012). However, such elements do not necessarily have to be a representation of the actual time and location of the image. It could be argued that it is the management of emplacement that is considered significant. As far as my argument is concerned it is important to understand this intersection of spatial, temporal and image management and how this process provides innovative and

unexplored ways in which the user narrates a sense of place as part of prosuming. As a result, the feeling of such social media consumption may lead the user to perceive the produced and consumed meanings as unlimited in both time and space.

The visual manner of using social media has positioned blogging platforms like Tumblr as a place where users, especially young people, can creatively visualise and circulate their posts related to intimacy, consumption, an aestheticisation of banality, personal beliefs, fun elements and gifs (Tiidenberg, 2016). For example, users may use their smartphones in mundane everyday moments: in places such as waiting rooms, school buses, shopping queues, bus and train stops. In addition, the linearity of the present is disrupted and obscured by the streams of the recent and older past when posts are shared with hashtags and captions as throwbacks, and flashbacks. Such social media practices allegedly bring a sense of connection and belonging. Therein lies the question as to whether such practices position social media consumption as a form of “virtual belonging”. My thesis is concerned with the impact of this change on the nature of consumption, and whether that feeling of belonging can provide the secure everyday foundations that young people apparently need during times of rapid social transformation.

New technologies and almost continuous social media access have given people the possibility of sharing their selected experiences, views, and beliefs with a wider audience. However, “it is a market out there”, a market for attention; most content in the form of tweets, photos, and videos is effectively lost in the chaos of information (Hermida, 2015). It is at the core of this thesis to understand what

this means for the notion of self in a complex digital world. As Hermida (2015: 1) argues ‘attention is a form of power used to spread a particular message and influence others’, but at the same time, it is a pressure that binds social media users in a tendency of measuring influence. This is especially true for those with less social media expertise or knowledge. The level of being influential has to be contextualised to the extent that attention is relational and temporal. It is this which leads me to discuss more thoroughly both the process of self-management and self-branding.

3.4 From self-management to self-branding

3.4.1 Impression management and the imagined audience

The above process culminates in the emphasis that social media places on the effective articulation of self. In effect, a managed self must be presented to the outside world as infallible. One of the key characteristics of the emergence of the social media sphere has been a progressively co-dependent relationship between impressions and the audience, to the extent that both are an integral part of the social media world. For Leary (2018: online [1996]), ‘the process of controlling how one is perceived by other people is called self-presentation or impression management’. Leary suggests that this process of self-presentation is not necessarily about deception but a matter of a strategic selection. He goes on to argue that what matters is others’ reaction to people’s impression management and whether such responses are according to their expectations, irrespective of whether such perceptions are positive or negative.

One of the first scholars who contributed to the study of impression management was Erving Goffman (1990 [1959]) in his seminal work *The Presentation of Self*

in Everyday Life. One of the reasons that this work has been so well cited was the prescience of his dramaturgical metaphor of front- and back-stage context in an attempt to illuminate aspects of everyday life. According to Goffman (1990 [1959]), it is the public image of individuals or their situations that forces people to act, communicating impressions to the audience based on their interests. Thus, public presentations and the signposting of behaviours can facilitate social interactions. The rise of social media platforms as a space where interactions take place has led to a reinvention of self-presentation analysis, but it has also brought new pressures, not least the need for inter-disciplinary theoretical considerations.

A key issue here is how impression management adapts to the new digital environment (Papacharissi, 2002). In a sense, social media platforms offer the individual a stage on which he or she has the opportunity to perform. The self-presentation of social media users is also accompanied, as Ellison *et al.* (2006) argue, by a particular temptation to portray an idealised self. The relevance of such forms of information control (Leary and Kowalski, 1990) have been examined in different settings (Lo and McKercher, 2015; Berkelaar, 2017). Ward (2017) discusses how users of a technological mediated dating app such as Tinder select their profile photos in order to maximise the chance of potentially positive matches. However, it is important to acknowledge that it is not only online interactions that impact desired self-presentations, but also the expectation of a future face-to-face interaction as a form of prolonged impression management (Ward, 2017).

Marwick (2013: 122-123) describes a process of ‘aspirational production’, an attention-seeking practice whereby an individual presents him or herself in a high-status social position in order to elevate his or her standing. The power of the image in this respect is undeniable: individuals curate their pictures and experiences in a way that may provide some sort of affirmation. But it is not clear what is the role of the audience in this process. In practice, how and what the audience thinks about the presenter is a matter of the utmost significance. More importantly, consumers feel they have the power in their hands to determine how it is their audience might feel.

The prosumption of impression management has created a situation in which scholars are having to reconsider the concept of the audience in the context of the new Internet-related media and recent technological developments. Webster (1998) argues that audience studies form three different models: audience-as-mass, audience-as-outcome, and audience-as-agent. For Webster, in the first case, the audience is conceptualised as an aggregate of individuals. What brings them together is their common experience. And yet, it is a term which does not necessarily carry negative connotations such as passivity and manipulation. In this regard, priority is given to the quantified measurement of people’s attention and preferences. The second stream of audience-related studies identifies media power as the cause of damaging effects both on individuals and society while they have a reactive stance. Lastly, the audience-as-agent signifies the exact opposite of the previous model. Individuals take the position of free subjects who can make their own choices and construct meanings.

It is of course important to recognise that people's actions outside the media environment are, to an extent, socially and culturally defined, and in some cases, the boundaries are blurred and all three forms of audience might overlap. For Ang (1991: 5), television audiences are institutionalised and constructed around the idea of passivity, signifying a silenced and objectified mass, namely an 'invisible audience'. On the contrary, Shimpach (2005) argues that being an audience is a labour-intensive performance emphasising the subjective element of an audience. As an individual, in becoming a constituent of an audience includes an engagement with cultural and political institutions. This highlights the role of the audience in a social media world which is essentially performative.

However, in a concept that is more aligned with the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis, the role of the audience member has been identified as produser (sic) (Burns, 2008). This neologism refers to those whose content is actually produced and used (or else consumed). New media technologies' development provides instant access and an opportunity for the audience to respond to the performance. Turnbull (2010) suggests that the new proliferation of technologies and instant access makes it more difficult to monitor audience reactions and contribution to television and radio shows. For Marwick and boyd (2011) it is social media technologies that overcomplicate the existing need of flexible impression management by connecting separate audiences. In their attempt to shed some light on the relatively unexamined social media audience, they have focused their research on the notion of imagined audience; a notion that seems very pertinent to my discussion of young people and social media consumption.

According to Litt (2012: 331) ‘the imagined audience is the mental conceptualisation of the people with whom we are communicating, our audience’. An imagined audience might not reflect exactly the real readers or viewers, but also include members of the wider social media environment. In effect, Marwick and boyd (2011: 129) have identified an audience, namely a ‘networked audience’ that ‘combines elements of the writer’s audience and the broadcast audience’. In a sense, real and imagined viewers are mixed creating a wide audience formed around a social media mass and users’ own social networks. Thus, imagined audiences are formed by both a public and private audience with hints of personal attachment.

The difference between an imagined broadcast audience and the networked audience relies upon the latter’s active role in connecting with the messenger (Marwick and boyd, 2011). However, in today’s social media sphere, in which young people are obliged to manage their self-presentations through networked audiences, it is pertinent to ask what effect this is having on their identities, and the extent to which users are forced to ‘manage tensions between public and private, insider and outsider, and frontstage and backstage performances’ (Marwick and boyd, 2011: 130), while the networked audience signifies the co-existence of various social contexts in which individuals need to deal with everyday challenges. It is thus incumbent on young people to succumb to the obligations of self-presentation, and in particular, the pressure to present and promote the best possible version of their virtual self to the outside world.

3.4.2 Self-branding

Self-branding is not a new concept; it certainly predates the rise of social media, but it is perhaps in the arena that social media provides that it is at its most

powerful. In recent years it could be argued that an entirely new kind of self has emerged: a *branded* self that challenges people's very sense of what they mean when they talk and present themselves. In previous sections, I discussed the emergence of social media as a space in which prosumers try to construct their identities, and considered the new challenges that this has brought. But a discussion about social media and identity only takes us so far in manifesting the wider impact on how people relate to this new space. In recent years, an equally enthralling characteristic of the modern self has been the emergence of branding. One of the key challenges of consumption studies is to shed light on what such transformations mean for how individuals are defined through their social interactions. In this section, I will further discuss aspects of self-branding before going on to consider how its interrelation with digital space is amplifying already existing challenges in the creation of the self.

3.4.2.1 The enterprising self and a culture of brands

The self is not of course, constructed free of the context in which he or she is implied. The rise of social media has taken place in societies in which interpersonal relationships are increasingly intermediated by markets, in line with the dominant socio-political ideology of neoliberalism (see Chapter 4, section 4.5.2). The impact of a neoliberal ideology in the work environment and everyday life can indeed be traced back to the 1990s with the rise of what was described as an 'enterprise culture'. According to du Gay (1996: 56) 'an enterprise culture is one in which certain enterprising qualities – such as self-reliance, personal responsibility, boldness, and a willingness to take risks in the pursuit of goals – are regarded as human virtues and promoted as such'. In this context, the worker is repositioned through the lens of an entrepreneurial self as a self-gratified agent

(Miller and Rose, 1990). In this regard, the notion of personal responsibility and choice becomes the means by which oneself can find acceptability, and thus meaning, in contemporary life. Wee and Brooks (2010), on a more critical note, point out that reflexivity has become a commodity which is packaged and promoted from the moment that individuals seek experts' advice on how to improve themselves. Therefore, the success of the reflexive self is dependent on the guidance of the market.

For Bröckling (2016: 21), the entrepreneurial self, or else the neoliberal subject (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017), 'is not only a set of rules of conduct; it also defines the forms of knowledge in which individuals recognise the truth about themselves, the control and regulation mechanisms they are subject to and the practices by which they condition themselves'. In this context, enterprise culture is not just a way to organise culture at work but also leisure. As Mumby and Kuhn (2019: 271) argue, 'we are not simply enterprise selves at work; we are enterprise selves all the time'. It is the transition from mere products to the 'brand-name version of a product' (Klein, 2000: 6) that has intensified this process.

In contemporary branded culture, the concept of brand signifies not just the consumption of products and services but the consumption of meanings that could possibly fit or enhance the consumer's own image of him or herself (Ross, 1971). Ross argues that it is the everyday interaction with the branded world that mediates identity creation for the sake of neoliberal capitalism. Meanwhile, Lury (2009: 67) describes branding as form of 'assemblage' due to the complex and multiple process of making a brand both for producers and consumers. In a sense, it is not just the object that generates profits for a company, but its brand

equity as a form of immaterial capital (Arvidsson, 2005). It is of course important to remember that the power of branding is not confined to products and services. As Bucholtz (2007) puts it, branding can be the means of developing a social identity either for the self, or by way of attribution to others. This reflects a broader shift in consumption from objects to brands to experiences, in which the self is more at the centre.

3.4.2.2 From branding to self-branding

The influence and domination of self-realisation has been most observable, perhaps, in the field of self-branding. Various authors have pointed out how marketing can serve to guide individuals on how to position themselves in the market and rise to stardom in the process (Shepherd, 2005). Self-marketing and personal branding are not a new phenomenon for celebrities, such as pop singers, athletes, and movie stars. Recruitment agencies and career advisors in academic institutions have turned to marketing practices to improve graduates' employment rates (Tas and Ergin, 2012). The drive towards self-marketing is supported by the professional development and marketing literature, as well as blog posts, on how individuals can manage their own brand (Peters, 1999; Montoya and Vandehey, 2009).

In this business-oriented world, the self resembles a product or a company. Individuals try to differentiate themselves from their competitors; individual (aspiring) celebrities try to find ways to be unique and distinct. Among marketeers it is argued that self-branding is a strategic way to deal with problems and achieve a successful life. However, the degree of freedom brought about by self-branding needs to be questioned. Such claims need to be mitigated by an appreciation of

the limited means that shape individuals' ability to market themselves. For some authors, successful self-branding is based on "authentic" and effective perceptions of image (Kaputa, 2012). Nevertheless, there is a contradiction between authenticity and perception. If there is no such thing as an objective true self, and it is all about perception, as suggested, then it is unclear what is authentic about self-branding. Authenticity has gained much attention in contemporary research about identity and it is its relationship with social media that I will discuss in more detail in the section 3.4.3.

One of the first to discuss the construction of celebrity-hood was Andrew Wernick in 1991. He argued that promotional practice is crafted by inter-individual competition. In an attempt to contextualise such a culturally mediated process, he noticed that this could be possible either unintentionally (via personal drama) or deliberately as the amplified staging of a career. In this regard, the role of self-branding practices is significant. It is argued that self-branding is a form of labour in order to create an outward conventionalised self (Hearn, 2008b). Thus, the commodified self is packaged and promoted.

Before we focus on the marketing practices of the self in the digital sphere, it is useful to highlight how self-branding can be traced in makeover reality television programmes, where participants are encouraged to expose their insecurities and vulnerabilities in front of an audience and a panel of celebrity "experts". In a similar way to reality television shows, a social media user may expose his or her own self in front of the audience. Hearn (2008a) sees transformation reality television shows as the means of manufacturing and communicating self-care and self-improvement. Images of insecure contestants conceal the self-branding and commodity logic. Therefore, the logic of self-branding is camouflaged under

other potential benefits. However, what is missed here is a transition from covert forms of self-branding to overt affirmation.

3.4.2.3 Self-branding in the digital sphere

Self-branding practices have well and truly reached the social media environment. A key point here is that social media is so effective at facilitating the process of self-branding. In a social media space, individuals can seek information, cultivate relationships and entertain themselves. At the same time, social media platforms are packed with sponsored content and advertising. In the context of self-branding, the non-advertising content can be considered an extension of the ads and sponsored product placements. While not every user promotes products on social media (at least consciously) and gets paid for it, it is tempting to focus on Wernick's (1991) point about the permeance of promotion culture, in that the non-advertising elements of self and communication on social media platforms function as an extension of the promotional self. However, such an 'edited self' (Marwick, 2010: 292) cannot be delivered unless considerable emotional labour is put into this process.

The social media terrain in relation to smartphones increases the opportunities for branding more than other existing communication technologies. While social media marketing techniques and social media self-branding can be recognised as a strategic career planning for people in various industries, it remains unclear what makes such strategically crafted practices so gratifying to young people. It is in the context of this thesis that I seek to understand this process and its implications for young people and consumption more generally.

In the social media sphere, average users may feel enabled to effectively manage their own personas as if they too were celebrities. It is worthwhile highlighting that this is not only a relatively low cost (i.e. have access to Internet, device etc.) way of buying time and space in social networking sites (which is what makes it so appealing to people) but it also represents an opportunity to portray their image in the same media environment as celebrities. For instance, back in the 1990s, magazines were a space where only celebrities could demonstrate their lifestyles, and audience would read and watch. Today, the audience-users can have their own profiles (e.g. Facebook, Instagram) alongside those of showbiz stars so that these stars become a kind of benchmark according to which they can establish their own credibility.

Schwarz (2010) suggests that self-portraits on social media platforms can be considered to be a system of popularity and social capital exchange signifying bodily and cultural capital. It is not only the notion of visibility and attention (reach) that is measured but other quantified measurements like friends, comments, retweets, and followers (Marwick, 2010). While aspects of self-branding have been researched among technology professionals, and people already familiar with the marketing logic (Marwick, 2010), what is underexamined is how the logic of self-branding and its ideological implications impinge upon young people's daily lives. This is in turn perhaps best demonstrated through the role of celebrity in social media.

3.4.3 Authenticity and micro-celebrity online

Social media arena functions as a bewildering environment for the demonstration and consumption of the self and, in doing so, it incorporates a level of tension that subsists between the real and imaginary, the authentic and the spurious

(Mansvelt, 2005). From a marketing and psychological perspective, authenticity is a social construction that reflects uniqueness, realness and truth (Arnould and Price, 2000) and the consumer is in a continuous quest for it (Belk and Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2001). Therefore, what matters mostly is the process of (appearing to) be oneself. From a slightly different perspective, one of the first significant contributions in the discussion of authenticity was Cohen's (1988) investigation of consumption in the context of tourism. For Cohen, authenticity is open to modification and determined by the consumer's aspirations. He goes on to suggest that a consumer's feelings and his or her interpretation of experiences may confusingly lead toward authenticity, but in reality, has to deal with a staged space that hems him or her in. To establish what does this mean in the case of young people who are yet to establish their "membership" of the world to which they are so determined to belong is one of the tasks of this thesis.

Authenticity is a contested concept and it could be argued that authenticity is in "in the eye of the beholder". Apart from Cohen, there are a wide number of theoretical contributions which attempt to contextualise authenticity (Pearce and Moscardo, 1986; Hughes, 1995). Liu *et al.,* (2015) in their research about gender, leadership and authenticity frame the term not as something humanly innate but as a performance (Butler, 1988). As such, I am interested in exploring the role of performance in young consumers' lives. In the social media sphere, self-presentations might run the risk of negotiating a deliberately desirable self where authenticity, if such thing exists, is nothing but a second thought.

In the advent of social media there is a general impression that new forms of communication are authentic, at least more than traditional media. It was believed

to give space to average users within which they could express themselves. However, this remains a concern. Social media users might not be any more satisfied with a search for evidence of authenticity in celebrities. Instead, they may expand this search to their own social networks, and at the same time, perform their own version of “authenticity”. In the world of celebrities and brands, what matters most of all is the creation and sustainability of a reliable persona (Moulard *et al.,* 2015). My argument in this thesis is that the commercialisation of personal life has motivated a shift in the quest for authenticity. For example, individuals try to construct “Instafamous” lifestyles, that is to say, a lifestyle consistent with being famous on Instagram. In this way, celebrity is not determined by who young people are, but how they can best demonstrate who they are through the resources that social media provide.

At the same time, on different occasions, bloggers and social media users may share candid images of their lives giving an impression of themselves as authentic in ways that counter-balance their glamorous lifestyles. In any case, we need to be aware that non-glamorous lifestyles can also be curated. In this sense, such depictions and images may serve as a kind of humanisation of “authenticity” as opposed to an aestheticised, amplified form of perfection (Goodwin *et al.,* 2016). In this thesis, emphasis is placed on further investigating the role of this sense of control in young people’s lives.

In a regime in which the self is commodified, elements of the celebrity culture exist in the social media landscape. This gives rise to the ‘micro-celebrity’, a term which has been coined to describe contemporary celebrity culture in the context of social media platforms. According to Senft (2008: 25), ‘micro-celebrity is best

understood as a new style of online performance that involves people “amping up” their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites’. Moreover, for Marwick (2010: 12):

> Micro-celebrity is an emerging online practice that involves creating a persona, sharing personal information about oneself with others, performing intimate connections to create the illusion of friendship or closeness, acknowledging an audience and viewing them as fans, and using strategic reveal of information to increase or maintain this audience.

A key concern for Marwick and boyd (2011) is the apparent way in which celebrity culture has been transformed: the fragmented and widely applicable social media self-presentation practices reach and influence more people so that celebrity is formed by what an individual does and not who he or she is. However, in terms of the broader discussion of the relationship between consumers and social media space, the problem with Senft’s and Marwick’s initial conceptualisation and interpretation of micro-celebrity is that it has been examined in relation to blogosphere and the technology industry. Both are somehow linked to a marketing- and celebrity-related world. This is something I will address in the remainder of this thesis.

Users’ attempts to raise awareness and to be famous has resulted in a new type of micro-celebrity that seeks recognition on social media platforms (Khamis *et al.,* 2017*).* Perhaps what is going on here is that many individuals (or else non-professional users) are inclined to experiment with the production of celebrity and its performative element. In this thesis, I am seeking to understand young people’s engagement with social media in this light and in what way young people develop relationships and therefore a sense of their own self in the context of

those relationships. I will now consider an example of this play out of identities through social media.

3.5 Self-branding in practice: the case of Instagram

Instagram is one such example of the performative nature of self. In this section I want to bring my thoughts on the relationship between identity construction and social media consumption to a crescendo by focusing on the example of one of the most used platforms. It summarises and illustrates some of the arguments made in this chapter, to which I will return. In considering the sociological importance of Instagram for consumption and youth studies in its many forms, it may be useful to start off by understanding its self-branding manifestations.

Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms around photo and video sharing as well as messaging. By June 2018, Instagram reached one billion active users all over the world and five hundred million active users on a daily basis. In January 2020, Instagram had secured around twenty-four million active users in the UK. On a global scale, Instagram's core target audience is the younger generation, with young people aged between eighteen to twenty-four comprising thirty percent of total users and twenty-five to thirty-four years old thirty-five percent. From that thirty percent (young people between eighteen to twenty-four years old) of total users, fourteen percent are female and sixteen percent are male. From the thirty-five percent of the other age group (young people between twenty-five to thirty-four years old), seventeen percent are women and eighteen percent men (Clement, 2020). In general, when it comes to young people from eighteen to twenty-five years old, Instagram is considered as one of the most rapidly expanding social networking sites (Smith and Anderson,

2018). Instagram's features include image and video editing tools, geographical tagging, commenting, messaging, live video streaming, hashtags, image filters and Stories. As Instagram's website suggests, 'post moments from your everyday life in your Stories. These are fun, casual, and only last 24 hours' (Instagram, 2020).

Instagram is characterised by the collage of images and videos that users produce and receive as a way of self-expression. For Hjorth and Hendry (2015: 1), 'smartphone apps like Instagram are both romanticising older remediated analog pictures while creating new ways in which images can be linked to place as a practice on the move'. For instance, users can actively time- or geo-stamp a picture either by choosing to reveal the exact time/place the image was taken or alternatively communicate to their audience different time and/or space details. Instagram users are not only consumers of the uploaded material but also its producers. In this way, it provides a temporal arena for the spatial manipulation of identity (Hochman and Manovich, 2013) by its users.

While scholars have recently started focusing on Instagram in relation to photojournalism (Borges-Rey, 2015), athletes' self-presentation (Smith and Sanderson, 2015), experiencing and communicating emotional events to a broader social network (Gibbs *et al.,* 2015), loneliness (Pittman and Reich, 2016) and elections (Filimonov *et al.,* 2016), what is underexamined is the interrelationship between Instagram, consumption and young people's identities. Baker and Walsh (2020) consider, for example, the role of Instagram in affirmation rituals in digital food cultures. They relate such changes to the emergence of a new style of validation of healthy and wealthy food lifestyles that

can be leveraged by users as a mechanism to achieve higher status through “likes”. The mere acts of posting and “liking” are acts of prosumption of a specific diet lifestyle and body image. For this thesis, the extent to which Instagram is about the validation of young people’s experiences is particularly important. The key thing here is that the proliferation of Instagram experiences captures young people’s imagination through the triggering of sensations generated from visual content.

It is the rise of smart mobile technologies, especially Instagram, that lead to new ways in which individuals can interact with each other. Instagram sparks young people’s fantasies and their willingness to consume in pursuit of those fantasies. It is argued that new ways of exchanging information visually have given rise to a global trend of presenting everyday moments (Serafinelli, 2018). Serafinelli is a useful point of reference here insofar as she suggests how a proliferation of mobile media influence people to optically consider individuals, their actions and space. For Serafinelli (2018: 8, emphasis in the original), ‘the extensive use of Instagram represents the foundation of a *new mobile visualities* aesthetic’. In this way, such media transformations can characterise the process of individualisation and identity construction. It is not that young people’s lives are inevitably visual and virtual, but rather that the virtual world has proven to be highly significant in how young people construct their identities.

One of the prominent characteristics of this new self-mediated visual culture is the selfie phenomenon. The “selfie” is a picture of oneself or the process of producing such a picture, according to Miltner and Baym (2015: 1704) ‘in which people hold out a camera phone and photograph themselves’. For Senft and

Baym (2015: 1588-9) selfies can be considered to be a ‘cultural artifact’ or ‘object’ and ‘social practice’ or ‘gesture’ indicating some sort of affective experiences, or as a form of communicating various messages to multiple audiences. It could be argued that the selfie is the primary means of self-branding. It is through selfies that young people promote themselves and at the same time seek affirmation. In this regard, selfie-taking can be viewed as valuable skill for influencers on Instagram (or elsewhere) that can lead to increased numbers of followers and possibly some kind of sponsorship or product placement. Abidin (2016: 3) argues that influencers are those:

> [E]veryday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in “digital” and “physical” spaces, and monetise their following by integrating “advertorials” into their blogs or social media posts and making physical paid-guest appearances at events.

That is, influencers are individual nodes of the online advertising industry who can induce their followers to spend time or money on products. According to Abidin (2016), influencers on Instagram can utilise self-photography for their individual advantage which is either financially related or a form of pure self-gratification. However, in order to be a successful influencer, a person needs to develop a personal strategy that will lead to them to accumulating a large base of followers. In this thesis, it is this idea of strategic planning that is important for understanding young people’s identity construction. What matters here is the fact that Instagram is quintessentially a place for consumption and self-promotion. In this way, the Instagram experience is all about putting young people at the forefront of the self-marketing process as part of a reassuring sense of belonging.

Semi-professional social media users and celebrities may not present themselves on social media as distant celebrities, but instead, less glamorously, as communicating a sense of authenticity. In this regard, one may observe that social media celebrities, professional (v)bloggers and users produce less curated videos and pictures presenting themselves as “everyday people”. Thus, a new way for communicating authenticity has emerged. This is evident, for example, when Instagram users share their non-filtered and non-edited pictures in order to highlight to their audiences that social media life is a different version of their lives. More specifically, anyone with an Instagram account can search and observe that there are a number of popular and widely used Instagram hashtags (accessed and searched in April 2020), such as #nomakeup (around 19 million mentions), #withoutfilter (around 300,000 mentions) and #effortlesschic (around 370,000 mentions) that users use to communicate “authenticity” to their audience.

Another way to claim “authenticity” and position oneself as somehow more “authentic” than other celebrities on Instagram, and expose their misrepresentations, is to abandon perfection by sharing filtered and edited photos alongside the non-filtered and non-curated equivalent. There are many popular articles that report this new trend for ‘expectation vs. reality’ Instagram posts (Boredpanda, 2019; Cosmopolitan, 2019). They report how (v)bloggers with a broad base of followers share and remind their audience that not every photo in their account is “real”, but staged, with a focus on the angle, lighting and filter through which the image is delivered. An influencer, Kim Britt, maintains an Instagram account named “REAL LIFE REMINDERS KIM” (@the_truth_is_not_pretty) where she ‘[embraces] all that is you’, signposting

‘social media versus reality’ posts. In a similar logic, influencers on YouTube share their morning and evening routines in apparent attempt to demonstrate how amiable they are and how relatable their lives are.

3.6 Conclusion

The impact of social media and digital technologies on how we relate to the notion of self is, of course, a complex subject for analysis. The intensification of virtual moments has transformed the way people are positioned in the online world in an era of neoliberal subjectivities (see Chapter 4). Individualised routes of success are translated in forms of self-branding online, where every day online practices are enacted for the purposes of seeking attention and affirmation. It is unquestionable that the social media space offers the user opportunities for new experiences. In the digital world, in which people increasingly produce and consume at the same time, and in which social media and consumption intermingle, the role of prosumption (the hazing of production and consumption) as a means of examining social media studies and reinventing selfhood becomes increasingly paramount. From this point of view, consumption (or prosumption) can in effect provide a focal point for the sociological examination of social media experiences.

One way of looking at all this through everyday consumer experiences. The sorts of instantaneous transformations that a social media-driven consumer society goes through indicates an equally indispensable reconsideration of the sociologists’ role in reflecting on such processes. The key here is in examining consumption, and indeed the relationship to the social media sphere, in an experiential context. Social media provides individuals with a sense of control of their self-presentations. Such control raises the issues of acceptability and the

extent to which it can be reconciled with an authenticity of presentation. Ultimately, prosumption does appear to offer prosumers a means, even partially, of reinventing the self. It is not clear how much of this reinvention is intrinsically motivated, and how much is extrinsically motivated by the desire or requirement to compete. In the next chapter, I will consider how young people are at the forefront of a world of uncertainty. I will further reflect on how contemporary socio-economic tensions affect youth identities at the intersection of consumption with social media.

Chapter 4

Young People and Identity

4.1 Introduction

Young people have long been presented, and still are presented, as being at the cutting edge of social change (Woodman and Wyn, 2015). There seems to be a general consensus that young people experience complex social and economic changes which affect the very meaning of their transition to adulthood (Wyn and Dwyer, 1999). However, the strategies that young people develop in order to deal with such challenges are underexamined. We have seen in preceding chapters how the changing nature of consumption and the advent of new forms of digital communication are reshaping the individual's relationship with consumption. In this chapter, I argue that young people's experiences and self-presentations are significant in the critical examination of consumption through a sociological lens.

As I established in Chapter 3, young people's lives are increasingly related to digital media. This highlights the need to understand the gap in the field of youth consumption literature, given that it is widely perceived that young people's relationship with what and how they consume is altered by the effects of social media and digital experience. My contention is that the impact of digital forms of consumption on who and what young people are has not been fully understood. Rectifying this shortcoming is, in part, an aim of this thesis.

In this chapter I discuss complex concepts such as youth, individualisation, risk society and uncertainty. The following will introduce these areas of interest as a lens for both understanding subsequent analysis and to position this research project in the field of youth studies and consumption. I will start by providing some

explanations about what the notion of youth means. Having discussed the structural and cultural approaches that sociologists of youth have long debated in order to understand young people's experiences, I will focus on the theoretical discussion of risk and uncertainty in order to shed light on the socio-economic and cultural transformations that affect young people's lives. I will consider the issue of individualisation as a way to realise how recent changes have impacted on young people's everyday experiences. After proceeding with a detailed discussion on young people, consumption and social media, I will summarise my thoughts as a means of encouraging a discussion about the sociology of youth.

4.2 Defining youth in a changing social context

Before I move on to discuss the relationship between young people's experiences, consumption and social media, I need to define what I mean by the term "youth", which has long been and remains a contested concept in the literature (Huq, 2006). Situating youth has become a major issue on political and sociological agendas, but it is notoriously difficult to define. For example, some commentators argue that it starts as early as twelve, although commonly at the age of sixteen, reaching up roughly to twenty-five and sometimes even to the late twenties and early thirties. Youth is also not just about age range, but rather about a way of life.

For Bourdieu (1993: 95), 'youth and age are not self-evident data but are socially constructed, in the struggle between the young and the old'. It is important to acknowledge the existence of socially-defined phases that describe our life, such as childhood, teenagers, adolescence, post-adolescence, young people and young adulthood (Galland, 2003). Such a categorisation is based upon a

normative, hypothetically rational, and deterministic process of maturation and transition (Wyn and Woodman, 2006).

For some people, youth is a biological and chronological period between childhood and adulthood (Jones and Wallace, 1992). For others, it is a socially, culturally and geographically defined category with meanings and values tied up in the socio-economic system (Wyn and White, 1997; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2008). In this view, youth describes a social position: a quest for making sense of self and society, and for a sense of belonging. Thus, it is a process by which young people try to construct and negotiate identities with particular socio-economic and cultural responsibilities, experiences, and expectations. This is how I define it in the context of this thesis.

My attention is drawn to how this quest has been complicated by the shift towards digital consumption. What I am in part describing is a transformation in young people's relationship with social change. Of course, this is part of a long-term historical process that commentators have sought to understand. It has been acknowledged that youth cultures and lifestyles do not only simply represent significant elements of young people's transitions; instead, they are significant in their own right (Bennett, 2013). It is important to understand how cultures and lifestyles are expressed through social media consumption. This is something that I address in this thesis.

4.3 Youth transitions

There are a range of conceptual frameworks that try to define and explain what it means to "be young". One approach is to regard youth trajectories 'as a transitional phase between "childhood" and "adulthood" where young people

either learn about becoming adults or where they pass through certain “rites of passage”’ (France, 1998: 99). Any standardised age category implies more “natural” and stage-oriented transitions from childhood to adulthood and old age. In the Western world during the twentieth century, such categorisations signified an understanding that adolescence as a period of life was linked to immaturity (Ayman-Nolley and Taira, 2000).

It was near the end of the twentieth century that many scholars turned their attention to young people; either during the 1960s in relation to social movements, or during the 1990s as a ‘manifestation of the frustration and alienation felt by a disenfranchised and economically manipulated group’ (Côté and Allahar, 1994: xv). As advanced economies moved to a period of industrialisation, transformations evolved around occupations and the education processes (Wyn and Dwyer, 2000). Authors such as Wyn and Dwyer (1999) note that it was these fundamental socio-economic transformations that affected young people and the traditional meaning of the passage to adulthood.

Under the impact of neoliberal policies (see section 4.5.2), young people have experienced difficulties in accessing the opportunity to move away from their family home and become more autonomous compared to the preceding generation (Hoolachan *et al.,* 2017; McKee *et al.,* 2017). There are a number of changes that cut across economic, technological and working conditions. Digital media have a significant effect on young people’s everyday lives, while at the same time, career transitions have become damaged and unstable (Salvà-Mut *et al.,* 2016). The increased complexity of economic life may lead young people to vacillate between different careers and working environments. Young people’s

transition from entering the labour market to creating a family now happens in non-sequential steps, characterised by chronological pauses.

Nowadays, the idea that the process of becoming an adult is somehow learned, or that there are certain steps that a young person has to fulfil as a social role, is widely challenged. Society is changing so rapidly that such roles are no longer fixed. In this respect, the complex alterations that young people face have resulted in a prolonged period of adolescence and youth (Côté and Allahar, 1994; Côté, 2000) with youth transitions to adulthood seen as 'extended' (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). It is acknowledged that youth transitions have become more de-standardised and non-linear as the outcome of a number of structural changes both in the economic and social sphere (Leccardi, 2005; Biggart and Walther, 2006). Thus, youth is certainly about more than a straightforward transition to adulthood.

Steven Roberts (2011) suggests that youth transition studies have neglected to shed light on 'ordinary youth' (Yoon, 2006) or else the 'missing middle'. By the 'missing middle' Roberts (2011: 34) means 'young people who are neither NEET [Not in Education, Employment or Training] nor following government-preferred pathways through various post-compulsory educational routes'. In addition, Wyn (2014) acknowledges that the school-work nexus can offer valuable insights, however, she explicitly calls for a need to address the weaknesses of pre-determined metaphors about youth development. Wyn suggests that education has to be seen as a place of connection instead of transition. In this way, it is the idea of belonging that gains ground. As Wyn (2014: 12) explains, young people have become 'self-navigators' in how they construct and reflect upon their own biographies. As we shall see, because of the multiplicity of digital transformation

and young people's experiences, we need to challenge past assumptions about what a youth transition might be.

It follows that in order to conceptualise youth through sociological lens, 'rather than treating young people as an amorphous group, the different experiences of young people pertaining to their different positions in social space need to be emphasised and investigated' (Threadgold, 2019: 10). In particular, analyses of youth transitions need to take into account differences and inequalities based on class, ethnicity, and gender. However, this does not only affect youth; Wyn and Dwyer (1999) argue that it is the social relations of all age groups that are changing here.

Youth needs to be acknowledged as neither a rigid nor an all-inclusive label that comprises young people as a homogeneous group. Instead, it is a flexible phase of life with no fixed beginning and no fixed chronological end. The traditional synchronised temporal sequence has effectively been superseded by a more fluid and unpredictable "exit" from youth. It is not that being an adult in terms of physical maturity and age has been postponed, but that there are certain life expectations and levels of autonomy which are deferred, and in some cases, indefinitely deferred.

For Jones and Wallace (1992), the youth experience constitutes a series of youth transitions (from school to work, family and housing transitions). The point here is that it is exactly these transitions that are challenged and diluted by modern society. According to Arnett (2000), in a more "positive" analysis of transitions, young adults engage in explorations and search for new life possibilities during what is termed their 'emerging adulthood'. This term, used to conceptualise

extended transitions, has been received with scepticism by scholars in youth studies (Côté and Bynner, 2008). Côté and Bynner (2008) argue that this new terminology represents another developmental stage of life in Erikson's (1968, cited in Côté and Bynner, 2008) approach to the life-course. They critique the need for another developmental addition that does not contribute significantly to the discussion. They suggest that Arnett's model avoids engaging with the issue of social class and in this regard functions only as a convenient metaphor for the prolonged transition to adulthood.

Côté and Bynner (2008) argue that the notion of emerging adulthood is confined within the currency of socio-economic conditions suggesting that it might be considered only as a reflection of a specific age. They reiterate their point that those young people who have to deal with different forms of exclusion are those who suffer most during an extended transition to adulthood. What is even more important for this thesis is that, during their attempt to acknowledge the importance of young people's own agency, Côté and Bynner (2008: 262) argue that 'the Internet provides other means of experimenting with and constructing selves, circumventing entirely the influence of parents' for young people who have been affected by socio-economic transformations. However, while Côté and Bynner acknowledge the changes due to the digital sphere, they do not proceed any further to incorporate such transformations into their analysis. More specifically, they do not explain the tools that young people use to construct the notion of the self, or the possible selves that might be created. It is exactly these transformations that are at the heart of this thesis. The intention of this project is therefore to shed light on the potential benefits for moving forward the sociology of youth by emphasising on such changes and spaces.

4.4 Youth cultures

An alternative way to understand the youth experience outside of ‘transition regimes’ (du Bois-Reymond and Stauber, 2005: 63) is through the lens of youth cultures and subcultures (Hebdige, 1979). In particular, understanding youth through culture challenges assumptions about what might constitute desirable pathways to adulthood and certain conditions of adulthood that could guarantee equal points of arrival. It highlights the significance of the symbolic sources that young people utilise to construct their identities. What such approaches do teach us is that it is important to situate youth as a lived experience in the context of cultural and social changes and not as a straightforward linear transition.

Perhaps one of the most influential contributions in the relationship between youth and culture is the body of work connected to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham during the 1970s (Hall and Jefferson, 1976). Specifically, at the heart of the youth subcultures project was the discussion over the relationship between youth cultural practices and class (Willis, 1977). The Birmingham School approach was interested in understanding the ways that (mainly white, male, heterosexual) working-class youth resist the dominant culture and its resultant class inequality. Their preoccupation was mainly with class, without taking into consideration other social elements such as gender, race and sexuality (McRobbie and Garber, 1977). It is important here to recognise that youth cultural forms need to include and reconsider the broader impact of social structure in this context. At the very least the impacts of class, race and gender elements (Nayak, 2003) play a significant role in social change and continuity.

Hebdige's (1979) contribution to the discussion of subcultures is of particular importance as he identifies the significance of the role of youth styles. While Hebdige's work remained within the approach of youth culture in relation to social position, his contribution signified a transition towards diverse and ever-changing expressions of youth cultures and styles. The youth culture discussion initiated heated debates between scholars who focus on the concept of subcultures and other post-subcultural approaches. Subcultural approaches reflect the research around style-based youth cultures, mostly during the 1990s (Bennett, 2011). The post-subcultural turn reflects the focus on 'cultural dynamics, informing young people's everyday appropriation of music, style and associated objects, images and texts' (Bennett, 2011: 494). More specifically, it was around the end of the twentieth century when the concept of subcultures (Redhead, 1990) and its attachment to class was criticised, and discussions about young people's experiences started to focus on post-subcultures (Muggleton, 2000; Blackman, 2005; Hodkinson, 2011).

While agreeing that the research on young punks (Hebdige, 1979; Clark, 2003), 'skinhead' subcultural lives (Pilkington *et al.,* 2010) and grime youth (Dedman, 2011) may have links to theoretical frameworks of "resistance" in dominant cultures, discussions around other cultural groups, such as hipsters (Schiermer, 2014; Michael, 2015), emphasise questions over authenticity and fragmented individuality (Bauman, 2000). The debate between youth subcultures and the post-subcultural turn in youth studies has informed discussions and theoretical contributions over the last twenty years (Bennett, 1999; Miles, 2000; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006; Bennett 2011; Griffin, 2011).

While there are strong reasons to argue that the youth subculture approach provides an interesting lens through which to examine young people's lives, it is doubtful whether it can adequately theorise young people's relationship with digital transformations. My main concern with the subcultural approach in understanding contemporary youth lives is that it simplifies the complex relationship between young people and digital space in an age of uncertainty. The emergence of diverse social media platforms, giving young people opportunities to pick and choose their styles in such spaces, and the complex relationship between the offline and online world, intensify the need to re-examine the notion of youth lifestyles, especially digital lifestyles, as a useful conceptual tool.

One of the main arguments in critiquing the post-subcultural approach to youth studies has been its lack of coherence as a theoretical tradition. My intention here is to frame this research within youth cultures and lifestyles as a realisation of their importance in young people's lives. In this context, Bennett's (2011: 497) contention is particularly significant:

> In terms of the claim that post-subculture is an inherently loose terminology then, there are reasonable grounds for arguing that subculture is, in fact, no less loose in terms of the myriad ways that it has been applied in sociology and cultural theory. In effect, both subcultural and post-subcultural approaches have been derived from a broad ranging set of theoretical traditions, with the effect that each embodies a range of different analytical perspectives to the study of youth culture. Indeed, such are the myriad ways in which youth culture is now approached as an object of study, from both subcultural and post-subcultural perspectives, that it could be questioned whether theoretical and methodological

> cohesiveness, in as much as this applies to a discrete set of investigative and analytical tools, is achievable, or perhaps even desirable?

Thus, it seems likely digital experience and consumer choice determine young people's lifestyles and have profound consequences for young people. A turn to individual "self-work" online opens up the opportunity for a new kind of analysis of youth cultures focused around the prosumption (see Chapter 2) choices young people are making in everyday life. Thus, youth cultures should not only be associated with the traditional consumption of material goods, but instead, incorporate young people's experience, online social media engagement, and prosumption.

In a globalised world, prior to the onset of Covid-19, state boundaries, and hence national identities and cultures, became modified and blurred. Societies were less territorially and spatially defined. Local socio-political events were no longer considered linear and progressive but part of a highly fragmented world. In a globalised society that is characterised by time-space compression (Harvey, 1990), in which social processes become "de-territorialised" and "de-temporalised", it is important not to prioritise the relationship between youth and the social production of offline space (Faruggia and Wood, 2017). In the context of the globalised risk society, something that I will address more thoroughly in the next section, young people have less control. As a result, they respond by turning to the online world. Digital space provides an arena in which young people's experiences are economically and politically negotiated. Young people's digital and consumer experience is an important space in which they may seek to assert their relationship with the networked world in which they now live.

4.5 Young people, risk society and uncertainty

4.5.1 Risk society

The notion of risk is one of the most significant and timely sociological concepts that contextualises young people's uncertain lives. Two of the most important contributions to the sociological debate around the issue of 'risk society' are those of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991). The concept of risk society is linked with the industrial societies of late modernity in which the notion of risk has become equally or even more important than other structural elements such as class (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). It was during the 1990s when social researchers turned their attention to the issue of risk as a crucial organising element of contemporary life (Green, 1997; Furedi, 2002 [1997]).

In this context, the experience of identity is exposed to new risks that function as outcomes of human action, scientific knowledge and technological advancement. Old certainties are challenged. What has emerged is a less predictable world characterised by insecurity (Giddens, 1991). One of the most prevalent characteristics of the risk society is that threats are no longer confined within its boundaries. On the contrary, dangers have become globalised to the extent that the consequences of risk came to transcend the limitations of time and space (Beck, 1998). It is within this context that those risks felt by people have become increasingly individualised. In other words, the individual's role arguably comes to be defined by risk, and yet it remains his or her own responsibility to manage its effects to the extent that that risk is personalised (Furedi, 2002 [1997]).

According to Green (1997), in an uncertain globalised environment, individuals are obliged to find ways to manage the difficulties that those risks produce.

Giddens (1991) argues that in contemporary society, individuals need to engage with the risk calculation of their own actions. Yet, according to Giddens, it is the wide number of possibilities to which individuals are exposed, and the associated returns which they have to calculate, that generates further anxiety. Giddens argues that self-identity is constructed as a 'reflexive project'. In this context, individual choices are interlinked with global social transformations, and as a result, it is even more difficult to manage any sense of uncertainty. It could be argued that today, self-identity is constructed in a digital culture that appears to extend the range of choices available to young people without necessarily protecting them from the risks that those choices imply.

Beck (1992) identifies risk as a crucial element of the contemporary world. Risk affects people's experiences either at an individual or a global level. Within the context of a risky everyday experience, the creation of a personal biography gains significance. In other words, individuals are increasingly constrained, yet increasingly responsible, for their own identity construction. Similarly, digital space and social media consumption provide an arena in which young people are responsible for their own choices, but with, perhaps, fewer constraints as compared to the material world. In this way, young people are enabled and motivated to produce both an offline and online biography. While risk and uncertainty existed before the digital transformations of recent decades, but it is the extent to which social media consumption interacts with this changing risk landscape which is considered here.

According to Beck (1992), inequalities exist in the risk society but these are not just determined by class. In other words, risk-related inequalities also exist. As such, it is not only the production and distribution of wealth that reproduces

inequalities but also the dissemination of insecurity. Beck's (1992) theory of risk society has been criticised for not thoroughly considering the existing class inequalities (Mythen, 2005). However, Beck (1999) tries to address the relationship between social exclusion and the global accumulation of risks. For Sørensen (2018: 14), 'risk society theory thus demonstrates how the new risks reinforce the general individualisation process characterising modernity and force individuals to find their own strategies with which to deal with them'. Thus, young consumers are coerced into finding their own ways to manage levels of unpredictability.

Beck (1995) distinguishes between pre-industrial hazards and the produced risks of industrial society. He identifies the former as nature-related, such as natural disasters and pandemics, while he argues that the latter are self-constructed risks such as unemployment and road accidents. However, there are also other diverse threats that are not easily identifiable in a single category, such as the threat of terrorism and the Global Financial Crisis. It is suggested that these share characteristics of both pre-industrial hazards and human-made risks (Beck and Lau, 2005). For Green *et al.* (2000), young people's everyday risks are linked to specific places. In analysing the intersection of risk society and young people's experiences, it is not only physical places but also digital places that are important elements in young people's identity construction and risk management strategies.

In the context of fluid youth experiences, the feeling of uncertainty is particularly intense for young people. According to Leccardi (2005: 126), 'it may be said that the imperative to choose does not go hand in hand with the certainty that personal decisions will be able to weigh effectively on future biographical outcomes'. For Nelson and Katzenstein (2014: 363), 'the rationalist view that we live in a world

of only calculable risk is too simple and leaves us with a dangerously incomplete view of economic life' and an incomplete (in some cases non-existent) view of social life. Thus, we may question, how young people make sense of their lives and the role of social and personal uncertainty. According to Bauman and Raud (2015: viii):

> For better or worse, uncertainty is our fate: for worse, because uncertainty is an un-drying fount of our misery, and for better, because it is also the prime cause of our glory – of human inventiveness, creativity, and our capacity of transcending one by one the limits it sets to human potential.

Of course, what is glorious for human beings as a whole, may well be inglorious for an individual who has not managed to 'transcend' the above limits. Socio-economic actors, including youth, still need to make choices, and their decisions are related to questions of self-confidence and self-esteem. But, individuals cannot be aware of risk calculation in advance when they need to choose whether to work in one job or another, emigrate, study a degree, or get a loan. In other words, young people have to deal with multiple risks. Indeed, youth's decisions have longer-lasting consequences, which exacerbates the future element of risk.

Under current socio-economic and political changes, large parts of young populations across the globe face increasing barriers to access quality employment opportunities. The deregulation of the labour market has resulted in de-standardised job opportunities for young people which demonstrate an elasticity around youth, more individualised career paths and a fragmentation of transitions (Pollock, 1997). Kovacheva (2001) argues that it is this increased risk and uncertainty that makes young people adopt flexible transition strategies under fluid socio-economic and political environments (Furlong and Cartmel,

1997). Furlong and Cartmel (1997) suggest that young people are exposed to a wide range of insecurities. Of course, this is still significant. However, it has taken a new dimension. Young people have to take an increasing number of personal decisions on a daily basis that may increase their sense of “precarity” (Standing, 2014). According to Harris and Scully (2015: 415), ‘the term “precarity” is broadly used to connote the fragility of social reproduction and working conditions under neoliberalism’.

One way of coming to terms with the diverse, culturally-specific nature of such transitions is by contextualising this discussion around two different (and polar) models of transition relating to the countries (Greece, UK) where this project was undertaken. According to Cavalli and Galland (1995), the Mediterranean (Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy) model may be contrasted with the UK model. On the one hand, the “Greek model” for young people is characterised by extended academic studies, followed by a phase of job precariousness, a long period of living with parents even after getting a job, and then finally leaving home, marriage and parenthood. Conversely, the main characteristics of the UK model, up until recently, were the early finish of academic studies, direct entry into the labour market, and early departure from the parental home, followed by marriage and parenthood. Yet, it is unclear (in the context of modernity, digital media and consumption) whether the differences between these two models have become blurred or intensified. This is something I explore in this research. Before I move on to briefly discuss the role of individualisation in young people’s everyday experience, I want to focus on the impact of neoliberalism in how young people experience everyday uncertainty.

4.5.2 Neoliberalism and uncertainty

Neoliberalism is a complex term widely used not just in political theory but across the range of the social sciences. The literature on neoliberalism has been extended enormously since the beginning of the twenty first century, and in the context of this thesis I will try only to provide a partial definition of the term. By neoliberalism I mean 'that body of theory emphasising market-based solutions to social and economic problems' (Albertson and Fox, 2019: 26). While it was first conceived as a response to classical liberalism (Mongardini, 1980), its destabilising nature and ideological emphasis on extending the reach of the market through, for example, privatisation and deregulation, has been fully realised during 1970s and 1980s. Neoliberal policies supposedly provide the ideological basis for the austerity doctrine that characterised the inter-crisis years and that generated further instability in people's lives.

According to Harvey (2007: 2), neoliberalism is a 'theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within and institutions framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade'. For example, Margaret Thatcher, one of the most infamous proponents and representatives of free-market policies, arguably failed to deliver convincing economic and social solutions to the problems of modernity in the UK (Albertson and Stepney, 2020). In the context of this thesis, I am interested in how such policies add to the effect of uncertainty in young people's lives, such as financial vulnerability and their struggle for housing independence and educational progression.

The logic of neoliberalism is strategically passed to individuals through the notion of personal responsibility (Roberts and Evans, 2013) which refers to the socio-economic failures of the system to provide sufficient opportunities for individuals are re-framed as personal failures of individuals to make the most of what opportunities remain. Neoliberalism is based on the supposedly vital motivation of competition, and the requirement of competition is that there must be those who lose (and suffer) as well as those who win (and benefit).

In recent decades, young people could be argued to have been one of the groups that has fallen victim most sharply to the worst face of neoliberalism. One of the major impacts of neoliberal policies on youth lives is the deterioration of employment opportunities and decrease of wages (Cieslik and Simpson, 2013; Cahill and Konings, 2017). This is translated into the rise of non-permanent employment and zero-hour contracts. In addition, neoliberal practices encourage competition and make it a key characteristic of people's lives (Stahl, 2015). It is within this context that increasingly precarious working conditions (Standing, 2011) are situated at the heart of people's interactions with the global socio-economy.

In an attempt to contextualise the importance of opportunities across and within labour markets, Rose and Baird (2013) emphasise that the problem is not a lack of youth aspiration but a lack of opportunities that would help young people materialise their hopes for the future. For example, this might be reflected in young adults' attempts to find part-time jobs to provide money for their studies. It is not only the labour market that is particularly hit by the impacts of globalised competition and prolonged austerity, but also housing independence. Da Vanzo

and Goldscheider (1990) argue that the parental home has been the normal residence of people in early adulthood.

As socio-economic risk increases (e.g. financial insecurity, unaffordable housing), it is not unusual for young people to return to their parental home in cases such as loss of job, divorce, end of studies or military service, or young parenthood. In effect, the aspiration for housing independence has become blurred for “boomerang” youth (Stone *et al.,* 2014; Tsekeris *et al.,* 2017). According to Berngruber (2015: 1276), “boomerang” is a ‘provocative metaphor of young adults who have left home, and have come back at least once’. In this way, the transition from the first home to independent residence is not always linear (Berngruber, 2015).

For many, the “exit” from the parental home can function as a ‘transition marker to adulthood’ (Berngruber, 2016). Rapidly evolving socio-economic transformations have affected young people’s housing aspirations given the rise of a ‘generation rent’ and the limited prospects of buying a house (McKee, 2012; Fuster *et al.,* 2019; Xian and Forrest, 2019). For Hoolachan *et al.* (2017: 63), it ‘denotes young people who are increasingly living in the private sector for longer periods of their lives because they are unable to access homeownership or social housing’. It could be argued that neoliberalism has a detrimental effect on youth aspirations by proffering a narrative of the creative entrepreneurial individual. Before I move on to discuss the relationship between young people and social media consumption, there is a need to shed light on this issue of individualisation.

4.6 Young people and individualisation

The concept of individualisation is significant for understanding the relationship between young people and social change. According to Elliott (2001: 162), 'individualisation, in the sense of self-making, self-innovation, reflexivity, reflex and experimentation, theorises various new articulations of self in an age of intensive globalisation'. This is particularly true in the context of the digital space and the social media arena. Although new opportunities for experimentation have emerged in this regard, it would be misleading to argue that people have more freedom to make their own lifestyles.

In contemporary social theory, individualisation is an all-inclusive term that builds its theoretical groundwork on examples from career development, personal relationships and even leisure time. However, it remains crucial to social theorists and youth researchers who try to interpret the multiplicities of contemporary identities. The question here centres on the role that young people's social media consumption may play in the construction of an individualised self. It could be argued that technological advancements allow young people more choice, which may create more routes to navigate risk, and thus foster a sense of increased certainty. However, it is important to assess whether this is translated into autonomy and freedom in youth lives.

For Elliott (2001: 162-3), 'the spread of individualism anew is built upon the cultural drives for continual self-transformation and instant self-reinvention'. The notions of redesign and repositioning are core characteristics of technological capitalism and global markets. This may be transferred into the realm of the personal and the self. In other words, in response to a rapidly changing world, new lifestyles are constructed that are faster, more malleable, and more

experimental. In this context, young people's lives and identities are a lot more complex than some traditional approaches might consider. What is of particular significance is to understand whether young people have moved from traditional frameworks to new ways of constructing their identity, and what this means for the feeling of autonomy in their lives. The marketisation of society under neoliberalism leads to a mechanism of self-strategies to refabricate the self in the context of global pressures. It may be that the self-organisation of young people's contemporary life experience comes with considerable costs: whether personal, emotional, or material. While social media might offer opportunities, at the same time, this proliferation of social media choice might be a source of ambivalence and intensification of uncertainty in identity construction. This is something I will investigate in the context of this thesis.

It should be acknowledged that new forms of belonging through social media consumption and digital space have emerged. Those new forms of connection are based on high levels of individualism. According to Beck (1997: 95):

> Individualisation means, first, the disembedding of industrial society ways of life and second, the re-embedding of new ones, in which the individuals must produce, stage and cobble together, their biographies themselves… Put in plain terms, 'individualisation' means the disintegration of the certainties of industrial society as well as the compulsion to find and invent new certainties for oneself and others without them.

Thus, the self becomes detached from pre-given structures, rules, and traditional processes. So in the context of this thesis, young people's negotiations of contemporary complex identity processes might be related to what groups to join

on Facebook, what celebrities to follow on Instagram, who the friends/followers that they want to accept/decline, what to share publicly and what privately, and whether they prefer to apply filters in their pictures, and so on. Furlong and Cartmel (1997) explained the processes of individualisation like a journey: one that allows various routes which lead to the same destination. However, young people appear to have to establish a sense of control of their own journeys. Of course, the point was not that all young people can proceed with their journey by the same means. What is of importance here is the semblance of choice that young people have in their everyday lives. Although conditions of life opportunities are structured or else class-based, young people are in a pursuit of individual answers to their problems (see Woodman *et al.,* 2020).

Perhaps this is primarily a question of space: a shift of space from physical places to the virtual. In these circumstances it could be argued that lifestyles become intensified, not in terms of belonging to a specific youth culture or lifestyle, but in terms of demonstrating a sense of strength through individuality (however partial). This process is accompanied by a changing set of aspirations. Together these motivate a new way in which young people see their own place in the world and transform how or why they engage with aspects of materialism. Indeed, it could be argued that young people are effectively strategising in order to best cope with the weight that is now on their shoulders in a way that it feels more intense than in the past. In sum, there is a change in how young people come to belong and the role that digital consumption plays in intensifying these experiences and the uncertainties is one which requires analysis.

4.7 Youth, consumption and social media

One of the most ubiquitous and important spaces in which youth appear to create or at least decipher their lifestyles during times of intensified individualisation and uncertainty is the arena of social media as I began to suggest in Chapter 3. In such circumstances, digital consumption may be coming to play an increasingly significant role as a space where young people can be independent and demonstrate a degree of status separate from their everyday material existence. Having discussed the importance of consumption and social media in the contemporary society in Chapters 2 and 3, I am interested in exploring the changing nature of youth consumption and lifestyles in an era of digital media.

Before I move on to specifically bring together the themes of consumption and social media and how they relate to young people's everyday experiences, there is a need to reiterate that consumption plays a key role in youth lives. Of course, the importance of youth consumption is not something new (Abrams, 1961; Willis *et al.,* 1990; Osgerby, 1998; Jones, 2009; Wilska and Pedrozo, 2007; Wilska and Lintonen 2016). For instance, "being young" can be considered an attitude of playfulness and coolness that is marketed to older generations, but it is also expressed through the attention that advertising agencies and marketing departments pay to young people (Cross, 2004; Smith, 2013).

There is some evidence to support the hypothesis that teenage years and young adulthood have become commercialised stages of life for all genders due to the increased role of media (Quart, 2013). Such examples can be described through the market segments of young girls' 'tween persona' (Coulter, 2014) and the heroic masculine in the US (Holt and Thompson, 2004). The extent to which young people engage strongly with consumption as performance and contribute

to the social media content with their own meanings continues to produce heated debates among sociologists of youth.

However, what is even more important in the context of this study is that the relationship between the young consumer-citizen and everyday experiences has become increasingly performative (Laughey, 2006; Banet-Weiser, 2007; Mason, 2017; Bennett, 2018) as youth seek to express their individuality and their sense of conformity to in-group ideals simultaneously. This has already been seen in the consumption of material goods and more specifically fashion, as Newell (2012) identifies in her research in Ivory Coast about crime and consumption.

Newell (2012) describes the relationship between consumption and unemployed young men, and the ways in which they use brands conspicuously, as a means of demonstrating success. These young men (so-called “bluffeurs”) try to affirm their social influence by using fashion and new technologies. Their success derives from the performative element of their consumption even if it is actually a staged illusion of abundance. In this way, young people are not only primed to consume, but also *to be seen to consume*: if anything, it is this process that sits at the very centre of this thesis. These marginalised young men manipulate their role as consumers to portray their personas in a way that offers some sense of authenticity. The power of consumption derives from its symbolic value. It is the performative element that communicates meanings related to a sense of belonging to groups. Being among consumers offers a semblance of group membership, however illusory this might be.

What this amounts to is a new kind of staging “authenticity” that is further ensconced by the parameters that digital space provides. This provides a

semblance of agency, and in this regard the sense of control, that young people so desperately need. One of the key points here is to explore the ways that young people assert their belonging in the current circumstances and digital context. It could be argued that this is why social media appear to be so significant to youth. Young people engage with it in different sophisticated ways. As a result, sociologists of youth need to focus on this issue without being preoccupied with past assertions. Youth identities are constructed in the context of both global and local; both permanent and ephemeral. It is within these relationships and interpretations that youth consumer culture lives.

Thus, young people are confronted with another challenge; to manage the self both in “de-territorialised” and “de-temporalised” contexts. In a continuously changing offline and online environment, young people are subjected to multiple pressures of the market economy and digital society. To an extent, what it means to engage in today’s world can be understood further by exploring in what way young people deal with the everyday changes and uncertainties of the digital society. It is likely that the new reality of digital society and technological innovations affects the nature of consumption, in particular, youth consumption (Theodoridis and Miles, 2019).

Younger generations, especially more privileged youth (i.e. those who can afford new digital technologies), are the early adopters and leaders of such change in our contemporary society (Mesch, 2009). Young people become prosumers to the extent that they combine both production and consumption either offline, through do-it-yourself activities or online. Young people’s consumption moments are the basis of the production of new social media experiences. It could be argued that such prosumer experiences intensify and reposition the social role of

consumption. Young people operate as ‘digital natives’ (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008, cited in Gasser and Simun, 2010) and in this light the relationship between consumption and identity needs to be reconsidered.

Palfrey and Gasser (2006, cited in Gasser and Simun, 2010: 83-4) in their study *Digital Natives Project* identify ‘digital natives’ as ‘this cohort as a particular population of young people roughly born around 1980, with access to digital technologies and the skills to use these technologies’. For others, young people are considered a ‘digital generation’ (Buckingham and Willett, 2013 [2006]). For Buckingham and Willett (2013: 1 [2006]) it is ‘a generation defined in and through its experience of digital computer technology’. Young prosumers tend to spend time in the digital sphere on blogs, vlogs, e-shops, social media platforms, e-sports and many other online activities. In this way, the interrelation of consumption with how young people negotiate their everyday lives is transformed by new temporal and spatial conditions. Digital platforms have introduced new ways in which young people can consume. The possibility of prosumption means that the performative aspect of consumption is intensified.

While Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (2010) point out a dematerialisation of consumption because of social media and smartphones, Magaudda (2011) emphasises the role of materiality of youth digital practices. It has been observed that young people use new forms of communication (e.g. online messaging, social media comments) which constitute prosumer experiences in which new cultures of consumption emerge (Cochoy and Hagberg, 2017). Therefore, young people’s identity construction process is revolutionised by new forms of social media communication that alter socio-cultural reality (boyd and Ellison, 2008; Papacharissi, 2015). It is the online space where young people try to find a sense

of a community and a place where they can belong to (boyd, 2014) among peers (Livingstone, 2008).

The transition to the digital space is also picked up by Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) who identify that young people's bedrooms are not the only space for identity construction, but so also is the online environment of blogs, chat rooms and social media platforms. It is in this regard that the physical boundaries are lifted and become less important than they were during past decades. Young people's identities tend to be increasingly interrelated with the digital space as part of a wider social transformation. More specifically, young people's new forms of relationships can be observed on Instagram (see Chapter 3) where ostentatious display still goes on (Tiidenberg and Baym, 2017).

4.8 Conclusion

In the preceding discussion I have addressed the question of identity and how young people's identity has changed as a product of social change. Consumption had and still has an important role to play in understanding young people's identities, under the current socio-economic and technological changes in our society, there is a need to consider the role of social media consumption in the construction of youth identities. New technological advancements, social media platforms and individualisation are affecting studies of consumption.

It is not clear whether consumption studies scholars are responding adequately to such ongoing changes (Buckingham and Willett, 2013 [2006]; Robards, 2012; Marwick and boyd, 2014; Berriman and Thomson, 2015). It is necessary for both youth and consumption studies to question any existing assumptions about young people's usage of the online environment. A new task that emerges for

social scientists is to find a way to shed light on the blurred boundaries between offline and digital consumption. Here, we need to ask how young people construct their self-identities and how they express selfhood both online and offline. In other words, I am particularly interested in the extent to which young people's relationship with digital media structures the nature of their lifestyles.

What remains mostly underexamined, however, is the role of young people's social media usage in the role of consumption. What is important here is to consider what is a paradox: young people's efforts to be "authentic", while, at the same time, offering their prosumption to the globalised digital "marketplace", and hence, one might suppose, being forced to temper their "authenticity" to fit in with market forces so as to achieve sufficient demand for their online persona. For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to understand whether social media provide young people with enough choice to select their selves, or whether it is a process more complicated than the social media arena appears to suggest.

The separation between offline and online youth space is reinforced and reproduced by assumptions that the offline space is linked mostly with structural elements of youth transitions, while the digital space is mainly connected with cultural conceptualisations of youth. In this regard, the old separation between structural and cultural approaches to youth are repeated. It is particularly important that these two distinctive spaces are increasingly interrelated, and in this respect, youth cultural and structural experiences have become interconnected. Thus, it is essential that sociologists of youth take into consideration both offline and digital realms in any attempt to understand how young people construct their identities in the contemporary society.

It appears that youth experiences are more and more situated in the intersection of the online and offline sphere, and in the junction of the structural and the cultural. However, it is not unusual for sociologists to ignore the one for the sake of the other, and instead study them as separate entities. Such an approach plays down the complexities that young people have to cope with in their daily lives. A crucial step to provide a convincing answer to difficult and challenging questions is to identity the appropriate conceptual frameworks that could potentially overcome such division. The intention of this thesis is thus to identity potential gains by focusing both on the offline and the online everyday difficulties that young people are confronted with in the contemporary world.

There is a need for a diligent and thorough critique of the relationship between digital consumption and young people's identities in order to be able to analyse the ideological powers of digital consumption. The fact that new processes of individualisation and discussions about the reinvention of the self have already emerged makes it imperative to empirically investigate the digitalisation of youth consumption. In considering the extent to which young people express themselves in a digital-life experience, it becomes of particular interest to focus on the notion of the youth *experience* of social life, as it is grounded upon both the structural and the cultural. In the following empirical chapters I examine the digital reinvention of youth consumption in a world of uncertainty and constant change, and the implications for the construction of young people's identities.

Chapter 5

Methodology

5.1 Introduction

This research is designed to gain insight into the relationship between young people's identity construction and consumption through the lens of social media in times of precarity. In this chapter I will outline the methodological considerations that I dealt with during the design, planning and implementation of this research. It is my intention to provide the rationale behind the use of focus group discussions, photo-elicitation interviews and observations on Instagram to answer my research questions. After framing the key aims of this study and providing my research questions, I will provide a description of the qualitative framework that underpins this research and I will discuss the details of my research design. Before thoroughly considering my sampling strategy, data analysis and data collection, I will provide a detailed discussion of ethical considerations that informed the research methods' selection. Finally, I will provide information regarding transcription and translation of data before reflecting upon my role as a researcher in the research context.

5.2 Aims of the study and research questions

In an attempt to frame my research questions, I will draw upon concepts that I considered in the previous three theoretical chapters. A key point highlighted in these chapters is the idea that consumption is a crucial part of an individual's identity construction. In effect, consumption is constantly changing. Everyday consumption practices are not fixed, but instead are constructed in relation to socio-cultural processes. In Chapter 2 I considered the changing nature of

consumption and its relationship with social change. While I described the historical context in which digital forms of consumption emerged, I reiterated the importance of understanding the relationship between identity and consumption.

In Chapter 3 I drew attention to the fact that digital spaces have provided an alternative lens through which moments of consumption are linked to everyday lives. In this context, I provided a detailed discussion of social media as a form of expression and self-presentation. In particular, I paid attention to the role that social media play in individuals' daily lives with specific reference to Instagram. Chapter 4 focused on young people's identities and their intersection with social transformations. It was my intention to understand the ongoing shifts in young people's relationship with social change in an age of uncertainty and austerity. In this way, I was particularly interested in how young people find ways to express themselves in this uncertain world. Of course, a key point in that discussion was the intensification of young people's experience of uncertainty and risk due to social and financial crises.

The main way to shed light on the relationship between the changing nature of consumption and young people's identities is to understand the role of social change, and how digital spaces impact upon young people's sense of identity. This thesis addresses the role of social media consumption in young people's identity construction and, thus, how digital forms of consumption have transformed what it means to be a consumer. As I stated in Chapter 1, I employ a comparative research approach between Greece and England (UK), specifically between the region of Greater Athens and the North West of England (see section 1.3). Such cross-national research can provide useful insight about youth identity construction and consumption. Although researching in different

settings, especially in different countries, is a challenging task for social researchers, the gains that may emerge are potentially more rewarding than single case studies.

The key focus of this study is the relationship between the changing nature of consumption and young people's identities. For the purposes of this my analysis, I have developed my rationale into four key questions:

1. Does social media consumption shape youth identities, and, if so, how does this affect young people's conceptions of themselves and their experiences?
2. Does young people's consumption of social media provide a realm in which they can offset the experience of risk?
3. In what ways do young people's self-presentations on social media contribute to their management of the perceived complex social and individual challenges arising in an age of uncertainty?
4. Does young people's consumption of social media constitute a significant change in the nature of consumption more broadly?

5.3 A qualitative framework

There was a need to develop an appropriate research design in relation to my research questions and aims of the study. After careful consideration of the possible methods that I could use, which would provide a sufficient richness of data, I decided to employ a qualitative approach in my attempt to investigate young people's meanings and experiences in relation to the nature of consumption. The underlying epistemological positioning of this study is that objects of enquiry are constituted by socio-cultural processes. In this context, 'all

knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted with an essential social context' (Crotty, 1998: 42). In this way, this study is situated within a social constructionist paradigm.

While there are many definitions and multiple concepts to consider when it comes to what constitutes social reality such as constructivism, social constructionism, and so on and so forth, for the purposes of this project I focus on the collective generation of meaning. Following Charmaz's (2008: 402, emphasis in the original) constructionist approach:

> (1) Reality is multiple, processual, and constructed – but constructed under particular conditions; (2) the research process emerges from interaction; (3) it takes into account the researcher's positionality, as well as that of the research participants; (4) the researcher and researched co-construct the data – data are a *product* of the research process, not simply observed objects of it.

Unsurprisingly, understanding the interconnection between the offline and online world in relation to consumption, as well as the meaning-making of human interactions, are the main drivers as to why this study is located within a social constructionist paradigm.

Within the social constructionist framework, the onus is on the researcher to become aware of his or her own exposal and sensitivity to the object of investigation; to understand participants' subjective social realities; and to realise how they give meaning to their situations according to different cultural standpoints. Investigating this topic under the lens of a social constructionist

model, the key point is how alternative subjective interpretations construct people's social reality.

Qualitative research is concerned mainly with the human aspect of knowing and understanding the social world and its importance in relation to the phenomena being analysed. In this way, researchers can investigate socio-cultural processes 'about which little is yet known' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 19). In this study, I am interested in understanding young people's experiences and produced meanings (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). It is the social context which necessitates methods of research, analysis and explanation answering questions of the *what* and the *how*. By deploying qualitative research methods, I intended to apply an 'analytic sensibility' (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 201) in practice and go beyond the surface-level content of my data.

For Ezzy (2002: 81), 'qualitative researchers study meaning'. Furthermore, according to Braun and Clarke (2013: 174), qualitative analysis:

> [T]ries to gain a deeper understanding of the data that have been gathered, and often looks 'beneath the surface' of the data, as it were, to try to understand how and why the particular accounts were generated and to provide conceptual account of the data, and/or some sort of theorising around this. Such interpretative accounts go well beyond what is obvious in the data, to explore meaning at a much deeper level.

In this study, qualitative methods provided the opportunity to access the heart of young people's everyday experiences under a new exploratory prism (Silverman, 1997). Thus, I focus on the changing nature of consumption through the lens of social networking sites and what this means for young people in an era of uncertainty.

5.4 Research design

In previous chapters, I outlined a lack of research merging the fields of social media, youth studies and consumption. The empirical approach that I adopted for the purpose of this study is methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2009 [1970]). My empirical approach included the following methods: (1) focus group discussions with young people, (2) photo-elicitation interviews (PEI) with their Instagram profiles and (3) an observation of my young participants' interactions on Instagram.

For this study, I have drawn upon triangulation (see Denzin, 2009 [1970]) and I employed forms of qualitative research methods. According to Denzin (2012: 82), 'the use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question'. For Flick (2002; 2007), triangulation does not represent an absolute strategy synonymous with validation, but instead, an alternative way of validating data. It might be argued that multiple methods and perspectives in one research project ensures accuracy and in-depth understanding.

There was a clear risk that my personal socio-cultural experiences and background created preconceptions that affected my own interpretation of the research findings (c.f. Fusch *et al.,* 2018). In a sense, it is of course important to acknowledge that both researcher's and participants' perceptions about the world are present in social research (Fields and Kafai, 2009). This is why triangulation is imperative in a qualitative research project. It is the process of triangulation and multiple methods that facilitated the mitigation of such bias (Jonsen and Jehn, 2009). In this way, the different data collection methods enabled me to reach data saturation (Fusch and Ness, 2015).

I utilised three different qualitative methods in order to confront any threats to validity (Amerson, 2011). Analysing the data through the lens of triangulation enhanced the level of reliability (Stavros and Westberg, 2009). For example, the findings collected during the second stage of my research (i.e. photo-elicitation interviews) are enhanced and strengthened by visual data derived from the Instagram observation. Methodological triangulation is applied in order to produce an integrated analysis of young people's meanings and experiences. This data gathering process contributed to in-depth understanding and insights (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) that I will discuss in the following empirical chapters. My approach was inductive. That is, I sought to generate theory in light of my data collection (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and hence the themes produced are related to the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

In recent years, a number of digital ethnographic methods and techniques have gained attention in social sciences; methods such as cyberethnography (Robinson and Schulz, 2009), virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), netnography (Kozinets, 2010), digital ethnography (Pink *et al.,* 2016). According to Beneito-Montagut (2011: 720), 'ethnographic studies on the internet usually tend to define the field of research in terms of specific services, applications or sites'. Although there are a number of studies that employ ethnography for researching the digital world (Markham, 1998; Baym, 2000; Hine, 2000; Senft, 2008), my study followed a multi-modal approach, defining the field site (Hine, 2017) with virtual ethnographic traits (Pink, 2007) which can be summarised in the engagement with my participants both in the face-to-face interactions and online observation. I was interested in analysing dynamic forms of sociality that evolve both in offline and online spaces (Postill and Pink, 2012) and utilised the combination of focus

groups, photo-elicitation interviews using Instagram and online observation of Instagram profiles.

5.5 Ethical issues

The consideration of ethics during the design, planning and execution of this study played a key role in informing my approach to the research. For Walliman (2017), ethical issues need to be taken into account regarding the researcher's integrity as well as his or her ethical obligations towards participants (e.g. consent, anonymity, option of withdrawal). It is the intersection of ethical issues with researching youth and the online environment that necessitated the positioning of ethics at the core of wider methodological considerations of this research project.

According to Durant and Chantler (2014: 137, emphasis in the original), 'research ethics is therefore a *process shaped by its contexts*'. The ethical challenges that I had to deal with during this project were: my approach as a researcher engaging with young people given my responsibility to protect their best interests; how to produce knowledge but at the same time respect my participants' sensitive information on their Instagram profiles; and what is acceptable or not in my pursuit to disseminate, present, and publish results based on this data. The project received ethical approval by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at Manchester Metropolitan University. During this process, and in order to gain approval for the project, I had outlined my rationale to respect my participants' rights of privacy. I paid detailed attention issues of access and informed consent.

While the participants of this research were not considered to be vulnerable young people (e.g. “minors”, people with disabilities, participants under the Mental Capacity Act 2005, from potentially marginalised communities etc.), it remained essential to deal with questions around issues of protection. During the first stage of the fieldwork, in my quest for young participants aged between sixteen and seventeen years, I contacted and sought permission from colleges (i.e. gatekeepers). In this way, I provided my participants all the necessary information about the nature of research prior to my visits and before conducting the focus group discussions.

In order to ensure that all my young participants (regardless of age) were well-informed before agreeing to contribute to this project, I distributed information sheets (both in focus group discussions and one-to-one interviews). These gave details about the purpose and the aims of the study, stating explicitly their freedom to withdraw at any time from the research without having to provide a reason. In addition, details about the objective and duration of focus groups and interviews were given. It was explicitly written in the consent forms that both focus groups and interviews would be audio recorded. Finally, in my attempt to secure confidentiality and anonymity, I reassured my respondents that pseudonyms would be used at all stages of the research. All the participants provided their permission and written consent to this end.

During the second stage of my fieldwork I conducted photo-elicitation one-to-one interviews (PEI) with my young participants. My intention here was to incorporate a creative method that combines visual characteristics in the context of semi-structured interviews. In this way, new puzzling questions and ethical issues were raised. For the purposes of this thesis, I wanted to provide prompts to participants

for our conversations and facilitate an open and creative dialogue. One potentially challenging decision regarding ethics was whether I would ask my participants to photograph and visually capture their everyday moments using their mobile phones, or whether I would initiate my discussion based on what they had already captured.

The former might have entailed a safety risk for my young participants and other people, as photographers and potential photographed subjects respectively. Therefore, I decided to proceed with the latter. I asked my young participants to log in to their Instagram profiles using their devices (e.g. laptops, tablets, mobile phones) in order to facilitate discussion. This helped me to ensure confidentiality, discretion and trust amongst my participants. It is worth noting that all participants used their mobile phones to access their Instagram profiles. However, any "exposure" of personal moments to others entails some risk. To address these issues, at the beginning of each face-to-face interview, I made it clear that I was interested in the elements of consumption and the connections between my participants' experiences and their photo-sharing attitude.

I enabled my young participants to take the lead and share whatever they felt was both appropriate and a vital part of their offline and online experience. Practically, my young interviewees took control of their devices and described already participant-captured content. My aim was to keep young people and their experiences at the centre of this project and to give them time and space to express themselves. Although I anticipated that this process might be resisted by participants, in practice they were happy to share their pictures with me via their public or private profiles on Instagram.

For the final method, I analysed the Instagram environment of my participants (those who took part in the second stage). This included content, captions, comments, and so on. It was during this stage that I faced additional ethics-related challenges. One unforeseen issue arose during the implementation of the second stage: while all my participants were over sixteen years old, my gatekeepers in the UK asked me to exclude their students from the third stage of the fieldwork. I resolved this issue, maintaining the good relationship that I had already developed, and agreed to this request. Thus, during the third stage of research in the UK, I gathered data only from young people between eighteen and thirty years old.

Ethical considerations and concerns need to be taken seriously when social media and visual elements are used in the research. For that reason, in the written consent form I explained that I would “follow” my participants on Instagram, maintaining their anonymity as in the previous stages of the project, only for academic purposes and only for the duration of the project. In this way, it was my decision not to rely on the notion of publicly available data (Markham and Buchanan, 2012) and gather data from users with public profiles without their consent. Instead, I preferred to seek consent from potential participants and made them fully aware of my intentions, irrespective of whether they had a private or a public profile.

In order to ensure that my contact with participants was completely professional, I decided to set up an Instagram profile for research purposes only. In my care not to influence their sharing choices, I chose to avoid sharing any personal material in my research profile. My assumption here is that they had already accepted and participated in the second stage of the project (in a few cases,

during the first as well) and in that way a generally empty research profile would not be conceived as fake or alter their sharing attitudes.

Despite the fact that I considered the above issues, the third stage raised ethical concerns in relation to the gathering and use of data from Instagram. Social scientists, in their attempts to proceed with Instagram-related research, have faced a number of challenges during the collection, analysis and dissemination of data (Highfield and Leaver, 2015; Highfield and Leaver, 2016; Locatelli, 2017). After the emergence of Instagram and social media in general as primary fields of research, a number of scholars have tried to address issues around the public-privacy issue (Ravn *et al.,* 2020). In the social media research field, it is argued that there is a need for a 'case-based' approach instead of following prescribed steps (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). While acknowledging the importance of visual material (e.g. pictures, mini videos) in my project, I decided that it would be more ethically appropriate to exclude such material completely from the dissemination phase, and instead only describe it in relation to textual material (Tiindenberg, 2018).

Ethical issues were important and an ongoing concern throughout all the stages of this research project. My engagement with research ethics led me to consider the essential values to the pursuit of inquiry. As Traianou (2014: 73) argues:

> "[E]thics" is frequently treated as primarily or entirely concerned with how researchers treat people in the field: whether they minimise harm to them, respect their autonomy and privacy, and so on. If "ethics" is interpreted in this way, then, in my view, ethics is not central to qualitative research, in this sense that it does not form part of its core task, which is to produce knowledge. Ethical considerations, in this sense, relate to what are and are not acceptable means in pursuing knowledge: they represent an

external constraint on the selection of methods and strategies in which researchers engage.

Of course, ethical considerations are related with practical approaches to treat participants and the research field, but what is equally important is to consider the value of understanding the social world as a central point for research.

5.6 Sampling strategy and participants

The sampling strategy in this research project was purposive (Patton 2001). That is, 'where the researcher selects what he/she thinks is a "typical" sample based on specialist knowledge or selection criteria' (Walliman, 2005: 79). It was my responsibility as the principal investigator of this project to set the eligibility requirements for participation so as to best address the specific research. According to Neuman (2014: 247), 'we sample to open up new theoretical insights, reveal distinctive aspects of people or social settings, or deepen understanding of complex situations, events, or relationships'. For the purposes of this thesis, my focus was on settings and the relationships implied by young people's consumption-based experiences during times of uncertainty.

As discussed in Chapter 4, young people are at the very heart of social transformations and their effects, such as the rise of digital society and the high levels of insecurity in their lives. These are the main reasons for selecting youth as the target group of this study. As I argued in Chapter 4, the age range of young people is not universal or concrete. There is not a pre-determined age group that can generally reflect youth experiences. My main intention was to achieve a diverse age and socio-demographic group that would potentially provide a broad range of young people's everyday experiences. That led me to include young people between the ages of sixteen and thirty in this project. This age group was

seen as the most relevant because it includes both youth in pre-adulthood years but also young adults in their late twenties.

The rationale behind this choice was also driven by the chronicles of the Greek euro-zone economic crisis. This wide age-related sample will potentially provide in-depth meanings in relation to youth precarity. In the beginning of this project (academic year 2016-2017), I considered that during the period 2008-2009 my participants were somewhere between the ages of eight and twenty-two years old. Hence, some of the participants were adolescents in pre-crisis years and in that way, they could reflect on such experiences.

In the first stage of my fieldwork (i.e. focus group discussions) there was not a strict selection process. That means that young people aged between sixteen and thirty years who responded to my call for participants could participate in the research project. For both Greece and the UK, the call for recruitment in the project was sent through Facebook pages for university students, and via emails to university administration teams and programme leaders that could send the call for participants on my behalf. As far as my younger participants are concerned, I contacted a number of colleges (high schools) and after some time I got positive responses. One of my concerns during this stage was to ensure that there would be a wide variety of responses in an attempt to address the nature of uncertainty in young people's lives and understand their life experiences. During the focus group discussions my young participants were split into three different age groups; sixteen to seventeen-year olds, eighteen to twenty-five-year olds and finally young people aged between twenty-six and thirty years. This was not possible at all times due to the difficulty in reaching sufficient numbers to proceed with the group discussion. Those groups were decided mainly based on

young people's educational backgrounds (i.e. college, undergraduate or postgraduate students) but also for practical reasons. That is, I had to contact young people and organise group discussions in convenient and familiar spaces for my participants (e.g. visiting a college, conducting focus groups in their university premises).

As I highlighted in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 there is a need to shed light on young people's experience-related consumption practices through the lens of social media. In this context, during the second and third stage of research there was only one criterion for potential participants to be eligible to participate: having an Instagram profile. This particular social media platform was chosen based on its features and due to the fact that it is one of the most popular among young people - thus providing potentially rich and meaningful insights (see Chapter 3).

During the first stage of research I hosted five groups in Greater Athens (Greece) and six groups in the North West of England (UK). The reason for doing one more in the UK it was practical. I received positive responses by colleges in the UK at the same time and I had already conducted this part of fieldwork in Greece. My intention was to have equal numbers of male and female participants at all stages. In the focus group that took place in Greater Athens, twenty-seven young people participated, while in the focus group discussions in North West of England I had thirty-five participants. The total number of focus group participants in both research locations was therefore sixty-two young people, and from those, thirty-five were female and twenty-seven male.

During the stage of photo-elicitation interviews, I conducted twenty face-to-face interviews in total, ten in Greater Athens and ten in the North West of England. I

interviewed five females and five males in the UK; in Greece four males and six females participated in the project. After conducting the focus group discussions, I asked those who had an Instagram profile whether they would also like to participate in the next phase. Ultimately, six out of ten people interviewed individually in Athens were also focus group participants, while in the North West of England only four participated both in focus groups and one-to-one interviews. As I mention above, three out of the ten young people who participated in the photo-elicitation interviews were restricted by the colleges to participate in the final stage. In all research settings, seventy-two young people participated in total. More specifically, I had thirty-one young people who participated in Athens and forty-one in North West of England (Table 1).

Table 1: Breakdown of young people's sample by location and gender

	GREATER ATHENS (GREECE)	NORTH WEST ENGLAND (UK)	TOTAL
FEMALES	14	26	**40**
MALES	17	15	**32**
TOTAL	**31**	**41**	**72**

5.7 Data Collection

The data are comprised of descriptions of the situations and experiences of young people, as opposed to quantitative and numerical codes. The research process can be summarised in three phases.

5.7.1 Focus Groups

Focus groups are a useful tool of qualitative research in the sense that they provide the space and time for interaction within a group of people. Focus groups are appropriate for those who are interested in understanding a phenomenon, and for which the main motivation behind the research is to uncover issues of meaning (Morgan, 1997) in a cultural context. For this research project and at this stage, I decided that focus groups were one of the appropriate methods to capture the needed insights and address my research questions. My intention was to establish groups of young individuals and explore how young people understood their own life experiences, and what consumption means to my young participants in the context of uncertainty in a digital society.

According to Hughes and Dumont (1993: 776), 'focus groups are in-depth group interviews employing relatively homogenous groups to provide information about topics specified by the researchers'. In this context, the researcher becomes a moderator who initiates conversations that will generate insights which would be difficult to gather in a different way (Morgan, 1997). A number of studies have used focus groups as a primary means to conduct research, including studies about propaganda effectiveness during World War Two (Merton and Kendall, 1946) and marketing research (Calder, 1977). One of the reasons behind this ongoing expansion is the ability of the social researcher to use focus groups in various and innovative ways adapted to the needs of each social research setting (Krueger, 1998). In this way, and in the context of this project, one can understand being a young person as less of an entirely individualistic pursuit, and more as something that is located in a social and cultural context.

In social science research projects, qualitative research methods have long been used to investigate “real-life” situations (Flick *et al.*, 2004). This way of researching targets an in-depth comprehension of people's experiences. For the purposes of this study, I conducted focus groups in order to facilitate conversations and understand participants' views for a set of topics following a collective activity (Kitzinger, 1994). My choice was also driven by the fact that focus groups constitute an efficient research technique (Krueger and Casey, 2000). I was most interested in the interactions between participants when they discussed topics such as precarity, austerity, the economic crisis, their future aspirations, social media usage, online shopping, online self-presentations and consumption practices by asking, for instance, ‘When you think about the role of consumption in your life, what comes to mind?’.

In this project, the number of young participants in each group varied from four to ten. There is no consensus in the literature as to the appropriate number of focus group participants. There are cases in which it has been suggested to be between eight and twelve (Stewart *et al.,* 2009). Similarly, Oates (2000) has identified that the number which works better and facilitates the exchange of views is between six and ten people. Nevertheless, Smithson (1998) argues that even less participants can generate valuable data and encourage interaction.

During the fieldwork, focus groups were conducted in college or university premises (both in Greece and the UK) or at a convenient place for my participants (e.g. café). One reason for conducting focus groups with young people under eighteen years old in colleges in the UK was a practical one; this was to access as many people as possible within college at the same time without putting extra burden on their teachers while adjusting to their teaching patterns and hours.

Conducting focus groups in such places as an outsider made me follow a more formal and “semi-structured” approach. In general, I tried to form the groups taking into account gender issues and grouping people of similar ages together (e.g. between sixteen and seventeen years old, eighteen to twenty-five years old, Table 2). In this sense, the inclusivity of the focus groups was stressed in order to give “voice” to every perspective through the eyes of young people.

Table 2: Breakdown of young people’s sample by age range, gender and geographic location

	16-17 YEARS OLD	**18-25 YEARS OLD**	**26-30 YEARS OLD**
FEMALES	15	19	**7**
MALES	7	14	10
GREATER ATHENS	8	15	8
NORTH WEST ENGLAND	14	18	9

Having formed the groups for this stage of my research, I started the discussion with some initial structured questions about participants’ socio-demographic background. Young participants at this first stage were not obliged to have social media profiles in order to take part in the research. This sample was chosen as I intended to gain insight from young people who were keen on social media consumption but also those who were opposed to it as a form of personal communication.

What is significant and uncovered important themes for the continuation of the research project is the way that young people responded to each other, sharing their agreements and disagreements through a constant interaction. It cultivated an environment which created a constructive debate among participants, such as the way of using social media, beliefs about the economic crisis (in Greece) and thoughts about Brexit and the socio-economic situation in the UK. This gave me the opportunity as a researcher to collect evidence instantly on how young participants understood their similarities and differences. The interaction within the group members allowed for an in-depth analysis of the role of consumption in youth identities.

Applying focus groups was not solely a method designed to gather information on my core topic, but also to learn more about young participants' attitudes, behaviours and opinions on consumerism in relation to social media expansion. The idea of bringing individual and collective perspectives together about consumption helped me access young people's wider opinions on the topic, and I received answers in questions of what, how and why. All focus group discussions lasted between one hour and two hours and were audio-recorded.

I deliberately avoided using the photo-elicitation method in the focus groups in order to ensure anonymity and privacy for my participants. Anonymity and a secure environment to share private profiles, especially personal pictures, is not easily achieved in a group setting. It would have been difficult to ask young people (adults or not) to provide and share moments of their social media profiles openly with strangers. Nevertheless, it was completely appropriate to ask them to express and state their personal views and opinions on the subject.

5.7.2 Instagram photo-elicitation interviews

In the second stage of my study I incorporated a creative method which combined a visual method, photo-elicitation through Instagram, in the context of interviews. I conducted ten photo-elicitation interviews in Greece and ten in the UK. Rose (2016) has commented how effective visual methods can be in bringing a research question to life. This effect is further reinforced though the deployment of photographs which can have express particular meanings for respondents. Photo-elicitation incorporates pictures during an interview and in this way elicits information based on visual and verbal information (Harper, 2002). According to Loeffler (2004: 539), 'photo elicitation is a collaborative process whereby the researcher becomes a listener as the participant interprets the photograph for the researcher'. By applying such an approach, my intention was to provide prompts to participants during our conversations and to thereby initiate an open creative dialogue. Hence, I invited my young participants to take the leading role in our discussions and in that way, they made full use of their experiences and Instagram posts.

Photo-elicitation interviews have been used in the past in various research fields from anthropological and psychological to sociological studies (Carlsson, 2001; Wang, 2003) introducing different elicitation tools such as drawings, cartoons, and graffiti (Harper, 2002). For the purposes of this project, I asked my participants to log in to their Instagram profiles using any device that would be convenient for them (e.g. laptops, tablets, or mobile phones). My young interviewees decided what to discuss by choosing which posts on Instagram made them feel more relaxed to interpret. My rationale behind implementing this

research method was that by using photos of everyday moments, young participants might connect to their own experiences.

By discussing with my young interviewees their experiences and consumption practices I developed a comprehension of the nature of consumption and their relationship with experience-based choices. This method is similar to the 'scrolling back' technique that has previously been applied to Facebook (see Robards and Lincoln, 2017). In this way, this process provided more time and material to participants to discuss using specific examples about the themes being explored. Thus, I was interested in how this approach could enrich the possibilities for reflection among my participants. All interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes and were audio recorded.

Many of the scholars who used photo-elicitation techniques have asked their participants to capture a photograph (or draw something) for the purposes of their research. I considered that this particular way of implementing the method was not feasible for two reasons. The first one was related to the potential bias resulting from my participants' rational choice to take a picture and share it online in the knowledge that the researcher is the audience. Second, such an approach might have been considered ethically ambiguous practice, as I suggest above. The fact that my participants had already photographed and shared Instagram moments that were significant to them offered a useful source of information and a starting point for our discussion. A photo-elicitation method, or indeed a social media profile-elicitation method, enabled my young participants to reflect upon their own meanings, self-presentations and interpretations. In collaboration with my young interviewees, we could co-create a detailed understanding of why they

posted specific photos and how they experienced actual moments and events in their everyday lives.

This method provided valuable evidence in terms of how young people think about their past consumption choices such as selecting a place to go or a specific product. Images that were captured at an earlier moment in time could be used as a point of reflection, identifying either preferable consumption practices that were worth publishing online, or in other cases, less meaningful moments. In this context, I was particularly interested in investigating young people's rationale behind their formal documentation of their moments. In other words, by checking back in time with my participants through their Instagram profiles, I had the opportunity to understand specificities around the existence or absence of moments within their lives. During the photo-elicitation interviews, I tried to overcome moments of silence by offering an opportunity for participants to discuss issues that were absent from their pages. This visual way of engaging participants in the interview process elicited information that would have otherwise remained unshared.

5.7.3 Visual data collection

It is the everyday presence of the internet in individuals' lives, and the new forms of communication that necessitate the need to experiment with new digital methods (Hine, 2015). In the context of this thesis, there is a necessity to analyse young people's construction of meanings by linking their personal experiences with visual examples (Pink, 2007). In this way, it is the combination of words with visual elements that facilitate the investigation of various forms of consumption. During the third stage of my fieldwork, the emphasis was put on young people's Instagram sharing practices. Thus, I decided to carry out research on my young

participants' Instagram interactions in light of its socio-cultural significance in their everyday lives (Pink *et al.,* 2016).

In the context of my participants' everyday usage of social media, I observed their photo sharing on Instagram using steps described below. For the purposes of this stage of the research, as mentioned above, I created a new Instagram research-only profile and I "followed" my participants (that is those involved in this stage) on Instagram. All of the participants were the same that had already agreed to participate in the photo-elicitation interviews, given that they all had Instagram profiles. Unfortunately, colleges did not allow me to include three students in the North West of England (aged between sixteen and nineteen years old, two females, one male) who participated in the previous stage due to the ethical considerations discussed above. I proceeded researching ten participants in Greece (six females, four males) and seven (three females, four males) in the UK.

The duration of online observations on Instagram for my seventeen young participants was two months. Having considered the proliferation of data that I collected during my daily observations, the two months seemed a reasonable time frame for this phase of the research. During this time, I had the opportunity to observe my participants' Instagram posts on multiple occasions such as weekdays, weekends, working time, free time, holidays. Because of the pace that social interactions evolve online in relation to the nature of both permanent and temporary Instagram posts, I had been gathering data daily for two months. More specifically, I monitored my participants' shared Instagram stories (i.e. a follower can see the post only for twenty-four hours). As far as the permanent posts are

concerned, I was able to check my Instagram Feed for my participants' new posts.

Despite the fact that for the permanent posts I could log in later to my Instagram research profile and proceed with the analysis, I decided to capture all posts by taking screen shots. In this way, I was able to maintain the ephemeral posts (i.e. Instagram Stories) for my analysis together with the permanent posts. In addition, this gave me the opportunity to classify posts into files for each participant (at least initially). This provided the advantage that I had all my data gathered together and I did not have to go back to my participants' profiles after I captured their posts. Over the two month-period it turned out to be really challenging to keep daily notes about my participants' posts. Instead I decided to keep essential notes when that was possible and then try to summarise my reflections on my collection of data on a weekly basis.

Although I allowed my participants to follow me digitally as well, I had already decided to avoid sharing any material online. This was motivated by the consideration that I did not want to risk compromising what was a very productive researcher-participant relationship during the second stage. I considered that any personal activity online might have affected my participants' perception about the research project, and that was something I wanted to avoid. In this way, I would position myself as an observer on the spectrum between a full participant and observer (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). All my young participants' photographs were collected and stored in password protected files.

By observing young people's interactions on Instagram, I intended to triangulate my data and increase the validity of my analysis. All gathered visual data and my

participants' interactions on digital space provided invaluable insights about young people's identities and the changing nature of consumption. In the beginning of my observations I was concerned with the distinction between actually participating in the activities I was observing or being just a passive member of the audience. For Laurier (2016: 172):

> [T]hose very spaces accommodate our presence and give us a role; we change the spaces we are present in to greater or lesser degrees, even we are seemingly passive. By our very presence we are participating members of the public, in a public space that provides persons using it with the right to do things like people-watching and to be watched by other people in return.

Therefore, I tried to make sense of the position I occupied as a researcher in the digital space. It could be argued that this initial stage of 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger, 1991 cited in Laurier, 2016) helped me to gain valuable information. During those months I followed a trajectory from being a complete "outsider" to an "insider". Thus, by undertaking observation of young people's Instagram interactions (e.g. shared posts, "likes", comments, captions, hashtags). I gained a better understanding of what the role of consumption practices were in young people's lives, and why those sharing practices were important to this particular group.

5.8 Data analysis

The data analysis of this study involves thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) combined with visual narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). I will begin outlining my approach to thematic analysis and then I will explain how I dealt with my visual data. Thematic analysis refers to a process that requires a high level of engagement and involvement from the researcher and an interpretation of data

(Guest *et al.*, 2013). According to Braun and Clarke (2013: 178), 'thematic analysis is relatively unique among qualitative analytic methods in that it only provides a method for data analysis; it does not prescribe methods of data collection, theoretical positions, epistemological or ontological frameworks'. Data gathered during the first two stages (i.e. focus groups and photo-elicitation interviews) were transcribed and analysed thematically. More specifically, I thoroughly analysed my young participants' words and categorised the data into themes.

For Braun and Clarke (2013: 174) qualitative analysis 'tries to gain a deeper understanding of that that have been gathered, and often looks "beneath the surface" of the data, as it were, to try to understand how and why the particular accounts were generated and to provide a conceptual account of the data'. In this context, thematic analysis goes beyond the quantitative approach of counting specific words or phrases. In thematic analysis, selecting material, structuring and generating categories, defining categories, revising and expanding the frame is crucial to the process (Boyatzis, 1998). Thematic analysis is employed in this research project in order to identify and describe both implicit and explicit ideas and patterns within the data. In this way, I identified patterns throughout the passage and then developed those themes that applied to different passages.

During the data analysis stage of the project, thematic analysis offered the ability to read thoroughly the amount of written data, translate all data into categories and become familiar with the material. It is important to emphasise that codes were developed to represent the identified themes in order to form new patterns and focus the analysis later. During this stage, it was important to proceed with a detailed systematic examination of the data and thus my priority was to avoid

looking at the material through my own expectations or assumptions. In this way, the categories produced during the analysis were content-driven (Krippendorff, 2004; Schreier, 2012) to the extent that the coding frame was matched to the material. That is why I emphasised specific aspects of the material which were related to the overall research questions.

During my analysis, eleven focus groups and twenty photo-elicitation interviews conducted in both research settings, were transcribed and coded using NVivo 12. All features of interest were coded on a sentence-by-sentence basis and I coded as inclusively as possible. After that, codes were read again, compared, contrasted and revised providing the building blocks of my analysis. In the following empirical chapters, I will focus my analysis on themes in which young people's views and experiences become distinctive and lead in interesting directions.

With respect to young people's everyday lives in the context of uncertainty and digital society, the Instagram posts (both permanent and temporary) participants shared provided insight into their processes of making meaning of experience-based consumption practices, while simultaneously dealing with insecurity. In this research project, a visual narrative method was employed as a third way to elicit further understanding on young people's identity construction. After the completion of the second stage of the fieldwork (i.e. photo-elicitation interviews), where consent had been granted, young people's Instagram posts were analysed. Participants' visual representations need to be situated and interpreted with consideration for the research questions (Riessman, 2008). In this way, I gave special consideration to reading young people's photos as 'texts' (Riessman, 2008).

Due to the proliferation of digital media and visual elements in our contemporary society, it is of course difficult to locate one definite guide for how visual analysis should be done. According to Riessman (2008), there are two main ways to interpret images in the context of narrative analysis; thematic and dialogic/performance. For Busanich *et al.* (2016: 100, emphasis in the original), 'thematic analysis includes closely examining the content of the images and identifying *what* discernable and underlying meanings are present in them'. For the purposes of my analysis, I draw upon the thematic visual analysis to interpret young people's shared posts alongside limited text that comes with each post (e.g. captions, hashtags, comments, notes). My intention was to proceed with a thematic analysis in this third method, as this also aligned with my decision to thematically analyse all my written-only data.

In this way, my emphasis was on what young people consumed, how they consumed it, and on the many ways that each image could be analysed. More specifically, I analysed their posts in the following ways: (1) as displaying something about experience-based consumption practices; (2) providing some information about the participant who shared the post and (3) as presenting youth socio-cultural meanings in relation to the changing nature of consumption (see Busanich *et al.,* 2016 for a similar approach). During the analysis, my first step was to identify the content of all photos shared, and the meanings around consumption, experience and youth identities that were reproduced in my young participants' posts. In the next stage, I put emphasis on the underlying meanings and their relation with the broader socio-cultural context. Third, visual elements were tied to written element in the posts (e.g. notes, hashtags, captions). I

focused on what was present and what was absent in my young participants' posts.

5.9 Transcription and translation of data

Two further issues that I had to deal with during my research were those of transcription and translation. Transcription is a process that is 'routinely taken for granted, but it involves hidden complexities' (Hammersley, 2010: 554). Even if it is considered a time-consuming process, transcription remains vital in enabling a level of accuracy, and it helps researchers familiarise themselves with the data (Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999; Lapadat, 2000). For the purposes of my analysis, all the focus groups and interviews were transcribed by myself. In the transcription reports, all the participants were anonymised using pseudonyms in order to ensure their anonymity.

Data were gathered in two languages, and as a result, for the purposes of writing this thesis, I had to translate parts of the data from Greek to English. All fieldwork data (i.e. focus groups, interviews, social media posts) collected from participants in Greece was in the Greek language and after the completion of my analysis based on the fieldwork in Greece, I continued to the translation of quotes used in this thesis. However, there were a few exceptions where young people used the English language on their Instagram profiles (e.g. hashtags, captions). Any content in English and all the information and quotes recorded in English were used in this analysis and written in their original form. My intention was to provide such information here in order to abide with the suggestion that one must provide the reader with important details, such as the stages of transcription and translation, and the language of quotes used (Temple and Young, 2004).

During the process of translation, I sought to keep quotes as close as possible to the original meaning. As a native speaker of the Greek language, this enabled me to proceed with the translation of large chunks of the material without the need of an external translator. More specifically, it gave me the opportunity to grasp the meaning of Greek participants' discussions without the risk of losing the original phrasing. Of course, when the researcher translates from a foreign language to the language needed for reporting (in this case English) some inaccuracies will no doubt occur. At all times, I was aware that my own attempt to translate data could create a kind of bias (however minimal in nature) to the knowledge production.

Being fully aware of this risk, in cases where direct translation did not provide the necessary meaning, I translated the material such that it generated the meaning of the original phrase. An alternative solution would be to conduct the data collection in Athens in the English language, but that would have made participation in the study more difficult, and would have increased negative response rates. Many of young Greeks learn English as a foreign language, but do not practice it in their everyday routine. At the same time, it would be an exclusionary and elitist approach to potential participants of this research project.

5.10 Understanding the research context

Being a Greek who has faced and experienced (from a close distance) one of the worst economic and humanitarian crises in Europe after World War Two, it is important to note in the consideration of my data, that it was a challenge to distance myself from my Greek participants' situations and experiences. In a sense, it was inevitable that the Greek crisis has played a significant role both in the actual research and in my position as a researcher. It is my attempt here to

identify those impacts and take them into account as a key element of my project (Drake, 2010).

Of course, there are certain effects when the researcher is situated in a position so close to the research setting (i.e. Athens) as well as the socio-demographic (i.e. age range). Despite the fact that it had been some time since the most difficult years of the crisis (i.e. 2010-2015), it was an emotionally intense experience to discuss with my participants (mainly during the focus groups) the nature of the situation in Greece. It could be argued that the design and practical execution of a research study are influenced by emotions as vital inspirational elements that form both the relationship of the researcher with his or her informants, and his or her interpretation of results (Jenkins, 2006).

The notion of reflexivity questions the researcher as an unbiased knowledge producer. For Berger (2015: 220), 'reflexivity is commonly viewed as the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that his position may affect the research process and outcome'. Therefore, during the fieldwork, analysis and writing of this thesis, I reflected and paid attention to the context of my own experiences in understanding young participants' meanings.

By sharing the Greek crisis experience with my informants, I was placed as an "insider" (Padgett, 2016). Being close to the research subjects comes with some advantages; that is, knowing the culture, having an awareness of the ongoing situation and realising subtle responses of participants (Kacen and Chaitin, 2006). Having personally experienced the Greek crisis, I was well-informed about the specificities of the historical events. It could be argued that my Greek origin,

and the fact that I was a similar age to my participants, framed the nature of my relationship with my research participants, and that this had a positive effect on the information my young participants felt able to share. Apart from my familiarity with the Greek context, my position as a researcher in the same age range of the participants, irrespectively of location (both in Greece and the UK), provided access to my participants' everyday social media engagement in a way that some social researchers (less engaged in the cultural intimacies of this generation) might have found challenging.

There were some occasions that my close proximity might have affected aspects of the data collection in an unintended way. For instance, trying to reflect on the focus group discussions, it may have been that sometimes I asked questions in a narrower way than a less initiated researcher might have done. This was a product of my familiarity with both the offline and online setting, in a way which might have limited the general interaction of the group. In my attempt to maintain a balance between my position and my own experiences, I minimised any complexities by giving the appropriate (uninterrupted) time to my young interviewees to narrate how they had lived the crisis and reflected on their experiences.

Throughout data capture I remained continuously alert of any possibility that I was projecting my own thoughts and experiences on to participants. Rather, I utilised the notion of reflexivity as a lens through which I could understand young people's experiences. By conducting the discussions, transcribing them, reading the data, reviewing my notes, re-reading the data, analysing, creating themes, checking for any inconsistencies, translating quotes and writing the thesis itself, I became increasingly aware of the need to understand my material, and thus to

identify whether or not my own experiences affected how I saw my data. During this research project, I constantly posed questions to myself about the nature of the study and the possible implications of my position in the research.

5.11 Conclusion

As I outlined in the introduction of this chapter, in designing and planning this research project, my intention was to collect a rich vein of data through a combination of methods that allowed a broad spectrum of participants and their engagement with social media. I purposefully avoided focusing on young people who were the most active users of social media and Instagram, but I deliberately included people without social media profiles. This was essential to the inclusive dimension of my project as well as the increase of “voices” regarding online and offline consumption. This helped me avoid the pitfalls of a kind of digitally-bias focus. In the three chapters that will follow, I establish connections between my participants’ words and their meanings of self-presentation as well as their consuming experiences. In effect, I will consider the importance of the relationship between young people’s identities and consumption in a digital age.

Chapter 6

Young People and Uncertainty: Data and Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will address the uncertainties faced by young people negotiating their identities both in Greece and the UK. By presenting the problems that young people face in their everyday lives, the chapter links how these problems are dealt with in the "real" (offline) world, and in that way, it addresses significant gaps in knowledge. Findings based on data aggregated during the first two stages (i.e. focus group discussions and photo-elicitation interviews) of the data collection process are discussed and analysed.

Several themes emerged from my focus groups and photo-elicitation interviews concerning the relationship between young people's identities and uncertainty. Although it is crucial to understand the reasons that create high levels of uncertainty through young people's life stories, exploring in what way precarity affects young people's identities is of equal importance. Either trapped in the middle of the economic crisis in the region of Greater Athens or facing instability in the North West of England, it is important to put emphasis on young people's experiences and interpretations. In this chapter I am interested in the relationship of youth experiences with social change. In the following sections I will consider how social transformations in an age of uncertainty impact young people's aspirations and the ways in which they deal with contemporary everyday challenges. After discussing the breakdown of "common biographies" and the significance of housing aspirations in youth futures, I will examine youth experiences of uncertainty. In particular, I am interested in both macro- and

micro-level characteristics of uncertainty, as well as how uncertainty has become normalised. Finally, the issue of emigration is discussed through the lens of escapism as a response to the everyday challenges of youth in the “real” world.

6.2 Young people’s individualised aspirations

A common feature of both research sites for my young participants was a highly individualised orientation to the future. Young people appear to navigate the present and imagine the future by planning their future life goals, and thereby exercising some level of agency. However, planning is not exercising agency *per se* as young people might not have the means to implement plans. In this project, I am not interested in the general causality of young people’s aspirations and how their aspirations might be bound up within different forms of capital. My concern here are the implications for their life choices and identities, and how young people understand their unique place and potentiality through their aspirations and future orientations.

6.2.1 Breakdown of “common biographies”

The role of social media and new technologies was evident in how young people aspire to their future. In their attempts to manage present and future risks, young individuals appear to adopt a citizen-entrepreneur doctrine which in turn constitutes a contemporary expression of the neoliberal subject (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). It is worth noting how some of my young participants were not seeking a trajectory similar to their parents. It was clear that the traditional forms of transitions to adulthood are less appropriate to young people’s lives today. Some of them identified a career through social media as their desired pathway:

> *It seems to me that as a country we are small anyway, and now in 2017 as things stand, you’ve got infinite resources to do everything, everything,*

> *everything… Logan Paul and others they started making some six-second videos and now they've got infinite money and they do whatever they want, no one tells them what to do. Lindsey Pelas started from Instagram and she did other things through social media… There is no such thing as I'll get my degree, my Masters, find a job, get my pension in my 60s, have family, kids… In Greece there is only that, only a one-way route, there is no way back, you just go there.* (Christos, 21, Greece, FGD).

Some of my participants challenged the relevance of linear transitions in their lives. Transition to adulthood has been criticised as not the only accurate description that permeates the youth phase of the life course (te Riele, 2004). The university-work transition appears to be less important in youth aspirations, or to put it in a different way: social media have become increasingly significant in youth lives, providing an alternative way, at least in their own minds. Hence, Christos sought a way out both from the Greek crisis and the notion of linear transitions to adulthood. He highlighted the importance of gaining money and recognised that earlier generations' aspirations are neither appropriate nor realistic for him.

For Christos, traditional linear transitions are no longer sufficient to provide the resources for a young person to succeed. On the contrary, the digital space appears to offer the necessary resources to maintain career aspirations. Of course, we need to acknowledge that such aspirations are highly linked to the notion of the entrepreneurial self (Bröckling, 2016; Kelly, 2006). As my young participant added, there are many people who have made money through the social media celebrity culture. In this way, the contemporary neoliberal subject individualises future trajectories by considering social media celebrity culture as the sole route to self-success, making money and gaining social mobility.

Large parts of young populations are preoccupied with the task of crafting their life as a project (Giddens, 1991), setting life goals, and dreaming about their future. It was evident that young people linked the issue of uncertainty to their aspirations. What is interesting for this part of the discussion is that for young people, success and failure are clearly individualised. For instance, Corrinne from Croatia who has been living in Salford for the last couple of years and works as an intern in Manchester said:

> *My kind of job doesn't tie me to be in places. So, I still have a feeling I have a lot of freedom and as I said I'm not married I don't have kids. I can still get a choice to move around. So, I feel still positive about my personal future but I don't know about the world to be honest.* (Corrinne, 27, UK, FGD)

The notion of mobile self (Urry, 2000) is relevant here as mobility is regarded as a choice and an individualised expression of Corrinne's aspirations. The notion of mobility plays a fundamental role in enabling her enterprising individualised self to maintain a sense of hope for the future. In this way, Corrinne's work and life aspirations do not seem to be place-bound. Corrinne's projections into her personal future still seem to be positive. It is here where she puts all her emphasis in order to feel that her aspirations remain achievable. What is interesting is the lack of attachment to any "real" community and how this relates to a discussion of their dissolution into a "virtual" community; something I shall return to in the following chapters.

The ability or otherwise to mould the future is an issue that is firmly placed upon the shoulders of individuals, and comes with an extra burden when their dreams fail to be fulfilled. My participants appeared to "invest" a lot in their own aspirations. However, the large number of available choices in contemporary

society has also had a negative impact. An individualised success plan reinforces the normalised neoliberal politics of personal success, and others' failure, around which young people's identity construction takes place. This is illustrated by Jack's point:

> *Well I agree with Sam to a certain degree where I think there's a lot of opportunity for us now and it's almost to the point, we've got so many different options. It's overwhelming and I think that's the source of a lot of anxiety because you just don't know what the best choice is for the future.* (Jack, 24, UK, FGD)

Individual experiences of pressure are consistent and continuous; future success comes with an increased individualised responsibility which reduces the possibility of establishing "common biographies" (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). The reduction in social identification and social narrative reduces the potential of common (social) aspirations and hence reduces the possibility of a social biography. It seems that uncertainty was considered to be a natural situation for them and what they needed was to find mechanisms to adjust to this reality:

> *In many ways we've got a lot of more uncertainty but I think you've just got to try and embrace it really and make the best of it. Try not to make things worse for yourself and for people.* (Jack, 24, UK, FGD)

In responding to the issue of uncertainty in the current socio-economic context, young people internalise the necessity to embrace or at least live with precarity in spite of structural constraints that might be exercised upon them. It is interesting here that Jack's aspiration was not to progress; it was rather (at least) 'not to make things worse'. It appears that young people try to get some control back by "embracing uncertainty" but it is this process that *intensifies* the feeling of uncertainty. In this way, young people try to develop their own subjective

strategies in order to secure their prospects in the labour market. Although Prokopis acknowledged the impact of anxiety, he emphasised his excitement about the future because of the range of available choices it offered:

> *There is always anxiety and you can never be certain about the future but I feel somehow great enthusiasm because I feel that I can do so many things, there are so many things to do. And I know that if I try I'll make it and I'm not scared much.* (Prokopis, 17, Greece, FGD)

Young people have become increasingly responsible for their own future both short-term and long-term. This is reflected on how they can be blamed for their own choices:

> *The only thing is not to make the wrong choices, just to make the choice to study something that I would like and it will make my life easier. And that's where I'm having trouble when it comes to choices…* (Petros, 17, Greece, FGD)

Young people's experience of individualisation is perhaps best understood in the context of them having to take responsibility for their own supposedly wrong choices. However, the right choice is only known to be "right" with hindsight; that is, if it leads to the desired end. This sense of choice-making and responsibility was evident not just in younger populations who are high school students but also in young adults in their twenties. For instance, Alekos (21, Greece, FGD) said *'there is a future that apparently is uncertain… And I have to fix it'*. Young participants in this project seem to believe individualised adjustments were their way out of uncertainty and suggested that they have the power to make things work, a process which effectively serves only to reinforce the very system which compels them to believe so in the first place.

6.2.2 Independence from parents and housing aspirations

Young people face increasing problems related to the housing market both in England and Greece. More specifically, young people have limited housing opportunities and are more dependent on the pivotal role of family support, while they are likely to be identified as 'generation rent' in the UK (McKee 2012; Hoolachan *et al*., 2017). In both research settings but especially in Greece, more and more young people experienced challenges involved in meeting their own (and social) expectations, as well as the dependency on their parents' financial support. It was evident that what matters to some of the participants was for them to become completely independent from their parents.

Antigone (21, FGD) who lives, studies and works part-time in Athens, provided an indication of the above. Although Antigone is relatively privileged compared to her peers, living on her own at this age in a flat that her family owns, she depends on her family's financial support. This is a source of stress for Antigone, while she added that she often eats and does her laundry in her grandmother's flat nearby. Young people in the Greek context routinely depend on their family one way or another, even if they live on their own.

The data indicates that young people in England also face high levels of anxiety about the housing market. For example, Jack (24, FGD) who lives, studies and works in Manchester wondered whether he would be able to buy a house in the next ten years. Jack's personal desire to own a house in the future is aligned with research results that have shown that young people still aspire to buy their own houses in the long-term (McKee *et al.*, 2017). Another participant from the UK research setting, Natasha who works in social care and lives in a shared house,

was even more explicit; she directly related housing instability as an extra source of pressure:

> *I've moved around a lot and I've always felt I think not having somewhere to live it makes me feel terrible… I feel much more settled at the moment but I have pretty much no savings.* (Natasha, 28, UK, FGD)

Natasha articulates the emotional impact of the ongoing changes in the housing market and reflected the effects of 'frustrated aspirations' (McKee and Soaita, 2018) when the younger generation cannot afford homeownership. Such emphasis on financial security and housing instability reveals the background of precarity (Standing, 2011) against which young people have to negotiate their identities.

The decline in homeownership rates for the younger generation is evident in the report of Cribb *et al.* (2018) published by the Institute for Fiscal Studies. According to Cribb *et al. (*2018: online)*,* a homeowner can be considered to be a situation where 'either the individuals themselves or their cohabiting partner owns the home in which they live, while those living with owner-occupying parents are not counted as homeowners'. They suggest that homeownership rates are lower for those born in 1985-89 compared to those born 1960-64. Significant differences exist even between two subsequent five-year cohorts such as that of 1980-4 and the 1985-9. Perhaps this adds to the above discussions of my participants who were explicit about the difficulties in fulfilling their housing aspirations. In addition, Cribb *et al.* (2018) examine the proportion of a specific age group that were homeowners from 1996 to 2016. More specifically, for young people aged between twenty-five and twenty-nine years old the homeownership rate has decreased dramatically from forty-six percent (1996) to twenty-five percent

(2016). Clearly, such findings support my young respondents' contention about how difficult it is for young people to fulfil their housing aspirations in the near future. Young people's inability to fulfil their aspirations thus contributes to a feeling of uncertainty.

6.3 The experience of uncertainty

Young people face high levels of uncertainty that diffuse into all aspects of their everyday lives. Indeed, it is the recognition of those precarious conditions that infuse further complexity to youth experiences. This section presents the overarching theme of uncertainty that was evident during this research project. More specifically, I discuss the extent to young people can be considered to be *citizens in uncertainty.* Any such conceptualisation derives from the effects of the socio-economic crisis in Greece, high unemployment rates, Brexit, and a lack of hope for the future.

6.3.1 Macro-level characteristics of uncertainty

6.3.1.1 Economy and uncertainty

I begin by describing the dissimilarities in the Greek and the UK economies and the experience of youth, before pulling together common themes.

6.3.1.1.1 Greek economy

The irregularity of the job market reproduces financial insecurity and confines youth in a zone of precarity (Cairns, 2011; Standing, 2014), namely a position somewhere between a stable job and being unemployed (Furlong, 2007). Many participants in this study discussed how the ongoing socio-economic situation precipitated strong emotional reactions and expressions. It is interesting to note

that most of the responses were negatively charged. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

> *How would you characterise the economic, social and political situation in Greece with one word and then more analytically?* (Interviewer)
>
> *Difficult.* (Grigoris, 28)
>
> *Disappointment.* (Sara, 28)
>
> *I think I like [the word] disappointment.* (Eirini, 27)
>
> *Chaos.* (Millie, 28)

Most of the participants expressed clearly that they did not expect that things would improve in the near future. They emphasised that such emotions derive from various parts of social life such as organisational matters, meritocracy, financial conditions, the welfare state and offered benefits:

> *[T]he way of living, wage reductions, if we can make the month, to be able to make my livelihood, only that makes me feel anxious, nothing else.* (Manolis, 26, Greece, FGD)

Manolis worried a lot about his financial survival, as expressed in the above quote. This was unsurprisingly very common across this study. The impact of the crisis and the continuous deterioration of employment conditions in Greece was reflected in my Greek respondents' personal stories. Some of the participants described how their salaries had decreased or stagnated. For those participants who were in employment at the time of the interviews, it was of absolute importance to seek another (better) occupation. For instance, Sara (28, FGD), who worked in the private sector, wanted to find a better job. She compared her life situation with the "good old times", when people used to work less hours and get more money. This "nostalgia for the past" kept reappearing in the

conversations with my participants. It was evident that many young people considered older generations to have had more opportunities to find a better job with a good salary. The precarious youth labour market acted as a trigger for comparisons between the conditions that shaped their parents' trajectories and their own "disadvantaged" productive years.

Due to high unemployment rates, my young participants had to deal with limited opportunities. In this context, young people's expectations for "better" jobs and improved everyday life conditions were expressed as an individualised target. For some, what is "better" signified a positive change in their working environment, while for others, it was linked directly to their actual wage. All the above remarks vividly emphasise the fact, as Mills (2004) notes, that the individualisation of risk comes hand in hand with risk associated with forms of non-standard employment. For instance, Chara (25, PEI) described how she woke up in the morning without knowing what was going to happen in her job. In this sense, my participants' comments convey the centrality of precarity in their lives.

Value crisis in an era of socio-economic transformations

My young Greek participants not only experienced a socio-economic crisis, but also a crisis of values. During the focus groups and interviews, references to Greek financial problems were linked to the 'lack of credibility of the political system' and 'young people's own faults as citizens'. My respondents' views shed light on young people's perceptions about critical issues such as civic engagement and blame for the crisis. The reasons identified by young Greeks to explain how the country reached this position are various and sometimes contradictory. However, their responses were similar to mainstream media

narratives provided as explanations of the crisis, and therefore may be derived from the media rather than individual consideration.

In this case, on a critical level, I detect that young Greek people perceive the economic and social downturn as either their fault or that of politicians, or sometimes both. For those blaming themselves, the feeling is that all people are somehow responsible for the situation and thus for the whole structure of society. Young people acknowledged how they tolerated what was happening around them and how this was a reason to take the blame. This sense of accepting everything passively, without doing anything, was presented through a perennial feeling of guiltiness. For example:

> *Everybody blames Greece that it hasn't got enough in order we can become something, study and live. I believe that we've got but we don't take advantage of them.* (Charis, 16, Greece, FGD)

Some participants suggested that the public sector increased enormously without a plan and a continuous wastefulness of public spending in the pre-crisis years. For others, the case was that during the crisis the private sector has been negatively affected and fully deregulated:

> *… In essence the private sector has been dissolved, everyone does whatever he/she wants, what we said about the organisation and what the rest claimed, it is a disappointment, a chaos, there is too much unemployment… In general, many people took advantage of the situation regarding wages and workers' rights.* (Grigoris, 28, Greece, FGD)

Most participants felt that there was no hope and that the situation was getting worse year by year. For some of them, such feelings signified an acceptance of the situation:

> *Unfortunately, we accept it, this is the worst thing, that at this point we expect the worst, we no longer expect something better... In a sense we made this, we voted for the politicians, we accept to work more hours, we haven't done anything… I just believe that we have become a puppet, we just wait for the next change and we're doing nothing, it will just happen… I know that whoever politician is going to be elected, what is going to change?* (Sara, 28, Greece, FGD)

Young people expressed mixed feelings of resignation and guilt. Such discussions suggest that Greek youth have lost their faith in the political system and that things could not possibly change. During the interviews and focus groups, it was evident that there were contradicting views expressed about the role of citizens and politicians' responsibilities. For instance, young people discussed whether citizens constitute the political system, and the role of civic engagement. Manolis (26, FGD) said that it is all about decision-making and that *'there is a need for a real democracy'*, implying in that way that the current democratic system is not completely "real". In addition, during the same discussion, Grigoris (28, FGD) added that there is no *'essential freedom'*, in that way he expressed his disappointment about the limited options available to him. In order to reinforce this claim, he described the freedom of shopping for expensive clothes, buying new iPhones, smart TVs and how this confines people to an illusory freedom. This is a particularly interesting point. It reveals how young people are not simply "consumer dupes". On the one hand, it is recognised that there is a lack of freedom in their lives, while, on the other hand, this gap is replaced by a different kind of freedom. It is an illusory freedom offered through consumption.

6.3.1.1.2 UK economy and Brexit

Unemployment and working conditions are not the only significant factors shaping young people's experiences of uncertainty; political changes can also have a profound impact. In this study, young people in England considered that they should have better knowledge of current affairs in order to comment on politico-economic issues. One of the common answers was 'I don't know anything' about the situation in the UK. This fieldwork started after the referendum in June 2016. Findings of the research reveal a relation between Brexit and uncertainty. In particular, Brexit appears to be a source of uncertainty. However, young people tend to avoid discussing the question of socio-economic insecurity in any depth:

> *I know bits. I obviously know about things like Brexit and what it is, but I don't want to know exactly what it is. I'll just read stuff about it. I don't want to know in depth.* (Rose, 16, UK, FGD)

> *They should fund more of the NHS and then I don't really know about Brexit enough, but… I don't really know about politics much.* (Bethany, 17, UK, FGD)

It was evident that young people in England are aware of current debates. However, there are two significant findings here. First, many of my participants barely knew about politics and specifics of Brexit, and second, some of them simply did not want to know. Many of them indeed, felt disengaged with the frivolous nature of most political debate:

> *Well, Theresa May [the Prime Minister of the time], more people make fun of her dancing on the internet rather than what she actually does as a politician. So, people, they'll make fun of politicians rather than actually listen to them and what they have to say. I don't think people like to pay attention to serious issues a lot of the time.* (Melissa, 16, UK, FGD)

For my young participants in England politics appears to be a trivial subject. For some of them, the idea of leaving the European Union did not seem to be a source of anxiety. For instance:

> *I don't really care if we leave or stay in the European Union. I haven't felt the effects of anything yet, like my life hasn't got worse because we've left the Union. Everything's just stayed exactly as it was before we decided to leave, so leave.* (Michael, 16, UK, FGD)

It is important here to acknowledge that the UK had yet to leave the EU, and the outcome of the decision about staying or leaving the EU seemed to be even less certain at that time. Ironically, Michael did not seem to know that the UK had not yet left at that time. The fragmented views about Brexit among my participants were evident. Another participant illustrated:

> *Standing on the edge of the cliff, you shouldn't jump off. You're gone, aren't you. And then money-wise, I think we're doing all right.* (Taylor, 16, UK, FGD)

Although young participants reflected on the high levels of uncertainty in their lives, at the same time, some of them highlighted that their living conditions are still quite good. However, there is no guarantee that they will continue to be. Good living conditions are not consistent for young people across Greece and the UK. It is worth noting that most of my participants would not be considered as excluded or living under conditions of extreme poverty. Undoubtedly, the discussion about uncertainty related to the socio-economic environment indicates that while young people are not entirely impassive to political changes, they also keep their distance from them. The way that they experience the political situation in the UK reveals the fluidity of the political environment and how rapidly things may change.

> *Well, it just seems like no one really knows what they're doing in terms of Brexit and things. Everyone keeps changing their ideas of what's going to happen when it's going to happen. It just doesn't seem like Theresa May is in control of the country.* (Rose, 16, UK, FGD)

Young people may feel despair instead of pure apathy. For some, the apparent indecision around UK politics adds to a gloomy present, with other issues feeding into what is generally a sense of resignation.

> *Yeah, crazy and a mess, because not only is it our country, but our country is kind of linked with USA and I don't know where they're heading at this point. So especially with our Prime Minister now, it's uncertain. Are they going to stay, which I think they should stay. It's worked for ages. Just remain.* (Taylor, 16, UK, FGD)

Problems such as lack of funding in schools, the health system and immigration are crucial in young people's understanding of the current political developments.

> *They won't make their mind up about Brexit. They're basically sitting on the middle of the fence. And then there's not enough money going to like schools and the NHS. And then there's everything going on with immigration.* (Mary, 16, UK, FGD)

Of course, there is a need to highlight here that the above implies that the way young people consume mainstream media is somehow superficial. It seems that they reach conclusions without taking into consideration a number of factors that might influence the media's agenda. Some of my young participants put the blame on the inter-generational differences and older generations' choices. For example:

> *[F]eel very anxious about Brexit as well. Well the effects it's going to have like I don't know I kind of feel very disenfranchised in a way kind of way. I felt kind of shocking that happened and I don't know it creates more uncertainty. And I don't know how we'll have Brexit and no deal. And*

basically, our generation is kind of screwed over by older generations. (Adam, 23, UK, FGD)

I think I will use the word uncertain again. I mean I agree with some things have been said here in some way I do it better than other generations when comes to equality and civil rights than in other ways. We kind of have it a lot worse in terms of things like buying a house feel a lot more unattainable right now than it would have done for past generations… And obviously there's a lot of uncertainty with the current political climate and Brexit. (Adam, 23, UK, FGD)

Such intergenerational tensions support views to reconsider youth experiences through the theoretical tool of social generation (Woodman and Bennett, 2015). The conceptual lens of generation is useful here as it signifies critical moments and experiences that distinguish some age cohorts from others, while at the same time, binding others together based on similar temporal, cultural, and structural experiences (Mannheim, 1952).

What is particularly interesting is that young people who had the option to leave were open to reconsider whether they wanted to stay in the UK after a bad deal for Brexit. In this way, mobility is presented as an individualised answer to problems that might occur after Brexit.

I'm not too sure. I would say it's a bit of a mess. Yeah, I get to Italy is very different. But I really like it here and I think Brexit will make a big difference in the deal they would have. I don't want to leave but if it's not a good deal if it is not a good deal for me to stay here then I have no reasons to be here if I feel like I'm not wanted. I come from my family who are immigrants in Italy. I feel like I have gone through being a stranger in a country and then I don't want to feel this stranger somewhere else. I like the idea of being you know one. So this was one of the main reasons why I moved to England in the first place. So it was very disappointing two years ago with everything that happened. (Sophie, 25, UK, FGD)

On the other hand, for some others, who may not have the option to leave the UK and they would like to have the possibility to work abroad, the threat of Brexit intensified the feeling of anxiety:

> *I would say for me I feel trapped in the UK [laughter]. Yeah, I definitely feel at least as European as I feel British and I feel like my prospect of working elsewhere is shrinking quite rapidly and that's an anxiety definitely.* (Charles, 27, UK, FGD)

The opportunity of envisioning a future outside the UK is linked with feelings of disappointment for young people who feel their options are shrinking and becoming disconnected from the rest of Europe.

6.3.1.2 Youth (un)employment and uncertainty

The fear of unemployment and job market conditions were significant topics of discussion for my participants in both my research settings. Young people's capacity to participate in social life through paid labour is significant for identity formation (Best, 2011). Furthermore, young people's experiences of non-linear transitions into the labour market support the view that the younger generation is aware of the constraints and manifestations of an institutionalised individualisation process (Cuzzocrea and Collins, 2015). The destabilisation of the labour market and high unemployment rates led to prolonged transitions (Côté and Bynner, 2008) and increased dependency on parents. Most of my participants had already gained or studied towards higher educational qualifications. However, the collapse of the labour market's structure had resulted in the devaluation of their qualifications.

The lack of possibilities for securing a job has had a profound effect on the ways in which young people imagine their futures. I argue that it is not only vulnerable

young people who face challenges that position institutionalised uncertainty at the core of their experiences. Most (or all) young people are to an extent vulnerable. More specifically, the labour market's structural changes and the fluid political environment represent a significant challenge across youth populations:

> *For undergraduate students occupational attainment is the most important thing that concerns us, which up to now and I can see it will continue to be a distant dream.* (Gianna, 18, Greece, FGD)

The future of young people is constrained due to their limited access to paid work. The university-work nexus is not only significant to those who are older and university graduates. It is also a continuous concern for those who are in college:

> *I'm not exactly sure what job I'm going to go into when I'm older, so I worry about if I'm going to be able to sustain my life when I get older.* (Michael, 16, UK, FGD)

It is evident that there is a pressure on young people to make the "right" choices in order to maximise their possibilities for a successful career.

> *I think the only thing that probably stresses me out is the uncertainty of jobs in the future. That's probably why I picked the course I did because it's more specialised, but I can also go into quite a varied array of jobs. That's probably the only thing that stresses me out.* (Edward, 19, UK)

My participants stressed the idea that they felt pressured by only one thing. By stating that they have only one concern camouflages the extent to which they are exposed to a generalised uncertainty. Young people are charged with the responsibility of making the right choices and for managing their results: life effectively becomes a 'reflexive project' (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992) insofar as the individual is supposedly placed at the centre of his or her own "internal" discussion, yet remains simultaneously disempowered. For young people in

higher education, increasing competition for a job functions as an extra source of anxiety, by which it is inferred that the opportunities for jobs are narrowing:

> *So many are going to uni now that the competition for jobs, like the job pool is getting smaller essentially, I suppose because more jobs are going abroad and actually getting a decent well-paid job [is] just getting a lot more difficult.* (Eleanor, 19, UK, FGD)

My participants noticed that there is a risk of being either fired or made unemployed in case of a firm's bankruptcy. It was clear that my young participants lived under the constant threat of losing their job. Such levels of insecurity affected the way they managed their expenses:

> *From a personal point of view, I spend money on the slightest thing, while now I put myself in the process to think not to spend such amount of money because I don't know whether the company is going to pay me, whether I'm going to be in this work, and you're getting into this when you see that the situation is going from bad to worse.* (Sara, 28, Greece, FGD)

Young people were less confident about how they can meet their consumption demands (in terms of expenses) and support themselves. This situation entails risk for those who may lose a sense of work identity. The increasing number of young people who cannot find full-time, permanent, or fulfilling positions has a profound effect on the ongoing devaluation of a working identity. Especially for technical schools' graduates like Leonidas (22, Greece, FGD) who stopped searching for a full time in his field, a permanent post is not easy to accomplish.

Young people may try to find alternative routes where short-term employment and part-time jobs are the norm. Most of the young people I interviewed were indeed largely aware of the precarious conditions of their employment status in advance, but it was the only route available to them – they had no other choice.

Non-permanent contracts were common types of employment among my youth sample. Financial security was linked to limited employment opportunities for my young participants in North West England, as the following extract illustrates:

> *I think I feel a level of insecurity in my life. Partly things that are kind of universal. So, you know, I don't know what the job market is going to look like in ten, fifteen years. So, I guess that applies to everyone. But things more specific to me I'm thinking you know how employable am I going to be. So, financial security is something I worry about sometimes.* (Sam, 26, UK, FGD)

While financial stability is one thing, another source of stress can be young people's concerns to find a stable job even though they have got an insecure one already. Stabilised labour market conditions are a precondition for young people to feel secure and confident to move on with their lives.

> *I'm getting anxious whether I'm going to find a more normal job than as a saleswoman in order to be able to make a family, something more certain. I can be laid off, the store may close, and I want find a job in my field. That is my only concern.* (Anastasia, 23, Greece, FGD)

The fact that educated young people have become redundant as a work force has a dramatic impact on social life. This is clearly evident in the next quote. As Lakis, a seventeen-year-old student, said:

> *It might be the only thing that I feel… [laughter]. I really feel uncertain for everything. From where I begin… Let's take it from my studies' perspective. I'm really uncertain because I don't know what my professional evolution will be. My future is uncertain and I think that worries everyone, independently of their income or anything else... This is something that worries me, because even the fact that the years have gone by and as we move from the peak moment of the crisis, I can't see any real improvement…* (Lakis, 17, Greece)

Employment clearly still has a significant role in young people's identities, irrespective of age.

6.3.2 Micro-level characteristics of uncertainty

6.3.2.1 Young people's studies and uncertainty

Young people's experience of uncertainty is not only constrained in the work environment and the economy, but it also permeates through other aspects of my participants' lives. For instance, some expressed how uncertainty is linked to their studies:

> *[I]t's very stressful to know that you're going to write some exams that are not just some simple exams. They define your whole future and not only this, that is you can go into a university which you may think that you'd like and finally you don't like it at all. So, just everything is destroyed and this is not little anxiety...* (Christina, 16, Greece, FGD)

The level of stress is enhanced for young people at the age of sixteen and seventeen when they are in many cases "obliged" to take crucial decisions for their life-course.

> *I've got clearly very much stress for the future and I'm thinking very much about what I'm going to do, where I'm going to study, what to study. If this country can absorb me, leave abroad, I don't really know, too much stress.* (Mara, 17, Greece, FGD)

Young people's experiences are crafted by a continuous pressure on them to make the right choices even at this early stage in their lives.

6.3.2.2 Family and uncertainty

In the context of the financial crisis, many young people would be exposed to the worst consequences of the crisis without family support. In such difficult times, family provides a safety net. On the one hand, young people who work and can

secure their income are to an extent independent from their parents, while, on the other hand, their attempts to sustain themselves on their own can lead to deadlock. However, in some other cases, young people have to not only face personal risks when it comes to their own life experiences, but simultaneously to provide for their parents. As Natasha (28, UK, FGD) said: *'My parents leave me debt and yeah money worries me a lot and I don't earn a lot of money'*. This was not made evident from all my participants but such a description demonstrates the multiplicity of the uncertainty that young people face. Nick brought to the discussion his own experience when it comes to family relationships:

> *Being the only person from my family who is here, everybody is abroad. That level of lack of support makes you feel a little uneasy and worried if things do go wrong you get sick tomorrow or something happens with you.* (Nick, 26, UK, FGD)

Based on the above, it was evident that young people's experiences of uncertainty cannot be regarded as an outcome of only one or two factors. There are both macro-level and micro-level characteristics that play a key role in the ways young people have to negotiate their identities in the context of a chaotic society.

6.3.3 Uncertainty as a normalised condition

Given that data were gathered in two different countries, there was a difference in how young people consider the issue of uncertainty. My participants in North West England seemed to face lower levels of insecurity compared to my Greek interviewees. Young people in Greece have experienced and still face the

devastating effects of the Global Financial Crisis. As the following extract illustrates, uncertainty is identified as having been normalised:

> *I'm going to say one word that is ambiguous and it's so funny to say in situations like this…fluidity… There's just nothing stable anymore…* (Alekos, 21, Greece)
>
> *Stable.* (Gianna, 18, Greece)
>
> *Something entrenched, something that you can grab and rely on it and continue.* (Alekos)

Here the discussion is less about the flexibilisation of youth transitions (Kovacheva, 2001) and more about the normalisation of the liquid life (Bauman, 2005). Young people are obliged to be the navigators of their own lives at times when stability is simply not achievable. They need to create their own conditions in order to experience some semblance of stability. Uncertainty can also be traced among young people in the UK even if it was in lower levels compared to Greece:

> *For me I feel that there's an instability and insecurity because we don't know what's happening and it's like being in that grey area. I think that again has personal implications...* (Nick, 26, UK, FGD)

Clearly the recognition of uncertainty as a generalised condition in which young people have to live needs to be highlighted. In this research project, there were a small minority of my participants in the UK who argued that their lives can be considered relatively more stable than others. For instance, John (19, UK, FGD) declared, *'I don't feel any particular insecurity'*. This is an interesting finding. Of course, my participants could be identified mostly as "ordinary youth" and in this way there are others who experience higher levels of uncertainty. Most of young people's choices and responses in this research indicate an individualised

approach in the way that they negotiate their biographies. However, it could be suggested that some of my participants, perhaps in a more subconscious way, avoid linking their personal lives with uncertainty. The irony is that in the contemporary neoliberal society these two are coming together; if you want to proceed with the former, you need to be able to accept the latter. For instance:

> *I guess just like uncertainties aren't really to do with me, but it's to do with some of the political and environmental. These are the kind of things that will make me feel uncertain about something just because that's generally what governs economic certainty, consumer confidence.* (Peter, 22, UK, FGD)

During my discussions with young people, although it was evident that the individualisation of uncertainty was a fundamental element of how most of my participants experienced the feeling of insecurity, for some of them, the socio-economic and political landscape was received as a somehow more distant factor that impacts their sense of instability. Thus, young individuals participate in a pretence: by distancing themselves from social sources of uncertainty, they try to maintain some sense of stability. However, by focusing only on the individual aspects of the normalised condition of uncertainty, it may affect their sense of belonging. In their attempt to gain some sense of belonging they have to "pay the price" to belong in an uncertain world. Their only alternative is to try to find ways to escape.

6.4 Emigration as a form of hope to escape

Having discussed youth identities in the context of a generalised uncertainty, in this section I am interested in emigration as a theme that emerged during my conversations with young people in Greece. The vast majority of my UK participants meanwhile did not seem to be at all interested in emigrating. Thus,

in the following section I will discuss solely the findings collected during the fieldwork in Greece and how they might shed light on emigration aspirations of Greek youth in the context of the crisis. More specifically, I will focus on data collected during the first two stages of my research (i.e. focus group discussions and photo-elicitation interviews). My intention is thus to consider the role of young people's emigration to another country as a form of hope that they might escape from the intensified experience of risk in the "real" world.

Emigration has been a significant social phenomenon in Greece even before the crisis. The country is characterised by a historical tradition of emigration waves. The first one was in the beginning of the twentieth century towards America and Australia, and the second after the end World War Two to elsewhere in Europe. Today, it is suggested that this emigration wave is the third largest in its modern history (Labrianidis and Pratsinakis, 2016). The crisis appears to have played a crucial role in young people's decision to go abroad even if they only partially acknowledge it. Emigration is driven to a great extent by uncertainty and limited employment opportunities. Of course, the connection between financial conditions and migration is not something new (Hadler, 2006). For instance, young people's anxiety about their routes to education and/or employment can be considered as "pushing" factors that force young people to consider the possibility to relocate abroad:

> *[T]here is uncertainty for what I'm going to do if I can go abroad, where to study and I don't know where to find a job.* (Charis, 16, Greece, FGD)

On the personal level, any decision to move to another country, especially for permanent residence, is not an easy task. When opportunities are shrinking in one country, then it is not unusual for young people to seek to fulfil their

aspirations elsewhere (Cairns, 2014; Van Mol, 2016). The Greek young people in this study expressed their desire to move abroad for study:

> *I have thought about going for studies mainly, now which country I don't know yet. Staying permanently, I don't know, I think that the weather and people are different abroad. I don't think I could stand.* (Dimos, 21, Greece, FGD)

> *It's too soon to start being worried about my professional future but clearly, I'm worried about the situation in Greece but at the moment I worry whether I would be able to do a Masters or anything wherever abroad, that's what I would like mostly. Because my occupational reinstatement seems further away than some extra training; that is worrying me now.* (Iole, 19, Greece, FGD)

Moving on to the consideration of emigration that ran through my focus group discussions, it was clear that employment opportunities played a role in my participants' willingness to go abroad either for further studies or work. Young people's experiences in the risk society have intensified their feeling of insecurity about the future. For instance, Christos said:

> *… My basic anxiety is neither finishing my degree nor doing a Masters but mainly the future. That is, I've got a degree and a Masters… And then what? Who is going to hire me? Here? Do I want to live abroad? For sure I want to go abroad, but can I find something? Could I make it? Is it possible to live alone far away without any support?* (Christos, 21, Greece, FGD)

What was really interesting was the fact that young people's answers were quite similar in different interviews and focus groups across the two stages of the research. My respondents were explicit about how significant it was for them to move abroad and escape from the context of the Greek crisis. The intensity of

the crisis and uncertainty is reflected in the intensity of finding an escape from its consequences:

Have you ever thought to go abroad? (Interviewer)

Yes (Vicky, 21, Greece)

Yes (Iole, 19, Greece)

Permanently (Antigone, 21, Greece)

Permanently (Christos, 21, Greece)

Permanently (Giannis, 21, Greece)

For me, there is no Greece. (Christos)

Yes, that's right. (Vicky)

And for me as well. (Iole)

This clearly depicts young Greeks' disenchantment and frustration with the socio-economic hardships in their home country and reflects their aspirations to escape. Young people who experience high levels of discontent made the decision to go abroad (van Dalen and Henkens, 2012). This is echoed by young people's answers and comments reflecting the so-called "brain drain" phenomenon in Greece that has gained significant attention both in academia and the media (Koniordos, 2017; Sakellariou and Theodoridis, 2020). By "brain drain" I mean the escape of young, highly qualified Higher Education graduates abroad. During conversations with my young respondents, the notion of international mobility, at least for academic study, and a desire to stay for longer periods in the host country, was a common theme. It should be noted that this is not an exception in Greek society. The vast majority of my Greek participants were interested in exploring opportunities abroad, even if that meant that they would stay for a longer period of time:

> *I don't think there is someone who hasn't thought about it, hasn't considered and not just as a fleeting idea, I believe that many consider it as a very serious possibility for their future. I don't hide that I've thought about it very seriously even now as a first-year undergrad, I consider that we need from now to start thinking what we're going to do in our lives. I believe that it's a really serious possibility for postgraduate studies, for a degree as my colleague said but even for a more permanent residence.* (Stamatis, 18, Greece, FGD)

It was evident that most of my young participants imagined their future away from their country of origin. This produces a number of questions about the factors that led them to take such a decision. They mentioned a number of different reasons that influenced their thinking. Throughout the focus groups and photo-elicitation interviews it was evident that macro-level characteristics, such as working conditions, had a significant effect on young people's decisions:

> *[A]broad they trust you as an employee. I know from people who used to work in Greece, they are in very good positions and they've got [job] offers in research and they've been given good money for research… Here in Greece, I believe that employees do not get paid for their job, the environment doesn't help them and in general there is an underestimation of the worker.* (Iole, 19, Greece, FGD)

In this context, Vicky went further by describing the current conditions. It is the notion of recognition in the work place that we need to pay close attention when it comes to young people's inclination to emigrate.

> *… So, I wouldn't argue that abroad you work less hours, but you're getting paid a lot better. This is my opinion. And you feel clearly that you're recognised more, your talents, skills and whatever you give.* (Vicky, 21, Greece, FGD)

On the one hand she emphasised the moral aspect of rewards and on the other the material expression of getting paid better. However, there is a myth constructed in this regard: that is, things will be better outside of Greece. The push factors for trying to find new opportunities abroad are not only related with the current economic conditions but with conditions in higher education. As Mara stated:

> *I want to go and live abroad. Hence, the first reason is that living abroad is something that I don't know and makes me feel excited; to live abroad with people who don't know me and I don't know them. Second, they have clearly better infrastructure abroad, more meritocracy, they are more formal, their life runs smoothly because here you are under continuous pressure and anxiety.* (Mara, 17, Greece, FGD)

Life abroad is seen and considered as an ideal life. Young people are enthusiastic about the prospect of experiencing "the unknown". The opportunity for adventure is a value by which emigration is assessed and, in many cases, experiencing a new world is thus uppermost in my respondents' minds. Such prospects to escape abroad provide young people with a sense of hope about the new conditions under which they can plan their future.

It could be argued that not only macro-economic factors, but also micro-level characteristics and personal experiences, play a key role in young people's decisions to seek an escape far from Greece. Christos, for example, said:

> *Whatever you choose to do abroad, there is a new pathway. Something new will happen. I believe it firmly that in Greece there is no such thing. My sister used to work in Greece. She graduated as chemical engineer with eight out of ten and she needed one and a half years to find a job. She finally got it and it was a good job. She worked six years "like a dog", fifteen hours per day, she left at eight in the morning and came back at*

> *eleven in the evening and then during the weekends I couldn't see her because she was sleeping all day. She was so tired and after six years, she got the chance and went to Paris to work. She's doing great and she told me that she hasn't been more relaxed in her life… She has never felt better before.* (Christos, 21, Greece, FGD)

In particular, his sister's negative experience of the labour market in Greece and her previous positive experiences in Paris have had a profound impact on his views about emigration. Christos' admission that Greece is not a place that provides life opportunities suggests that it is more than merely finding a job that affects his motivation to emigrate. Going abroad either for studies or work is valued highly by young people and their families. It was evident how such decisions are influenced by my respondents' parents:

> *[I]n the beginning of the year I was thinking about going to England but I didn't do it, but I want to go for sure… Basically my father wanted to send me very much but my mother is more reluctant, but certainly I want to go as soon as I get the chance.* (Charis, 16, Greece, FGD)

Prospects for further education appears to have a pivotal role in family's decision to support young people to move abroad. The findings demonstrate that young interviewees have clearly expressed emigration as part of an individualised biographical route:

> *I would like to go somewhere else and meet other people, see other places and of course the country's economic situation is a bonus but I just wanted to change my life.* (Lakis, 17, Greece, FGD)

It is clear that for some of my participants, life is considered as a project (Giddens, 1991). In this way, young people perceive their life as manageable; something that they can self-control. As far as mobility and emigration are concerned, they can be considered as life changes that imply biographic openness. Some of my

respondents expressed their views that success is based on values, such as hardworking and willingness to change. It is important to highlight how the perception that life can be managed signifies that willingness is sufficient enough for someone to succeed abroad:

> *As I can see how some things function abroad… The disappointment stems from the fact that there is no willingness for change [in Greece]. This doesn't exist abroad. I believe that a person, someone with a thirst for work and in general someone who has the willingness for a particular field will be able to make good use of it.* (Vasilis, 18, Greece, FGD)

In this way, young people become responsible for their own success and failure. As it was evident during my discussions with young participants, for some of them, any failure in youth transitions abroad was a personal issue:

> *… [T]here are many young people who move abroad either for work or studies and they come back after a year and they say I'm not well, I didn't succeed anything, while essentially you realise that he/she hasn't put any effort.* (Gianna, 18, Greece, FGD)

Thus, failure is considered as proof of a lack of hard work. It could be argued that such beliefs are based on the notion of success only as an individualised path.

6.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have focused on understanding the nature of young people's identities at the intersection of uncertainty and their experiences in order to gain a sense of what it means for them to negotiate their identities under precarious conditions. My aim in doing so has been to shed light on the multiple pressures that my participants experience in their homes, working environments, during their studies, and, in particular, to uncover the key factors of those forms of stress which actively make them worried about their future. My participants plan their

personal goals in different contexts in which “risky” trajectories are gradually increasing. Behind the clear explanations of a socio-political crisis was the participants’ lived experiences of economic change; indeed, some of their narratives express the individualised aspect of choice that largely is determined by the influence of new technologies, social media and the option of emigrating abroad (in the case of Greek participants). In this sense, young people are forced to negotiate their biographies through increased individualisation as a result of the illusion of choice.

For some young people, uncertainty is linked to the deterioration of their chances of actually finding a good job. Often this involved discussions and debates around working conditions in the context of the economic and social crisis in Greece. During the discussions of uncertainty in the UK, young people were often unable to characterise their lives as stable. While the intensity of uncertainty and precarious conditions is one of the things that seems to differentiate the research context in Greece and the UK, instability is not completely absent in the UK context. However, precarity was a lot more pronounced in conversations with my Greek participants. When I started this project, I was concerned that because of the level of the economic crisis, especially in Greece, the discussions would be dominated only by the idea of uncertainty and that young people would effectively be resigned to a sense of hopelessness. However, when I analysed the discussions that took place with my participants, they actually seemed to maintain aspirations for the future and the willingness to plan for their future. Within this research many young people tried to plan their future based on individualised aspirations, both in the UK and Greece.

In light of the extent to which media narratives continue to craft the agendas of those who created the crisis, there may be a basis to try and clarify the power dynamics behind media power concentration. Young people's individualised aspirations, linked with the social media celebrity culture, leads me to consider the proposition that the "exodus" observed is not only via the physical process of emigration but also through the digital world of impressions. In the next chapters I will start investigating whether or not consumption and specifically digital forms of consumption provide an alternative means of escapism in this uncertain world.

Chapter 7

Young People and Consumption: Data and Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter explores young people's understanding of consumption and discusses whether consumption is a powerful motivation in their lives. In this section, I am interested in the transformation of the experience of consumption in the light of the recent economic crisis and the emergence of digital media. In this way, I discuss the indirect effects of the financial crisis and uncertainty in the perception of young people's consumption. I consider the hypothesis that young people regard expenses for experience-related consumption as more justifiable than other forms of consumption amid precarity and the increasing use of social networking sites.

In what follows, I describe the relative effect of economic uncertainty on young people's consumer choices. In particular, I emphasise the need to recognise the ways in which young people adjust and are self-reflective when overt consumption, a primary vehicle for their identity construction, has been negatively affected by the socio-economic hardships of prolonged austerity and new digital media. I consider the impact of uncertainty and crises upon young people's ideas about consumption in both Greece and the UK. Adverse economic conditions have resulted in the increasing dependence of young people on their parents for economic support, even in relatively older ages. Over the past decade, economic growth has faltered, yet consumption aspirations have not. The resulting increase in public and private debt has become a point of critique in public and private discourse in relation to specific consumer choices. Indeed, it is unreasonable

expenditure in times of tight economy that constitute debt as a cultural norm. This raises questions about how young people perceive consumerism under precarious economic and social circumstances. In the following section, I will establish the key role of consumption in young people's everyday lives. Before focusing on critiques of consumption, I shed light on the role of the family in teenagers' consumption. I will discuss how young people try to identify themselves as "average" consumers in order to justify their role as consumer-citizens and I will conclude with the role of consumption as a means of escape from the constraints of the everyday.

7.2 The significance of consumption in young people's lives

The initial aim of this project was to address the relationship between social media consumption and youth identity construction. However, the data that emerged during my focus group discussions and photo-elicitation interviews with young people provided significant insights into the role of consumption in young people's everyday lives and it is that material that I will discuss here. The data presented here will provide a starting point why consumption is so significant in understanding how young people negotiate their identities. Although some of the participants were critical towards shopping, the majority acknowledged its importance:

> *For me to buy clothing is something very important. Even I don't like saying this, as far as girls are concerned, [shopping] is a psychotherapy, because you will go there, you will buy, you will tell your news, your friend will say 'this looks good at you or not' or a compliment. And these are all nice stuff.* (Aspa, 17, Greece, FGD)

There are two main points that are significant for this analysis in the above quote. First, for my young participants, consumption is not significant *per se*. Instead, its

role lies in its social and symbolic characteristics. It provides one of the primary means by which young people communicate and connect with their peers. Second, according to Aspa, consumption is even more important for young women. In this way, the issue of gender appears to be significant in how young people perceive the role of consumption in their lives. Such gendered approaches to consumption were expressed from young women who were high school students but also older participants who studied at university.

> *I put a lot of emphasis on clothing, and it may sound somehow peculiar because I'm a girl, so I think that all women as far as consumption and clothing are concerned are more inordinate consumers.* (Gianna, 18, Greece, FGD)

The difficulty that young people have in resisting forms of consumption was clear. For instance, Natasha described how difficult it was for her to resist and handle her impulse to consume when she went to the high street:

> *I want to consume and I'm all the way down the high street and feel like I can spend all my money and so it's a bottomless pit.* (Natasha, 28, UK, PEI)

It could be argued that it is difficult for young people to distance themselves from shopping. What was particularly interesting during this research was observing how young people linked consumption with the notion of competition. The *feeling* of competition among peers constituted a common element in both research settings. My young participants explained how clothing and new technological products may function as a means of competition among peers. For instance:

> *Everyone's trying to get all the new fancy clothes and trying to be the best at everything, so they keep going out and buying because there's always something new coming out to buy.* (Lana, 17, UK, FGD)

In effect, what is being purchased here is not products and services like clothing and technological devices. Instead, it is the *experience of competing* successfully over clothing and access to technology. For example, as Michael argued:

> *I think our generation spends more money than any generation before us because it's important to spend more money on clothes now. From what my dad told me when he was young it didn't really matter. But now it's more like a competition. You have some standard that you have to meet, if you want to look better.* (Michael, 16, UK, FGD)

This feeling of competition seems to be especially pronounced around mobile phones and technological products. It might be argued that young people are somehow obliged to participate in this competition.

> *I've got an iPhone 5, which must be four years old at this point. And when I see someone who's got an iPhone X or something, I want that. And I try to save up money so I can get one as well.* (Michael, 16, UK)
>
> *Okay. So, what is the difference [from the last one]?* (Interviewer)
>
> *It's a social statement that you can have a better phone, and you can afford the new one.* (Michael, 16, UK)
>
> *I have the Samsung Galaxy S9 Plus, which is one of the latest ones that they have. But then the Samsung Galaxy S9 Note came out a few months ago, and even though this phone's less than a year old, it makes us all want that one. I've had this phone for less than three months, and I still want the new one already. But it's over 300 pounds so the new phone's ridiculous.* (Melissa, 16, UK)
>
> *Why do you need the 'Note' instead of the 'Plus'?* (Interviewer)
>
> *It can do more, obviously, from a technological standpoint. But, having the newest phone can, I guess it makes you feel good about the fact that you can afford to have that phone or that your parents will allow you to have*

> *that phone, compared to other people. Makes you feel better, I guess.* (Melissa, 16, UK)

Although young people do not identify this need for a new iPhone explicitly as a competition, they describe it as a desire to *keep up with their peers*. Consumption of new technologies functions as a resource to young people to navigate a complex social environment. Thus, the notion of consumption appears to be linked with young people's need to belong. However, it is difficult to belong among peers without the necessary belongings that give access to social standing in these groups. On the one hand, by consuming the latest iPhones young people seek a sense of belonging to a group of peers. On the other hand, the pressure to consume in order to keep up with peers and compete intensifies any sense of instability that they try so hard to dismantle.

Throughout my conversations with young people both in Greece and the UK it was evident that the image portrayed to others, and what others think of them, was significant. The process described above is intensified in digital space. In this project, my young participants explained how forms of conspicuous consumption take place online without being confined to luxury products. According to Veblen (2005 [1899]), conspicuous consumption is the ostentatious display of luxury products and wealth to demonstrate a superior status in comparison to others. However, for Walters and Carr (2019: 297), 'subjectivities are acknowledged to be temporally and spatially fluid, and luxury must therefore be defined in relation to the time and society in which it is found'. In this way, it is difficult to define what is luxurious due to its subjectivity. In the context of this discussion, what is important is the notion of social status. For example, the young people I interviewed argued that although many people buy the latest smartphones, and

in doing so, enhance their social status, this does not depict a real demonstration of wealth. Indeed, some of my respondents suggested that many young people spend their money on new phones and consequently cannot afford to go out with their friends. For instance:

> *In general, I consider that as Greeks, they feel better with themselves if they project a nice image and not necessarily that I'm rich, I'm comfortable or something like that, and it is possible that they cannot access essentials in their life.* (Antigone, 21, Greece, FGD)

Young people are fully aware of the role of social media in contemporary society. For those people who cannot afford to consume high fashion, expensive brands, the alternative way to compete is a more intense display of consumption through social media emulating 'Rich Kids on Instagram' and micro-celebrity lifestyles. I argue that, in a context of financial constraints, representations of consumption on social media, become significant to young people as a means by which they can compete for social status. This is evident when young people use social networking sites, such as Instagram, to communicate their lives and moments of consumption. This might be buying new clothing, going to a club or bar, even to a new café. Ultimately, this new digitalised form of conspicuous presentation of consumption is free.

> *It doesn't need any money to be there [on social media].* (Vicky, 21, Greece)
>
> *It doesn't need any money.* (Giannis, 21, Greece)
>
> *You can do whatever you want.* (Christos, 21, Greece)
>
> *And show whatever you want.* (Giannis, 21, Greece)

Indeed, it could be argued that social media appears to offer a sense of control in young people's lives. Young people cannot afford to abstain from the online

competition. In this way, any possibility for manipulating the shared images online, as well as the representations of moments of consumption, intensifies the competitive atmosphere among peers.

> *I know people buy clothes and then will instantly sell them on because there's a picture of them on social media wearing those clothes. So it's like I think there is sort of a need to constantly buy stuff to improve yourself.* (John, 19, UK, PEI)

It could be argued that the latest iPhones and other products are no longer the only form by which young consumers can make a social statement. The demonstration of one's self as someone who can afford experiences, such as going to specific places, bars, cafés, clubs, traveling abroad and going on trips can be considered a new form of ostentatious display. The importance of experiences as a resource for conspicuous consumption was evident when Anastasia (23, Greece, PEI) said that she went to a hair salon and had her hair done in a special way, and then uploaded photographs of it on her Instagram profile. The specific platform is transformed to a platform for display of consumption and experiences. It is the place in which young people try to assert their choices over products:

> *I've posted my shoes, when I got them… I put a poll, should I keep or send back, because I didn't know. And obviously, everyone thought send back so I sent them back.* (Juliette, 19, UK, PEI)

Thus, the consumer's followers do not simply constitute a passive audience but rather a pro-active group that accepts, denies, and proposes consumer choices. The above quote demonstrates fully the power of social media which provides young people with a new space for connection with peers, while, at the same time, offering a space in which competition for social status is intensified.

7.3 Negotiating the constraints imposed by parents on consumption

In the discussions that I had with young people both in Greece and the UK it was evident that access to financial resources was a continuous area of concern. Youth lifestyles are negotiated within the constraints imposed by socio-economic conditions (see Chapter 6), but also by parents. Of course, the parents' role is not only to constrain but also to provide for their children, and in this way, young people can play their role as consumer citizens. For many of my young participants in Greece who were between eighteen and thirty years old, the parents' financial contribution was significant. Most young adults described how they live with their parents and how their parents provide for them (i.e. paying rent or other expenses in cases when young people live alone, providing monthly income or whenever their children need to buy something). On the contrary, in the North West of England, most young participants in the same age group relied less on their parents' economic support. In this section, I am interested in particular in how young people in colleges/high schools between sixteen and seventeen years old negotiate the constraints that they have to deal with as consumer-citizens.

Young people in this age group tend to manage their expenses on a weekly or even daily basis. However, management of their resources can be described as a difficult task for my young respondents. For instance:

> *I'm not so good with economic management, so I generally I'm not going to ask my parents to give me for the week. I used to do it in the past, but I didn't spend money then, my mind wasn't around spending and the way of being entertained it didn't entail to have money. So, I basically ask for*

> *an amount of money every day depending on what I want to buy because it might be the case that the money I want to spend, not being necessary for going out, but buying clothes, shoes or do my nails.* (Aspa, 17, Greece, FGD)

Parents appear to have a major influence over purchasing decisions and actual purchases. It was clear that irrespective of gender, managing consumption at this age is related to managing parents:

> *Many times I've said to my mum that I want to buy a tracksuit because I don't have tracksuits, she is going to buy without knowing about it, and if I know that she is going, I will go with her because it is easier to spend money instead of asking her to give me money.* (Charis, 16, Greece)
>
> *Diplomacy*. (Lakis, 17, Greece)
>
> *It's different to tell her give me 20 euros to buy a tracksuit and it's different to go together, see the tracksuit and then she agrees more with what I will buy and if I ought to.* (Charis, 16, Greece)

In most cases, the young people that I interviewed were compelled to ask their parents for money. It could be argued that although parents' financial resources offer a sense of autonomy to young people, at the same time, it limits their role as consumer-citizens as they may be forced to negotiate parents' approval before any consumption choices. In this sense, the realisation of an individual's consumption aspirations may be limited by parents' decisions and desires. What was interesting during my discussions with the teenagers who participated in this project, was the fact that they highlighted how parents may exploit their children's consumption choices as an opportunity to fulfil indirectly their own roles as consumer-citizens themselves.

It depends on what I want to buy. If I want to buy something really expensive I will certainly go with my mum, because my mum is a "slave to consumption" and she takes whatever she finds in front of her, and because it is of my interest very much obviously, for example, I want to get two pairs of shoes and I don't know which one to choose, she would say 'buy both of them'. It is superb! (Aspa, 17, Greece, FGD)

It was evident that the role of both parents, but especially mothers, is important when it comes to buying decisions of young women. The situation is similar for young men:

I'm not used to going shopping or to go and browse stores. Once in a while, if a friend brings me round who is more interested in that. But I was never being moved by this point. If I need clothes… Like I've got hole-ridden socks, I'd say 'mum I don't have socks'. Because many times, while I know that I should go… It is my obligation I'm bored to do this job. Although I understand what is nice with all this situation… To go and browse. Because you know what suits you, you know what you want to wear. (Prokopis, 17, Greece, FGD)

For Prokopis, on the one hand, he described how engaging with consumption is boring. On the other hand, he acknowledged that shopping provides an arena of self-expression. The situation in the North West of England appears to be slightly different for some of my teenage participants; one of the reasons for this may be the level of economic independence, that is to say, whether young people have at least some money to manage themselves:

I never go shopping with my parents. They don't really have an influence on what I wear. If it's my money it's up to me what I spend it on, but it's different if they're buying me the clothes… So, if it's Christmas and I give them a list from what I want from online they will go through and they will tell me, 'You're not having that'. Or, 'You're having this kind of thing' … If

> *it's my money… then I can get whatever I want, but if it's their money then it's a different story.* (Melissa, 16, UK, FGD)

What is interesting here is how Melissa describes how she goes out to buy what she chooses, rather than shop online. Indeed, she relegated online purchases to gifts. The affordability of consumption gives some level of independence to young people. Those who have resources also have the right to decide when and how they can spend their money.

The ways in which young people receive money from their parents (and how it was received) varied widely among my Greek participants. There is no specific rule, but it seems that young people aged between sixteen and seventeen years old do not receive a predetermined amount of money from their parents. Instead, they get money on a case-by-case basis for school snacks, going out with friends and other personal expenses. In some cases, they are provided with a weekly budget for school-related costs, and then they need to manage their expenditure. Some of those issues are described in the following discussions:

> *[What another respondent said is] More or less the same for me. There isn't a predetermined amount [of money] that I will get.* (Mara, 17, Greece)

> *When I want to buy something, I will ask and I hope for the best.* (Petros, 17, Greece)

> *I ask for money only when I'm going out and I receive money to eat at school but when I want to buy something useless, for fun, I might not waste money at school and take lunch from home in the morning. With the money that I keep I will buy useless things.* (Charis, 16, Greece)

Young people seek to exercise agency in such cases. In this way, young people try to maintain a sense of ownership of their spending, which is to say, this constitutes an attempt to be more independent consumers. In this context, it was

also significant how some of my participants described their own consumption choices as ‘useless’. It is not clear whether their own choices may be regarded as useless because they are self-reflective or because it echoes their parents’ criticisms. Ultimately, if young people have the opportunity to save money during the week, the weekend represents the socially accepted time when they spend their money. The act of consumption is apparently more valuable if it takes place during the weekend with peers.

7.4 Critiques of consumption

7.4.1 Consumerism

There are a multitude of ways in which young people could criticise consumption. Interestingly, the relationship between consumption and young people is a complex process that is worth exploring in the context of the Global Financial Crisis. Many of my young participants both in Greece and the UK had some kind of critical stance towards consumption, especially to the notion of consumerism. Although there is a lack of data in this project to suggest whether such criticism against consumption is translated to anti-consumption practices, during our conversations some of my young respondents described how dissatisfied they were with aspects of consumption. Consider the case of one participant, Christina, who argued that she feels a negative meaning associated with consumption due to the pressure to consume “unnecessary” things. More specifically:

> *It’s just that we usually link consumerism with consumption in general and we have put a negative sign that we consume more than we need and we don’t think about the essentials.* (Christina, 16, Greece)

> *We consume more than what is necessary.* (Lakis, 17, Greece)

> *Especially from the moment that we live in a capitalist system, obviously we consume a lot more than what we need.* (Petros, 17, Greece)

In the quote above, the discussion highlights the fact that consumption is promoted, not for the sake of young people, but for the sake of the economic system in which they find themselves. Hence, one of the arguments suggested is that we live in a capitalist society and, in the absence of widely accepted socio-economic alternatives, the act of consumption is unavoidable. For instance:

> *I think it's important in everyone's life. I think you're bombarded with advertising everywhere. I don't think you can avoid it. And we live in a capitalist society, so everyone's consuming all the time as much as they can.* (John, 19, UK, FGD)

The above was a common realisation both in the UK and Greece. This feeling of the inevitability and the social responsibility to consume demonstrates that young people's consumption choices can be considered, at least in part, to be a response to socio-economic pressures. However, John continued in suggesting that consumption is '*not necessarily a terrible idea, it's quite nice to buy stuff that you like, you want to wear. But yeah, it can go too far I think'*. Indeed, it could be argued that although some of my young participants expressed their concerns about consumption, many of them highlighted its importance. Although my participants were aware of an anti-consumption narrative in relation to the current economic system, they did not seem to engage with ways to undermine it within a framework of alternate politics (Wolff, 2005). Although there was a slight tendency towards an anti-consumption narrative, this was not automatically translated to forms of resistance by my participants, and certainly not the rejection of consumption more generally.

It is this negative connotation with consumer behaviour that reflects a continuous purchase of new things to replace old; indicating a short-lived relationship of consumers with products (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2009). Young people have been self-critical about their consumer behaviour, nevertheless, they did not seem to be concerned about environmental or ethical issues related to consumption as elsewhere (Shaw and Newholm, 2002). The quest for material goods and especially for "more" than what is needed turned out to be another point of criticism. For Charles (27, UK, FGD) consumption is '*a word with a negative implication, that seems to imply that somebody is taking more than they need'*. Many of my participants shared a feeling that the phenomenon of consuming goods for immediate gratification is intensified in our modern society and there is gap between what people consume and what they really need.

The criticism here lies in more personal concerns about the quality of the purchased goods. It is this relationship between the quality and quantity of acquired products that seems to be of interest to my interviewees. The main point of discussion was the pursuit of more and more material goods. My informants' concern here was that consumption does not necessarily mean more happiness. Lakis acknowledged the complicated nature of his self-identity as a consumer by referring to the quantity-quality debate. In this way, differences between quality and quantity are linked with the discussion about a more long-term happiness and fulfilment:

> *If what you consume is not of quality and it doesn't fulfil you and it's just for a time period and then it goes, it doesn't necessarily make you happier. But if there is a personal value to what you consume, may be spiritual or something like this, might last longer and make you more fulfilled.* (Lakis, 17, Greece)

While this idea of spiritual consumption sounds like an oxymoron, it illustrates a discrepancy between consumption oriented towards intellectual elements; not as a form of anti-consumption and consumer resistance but as a pursuit of fulfilment of a desire for happiness. Of course, the 'social nature of happiness' is undeniable given that it is based on everyday experience (Cieslik, 2018: 117-118). For most of them, happiness deriving from material consumption was something temporary. Although my informants apparently did not refrain from unnecessary consumption, they were aware that products are more wanted before and during the acquisition process. One of my respondents, Jack (24, UK, FGD), voiced feelings of disenchantment and regret about his purchases. It is the nature of ephemeral pleasure that derives from buying products that my participants argue renders their consumption unfulfilling.

Aspa (17, Greece) criticised the idea that increased spending is equated to having a good time. She reflected on her consumer behaviour, becoming self-critical, while she admitted that she spends a lot of money unnecessarily on the basis that if we spend a lot, we will have a good time:

> *Of course, I am from the worst people to speak because I spend too much money on "trivial things", but I think in general that it is a wrong way of thinking.* (Aspa, 17, Greece, FGD)

These data indicate that we need to question young people's agency in resisting current socio-economic pressure, in terms of the impact of the crisis, others' overconsumption and the debt that ensues. We must also consider their agency in resisting actions which will lead to yet further debt and thus further financial instability both personally and socially. For Alekos (21, Greece, FGD), *'consumption itself is something basic and could be something innocent'*.

However, he considered the relationship between consumption and economic forms of inequality to be the main reason why consumption cannot be considered as innocent anymore, especially in the context of the financial crisis.

7.4.2 Hyper-consumption

In a globalised world where marketisation and consumer choice has become central to young people's lives, it is significant that the notion of the "excessive consumer" plays a central role in the negotiation of young people's identities and social processes. During my first focus groups with young people, the idea of excessive consumption or what I refer to as hyper-consumption in Chapter 2 was something that came from them:

> *I relate consumption more with hyper-consumption because this is the word that we listen more and I think that concerns youth in our times.* (Mara, 17, Greece, FGD)

The expectation of consumers that they can have what they want, when they want and where they want is challenged by austerity and financial restrictions. While my participants considered hyper-consumption to be a negative aspect of our society, they did not relate it to the climate crisis and environmental risk. In their attempt to describe the impact of hyper-consumption, they related to a continuous stimulation of demand fuelled by celebrities and the advertising industry. As my participants described it, there is a tendency for the multiplication of desires, when at the same time, our essential needs are already met. Young college students had a feeling that there is hyper-consumption amongst their peers, though they tend to regard themselves as being rather less motivated by its ethos.

In the context of private and public debt, both of which have attracted a lot of media attention, some of my participants associated debt accumulation with the consumer society.

> *I have the perception that a lot of people who are excessive in their consumption spend money they do not have which is why so many people have problems with debt and why credit cards are so overused in the UK.* (Bill, 25, UK, FGD)

The idea here is that people keep going on a shopping spree even though they have been living in debt. In this global environment, there is ambivalence over whether young people can adjust efficiently to new consumer processes.

> *Because you were used to [consume] from the previous years having some money and living in a different way from how you live now and sometimes you get carried away with it and you're doing the same, whereas then you regret it.* (Ariadne, 22, Greece, FGD)

The idea that young people consume more than is required appears to be closely related to the narrative of guilty consumers predominating in mainstream media. This links the idea of "excess" with consumer choice and the "hyper-consumption" argument more broadly (Gottschalk, 2009), providing a prism through which we can analyse the critiques of consumerism. In fact, for young people the problem lies in the more ostentatious display of hyper-consumption and not the purchase of goods and materials itself.

> *[Hyper-consumption] is promoted by the media and as a result young people in our age buy things in order to look better, to entertain, to be more fashionable, to get the latest phone while they don't have the money, in general we have put ourselves in a process of a mass, to buy what we buy in order to be better than the others, that is wrong for me.* (Sara, 28, Greece, PEI)

What young people may suggest is that in the context of the financial crisis hyper-consumption and “excessive consumers” are considered “consumer dupes” but in this way just consuming becomes relatively innocent. It could be argued that the specific socio-economic context puts a pressure to young people to appear to challenge older consumption patterns. I argue that it is the limited financial resources that motivates this discussion. In particular, we have to be critical here in the way that young people consume narratives promoted by the mainstream media regarding how Southern Europeans are just lazy consumers who spent money irresponsibly. The central point here is that consumers may make consumer choices to distinguish themselves from others but also from a desire to live better, to more fully enjoy life’s pleasures, and to reassure themselves that they have agency in achieving a valid lifestyle choice. Yet, there is also a sense of guilt associated with consumption, particularly consumption that, *ex-post*, may be perceived to be financially or ecologically unsustainable or irresponsible. A sense of such guilt may be based on the accusation that they (or their governments) have lived for many years beyond their means.

7.4.3 Conscientious consumption

The expectation for adjustment from reflexive to conscientious consumer behaviour was evident amongst my Greek participants. The crisis did not only have an effect on the adjustment of people’s consumption patterns to the reality of their new income; it affected young people’s expectations as consumers. Understanding the relationship between the financial crisis and young people’s expectations about consumption is of particular importance at this stage. I am interested in the meanings that lie behind my participants’ expectations about the role of consumption in society. What many of my participants wondered was the

extent to which individuals, and in particular the younger generation, competes to appear to consume. For my participants, young people reflect a consumer generation that prioritises spending. They consider this to be an intergenerational phenomenon. According to my informants, the younger generation has not fully realised what is happening in Greece. Iole had the impression that when it comes to the notion of consumption, young people about her age engage more than older generations.

> *I believe that the crisis has hit more older people and at the same time, young people behave as they can't see it, as… And their choices are specific and related to their image.* (Iole, 19, Greece, FGD)

My suggestion here is that young consumers do not reduce consumption in response to a call for more social consciousness; their pretention about the absence of the crisis is held in order to continue to "freely" engage and celebrate consumption. In this sense, it is difficult to consider my participants as members of a socially conscious consumer generation but rather consumers who criticise themselves and their peers and would ideally expect their choices to be more conscientious and restrained, while at the same time persisting in their consumption habits. The general picture that is constructed here is of the individualised consumer who is interested in his/her ability to participate in the consumer frenzy. As Vasilis noticed:

> *[T]here is a specific consumer culture which totally contradicts the financial reality of our era, it is not only that they [young people] bother spending for specific needs but they don't have any awareness of where they give their money and who provides them.* (Vasilis, 18, Greece, FGD)

As illustrated earlier, the provider can be young people's parents. In this way, the above expressions of anxiety about consumer culture are not related with

alternative forms of pleasure and satisfaction, but instead reveal the strength of a consumer culture linked with an abstract concept of the “good life”. Even after the Global Financial Crisis, it could be argued that the consumerist logic of hedonism and ostentatious purchasing remain drivers of, if not economic growth, then at least, economic aspirations. However, there is a significant distinction between unchanged aspirations to consume and the reality of actual constraints. While the critique here to affluent consumerism is not about the possibility of a foundational restructuring and reformation, but a more modest response based on young people’s experiences and expectations:

> *Each one has to put some limits due to the crisis; you can go out, have a good time and think that you don’t need to spend a lot of money.* (Vasilis, 18, Greece, FGD)

Vasilis acknowledges that it is completely normal to have a good time and to seek entertainment. Hence, it is not an anti-consumerist sentiment that is presented here as such, but rather a call for reduced consumption due to the crisis. My participants described how young people visit clubs and bars and spend their money in buying “bottles” of alcohol by spending a large proportion of their income in one night, even though this might mean that they are broke the next day.

In the context of the crisis, the criticisms were focused on the rationale for the existence of the self as an “only” consuming self; it is only entertainment and having a good time that matters. My participants were curious about how people can be in debt and still spend money to buy the latest phones, and even go on trips for two or three days. The expectation for reduced consumption were not constrained in the material goods but also permeated everyday life. For instance:

> *We're describing that a disaster is happening in the country and all the cafés are full. How is this possible?* (Millie, 28, Greece, FGD)

It seems that this was a common quandary for my informants. They said that everybody talks about the economic crisis, and yet at the same time they can see that many "places of consumption", such as bars, cafés and restaurants, remain full. Following this, a participant questioned how it is that so many people can afford iPhones and keep going to shops. Many of them queried whether any such crisis actually exists. Vicky questioned whether she is the only one who cannot see the crisis:

> *I might not see the crisis. It might be the case that the neighbourhood where I live isn't the appropriate area but I think that consumption hasn't been reduced but it is increasing.* (Vicky, 21, Greece, FGD)

Some of my informants identified the problem as being that people were not used to a frugal way of life; instead they were used to spending more than what they earn. In this way, what some young people expected was a resistance to consumption from their peers in the context of political and socio-economic transformation.

7.4.4 The "average" consumer

It is evident that the financial crisis has played a crucial role in how young people consider consumption, how they position themselves as consumers in this context, and, to some extent, their professed agency in resisting the self-destructive behaviour that hyper-consumption might imply. It could be argued that there is a paradox here. Although young people tend to criticise their peers and people for their hyper-consumption culture, they often present themselves as "average" consumers. As Pavlos stated:

> *I personally consider consumption as a mass "must" and nothing more and it is a far cry from what every person needs in reality. The perplexing thing is that even during crisis people consume too much unnecessary things… Stuff that considered to be luxurious keep being consumed almost to the same pace and level. Personally, I am always an average consumer.* (Pavlos, 30, Greece, FGD)

Pavlos was not the only one who presented himself as an average consumer in the fieldwork in Greece. Another participant illustrated the same point:

> *…[N]either I consume to a great extent, to an extensive extent, I am an average consumer, the necessary…* (Gianna, 18, Greece, FGD)

This signifies an attempt by at least some young people to disassociate their consumer behaviour from excessive consumer habits, and thereby position themselves as rational choice-makers. It indicates their desire to exhibit agency in resisting overt social pressures to hyper-consume. This highlights a contradiction between their aspirations to keep consuming and their attempt to throw away the stigma of them in a sense being "co-creators" of the crisis. In this regard, my participants try to move away from elements of hyper-consumption either by positioning themselves as average consumers or by explicitly justifying their choices. This dismissal of consumption as unnecessary is embedded in a self-deluding imagination from the moment that young people participate in various forms of consumer culture. If we consider, as they did during our conversations, hyper-consumption as another reason for the crisis, then we can understand young people's attempts to re-position themselves as responsible consumers. Thus, some explained and described how they are still capable of putting limits on their spending. This was not only the case among Greek participants, but it was a common issue for my UK interviewees:

> *I don't think I think of myself as a consumer of anything in particular. Obviously, I shop for food, I shop for other things as well but I've never thought about it in a way that suggests I take more than I need.* (Charles, 27, UK, FGD)

In practice, some young people do overconsume. Some young people justify moments of excess demand for goods and services that they desire.

> *I'm a little bit like someone else said. I try to think of myself as someone that doesn't like consuming but then you end up justifying moments of excess. I think it's ridiculous that people spend thousands of pounds on jewellery for example but if I had the money, I would spend thousands of pounds on a new bike for example which is no different at all. I justify it myself somehow, it's like superior to buying jewellery.* (Bill, 25, UK, FGD)

Similarly, young people may justify their consumption choices in relation to technological products. For instance:

> *I buy my phone once every two years I feel like buy not the latest one but the next the latest one might think the phone is something that I use every day. So I don't mind justifying that. I mean I try and get a good contract deal or wait till someone is doing a sale or something like that. It's something I'm using everyday so I don't mind spending a lot of money on that. I would like to have a phone that lasts a couple years and not one that will break in six months.* (Adam, 23, UK, PEI)

The process of justification implies an attempt to absolve themselves of guilt which young consumers may experience before and especially after a purchase. For some of them, this motivates an attempt to justify purchases every time, and think about taking a decision that makes them feel uneasy. In the case of my participant here, the feelings of guilt preceded the purchase decision. The main point is that young consumers use particular tactics that allow them to buy

products and avoid the guilt that might otherwise be attached to such purchases (Burnett and Lunsford, 1994).

7.5 Experiential consumption as a means of escape

Not all young people are able or even desire to resist a consumption-driven everyday life. In an attempt to understand what this means for young consumers, Pavlos suggested:

> *I consider that most of them [people], at least those who are close to me, while they do not have a need to consume in reality, they find it as an illusion. You know what? I will buy something and I will feel better or I won't feel that the crisis has worn me out.* (Pavlos, 30, Greece, FGD)

Thus, consumption can facilitate a means of escape from everyday life, offering an illusory "reality" that promotes positive feelings and beautiful moments of material affluence. This reinforces the idea that young consumers live in a self-deluding reality where they try to define themselves by their possessions, which means that they have to keep their level of consumption as high as possible. However, such escapism is simply not possible due to economic restraints, then the only alternative is for them to condemn consumption. As I will argue in this section, the notion of experience is significant in understanding how young people may justify their own choices. My contention is that young people use consumption to add value to their experience and to young people's perceptions of what their experiences might be. As we have noticed above, there are moments when people justify their purchases, and this tends to be when they buy a product that lasts longer or at least one that they expect to last longer. This can vary between expensive branded shoes and high-quality clothing to technological

devices and smartphones. Here, it is important to understand how the idea of experience adds to young people's self-justification for keep consuming:

> *…I prefer [to spend money] on what is an issue of experience and having good times.* (Eirini, 27, Greece, FGD)
>
> *I would agree with Eirini, I am doing the same, that means that I don't consume a lot, I don't consume almost nothing in clothes and cosmetics and all these, I buy what I need and only when something is broken to renew it or to replace the one that I had before, I also prefer, if I have got some money to spend, to spend on going out for food or buy extra stuff from the super market and then for going to the cinema, theatre or a trip, in entertainment, I prefer to give it there.* (Millie, 28, Greece, FGD)

The nature of consumption varies and, in this respect, there is a need to examine the realm of experiential consumption. The idea that is important for the following analysis is the concept of "lived experience" as the representation of interpreted realities. Here, we need to distinguish that experience-related consumption can be manifested either as a personal "lived experience" or as a representation of young people's "lived experience" to their peers through social media. Young people can be said to be engaged in spending money for something that lasts longer and the social profits that might reap as a return on their "investment":

> *Particularly as a teenager you sort of feel like it's good to be buying things more often. Whereas now I just try make sure when I spend money. It's like an investment. So, I like to buy things that bring things back for as long a time as possible.* (Jack, 24, UK, FGD)

This "investment" is not directly linked with financial profits but as an individualised process, albeit in a social context, in many cases with the expression of status. The pleasure of consuming experiences, and the peer

appreciation that this attracts, plays a pivotal role in motivating an individual's sense of consuming, insofar as it is this way that they succeed in feeling gratified.

Meanwhile, from the perspective of young people, there is not one aspect of consumption, but many different and contrasting aspects. Experiences such as going on trips, cinema, theatre, and others such as going out for food and drinks provide a context in which such consumption can flourish. In this latter case, it is not the consumption of food which is of primary significance, but rather the experience of where and when one goes out, and with whom. The question here lies in how a one-off expenditure that does not last (i.e. going for food, a play at the theatre, watching a movie, a weekend trip) is considered by my participants as sufficient to justify consumption. I argue that it is the significance of doing things and the memories from those experiences that can be "banked" on social networking sites for consumption again later. It is my contention that this particular form of experiential consumption mechanism compensates for any obstacles to traditional consumption caused by austerity. In other words, young people will do everything they can do in order to use consumption as a means of asserting the extent of their belonging. The world of social media may well exacerbate this process and thus self-justify the kind of spending and presentation of self in which young consumers are engaged.

While the context of the recession imposes difficulties in justifying excess demand for products, experiential consumption choices potentially provide an escape from financial constraints. The idea of experiential consumption, as discussed by my participants, comes hand in hand with a discussion about doing things outside the home. In this sense, outdoor spaces for consumption and forms of experiential consumption are intertwined. For example, it is not unusual for young

people to save up for trips abroad or concerts. The multiplicity and the plurality of outdoor experiences that were discussed during my interviews signify satisfaction, emotions, belonging while shared experiences facilitate bonding among peers. However, the "bonding" itself takes place in a competitive environment. Through experiential consumption young people are able to compete more intensely in order to be perceived as "consumers" who actually have a degree of agency and control over their own circumstances. For instance:

> *During this time, I can see [on social media] too many landscapes due to the holidays… I'm influenced very much, I'm jealous… Going out, going to the beach.* (Chara, 25, Greece, PEI)
>
> *Have you felt that in other occasions?* (Interviewer)
>
> *Mostly when I was at work and I was there for twelve hours and they were going out for coffee, drinks and I was working.* (Chara, 25, Greece, PEI)

Young people have also realised the power that the consumption of particular spaces and indeed of travel can bring to their profile. Spending money by going on a journey may allow justification of the expenditure as self-improving. As Lakis said:

> *…[M]y mind it doesn't go to goods, that is, consumerism is to spend your money for a trip as well. But there is no way that the trip is going to offer something negative, it will make you more open-minded.* (Lakis, 17, Greece, FGD)

Justifications about the experience-related consumption tell us something profound about the role and power of consumerism. But, the most potentially beneficial line of inquiry focuses on the way in which criticisms of hyper-consumption, as discussed here and in Chapter 2, composed of moments of self-critique, can be reversed - or rather we might say, *subsumed* into a different form

of consumption – for the sake of an experience. Thus, young people regard experience as a different form of consumption that can be more justifiable than the material consumption of an object or product.

Young people, under the pressure of socio-economic change, may be motivated to spend more on experiential moments and less on products to such an extent that they feel they do not waste their money on something useless, or at least, on something for which the enjoyment is brief. Yet, those decisions might reflect a choice that is being made under the pressure of economic hardships and a limited budget. In this sense, the experiential element in which young people invest, and thus young people's consumption in general, is more liable to be about long-term planning than it has ever been before. Examples might include: to save money for a trip or to decide to go to a gig. The need to cut down other expenses creates a need to keep consuming at least in a way that maintains consumption as a core aspect of young people's identities. In this sense expenses related to experiences are becoming more and more of a priority for young people.

The idea of experience here seems to be connected with the idea of memories and the duration of the product. The memories of a trip or a concert might persist longer than the satisfaction of buying a new t-shirt or a pair of jeans. This change in emphasis reflects a contradiction in the modern churn of consumption in our everyday lives. Our life is constructed and surrounded by extremely quick rhythms, and experience is now apparently characterised by ephemerality. The importance of consumer experiences instead of products with a short life-cycle is reflected in my discussions with my participants in the UK fieldwork. For instance, Adam argued:

> *I spend more on my experiences so I don't know… Like a concert or a trip, I like to go travelling a lot and as an artist. I spend a lot on concert tickets. I went to a concert earlier this year and was one hundred pounds a ticket but it was such a good concert. I think that was worth it to be. And I've got to have that than buy like something that I throw away in a few months.* (Adam, 23, UK, PEI)

Social media may thus operate as another space in which this personalisation of consumption can be operationalised and I will return to this question in Chapter 8.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter has begun to interrogate the interconnection between consumption and experiential aspects of young people's spending narrative and choices. In addition, the negative connotation of consumerism and hyper-consumption was considered. It is clear that young people may exercise agency and reap the benefit of choice through experiential consumption, such as going on trips, going to gigs and going out. Youth transitions are connected to consuming experiences and young people's consumer behaviour depends on their stage of life. Especially at a young age, parents play a significant role in dictating young people's consumer choices. Young people's limited budget for consumption pushes them even more intensely to experiential consumption, and specifically to the notion that spending on memorable moments is more worthwhile than spending on products that provide short-term satisfaction. The experiential consumption revitalises the role of consumption as a vehicle for constructing young people's identities. Thus, young people have little choice but to have recourse to experiences. It also increasingly puts social media in the spotlight as an experiential arena in its own right. It may provide a means by which these

experiences, or the perceptions of these experiences, can be intensified. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how this is actually happening through social media usage as a form of experiential consumption, and more specifically, through the advertising of consumption and construction of a brand-identity around experience.

Chapter 8

Online-branding and the prosumption of an ephemeral self

8.1 Introduction

In Chapter 6, I addressed the many uncertainties young people have to deal with both in Greece and the UK. While, in Chapter 7, I explored the changing nature of youth consumption and its role in young people's identity construction. It is clear that young people's consumption is less about the material purchase of a product or a service, and more about the experience of competing successfully with their peers over their respective access to consumption. In this final data and discussion chapter, I am interested in analysing how such social changes evolve and intersect with the digital world. In what follows, I will consider how digital media transformations have affected young people's online presence and engagement with impression management, and hence what this might mean for young people's identities. This chapter critically considers the environment for identity that self-branding and social media facilitates.

I report data gathered from all three stages of the fieldwork that were conducted during this research. More specifically, it explores insights which emerged during my research with young people via our focus group discussions, photo-elicitation interviews and the online observation on Instagram. Each of the following sections will consider key dimensions of young people's online presence in relation to the management and marketing of the self. I will begin to explore young people's online self-presentation techniques before moving on to analyse the reasons behind such practices. In doing so, I will focus on young people's

insecurities, their quest for “likes” as a form of attention-seeking and the notion of escapism. The effects of self-presentation and self-promotion are emphasised through a discussion of the process of reinventing the self, in particular, an idealised but ephemeral self that has emerged as young people’s response to the condition of a normalised uncertainty.

8.2 The management of the self online

In Chapter 6 I discussed the social transformations that young people have to deal with, and what the related tensions mean for their everyday lives. In this chapter, I am interested in how such tensions are resolved in the arena of digital technology, particularly on social media, and how young people negotiate their identities through their engagement with such media. My intention is to provide evidence to do with the performative nature of young people’s engagement with social media. While social media as an impression management arena has been examined previously, impression management practices are intensified in the digital sphere and the connection between self-management, consumption and identity is an under-explored area.

8.2.1 The front- and back-stage in the digital world

Self-management is encouraged by social networking sites that provide young people with a semblance of control over how they are portrayed. The data gathered highlights the way in which social media posts, created and curated by young people, are productive attempts that reflect a sense of the self as being “managed”. However, such actions are not simply about production but also consumption. In my conversations with young people, the switching between a back- and front-stage (Goffman, 1990 [1959]) primarily signified an interchange between a real and a not-so-real world:

> *It happened to two of my friends, who are partners, who went for holidays abroad and shared lovely photos with hearts, and then one called me crying and she says 'everything sucks, it's a mess'. That is, the image created on Facebook to be so nice and then this girl calls me crying. The reality is entirely different from Facebook.* (Antigone, 21, Greece, FGD)

Social media posts reflect moments demonstrating personal information. This process of creation takes time and effort but such a process is expected by social networking sites users. During the interviews with my young participants, it was evident that offline life and social media content are (to an extent) different. For instance, Sophie said:

> *I see a lot of my younger cousins, and doing that kind of thing, having those kinds of brands and taking pictures that I've seen ten thousand times and poses, and the way they behave and I know they're not like that, but that's just how they want to be perceived, I guess.* (Sophie, 25, UK, PEI)

The management of social media posts has serious effects on how the self is envisaged and presented, and how young people's identities are imagined and experienced. Young people's shared photos and videos on social media frame social life, and in doing so, they actively craft the visualisation of how the self is perceived. As one of my participants, Millie (28, Greece, FGD) said, '*They're [social media] not a real form of communication'*. For many, this process transforms the raw material of one's experiences from reality into perception:

> *…I do associate it with for example people like my brother. His Instagram is just horrendous. It makes you feel ill and stuff. Maybe I know what he actually does and I know it's not like… I think it's because I know the truth [laugher]… It's not entirely Photoshop. He does do the things on his Instagram. He just travels a lot. But I also know that's not everything in his life. Well, if it's someone you don't know maybe you just assume that really is their life and that's why makes people feel shit.* (Bill, 25, UK, FGD)

The self is consciously curated through young people's social media posts. This occurs through young users' choices about what to portray and what to exclude from their social media profiles. Social media can be a way to enable and mobilise the self. In my discussion with young people, it was clear that young social media users feel that a lot of people do not really look like how they appear in the digital world. This necessitates a distinction between "real-world" and online appearances. Interestingly, there were many similarities in the way my young participants in Greece and England (UK) understand this process:

> *… My profile's a catfish [laugher]. My profile is beautiful but it's not like that in… People will post for the "likes". I saw a post before and it was just because someone posts relationships of them in a happy relationship or post this and that doesn't mean that is what it is in real life, which is really true. But my photos are from when I dress up and I go out or when I'm going out on a special occasion. I'm not just going to post a photo of me now. It'll be when I'm dressed up.* (Juliette, 19, UK, PEI)

Such means of self-presentation support the notion of back-stage (offline) and front-stage (online) where a different version of the self is presented (Goffman, 1990 [1959]). The point here is not that this was not happening before social media's rise, but that this process is amplified in the digital arena. For Joseph, social media is a,

> *…[C]aricature. It's not, I mean, none of it is real. It's a fictional world of you own creation, where your narrative can be heard by loads of people. Uncritiqued, if that's what happens, but it's nonsensical.* (Joseph, 26, UK, PEI)

What my participants indicate is a life where a different self is presented in front of the camera, and another one exists behind it. This is not merely a strategic choice about what to present; it is a creative attempt to exclude what people feel

needs to be absent. Performance thus becomes ever more significant in a consumer's life (Goffman, 1990 [1959]) but in a much more intense way than it did in the past. In this way, young people engage with the social media world in an attempt to produce a digital ("like"able) version of self. In effect, social media constitutes a contemporary arena for do-it-yourself identity construction.

8.2.2 The third stage: Permanent posts vs. InstaStories

At the beginning of this study, I had anticipated that the proliferation of many types of social media platforms and the potential uses that Instagram provides would be significant to young people. At the same time, although I expected, to an extent, that while some of my participants' InstaStories (i.e. posts that can disappear after twenty-four hours) would be a way to self-manage online, I underestimated how significantly it would become a theme throughout my focus group conversations and photo-elicitation interviews. During the fieldwork, my participants explained that the Instagram Feed consists mainly of curated photos that give a first impression that will stay on social media profiles "forever" (or at least until users feel that those photos are no longer aesthetically significant to their feed). On the other hand, temporary stories that disappear in a day may provide an opportunity for young people to share moments in a space that facilitates and stands further experimentation.

According to a blog post (Jamiascreative, 2018) related to Instagram, the main idea behind InstaStories is to 'record a flow of your day and your random thoughts that enter your mind' with specific examples such as: 'picture of your breakfast… Add a little note on how it makes you feel'; 'video of your lunch completed with a location tag'; 'picture of your favourite soda that you drink every afternoon' and many more, with a 'final picture of the day of you finally in bed'. Such ways of

using Instagram signify an intensification of the pressure to both produce and consume the mundane and to present the everyday as a means of solidifying the self. On the other hand, when it comes to Instagram feed posts, the same blog proposes that a 'feed should focus on polished, planned images and videos'. My participants seemed to be fully aware of the techniques and tactics needed for sharing on social media. For instance:

> *I put on my InstaStories stuff I wouldn't put on my feed because it wouldn't get as much "likes". But it's a nice photo so it can go on. Or it's a nice photo but it doesn't match my feed. Do you know what the highlights are?* (Juliette, 19, UK, PEI)
>
> *Yeah.* (Interviewer)
>
> *I put most of my stuff into my highlights. So, I just put it on my story and then it goes into my highlights* (Juliette, 19, UK, PEI)
>
> *Okay. So, what is the main difference?* (Interviewer)
>
> *It looks better on my feed than it does on my highlights. So, if a photo looks good on my feed and I feel like it'll do well, it's going on… But if it don't, it's just going to go onto on my story… In my stories, it's just like videos of me and my friends or videos of me and my boyfriend or just memories for me and my boyfriend like from when we went to London. Or just like… Literally videos of my dog.* (Juliette, 19, UK, PEI)

Several of my participants explained how they choose to share funny or silly moments on their InstaStories, highlighting that they mainly select photos without their friends for permanent posts. Thus, InstaStories are supposed to be less curated and more spontaneous than permanent posts. As another of my participants, Sophie, said:

> *I think you don't really put much thought into the Stories. It's just a quick thing. I could share a picture of this thing and I don't really care. It doesn't*

really matter. It's going to be deleted in twenty-four hours. (Sophie, 25, UK, PEI)

It is interesting to understand that such a temporary timeline contrasts with the notion of front-stage (Goffman, 1990 [1959]), chronologically-ordered presentations in the Feed, because the InstaStories feature does not technically involve curating a persistent exhibition or archive of self. Nevertheless, this has been undermined partially by Instagram's features, as its users are given the opportunity to select and save their favourable moments (shared posts) in their Highlights.

In our conversations, my participants indeed reported that InstaStories allowed for a communication of less formal and more banal moments of their daily lives. In addition, my interviewees revealed that they used this feature for temporary posts when they were bored or wanted to communicate a message of their activities without focusing so much on the aestheticisation of their posts. These unwritten rules and beliefs about the contextualisation of InstaStories usage is often invisible to older users of social media (Vaterlaus *et al.*, 2015). In an attempt to further understand the differences between permanent posts and other temporal ways of self-presentation, during the discussion with my participants, I put an emphasis on InstaStories:

If it's not permanent, it's not a best fit. I think that might be the difference. (John, 19, UK, PEI)

Is the best bit on the permanent post? (Interviewer)

Yeah. And then so Snapchat stories, Instagram stories would be of everyday life, sometimes emotions, and people would be like, 'I'm missing this person'. That sort of thing. It won't tell you something about themselves, I don't think. For me, that's why I wouldn't post anything that's everyday

> *permanently because it doesn't make sense. It's almost like if you said at the start, 'Tell me something about yourself.' And I went, 'I had a cup of coffee today.' It's just out of context maybe.* (John, 19, UK, PEI)

The self-aware user therefore makes a choice, checking a number of parameters relating to the content such as the medium, access/awareness of the medium, and the social context (Katz *et al.,* 1973). InstaStories, the predominantly visual-based affordance of Instagram, is another important way in which self-presentation occurs in this context. Thus, young people are in place to select a suitable medium to facilitate their goals according to the specific capabilities of the platform. For example, as Jeremy said:

> *I think people definitely go for 'Look where I've been. Look what I've eaten today. Look at this thing.', which if they want to do that then that's okay.* (Jeremy, 28, UK, PEI)

What my participants suggested provides insight into the different ways to use Instagram, and how they were handling their social media in terms of the platform's characteristics. My discussions with young people indicate that the temporary posts generated by InstaStories constitute another means of self-presentation. Therefore, it could be argued that traditional notions of self-presentation are no longer sufficient. In this way, the management of the self is not only two-dimensional, that is back- and front-stage, but also incorporates an interstitial third-stage.

8.3 Motivations behind the online management of the self

Given the impression management taking place on social media, I examine possible explanations for why young people are pushed into playing out identities in such an unapologetic fashion. It is important to shed some light on the main

reasons behind such identity construction practices. My focus group discussions and photo-elicitation interviews helped me to tease out some responses to these questions. It could be argued that some of the justifications of young people's self-management practices are: young people's insecurities; status-seeking attempts that infiltrate social life and young people's desire to seek an escape from an uncertain reality.

8.3.1 Battling insecurities

As a means of highlighting and explaining some of the reasons behind young people's self-presentation practices online, I briefly discuss a theme that emerged during my conversations with participants regarding the role of youth engagement with social media impression management practices in compensating for social insecurities. For many, social networking sites have become inseparable from everyday life, which suggests they might become related to aspects of mental ill-health, such as depression and anxiety (Keles *et al.,* 2020). In this section I investigate how my young participants perceived social media as a way to camouflage psychological distress and personal insecurities. During one of the focus group discussions, one of my participants illustrated this point:

> *Facebook is a mask for many people to conceal their weaknesses in real life, especially for those who communicate and search for relationships in that way [via social media].* (Manolis, 26, Greece, FGD)

Social media's positive and/or negative impact on young people's mental health is unquestionable (Rosen *et al.,* 2013). My intention here is to provide evidence on how some of my participants argued that young people's online management of the self is a way to hide problems they may face from their peers. During the same focus group discussion, another participant added:

> *Just think how many needs are covered by [Facebook]. Via this thing, you meet people and make relationships, a sexual relationship with people through Facebook. Guys, it has concealed so many weaknesses, because it's so easy to engage in this process, to hide behind it, and instead of recognising our problems and say that we have some weaknesses in these areas, I'll struggle against them. We hide behind this and we make fake relationships.* (Eirini, 27, Greece, FGD)

It is important to highlight here that it is not my intention to dismiss any claims that social networking sites may help young people meet new friends and form relationships and, in that way, gain some sense of belonging and social support (O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011). However, it is also vital to consider young people's own interpretation of online self-presentation practices. Some of my participants explicitly linked social media usage to a lack of self-confidence. For instance, Sam said:

> *So, I've got a very very close friend of mine yes, she posts a lot on Facebook and Instagram and portrays a very kind of romantic idealised version of what her life is like. She's always posting pictures of herself at galleries or she's reading a book, she's reading an intellectual book, she'll post a picture of the book with a coffee next to it, all of that and put like a filter on it like a ray of sunshine or if she's sat next to a lake she has to post it on Instagram, all of that. And I, from knowing her personally, I know that she's heavily depressed. And I do think that the two are completely connected. I think this is a way for trying to feel good about herself and get some recognition. And I feel like in the long term it probably makes her a bit worse because she kind of uses this as a crutch somehow.* (Sam, 26, UK, FGD)

It is clear that, in a social media world, young people's need to conceal insecurities that may be manifested through their digital self-management. Being self-reflective, Sam continued:

> *… And personally, when I've done a similar thing, I find that you know, if you don't get the response you're after, it makes you feel worse and all of that. So, I find the way she presents herself online, it's completely tied to her insecurity and lack of confidence.* (Sam, 26, UK, FGD)

In my conversations with young people, this theme was evident in both my UK and Greek research settings. One young male participant, Christos (21, Greece, FGD), explained that getting "likes" may help young people to cover their insecurities when they meet a new person. He described how when a young man adds a girl [on Facebook] and she accepts his friend request, if she "likes" one of his posted pictures, it will not necessarily lead to a serious relationship; he rather gets a boost of self-confidence. In a similar way, Serina described:

> *If people are feeling a little bit self-conscious or a little bit insecure and therefore they feel like they need to portray themselves in a bit more of an attractive way in order to… Maybe for people to like, and the guys to like it and think, 'Oh, that girl's hot'.* (Serina, 25, UK, PEI)

In this way, perhaps, young people's online self-presentation can be explained not only as a strategic way to combat individual insecurities but a process related to young people's desire to attract attention.

8.3.2 Attention-seeking practices in the social media world

During my conversations with young participants in both research settings, it was evident that the creation of a social media profile is usually a result of peer pressure and a desire to keep up with peers' every day news. Many of my participants would agree with Juliette's (19, UK, PEI) statement: '*I got it [the profile] because everyone else had it'*, as this was a common starting point in our conversations irrespective whether we discussed social media platforms generally, or converted into pressure to create a "like"able account, that is to say,

pressure to satisfy an audience of peers. It is the notion of the power of the gaze (Sassatelli, 2011) that it may reinforce the idea of an audience-oriented digital impression management. The motivation to communicate aspects of the self in an online environment is in accordance with the idea that audience is so powerful that in some, maybe most, occasions it may implicitly direct the staging of the play.

Social media can provide a sense of status in a variety of ways. These include the numbers of friends/followers, shares/re-tweets, comments/replies, likes/hearts, views, and so on. In this way, the prosumption nature of new media motivates young social media users to try to construct and maintain a social media presence through which they can effectively communicate their messages to the audience. The message is crafted and curated depending on the user's perspective of audience demand. As such, it is partly an audience-oriented form of communication, but mostly it represents an effort at affirmation-seeking:

> *We [with his friend] were all day together [online], playing games, Skyping, just chatting, etc. and at some point, I saw a photo, going out for a coffee. And I am thinking, when did he manage to go? Before twenty minutes we were on Skype, what coffee? And I called him to ask where he was and he said 'At home'. And then he said 'I've saved this photo three days ago when I was out to upload it now'. And it was indeed with a sunset, and the same time, the sun was going down, and he told me 'It's perfect timing, I will get many "likes" because it's the time that everybody is in for the afternoon scroll down'.* (Christos, 21, Greece, FGD)

It has been highlighted elsewhere (Frison and Eggermont, 2015), that the process of "liking" a photo is a significant and daily part of users' engagement with social media platforms, and that it can have an impact on the poster's self-esteem and satisfaction. As one of my participants noted:

I think when you post a photo and you get lots of "likes"… And obviously, you get like more confidence. Do you know what I mean? It makes you feel good about yourself. (Charis, 16, Greece, PEI)

Is this a boost of confidence? (Interviewer)

Yeah. And it just makes you feel good about yourself. You could post a picture and get like 200 "likes" on it. (Charis, 16, Greece, PEI)

In this way, "likes" maximisation may signify the maximisation of reputation and reward on social media sites (Gandini, 2016). Instagram users can offer their approval on others' posts and even "like" (i.e. the symbol of a heart on Instagram in response) others' direct messages on its messenger section by clicking the mini-heart below the message. Facebook's "thumbs up" sign is replaced by the mini symbol of heart on Instagram, signalling approval and reinforcing the same logic. It is not my intention here to interpret impression management and a quest for "likes" through a technologically-mediated deterministic logic. However, it needs to be highlighted that social peer influence for acceptance gains further importance due to the platforms' architecture which conspicuously displays the total number of likes/hearts, re-tweets/shares under each shared post.

As was evidenced during my fieldwork, participants actively shaped their social media profiles. In their attempts to seek attention and gain validation they could exercise agency by choosing strategically when to upload a post during the day. For instance, as Melissa (16, UK, FGD) said, '*So I'll just wait and then put it on my Instagram at peak time'*. In a sense, "likes" may function as an indicator of peer status and popularity (Dumas *et al.,* 2012) as well as a way for young people to evaluate their reflexive project (Gidden, 1991). This process affects young people's online strategies. One of my young participants who was committed to her "success" in social media stated:

Do you check the peak hours and all that? (Interviewer)

Yeah. (Mila, 16, UK, PEI)

Which are the peak hours? (Interviewer)

It depends on your followers because on Instagram, you can have a business account. I used to have a business account. (Mila, 16, UK, PEI)

Do you have one? (Interviewer)

No, I don't anymore. But I used to have a business account and it comes out with insights… And it will tell you when the days people are most active, how many people have seen your photo, how many people have "liked" it, or if they saved it. And also the days when people are most active, all the times when people are most active… Sundays are usually… And then on mine, it used to be during the weekdays. It's usually around 9pm. (Mila, 16, UK, PEI)

Young people's plans and decisions about posting is linked with the number of "likes" they attract. As demonstrated, in some cases, young Instagrammers may create a business account that provides more detailed information about their online activity and their audiences' engagement. Thus, young people are able to strategically manage their profiles.

In general, such constant competition for "likes" is linked with the idea of social comparison and an evaluation of appearance compared to ideals of beauty presented both on traditional and non-traditional media (Festinger, 1954; Want, 2009). Another young participant illustrated this point:

Have you ever posted anything and then you deleted it as it wasn't good enough? (Interviewer)

Yeah. Yeah, a lot because I have a lot of posts archived so they're still on my profile but nobody else can see them. (Juliette, 19, UK, PEI)

Yeah, but do you remember why did you delete those? (Interviewer)

Because I thought I looked ugly on them [laughter]. (Juliette, 19, UK, PEI)

The importance of attention in young people's lives is reinforced further by evidence suggesting that characteristic comparison mediates the relationship between frequency of social media use and the acceptance of body image (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2015; Fardouly *et al.,* 2017; Feltman and Szymanski, 2018). Of course, social media content is mainly peer-generated, apart from the advertising, in a way that users become producers and consumers of content. In this way, they are simultaneously information sources and receivers (Holland and Tiggemann, 2016). Thus, it could be suggested that young users have effectively become prosumers of "likes":

> *It's very sad. My brother always calls me for it because it's just I like having the "likes". I don't really care about Facebook, but I like having the "likes". Right, if I post a photo on Instagram and it doesn't get a certain amount of "likes" in a certain amount of minutes, it's coming down.* (Juliette, 19, UK, PEI)
>
> *Have you deleted many pictures?* (Interviewer)
>
> *Yeah, it goes up at peak time. So, Sunday, at teatime, five o'clock is peak time on Instagram. So, if you post a photo at five o'clock on Instagram.* (Juliette, 19, UK, PEI)
>
> *You'll get more?* (Interviewer)
>
> *Yeah, I'll get seven "likes", ten "likes", in a minute. But if you post it not in peak times, it's going down.* (Juliette, 19, UK, PEI)

The competition for "likes" is interlinked with the filtering and editing mechanisms that Instagram provides to its users and their desire to maximise their self-management's effectiveness (Dumas *et al.,* 2017). Thus, this process of post deletion tells us something important about the concept of the self; it reveals how a part of young people's identities may be "consumed" online but not necessarily

approved by the audience. In doing so, it presents a self that is fragmented and needs to be reinvented.

8.3.3 Digital self-management as escapism

Having looked at emigration to another country as one form of escapism above, and as a response to social issues and tensions that young people face in an age of uncertainty as emerged from our conversations (see Chapter 6), my focus now shifts from offline to online emigration. As demonstrated in Chapter 6, young people's socio-economic disenchantment may lead them to seek an escape. The data presented in this chapter demonstrates that social media are essential to the negotiating processes of young people's identity construction. This part of the discussion focuses on the factors behind young people's desire for online impression management. It is important to highlight that one of the main themes that emerged from the focus groups and photo-elicitation interviews with young people was the absence from social media, and particularly from Instagram, of the ongoing economic crisis. For example, this young participant from Greece, Iole who is a heavy user on Instagram, said:

> *I think that they [people] are tired to listen that there is a crisis, financial, intellectual and they just browse Instagram and they see something ideal.* (Iole, 19, Greece, PEI)

A common issue among my Greek participants was that they considered the effects of the financial crisis to be absent from content on Instagram. Clearly, there is a misrepresentation between young people's perception of digital space and the lived reality of the majority. Likewise, this participant from Greece said a similar thing when tried to explain the crisis' absence from social networking sites:

> *If we could take someone and make him forget and he/she doesn't know anything about reality, neither about the crisis or the crisis of values or the financial or the political, nothing. He/she doesn't know anything about the socio-political and economic [crisis] and we make him understand what is happening only by the stories [on Instagram], shared photos, and generally by social media's virtual life and then take this world's image that he/she would create and after that show him the reality. I don't believe he/she could find not even one similarity between the two pictures, not even a common thing. I think that we can use this example to understand how social media distort reality's reflection.* (Pavlos, 30, Greece, FGD)

Pavlos went one step further by hypothetically comparing representations of life on social media to real life. Most of my participants agreed with such a distinction between reality and the social media world. Some of them argued that they could not see the effects of the crisis, but only in some requests posted to volunteer or provide help. Several highlighted that social media is all about entertainment and especially on Instagram the financial crisis is totally absent. Michalis added:

> *I would say that it's a recourse from reality, and this way a medium [of communication] where I wouldn't see what occurs around me, I'm not sure if I could, whether would have any meaning to use.* (Michalis, 29, Greece, PEI)

Thus, online space can be perceived through the lens of Instagram and impression management, which can mask actual financial hardship. What Michalis said illustrates that this type of online emigration via self-presentation concerns an engagement between both producers and consumers of the social media content. Indeed, the key attraction of virtual migration is a notion of the social media space as an idyllic lifestyle destination where the digital young migrant may experience a happier pace of life; a crisis-free life. For example, Chara said:

> *I think that you have this medium to show that another side of things exists and not being miserable… It's a means to be relieved. Let's say you watch the news… you don't see this when you go on Instagram and Facebook.* (Chara, 25, Greece, PEI)

Young people emigrate, digitally seeking, from the stresses and disappointment of reality. In the example of Chara, it is evident that this process, at least to an extent, is a conscious quest for alleviation. The question of whether this works as a permanent or temporary relief is one that I am going to address in due course. Overall, my young participants stated that Instagram users would not post on days where they are not doing anything special:

> *He/she is not going to post the day that he/she didn't go for a coffee because he/she didn't have the money, he/she would post the day that did go for a drink and he/she would buy couple of [spirit] bottles.* (Giannis, 21, Greece, FGD)

My young participants admitted that the excess they demonstrate through social networking sites is vital to ensure that consumption can continue to be flagged, even when its expenses have decreased. It is in this context that many of my young people argued that proof of the financial crisis simply does not exist on Instagram:

> *Can you see elements of the economic crisis on Instagram?* (Interviewer)
>
> *It isn't there.* (Iole, 19, Greece, FGD)
>
> *Instagram doesn't show the crisis.* (Vicky, 21, Greece, FGD)
>
> *On Instagram I do not want to show my problems, I want to show that I don't have any!* (Chris, 21, Greece, FGD)
>
> *That's it.* (Vicky, 21, Greece, FGD)

Everything is perfect. I don't know what you do, but I'm perfect. (Iole, 19, Greece, FGD)

The reality of my participants' lives is that the sense of biographic and aspirational openness that they have feels broad-ranging. Online self-management provides them with a sense of ownership of their lives. However, the fact that they are compelled to materialise their subjective expressions of dreams in this way means that they will always be disenchanted: in a sense they will never manage to escape.

8.4 The digital marketing of the self

Self-management is not enough. Self-presentation strategies are rewarding but their rewards are apparently short-lived. The public allure of branding lies in its power as a form of symbolism. It is clear that the world of social media can be considered as a world of marketing. What is interesting about a social media environment dominated by branding logic is that young people are aware of such mechanisms and are in effect willing to incorporate them into their practices. Having discussed self-enterprising and self-promotion practices (see Chapter 3), in this section, I examine the process of negotiating young people's perceptions about promoting the self and interactions on social media, especially on Instagram. This section presents the broad themes that emerged during my fieldwork in relation to young people's self-branding practices. Therefore, I rely on data that emerged from my focus group discussion, photo-elicitation interviews and online observations on Instagram. This section will examine how entrepreneurial logic enabled on young people's social media interactions shape the content of their shared posts online and contribute to the creation of meanings for young people's identity.

8.4.1 Self-branding in the social media sphere

During my fieldwork there was evidence to suggest that social media, Instagram especially, had a role to play in my participants' marketing of their (desired) self. As Adam (23, UK, PEI) expressed clearly, '*Instagram… It's more like life through the perfect lens'*. Of course, it is reasonable to suppose that people are not going to post a bad photo of themselves, however, this response demonstrates that Instagram is perceived as a lens through which lives are mediated. The marketing logic afforded by social media provides the constant possibility of self-branding that, at its core, is visual and performative. The proliferation of photos and videos makes it possible to visually market the self as faultless. Many of my participants used this concept of perfection to describe others' online social interactions and social media life. As Joseph said:

> *Well, generally, I'm of the opinion that viewing life through social media is a lens within itself. It's like you're looking at life through an Instagram filter so to speak. So, I feel it's as time goes on, the nature of the way that we consume is more fantastical and more unrealistic.* (Joseph, 26, UK, PEI)

What Joseph described here is how social media can function as a way to present and observe life in a customised, self-censored way. Through this visualisation, the intersection of social media with consumption results in an experience that is changing. It offers a hyper-real (that is, beyond real) environment, an idealised version of reality and self that young people perform and present to their peers to be "consumed". In this way, social media enables fantasy and arguably compels young consumers to engage with it. Other respondents described explicitly how some of their friends have constructed a branded self. For instance, Sam argued:

> *I'm saying my friend kind of uses not expensive material possessions but she portrays this kind of intellectual life but that's kind of her brand… You*

> *know reading clever books and going to exhibitions and being this intellectual is her brand. I think in the same way as someone wearing expensive trainers and having expensive whatever… That's just the replacement for her.* (Sam, 26, UK, FGD)

It is interesting how Sam explained that self-branding strategies do not always include expensive purchases but are about choreographing a version of self. Essentially, this strengthens the argument that the rise of social media could be the prime means of experience-based identity construction for young people. Sam's friend's social media posts are structured around the persona that has been created for her followers. This illustrates the extent to which self-branding is becoming a means of experience and self-identity consumption.

The manifested dominance of self-promotion has motivated what might be described as the branding of an idealised self. The branded self may be fundamentally linked to a competitive idealised self since, on social media, young people may try to keep up with peers to build their audience. Several of my participants explained clearly how the life projected on social media is an ideal life, one that does not correspond to reality. This notion of a consummate self and lifestyle came up constantly during my conversations with young people. While many young people indicated that their perception of people on social media was of an ideal self, others stated how they have gone about promoting such an idealised self themselves. For my participants there was a clear distinction between what young people demonstrate that they are and what they really are. For example, Mara said:

> *It [Instagram] is an illusion… Because everyone shares, we share… I don't exclude myself from this… Photographs that don't apply to reality.* (Mara, 17, Greece, PEI)

The aspiration for a successfully branded self necessitates the broadcasting of the perfect life. This way of playing out of identity in a rapidly changing world is not as liberating as it first appears. On the contrary, it demonstrates that, in light of the process of prosuming perfection, the very notion of being your real self is radically undermined. For instance, Michalis said:

> *I think that the mentality that Instagram shows is more of a world that we would like to be.* (Michalis, 29, Greece, PEI)

Michalis was explicit about this unreality, and directly related it to how the platform may exercise some form of power upon users and beguile young people into presenting a different version of themselves:

> *I think that everyone more or less… Not that is only people around us… I might have done it at some point. So, I can't say who has done it and tag someone, I just think that it is the type of the platform that sometimes entice [users] to show something that they are not.* (Michalis, 29, Greece, PEI)

Several of my young interviewees referred to young people's social media profiles as fictional, and on one occasion Charis (16, Greece, PEI) went as far as to call it a "sham". Most of the young people highlighted how social media users try, with their social media posts, to depict an ideal life. Sara gave a really good example of this:

> *Ideal… Unfortunately, many times some people try to give prominence to the ideal and it's there where we lose merit. It is unpleasing to go out… I'm doing it as well to go out and take a photo… But to go out for a drink and spending seven out of the eight hours that someone is with others on his/her mobile phone being "live" in order some others see that he/she's having a good time, it doesn't say anything to me… It's OK to get a picture, a video but until there. Spending all the time on a mobile phone, showing where someone is and having a good time, it is ostensible… Look 'I'm*

having a good time and you are at home'. I don't like that; I don't like it. (Sara, 28, Greece, PEI)

Despite criticism of other's behaviour, and what this might mean for young people's values, what could be suggested here is that young people are aware that social media provides a means by which they are able to create a world of their making; a selective and filtered world. The question that lies at the heart of this discussion is how this branded idealised self is actually promoted.

During my focus groups and Instagram profile-elicitation interviews, young people described and demonstrated what posts were significant to them and justifiable to share on social media. It was interesting how shared photos were related to moments that young participants characterised as 'cool' and worth remembering. For instance, Joseph (UK, PEI) aged twenty-six, showed that some of his posts were about when he had great time at his friend's birthday party during the Octoberfest beer festival in Manchester. In addition, another participant, Bob (16, UK, PEI), who is a college student and into theatre, explained how he enjoyed performing and loved doing Sweeney Todd in a theatrical play, so he posted lots about his performance. Another common theme of favourite posts were holidays, which is probably not too big a surprise given the fact that, in most cases, holidays are linked to memorable moments and fun. Another example is Mila (16, UK, PEI) who shared a post when she passed her driving test. These examples were thought-provoking because young people both in Greece and the UK linked their content to experiences. It is the combination of the performative nature of young people's engagement with social media and the experiential nature of youth consumption that leads to this idealised self.

Social media posts' content and experiences matter a lot to the construction of an idealised self. However, the notion of appearance is equally significant. My respondents generally explained how Instagram filters' usage make users look better. They described how filters can enhance photos. Joseph said:

> *Yeah, I use filters. I mean, not widely. I don't airbrush or anything like that, but I use a different light filter in order to make myself look a little bit more attractive than I already do, which I know is fantastic because I do look great.* (Joseph, 26, UK, PEI)

In fact, filters were seen to be a means to improve the self. For instance, this point was illustrated by Adam:

> *I suppose the filters, they kind of just make your photo look better, give it better lighting. I suppose we like to use to make ourselves look better, make the skin look clearer, make that photo that bit better, more perfect.* (Adam, 23, UK, PEI)

Young people seemed to be fully aware that there were other users who may use filters on a regular basis. In addition, another young female participant, Serina, highlighted that she can understand how other women may use filters when they *'haven't done the makeup and the hair'*. But it was even more interesting when *Serina* described the role of social media filters:

> *So I think sometimes you can use it as a bit of a mask… I think, generally people use it to make themselves look more attractive, whether it be clearing the skin to make it look visually more attractive, I don't think I know what other reason.* (Serina, 25, UK, PEI)

What was significant in my discussions with young participants was the metaphor of the filter as a mask (Goffman, 1990 [1959]). Thus, filters may function as one of the props of self-presentation and self-branding. During my conversations with young people, it was worth noting how several of my respondents described the

aestheticised body as an attempt to attract the attention of their peers. It was clear that aestheticisation practices are crucial for young people's Instagram experiences, and that they affect our understanding of self-branding. For example, Aspa said:

> *Women who have a very nice appearance can pursue a career on Instagram and how can I say it, they often show it up and, in this way, it attracts the male population for obvious reasons.* (Aspa, 17, UK, FGD)

For my participants, this seemed to be a straightforward case of common sense. They explained how other users tend to give "likes" to those who show their "traits" rather than those who are quiet. Some of my participants explained how aestheticised content may be equally useful for both women and men. However, in some cases, young interviewees did tend to highlight some different aspects of content usage:

> *I think that a man can't show some of his intense features so easily, only his abs, but certainly, someone who posts with his swimwear is going to get more "likes" than someone who posts with his t-shirt.* (Anastasia, 23, Greece, PEI)

This was not only a theme of discussion with my Greek participants; I received some similar reactions from my participants in the UK. For instance, in one of my photo-elicitation interviews, Juliette explained how some of her posts could receive more "likes" instead of others. Juliette described:

> *… 273 is my most "likes"… A sexualised post… I have my bum on it which obviously the boys ["like"]…* (Juliette, 19, UK, PEI)

It is reasonable to argue that young people's self-promotion and the sexualised body are linked. Interestingly, in my conversations with Greek young people, a similar explanation was expressed explicitly:

> *At least for a man to make a like to a woman and be kind of famous [on Instagram] there are some other reasons, she must be a little bit naked to get "likes".* (Ariadne, 22, Greece, FGD)

This notion of approval of a sexualised post was reinforced when Anastasia (23, Greece, PEI) said that one of her "normal" photos attracted "likes" only by women and not from men. The tactics of self-promotion are not only confined to the boundaries of a generic sexualised post, but incorporate other crucial choices such as clothing and sharing photos with partners. For example, Iole said:

> *Those with your boyfriend or relationship… They are not getting so many "likes". If you look here, I haven't even got 250.* (Iole, 19, Greece, PEI)

While some choices, such as whether to validate a partner and a relationship on Instagram, are crucial, young people's management of social media posts tends to go far beyond that. Of course, it can be said that young people use tactics to promote an idealised self, as explained in previous sections. However, it could be argued that a "true" self is no longer enough for the promotion of the idealised self. In this regard, the self needs to be enhanced to remain competitive in a "marketplace" defined by the ability of a user to attract attention.

8.4.2 The augmented self

The argument being advanced here is that the promotion of an idealised self cannot offer the expected rewards in the competitive "marketplace" of attention and affirmation. But there is a need for an extended self, one that enhances the individual and his or her self-brand equity. The social media arena provides a space in which the possibilities for self-extension proliferate. The social media generated self is freed from constraints and is actively engaged in a space in which consumption and experience become key resources of success. The social

media sphere being explained here is one in which young people's identities are evidently subjected to increasing choices. It is my suggestion that the self is reinvented by using props for an augmented self-brand.

Before moving on to discuss the features of young people's extended self-branding, and the imperative of augmenting the branded social media persona, I want to present evidence of how my young people's Instagram practices and photos verified what many described during the focus group discussions and photo-elicitation interviews. Several of my participants described how young people on social networking sites may share some of their pictures in order to show their friends/followers where they have been. One of the common examples provided was that they may often post and consume others' posts from specific places. For instance:

> *The most frequent [posts] are if they go to places like cafés, the beach, the Acropolis or abroad, these are the most common things they share and then I think just selfies.* (Petros, 17, Greece, PEI)

Of course, my main point of discussion here is the props that young people use for the construction of an extended branded self. However, it is imperative to shed some light on the significance of selfies depicting moments of my young participants. Selfies were common in the material collected over the two-month period of my fieldwork. In some cases, my young participants appeared alone in selfies or mirror selfies (i.e. picture of the self captured via a mirror), while in a few cases they appeared side by side with their friends. For instance, on one occasion, Chara (25, Greece, PEI) shared a permanent post on Instagram containing two selfies as a series of pictures (that is, one after the other, collated) accompanied by three hashtags: #endofweekend, #14july, #selfreminder. In both

selfies, Chara's face occupies the entire frame of the picture in an unidentifiable location. In the first picture, Chara looks straight to the camera smiling, while in the second one she looks at the camera from a different angle. Chara's face is clearly made up using lipstick and blusher. While in most selfies either posted on their Instagram Feed or InstaStories, the self comes first and foremost, there are some cases where the selfie picture has a note showing the time the picture was taken or it is geo-tagged revealing the place it was taken. Clearly, even in selfies, some other features gain importance that may help in the promotion of the self.

It was during the photo-elicitation interviews that I realised that my young participants shared pictures of their holidays widely. In some cases, they went through and narrated pictures depicting a beach or moments of their vacation in Mykonos and Santorini. In another example, one of my participants, Petros (17, Greece, PEI) had shared a picture of the Colosseum from his trip to Rome. In the last stage of my research, during the period of online observation, it was even more prominent how, in posts, young people position themselves in specific socio-cultural spaces that identify them as experience-based consumers. This element of identity-construction draws attention to the increasing role of images in contributing to young people's self-branding practices.

In many cases, an idealised real-world location may function as a prop to be used by participants. This specific theme was not about bars or cafés but about genuine locations (geo-tagged or not). Of course, if we consider places such as a Greek island or the Acropolis, they carry their own values and meanings. To an extent, they are branded places. For example, two of my participants shared photos of the Acropolis. The first one, Dimitris (29, Greece), shared a photo of the Parthenon being lit up at night, did not use a tag for his location. In contrast,

my other young interviewee, Mara (17, Greece) shared part of the ancient Agora of Athens using the geo-tag ‘Acropolis’. In both cases, by sharing creative posts with landmarks, my young participants used place strategically as a point of reference in their everyday moments, and this marks them as prosumers of the brand of space.

Before considering the role of geo-brands in young people’s self-branding practices, it is worth considering the example of the beach. Of course, the period of online observation during the summer months (July and August) had an effect on the content of posts captured. However, the importance of holidays and beaches demonstrates the increasingly experiential nature of the consumer society in which young people live in, and the way in which any symbolic meanings of branding are transferred from the places in which young people spend time and/or money to the construction of their selfhood. Many of my participants shared pictures of a beach, either depicting only the location, or in other cases themselves and/or their friends. For instance, one of my participants, Anastasia (23, Greece) shared a picture with a sign ‘The Love Bay’, with the geo-tag ‘Love Bay, Poros’. In another case, Iole (19, Greece) posted a picture of the sea and the blue sky with a note ‘Sunny and today the…’ geo-tagging the location, namely ‘Kalamata’. It is important to consider the role of place in the construction of a social media self and relate such developments to the rise of a new way to engage with place. This is no longer a space where just people visit, but rather where they actively capture and share online, engaging in a self-branding activity. Perhaps most importantly, the role of place is not only a space in which young people live and act but also it affects their self-branding practices.

In effect, the mere act of going to a specific location, taking a photo and then sharing it online is an act of prosumption.

Another theme that emerged from the analysis of my young people's Instagram posts was their engagement with brands. During my online observations, I collected thirty-three photos with elements of branded products or services. The branded features either appeared in the photo or were tagged as a geographic location. There were several cases, such as the demonstration of cafés or bars, where the branded element was presented in a more subtle way, via a geo-tag. Only in a couple of cases were the brands' Instagram accounts tagged. In a few cases, there was a combination of a geo-tagged space of consumption (e.g. a bar) and a branded bottle of spirit. In the 'brands' theme, I analysed pictures presenting brands in a prominent position in a way that focused the audience's gaze on the product. In such images, the branded product is photographed at close range so that the background and periphery gain less attention, focusing exclusively on the product, in this way allowing the individual concerned to demonstrate his or her consumer persona and, at the same time, to enhance his or her self-brand equity by transferring the perceived value of the branded product to the self.

My young participants produced staged posts that paid considerable attention to detail. For instance, in one case, one of the participants photographed a bottle of Sol beer but next to it was a bottle of water provided by the bar. The bottle of water carried the logo of the bar. In this way, while her post was not geo-tagged, it was a more subtle way of communicating both the purchased drink and the name of the bar. For my informants, their choice of what to drink and where to go seemed to be vital elements of their self-branding. Such elements of self-brand

equity are communicated in the posts in several ways. Some shared photos of them holding a bottle of beer or a paper cup of take-away coffee, others posted pictures that showed them in a café or a restaurant menu, and in other cases the picture of a place with either a geo-tag or a note. More specifically, one of my participants shared a picture depicting a take away coffee in her car. In this example, we can identify two different branded props: the name of the café where she bought her coffee and her Hyundai car. What is being performed here is an active way of enriching her brand equity by capitalising upon the shared picture of the acquired products.

Through these examples it can be argued that the ability of social media users to successfully attract and maintain audience attention is affected by their ability to manage and promote the augmented self efficiently. While posting about the self remains significant, supplementary elements are equally important in an attention-oriented competitive social media world.

8.4.3 The new ephemeral self

Social media play a fundamental role in the intensification of self-management and self-marketing. Young people are at the forefront of a changing world, a world of uncertainty as I demonstrated in Chapter 6. At the same time, internet access and social networking sites provide an easily accessible arena in which young people can “perform” their identities. In the current transition towards large segments of one’s life being committed to and expressed via digital platforms, the self is reinvented, and social media provides the means by which young people can construct and promote an idealised representation. Such a notion of self is formed only by the positive moments in life in a sanitised space where all the negative aspects of everyday life must be filtered out. Recently emerged social

media platforms, such as Snapchat and Instagram, with their features of twenty-four-hour stories, put considerable pressure on young people. As discussed earlier, the idealised self is no longer sufficient. Young people need some props to maintain attention in a competitive commodified arena. In this way, their sense of self needs to be augmented. It is not merely a question of self-censorship (neglecting to post less aspirational experiences) – it is a question of the creation of more or less real experiences in the social media market.

Social media profiles are arguably the space where young people try to manifest their experiences. They offer an escape through experience-related consumption posts promoting the freedom of the consumer society. However, the existence of such an environment is premised upon the expectation that young people will post relentlessly. As my young participants demonstrated:

> *[I post] to get some "likes", to show something new, not seeing [her peers] that I go to the same places.* (Anastasia, 23, Greece, FGD)
>
> *… If you go to new places, certainly you want to upload [posts], to demonstrate to the people that you don't go to the same places all the time.* (Ariadne, 22, Greece, FGD)

In other words, young people's shared posts are characterised more and more by innovation. What is interesting about this process is that this notion of newness, as well as the self that is promoted, are actively consumed:

> *If you look really nice in a photo, if you get something new, like if you get a new phone, put it on Instagram.* (Mila, 16, UK, PEI)

Of course, digital technological advancements in relation to photography have transformed self-identity disclosure practices (Serafinelli, 2018). Entry to the social media world allows the young individual to actualise their self. Producing

and consuming on social media satisfies young people's desires. Nevertheless, young individual's self-fulfilment is momentary:

> *It's a temporary backdrop isn't it for you where as if you put a permanent post in than it's going to last for longevity. Where as you just put another story up and then it's another story.* (Joseph, 26, UK, PEI)

Engagement with social media apparently creates an extra pressure for young people to constantly and instantaneously reinvent the self. This new sense of selfhood is characterised by its *ephemerality.* It reflects a de-standardisation of young people's biographies by a fragmentation of the self into discontinuous ephemeral *moments*. Young people access a sense of control of their trajectories through social media, but in doing so, their control is ephemeral and ties them to the parameters that consumption provides. In a sense, young people have no choice but to present their *ephemeral self.* In this regard, social media provides a sense of stability and yet perpetuates that instability at one and the same time.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on social media as the primary consumption-based form through which young people negotiate their identities. Of course, it would be an exaggeration to argue that the social media self is entirely technologically determined. Social networking sites provide a space in which youth identity construction is actualised. Digital production and consumption of the self is in a sense liberating. It gives the young consumer a sense of control. And yet the degree to which digital impression management and self-branding are genuinely emancipating is questionable. Social media users also have a price to pay for this, not least in the case of young people who are yet to establish their "membership" of the world to which they are so determined to belong. In fact, by

its very existence, social media space simply magnifies the degree to which authenticity of the self is undermined. In a consumption-oriented social media world everything apparently becomes about perception rather than about authenticity.

Here perhaps dwells the key transition in the changing nature of the relationship between consumption and identity: perception becomes everything. In order for young people to survive in this world they must construct an idealised self. This is all about focussing on what someone does and portrays rather than who or what it is they are. In this regard, young people have become the victims of their own success, as an ephemeral self needs to be constantly reinvented.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

The purpose of this research has been to critically assess the role that social media plays in young people's consumption as part of their relationship to a world of uncertainty, and what this means for the construction of identity. Consumption is neither passive nor static; it is the both the product and the driver of social change. This is why it is imperative for social researchers to understand the role that consumption plays in young people's self-identity, and how they potentially construct themselves through what it is they consume. This research is situated in a precarious world in which young people undertake such a negotiation in social media space through comparison with one another. Theory and data indicate socio-economic uncertainty and the impact of austerity frames youth experiences, and that young people's relationship with social media provide a pivotal means by which young people adapt to such uncertain futures. The digital space provides young people with a potential of ownership of the course of their lives, but the escape that it offers is quintessentially ephemeral. The performative nature of young people's relationship with social media is to an extent therefore transforming the nature of consumption. A key point of emphasis here then is that the nature of consumption has become performative.

9.1 Youth lives in a chaotic society

I have examined, theoretically and empirically, the way in which social media consumption has impacted how young people negotiate their identities as consumers in a socio-economic context they experience as increasingly chaotic. The discussion about the role of uncertainty in young people's lives is central to

any attempt to produce a meaningful understanding of the relationship between consumption and youth identity. In Chapter 4, I discussed the impact of the risk society (Beck, 1992) and uncertainty on youth lives and experiences. Since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, and during the inter-crisis period from 2009 to 2019, any theoretical and empirical discussions around the role of risk and uncertainty in youth lives has become ever-more important. The global economic crisis, triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic has led to an escalation in uncertainty, with ongoing negative consequences for contemporary societies and youth. These effects are likely to be long-lasting, if not permanent. It is on these grounds that the findings of this study are worthy of contemplation as it is likely youth responses to the Global Financial Crisis and the austerity of the inter-crisis years will indicate their response to the impact of the Covid-19 crisis.

I addressed the research questions posed using a triangulated qualitative framework. In the first and the second stage of this research, I employed focus group discussions and photo-elicitation interviews to provide the opportunity for young people in Greece and the UK to share their concerns and anxieties. At the same time, this served as a platform upon which I engaged with the complex social and individual challenges young people face. Through my empirical research, I have demonstrated the potential gains of a triangulated qualitative framework that tries to address the experience of uncertainty. As such, this study provides insight into the complex conditions that young people experience when negotiating their identities. The comparative element of the research, in two different countries, informs debates around the increased level of risk that young people are experiencing and herein lies a key contribution of the thesis.

The emphasis that young people put on instability during the focus group discussions, and their constant attempts to describe its role in their everyday lives, indicated that it was an issue that demanded further discussion and analysis. The findings of this research illuminate how the nature of uncertainty is expressed during political and financial crises. Although the differences between the Greek and the UK economies and their contrasting levels of impact on youth lives were evident, common themes about young people in both countries emerged. Data gathered suggests young people's lack of independence from parents, their fear of unemployment, and the unpredictability of work are major drivers of uncertainty. However, it was evident that the intensity of uncertainty and the way in which young people take this upon their own shoulders was one of the things that appears to differentiate young people's experiences in Greece and the UK. Such differences can be summarised on young people's disenchantment about the ongoing situation in Greece and their contention that there is no future in the country, while, young people in the UK they did not express intense feelings in a similar way. As I argued in Chapter 6, it is these conditions that hold youth in a state of precarity (c.f. Standing, 2014). In the 1990s, Furlong's and Cartmel's (1997) discussions about risk and uncertainty in youth lives emphasised the effect of uncertainty on work, and its subjective impact on youth identities. My data show these results are still very relevant today, and yet have taken on a new dimension.

The possible life choices and constraints (and as a result the risks) that young people have to deal with have multiplied in the last twenty-three years. This study reaffirms, as I argued in Chapter 6, the fact that young people are obliged to find individualised ways in which to navigate their present through the intensity of this

uncertainty. What this study adds is that the feeling of uncertainty has become *normalised* and that social media provides the primary arena in which this takes place. It was evident that young people expect 'there's just nothing stable anymore'. It is within the condition of an ever-increasing *normalised uncertainty* that young people try to retain a sense of hope for the future, and adjust to this reality. By the end of 2010s and in the beginning of 2020s, this feeling that young people's pathways are subjective and unique has intensified. Social media provides a space within which this can happen, while simultaneously feeding the process of intensification it may otherwise alleviate. One of the core findings of this research is that, as I discussed in Chapter 6, young people appear to be obliged to negotiate their identities against the background of uncertainty while recognising that there are increasing constraints, and hence a lack of freedom, in their lives. The data suggest young people understand that consumption facilitates the role of what is in effect an illusory freedom. The social media space in which they can supposedly be whoever and do whatever they want becomes an arena in which they must compete. In a period of severe economic crisis and limited financial resources what young people can actually buy in order to achieve such freedom is limited. In this way, the waters that consumption offers are characteristically choppy. As I have empirically examined, such tensions are summarised in the paradox that exists between young people's critique of consumerism and their excessive engagement with it, despite and in a sense because of the constraints imposed by the financial crisis, and their paradoxical embrace of social media facilitated prosumption. As a response, youth seek new ways to escape from the feeling of risk but without actually distancing themselves from the heart of consumer culture which would in itself be a price too high to pay.

9.2 Escaping to idealised worlds

This thesis illustrated a situation in which disenchanted youth turn to escapism. Based on my findings, it is clear that young people are compelled to confront a turbulent and unstable world and, in their attempt to navigate this, seek some form of escape. Although this turbulence and instability are not of their making, the sheer intensity of the crisis imposed on youth is mirrored in the intensity of their attempts to escape from its consequences. As I argued in Chapter 6, one form of escape for Greek youth was to give up hope of achieving their aspirations in the country of their birth and relocate to another nation. The evidence suggests that for young Greeks emigration, is, at least in part, a parallel response to the daily challenges young people face in the offline world. Migration aspirations for European youth, in the context of the crisis, are not something new (Van Mol, 2016). This study has shown that many young people perceive the host destination as an idealised place. For example, Greek youth in this research were well aware of risk and uncertainty in Greece, but did not realise that a similar sense of risk and uncertainty exists among young people in other countries, as became evident from the fieldwork in the UK. It is worth noting that aspirations for escape are not purely defined physically. They are also, and arguably predominantly, virtual in nature.

Research findings demonstrated that young people also aspire to migrate to a virtual world. It was evident that there are some parallels between migration to another nation and migration online. This project has shed light on the contemporary youth experience of consumption, and how the process of meaning-creation has (to an increasing extent) become digital. My data suggests that young people use consumption as a resource to add value to their

experiences and to their peer's perceptions of what such experiences might actually be. In such circumstances experiential forms of online consumption constitute a more justifiable resource of identity construction given the nature of financial constraints and economic hardships. As I argued in Chapter 7, young people buy products, not necessarily for their own sake, but for what they offer them experientially as a means of competing with their peers. In Chapter 8, it was evident that the pro-active advertising of moments of consumption represent a key ingredient in this process. It is through this process that the feeling of acceptance can be achieved. In this context, it is not only through products that young people can stand out, but also through experiences and the meanings that those experiences can imply for others who consume the self-branding that a young person choreographs. Experience-led consumption can be considered to be an alternative but equal form of ostentatious display in the eyes of the young consumer.

Within the context of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, and the associated uncertainty of the inter-crisis period, young people were certainly open to criticising the consumer culture in which they participated. Young people identified hyper-consumption as the main focus for this critique. However, it was evident that young people sought a kind of mechanism to justify their own engagement with forms of consumption, either by relating to themselves as "average" consumers, or through a personal narrative of choices that were justified by the "quality of consumption".

Many of the young participants argued that they took their decisions as any rational consumers would in response to the economic crisis. But this is something that we have to examine critically. It might be they thought that this is

what they *should* say in order to shed themselves in a positive light. Although my respondents heavily criticised their peers as being irresponsible youth who only want to exhibit their status, they seemed not to recognise their own engagement in the realm of consumption. Another interesting point that emerged from the research was this need on the part of my respondents to portray themselves as rational consumers, as if saying so would make it true and thereby camouflage the complex decisions that young people have to make in their everyday lives as consumers.

Digital media and technological advancement, help to ensure that social media consumption is a significant part of young people's lives. The above point was well illustrated in the third stage of this research during my period of online observation on Instagram. As became evident by observing my participants' posts on Instagram, elements of the crisis were conspicuously absent from their online curated lives. It is this fantasy world of Instagram that offers young people an opportunity to let themselves partake in a world where the financial constraints and the multiplicity of uncertainty can be eroded. As I argued in Chapter 7, Instagram constitutes the space in which young people try to assert their choices over products and experiences; this was common between young people in Greece and the UK.

During the focus group discussions and photo-elicitation interviews, young people continuously referred to the impact of Instagram, and social media more broadly, on how they display a higher status than that which they actually have access to in the offline world. They simultaneously, however, deny that this had an effect on their own way of sharing moments online. It seems the "marketplace" of "likes" creates a disincentive for young people to post photos and videos simply

in order to “show off”. They have to perceive of their own posts as authentic: authentic in the sense that they will hold their own in the social media world. There is a paradox here. Young people appear to *perform* authenticity and part of this is precisely because people are expected to perform authenticity.

The attraction of the social media space lies in the power of the experience and the fantasy world that this offers to the young consumer. Within the social media world, Instagram represents a controlled landscape that facilitates performance. Instagram’s environment, in which everything is well on the surface, creates an illusion of the flawless consumer (Bauman, 2005b). It is a supposedly pleasurable and idealised space that fulfils young people’s thirst to construct communal spaces in which they individually conquer; a space distinct from external conflicts. It is my suggestion that Instagram, the new virtual cathedral of consumption you might say, promises the young consumer a contemporary dreamworld of escape.

9.3 Young people and social media consumption

The effect of consumption on how young people relate to the self is without doubt a complex issue. The contention underpinning this thesis is that the impact of social media consumption on youth identity is such that young people’s experience of everyday life is fundamentally altered. In Chapter 3, I have considered the ways by which the young self is reinvented as a performative entity and in which self-presentation (Goffman, 1990 [1959]), self-branding and perception prevail upon authenticity. Young people do not spontaneously display themselves, but they rationally calculate their persona in a way that they perceive it can satisfy their audience. In Chapter 3 I explored Marwick and boyd’s (2011) contention that social media self-presentation practices have an effect on the relationship between the notion of celebrity and individuals. The data gathered

and presented in Chapter 8 suggests that young people are increasingly engaged in practices of self-branding in the social media world. Young people have become self-branders.

In an unstable world in which one socio-political and financial crisis succeeds another, young people struggle to find a way to establish themselves. As I argued in Chapter 2, the role of production/consumption (prosumption) of a social media profile as a means of identity construction is significant, as does social media, as an arena within which youth's identity construction can be achieved. In Chapters 7 and 8, the evidence suggested that at first sight, social media consumption offers young people a sense of playfulness and imagination and the digital space provides the opportunity to assert some sense of control. What I argue here is that young people use social media as a source of endowing and communicating meanings. In other words, social media consumption appears to offer young people an alternative (and financially accessible) resource by which constructive notions of self can be identified. However, what such resources can ultimately offer is perhaps only ultimately illusory.

There is a hidden irony here. Social media consumption provides young people with the resources they need to negotiate their identities. However, such a world quintessentially reaffirms the power of consumer capitalism. Consumption is no longer restrained by temporal and spatial limitations. But what is important here is that young people can consume, but their own identities are also "consumed". In Chapter 3, I tried to shed some light on the discussion about micro-celebrity practices. Senft's (2008) and Marwick's (2010) contributions are significant here. However, their research was mostly related to the territories of blogosphere and the technology industry. This research project goes some way to addressing this

gap. I argue that micro-celebrity practices are not confined within a marketing-related world but they have direct impact upon on young people's everyday lives. As I argued in Chapter 8, the image of the consumer persona has become a necessary currency that is the key to peer approval. It promotes consumerism as a lifestyle and requires evidence of this lifestyle to be prosumed online.

Social networking sites provide a way of assessing young people's choices. Young people self-present and self-promote elements of their identities, and in that way, they try to validate their choices. There has always been an entrepreneurial version of the self, but social media intensifies this process. In the social media arena, young people are left in a state of constant flux, facing the risk of presenting and promoting an unacceptable brand. In the competitive environment that social media provides young people's strategic decisions about what to share or not become more and more calculating when every post may result either in success or failure. What is intensified in this process is a feeling of life as a personal project.

The irony here is that young people try to accomplish all this through the notion of individualised responsibility by designing and constructing their 'life as a plan' (Giddens, 1991). Gidden's point is of paramount significance. The notion of life as a plan or project has provided a convincing metaphor to understand the processes by which individuals tend to negotiate the relationship between identities, subjective risk and uncertainty in the 1990s. The findings of this study, as discussed in all the empirical chapters but mainly in Chapter 8, reveal how this process has intensified in the context of increasing risk and the digitalisation of consumption.

It is clear from the discussion with my participants that a young person is setting out into a lifestyle market that somebody can face success and failure as two equal imposters. To compete in this market, young people are obliged to follow micro-celebrity and marketing practices in relation to their lifestyles. In this case, I want to argue that the online identity that they try so hard to "monetise" can be best described as a kind of *start-up.* What I call a *start-up identity* is similar to the nature of a start-up business. While start-ups have to design and implement specific plans and projects, one of their main elements is the risky circumstances within which they have to manage what might well be a failure. Unlike generic projects, they are usually solo entrepreneurial projects or in very small teams. Likewise, today, young people's *start-up identities* have high levels of uncertainty and amount to a small-scale but nonetheless considerable risk.

The rejection young people may face can feature either in the "real" world or in the virtual world. In the former, they face rejection due to the recurrent crises, exclusion from the labour market and the risk of failure to fulfil their aspirations. While, in the latter, they may face rejection from a social media world in which they tried so hard to belong. Only a small percentage of start-up new initiatives can see their value increase in a way that matches their dreams. To a certain extent, the same "rules" apply to the social media sphere. With the impression of having absolute control of their branded self, what many young social media consumers fail to realise is that the vast majority will not end up being Instagram "influencers" or celebrities on social media platforms: that ultimately their online social media success is a matter of their own judgment and unlikely to reach the levels to which they might aspire.

9.4 Digitalisation of consumption and de-territorialisation

One of the things that I have argued throughout this thesis is the importance of social media consumption in the reinvention of the nature of consumption, and in the notion of self. What I am suggesting here is that capitalism offers a sense of reinvention of the self through social media consumption, so that young people can maintain a semblance of choice. Social media consumption appears to provide young people with a sense of control. But the choice that is qualified is a private choice in a supposedly communal space which is controlled. One of the issues at hand is whether young people can gain any sense of genuine stability in a space that is so highly regulated by the opinions of others.

It would appear that Instagram is the contemporary version of the mall. Instagram thus functions as the modern space of consumption. It offers the young consumer a broad range of choice in a fantastical place, but at the same time, conceals its exploitative capitalistic nature. As I discussed in Chapter 3, Castells (2010) suggestion that we live in an era where time and space are fragmented and, in this way, life has become a series of temporal and spatial streams is significant here. The results of this research come to confirm such a suggestion and I therefore argue that young people construct their sense of belonging upon such foundations. In Chapter 8 it was evident that the nature of consumption is increasingly digitalised and de-territorialised. In this way, young people consume without sharing a common physical territory. Today, it is difficult to discuss offline and online consumption as two distinct forms. Consumption is not primarily bounded by physical space. One way of further understanding this process is then by returning to Ritzer's (1999) concept of disenchantment. In this way, the virtual cathedrals of consumption offer the young consumer the feeling of a

unique experience surpassing time and space boundaries. Young consumers can curate and choose the lifestyle of their own choice. But in a world of constant change the notion of the self appears to be ephemeral and it is due to this sense of ephemerality that the foundations upon which young people construct their sense of belonging is undermined. Social media consumption offers some resource of stability on the surface but at the same time destabilises youth identities.

9.5 Limitations of the research

Given the theoretical nature of the above contentions there is a need to take into consideration the specific issues that came to define this study. This research examined young people's social media consumption and focused on their self-branding practices on Instagram. While there was much emphasis placed on Instagram during the second and third stage, this limits the range of the research. The social media landscape is not static, but a fluid and fast-changing environment. A few years ago, young people were the core users of Facebook and that was the main platform where they expressed themselves. As a result, many researchers focused their studies on that platform. Today, young people choose Instagram; tomorrow it will be something else. Of course, this does not mean that useful insights gained by scholars become redundant. On the contrary, such investigations lay the theoretical groundwork for future research.

Regarding the selection of participants, my decision during the second and third stage of the research was to focus on young people who were not necessarily heavy users of Instagram and social media. I rather chose to focus on users with active profiles. I chose not to research, "follow" or interview young people who would be considered as Instagram celebrities or especially savvy users, although

by using this alternative approach I might have gained a more in-depth understanding of their motivations. However, by including non-Instagram and non-social media users during the first stage and “average” users during the second and third stage of the research, I had the opportunity to grasp a broad range of views towards understanding the social phenomenon of the relationship between consumption and youth identity.

My intention in the beginning of this research was to understand young people’s relationship with consumption in the context of uncertainty. The fieldwork was based on two different countries. It could be argued that this decision might limit the advantages to be gained by my focusing intensely on one location. While concentrating solely on one location would have offered a more in-depth analysis in one country, researching two different locations has provided me with a comparative perspective and analytical skills that offered an alternative perspective. Moreover, this was a study that incorporated three qualitative stages. Undoubtedly, additional theoretical and empirical insights could be gained by researchers who would be able to complement this study with a mixed methods or quantitative approach. This would be an interesting point and, in that way, results could be generalised to a wider population. However, it is worth noting that my qualitative approach produced an insight into the meanings with which young consumers endowed social media which could not otherwise have been revealed.

This study focused on young people’s meanings and practices sharing (or not) content on social media, and the relationship between their self-presentations and consumption. The steps between the second and third stage in the research could be reversed. More specifically, I could have proceeded by observing young

people's Instagram profiles, and then moved on to the photo-elicitation interviews. In that way, I would possibly have been better prepared to discuss the specific images young people were willing to share with me, instead of trying to adapt my questions to the pictures they selected. Of course, by doing so, I would have sacrificed the spontaneity of my interaction with the young participants and this would have increased the risk of imposing my preference of the photos analysed, instead of giving them the opportunity to take the lead during the conversation. On reflection, the above concerns do not outweigh the opportunity my research afforded me to access the complex set of circumstances in which young people negotiate social media consumption.

9.6 Future research

In this thesis, I have presented evidence that for young people the nature of consumption has become increasingly performative. Such an analysis could function as a foundation for future research in attempts to address questions in youth and consumption studies that seek to understand the ways in which young people seek to mitigate against their experience of risk and uncertainty in the everyday. This research will complement further projects that seek to identify similar transformations in other social contexts. Such projects may focus on different target groups or different countries. Unpacking matters related to such social changes is a significant starting point for the discussion of the role of consumption in everyday life.

This thesis sheds light on the significance of the spatial expression of this transformation across time, from high streets and shopping malls to the digital space. Future work must seek to interrogate how transformations in the nature of consumption have the power to reinvent the relationship between people,

especially young people, with spaces, in the broadest sense, of consumption. What does this process mean for the notion of place? Does the desire to construct and control a sense of place remain fundamental to how social actors endow meanings to spaces? What are the implications for young people's collective sense of place? Digital technology does not only offer new ways of communication, but it is linked to processes of socialisation. Perhaps the challenge ahead then lies in social researchers' examination of the placemaking capacity of digital consumption.

9.7 Concluding comments

The original rationale behind this study was to investigate the relationship between social media consumption and young people's construction of identity in the context of socio-economic instability using a comparative approach between Greece and the UK. One of the core issues that this research project has put emphasis on is the performative nature of young people's relationship with social media. The intention of this discussion of social media consumption and youth identity was to demonstrate how young people's social media self provides a means for the playing out of young people's identities in an uncertain world. Although social media consumption appears (on the surface) to enable and provide some sense of management of identity, it intensifies the pressure on young people to respond sufficiently to social changes.

Young people engage with social media in an attempt to construct relationships and a sense of their own self in such a context. By focusing on social media consumption and young people's sharing of everyday moments, this research has demonstrated how young people consciously curate their online profiles. It was evident that young people strategically exclude what they feel would be

detrimental to their self-branding. Instagram constitutes a space in which moments of youth consumption are documented online. It is within this space that young people's pressure to both produce and consume the mundane both consolidates the self and demands its perpetual consolidation.

The sociology of consumption, and especially scholars who focus on youth consumption, are confronted with the challenge to adapt to the changing nature of consumption in a fragile and digital world. The ongoing development of new technologies will continue to intensify young people's experience of social change and will mean that such research has to be increasingly time-sensitive and adaptable.

This research has sought to maintain a focus on the difficulties that young people face. It is undeniable that young people's experiences are characterised by the prospect of unemployment, fluid working conditions, zero-hour contracts, a lack of housing opportunities and diminished wages, along with many other obstacles. The Global Financial Crisis that started in 2008, and the austerity measures that followed, have left their mark indelibly in young people's everyday lives, both in Greece and the UK. In a moment in history in which the impact of new crises has already started to emerge, it is of the utmost importance for sociologists of youth to be fully aware of the need to understand how social transformations in an uncertain world affect young people's lives.

The implications of this study are even more pressing at a point in history when societies are trying to adapt to the demands of a Covid-19 and hence a *post*-Covid-19 world. In some senses, young people may have been hit less by the pandemic outbreak compared to other segments of the population. However,

there is no indication that they will be protected from the inevitable economic and personal crises that will follow. In the pandemic era, the blurring of processes of production and consumption become increasingly de-territorialised. Digital prosumption appears to play a crucial role in how it is young people respond to this crisis. As this study demonstrates, we need to remain critical and vigilant about the ongoing transformations and their impact on youth identities. Digital space is important insofar as it alleviates the pain of social change and yet intensifies it at every step along the way.

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