The Mindful Consumer

Mindfulness training and the escape from consumerism

A think-piece for Friends of the Earth Big Ideas Project by Dr Alison Armstrong of Present Minds, and Professor Tim Jackson, Director of the Sustainable Lifestyles Research Group at the University of Surrey

For more than 40 years we've seen that the wellbeing of people and planet go hand in hand – and it's been the inspiration for our campaigns. Together with thousands of people like you we've secured safer food and water, defended wildlife and natural habitats, championed the move to clean energy and acted to keep our climate stable. Be a Friend of the Earth – see things differently.

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Foreword

This essay forms a contribution to Friends of the Earth's 'Big Ideas' programme, which is examining potential high-leverage interventions towards justice and sustainability across a range of domains. This paper forms part of the exploration of the topic of consumption and wellbeing, in which earlier consultation and deliberation identified a key question of how societies might reduce or replace the role of consumption and consumerism in supporting human identity. Here, Alison Armstrong and Tim Jackson bring their cutting-edge research and deep experience in sustainable consumption to bear on the topic. They suggest that mindfulness is a critical part of the answer: that by teaching mindfulness in schools, workplaces and other institutions we can weaken the social and psychological forces that encourage us (in modern Western societies at least) to find meaning, values and identity in consumerism.

The great value of this piece is not that it tries to replace one value system (consumerism) with another, but seeks to give people tools to recognise how such values systems gain sway, and to deliberately and deliberatively construct alternatives. Moreover it offers a change process which avoids paternalism and respects us as individuals, yet simultaneously challenges the negatives of individualism. In a complementary way to the ideas of empathy building advocated by Roman Krznaric in a companion paper in the Big Ideas series, Armstrong and Jackson explain how mindfulness can enhance our individual identity and self-esteem in ways that help us recognise and value others, in and through full participation in society. In these ways mindfulness could also be expected not only to complement empathy education, but also to underpin the citizen participation called for by Eurig Scandrett in his Big Ideas essay on popular education in the city.

It appears that mindfulness can also have economic consequences, enabling the interpersonal connections that support the sharing economy advocated by Julian Agyeman and his colleagues in their Big Ideas paper on Sharing Cities, and enhancing people's ability to cope with uncertainty – a key theme emerging in our work on responsible innovation. But Armstrong and Jackson caution wisely that we cannot expect miracles from mindfulness alone. To expect it to overturn the effects of unsustainable and exploitative economic systems would be like putting a 'sticking plaster' on a 'gaping wound'. Interventions to transform marketing, as suggested by Victoria Hurth and her colleagues in their Big Ideas paper making the case for a sustainable marketing paradigm would clearly help. Structural economic reforms will be needed too, as we are currently exploring in our Big Ideas topic on business and economic models.

There is a further reason to see mindfulness as an invaluable tool in economic transformation, however. That is because it has 'subversive potential': the personal benefits of mindfulness mean it will be adopted by members of the powerful elites too, not just used to encourage employee compliance; and that prepares the ground well for a more constructive public debate over the nature and future of the economy.

Mike Childs, Friends of the Earth, September 2015

1 Introduction

Mindfulness is a meditative practice which sets out to enrich our attention and awareness in everyday life. It has its roots in Buddhist philosophy, but has enjoyed a recent resurgence of secular popularity, due in large part to a rising need for tranquillity and reflection in modern society. Our aim in this essay is to explore the potential (and the limits) of mindfulness in countering the over-bearing consumerism which characterises modern Western society.

On the surface, this project may appear heroic. Mindfulness is concerned with mental states. Consumerism is concerned with stuff. Linking one with the other seems incongruous at first sight. A fundamental premise of our argument is that there are undeniable, indelible links between mind and matter, particularly when it comes to consumerism.

This is not to deny that we are living in a material world. Our relationship to material goods is not just self-evident but inevitable. The everyday reality of our lives is an inherently material one. We must eat and drink to survive; find shelter and clothing to protect ourselves. We take the materiality of these tasks so much for granted that many of our everyday decisions pass almost unnoticed beneath the cognitive radar. Habit – the mind's efficiency mechanism – removes many of them from outright consciousness.

But our lives are never entirely material. The social world of human beings is often as important, sometimes more important than our material world. Identity, love, value, meaning: these are all a vital part of what it means to be human. Social and psychological goods are not in themselves producible, tradable commodities. But each of them carries a material footprint. We express our love through gifts. We define our identities through possessions. Even our belief structures are grounded in sacraments: outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual meanings. The links between the inner and the outer world are both ethereal and irrevocably material in nature. And these links too are sometimes obscured by habit.

There is nothing inherently pathological here. Saints have appetites too: the most devout ascetic will waste away without material communion. Sacred objects hold both psychological significance and physical form. The links between inner and outer never quite disappear. Material goods become a language through which we communicate. Desire, affiliation, longing, affection, identity, importance: these are some of the conversations that we are capable of having because of our intimate relationship to material stuff.

We need not even be fully cognizant of these subterranean vocabularies. They are almost instinctive in their expression, virtually subconscious in their recognition, and present in every single society for which we have anthropological evidence.[1]

But there undoubtedly pathologies in modern consumer society: some obvious, some less obvious. One of the most obvious is the extent to which we have over-materialised our social world. Consumerism is essentially the handing over of our social lives to material expression, a process that has been accelerated by advertising, marketing and the demand for economic expansion.

The problem was articulated with remarkable clarity sixty years ago by Victor Lebow. "Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life," he wrote, "that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption… " Whether we like this process or not he pointed out, "[w]e need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing pace". Relentless consumption is needed, so the argument goes, just to maintain economic stability.[2]

Like our attachment to material goods, this pathology has both inward and outward manifestations. One of its outward manifestations is the burden that material consumption has placed on the fragile ecology of the planet. These impacts are by now well-rehearsed. The Stockholm Resilience Centre has identified four key areas where human activity already lies beyond the 'safe operating space' of the planet: climate change, land use change, loss of biosphere integrity and overload in bio-geochemical cycles. The fact that it would take three or four planets to support a western lifestyle for the global population is both an ecological and a moral indictment of our culture.[3]

The inner manifestation of the consumerist pathology lies in the fact that it is not necessarily making us happier. Sometimes it even obscures happiness. Kate Soper has argued that modern western society is suffering from a 'fatigue with the clutter and waste of modern life'.[4] Helga Dittmar and her colleagues have shown how excessive materialism undermines wellbeing, not just at the margins but across society as a whole.[5]

The continual search for consumer novelty triggers an ongoing pervasive anxiety regarding whether we have enough, or the right stuff.[6] The outer pathology of ecological destruction might simply be construed as an inconvenient reality if it were an inevitable consequence of a successful pursuit of happiness. Aligned with the inner pathology, it is nothing short of tragic.

The nature of this tragedy is often invisible to us, precisely because the relationship between the inner and the outer world takes place beneath the radar. This is where the first hint emerges that becoming more aware, more mindful, may open up space for transformation. The concealing power of habit and denial is a ferocious opponent to transformative change. In casting a light on the language of goods, could mindfulness help us to gain more power over it?

To suggest such a mechanism is not a simple appeal to 'awareness raising'. Mindfulness tends to operate more at the level of understanding than of 'information'. If successful, it would illuminate not only the how of our appeal to consumer goods but also the why: the inner motivations that lie beneath the lure of novelty and bling. Mindfulness is ultimately a technique for self-transformation, a means of freeing us from addictions, addressing our deepest anxieties, and (in the religious framing) leading us towards 'enlightenment'.

These potential benefits emerged for us most clearly in our research with a small section of the community where the pathology of consumerism is clinical in its proportions. The existence of compulsive or addictive shopping is now a well-documented phenomenon, particularly in the affluent countries of the global North. As with many addictions, the associated health and wellbeing impacts can be deeply destructive. Working closely with sufferers of compulsive shopping over the last decade, we have used mindfulness practice as a way of addressing and alleviating this particular addiction.

From the beginning of our work, we could not help wondering if the similar (somewhat milder) symptoms discernible in a broader population might not suggest that the problem itself is systemic and social rather than purely individual in nature. Might pathological shopaholics, like the fabled 'canary in the mine', be an outward and visible indication of a broader underlying flaw in the social logic? And if this were the case, we wondered, might it be possible to think of mindfulness as a way of addressing the rampant consumerism that characterises modern society?

Our aim in this paper is to develop this broad hypothesis. In Section 2, we establish more carefully the links between consumerism and our core social and psychological goals (identity, value, meaning). Section 3 provides a brief overview of mindfulness practice: we

explore its origins, its characteristics and its secular applications. The empirical foundation for the paper rests on our research with self-confessed shopaholics, the results of which we describe in section 4. We discuss where and how it was successful, but also identify its limits. The final section of our essay returns to the broad hypothesis. We discuss the potential for mindfulness to alleviate the over-materialism that threatens to undermine society at a broader level. We also acknowledge clearly the limitations of such an endeavour.

Facilitating such a change is likely to be no trivial matter. We are bombarded daily with messages that attempt to convince us that owning certain goods is important for expressing ourselves, for reflecting our identities and values, for achieving a contented family, for meeting our aspirations or fulfilling a sense of purpose. Foregoing material possessions threatens to place us at a serious social disadvantage in such a world. Yet the promise of a society in which it is possible to live better by consuming less is one that is clearly worth pursuing. Could mindfulness be one avenue towards healthy identities, values and meanings? In brief, this essay asks the question: is a more mindful, less materialistic, society possible?

2 Consumption, Identity and Meaning

Underpinning our social and psychological goals is the need to sense and to know ourselves. The process of identity formation starts when we are very young and is largely unconscious. It becomes most visible (both to ourselves and to others) when it is unstable. Human beings also possess an inherent need for meaning. Again this is not something we are continually conscious of, but it is nonetheless an important factor in many of our decisions about how to live, what work we do, and the values we live by.

These two factors – identity and meaning – feed continually into our daily decisions around the friendships that we form, the social groups that we belong to, the hobbies we give time to, and the careers that we strive for.

The material goods that we buy, use, throw away and (sometimes) choose to keep operate as symbiotic reflections of these unconscious processes. In this section, we outline more clearly this vital connection between material objects and social or psychological meaning. We also explore how concepts of identity, meaning and value are negotiated through the symbolic power of consumer goods, drawing on empirical data from our own research work where appropriate.

The evocative power of stuff

Functionality and meaning co-inhabit material goods. A shoulder bag is useful for carrying around small items needed when travelling away from home: money, credit cards, phone, diary, a bottle of water. But there are other less practical and less tangible reasons for buying and carrying a shoulder bag. Sometimes the simple act of buying is enough to make us feel good. It can stimulate positive feelings that may be associated with power, control, efficacy, and pleasure. More often, the symbolic aspects of consumption are distributed more evenly across purchase, use and (even) disposal. Particular aspects of the shoulder bag convey something specific to ourselves and to others. Its weight, its colour, its style, its brand carry vital information about taste, status, spending power and style.

Material stuff has properties that lie beyond functional “utility value”; goods carry symbolic meaning. A circular ring of metal worn on a particular finger is not merely an artefact; in many cultures it symbolises commitment to a monogamous relationship with a significant other. This meaning function is well-recognised and determined by the current social and cultural norms within those cultures.

The symbolic power of material goods allows us to communicate things to others (and to ourselves) without the need for words, definitions, or discussion. We simply wear the ring or carry the bag and know (often unconsciously) that its symbolism will be interpreted and understood.

In a landmark paper entitled “Goods are not goods” published in 1966, the economist Kelvin Lancaster made this point very clearly. It is more appropriate to think of material goods as bundles of different attributes, he argued, because they are never really what they seem. Some of their attributes are of course entirely functional. But others are concerned with conveying vital information. Status, power, morality, commitment: these are social goods. The symbolic power of material artefacts allows us to convey information about these social goods to each other, and affirm them for ourselves.

There is an inherently social and cultural aspect to this relationship. Symbolic meaning is socially and culturally constructed. We cannot decide unilaterally on the symbolic meaning of a particular object. Rather these shared meanings emerge over time in the context of social

and cultural norms. This is not to say that powerful vested interests cannot attempt to control and subvert these meanings. On the contrary, they can and often do. During processes of privatisation, for instance, there are notable shifts in language. Passengers become customers. Patients become clients. But these attempts are not always successful and can be rejected by cultural forces that are more powerful than individual or selective interests.

Culturally constructed meanings are rarely if ever entirely sacrosanct. But cultural mutation is slow and the relative "stickiness" of symbolic association allows us to use contemporaneous meanings in a surprisingly efficient and structured way. The result is a kind of "social conversation" that allows us to communicate with each other without the explicit use of words, thoughts, or even conscious intentions.[7] This surprising power of material goods is key to understanding their role in helping us construct and maintain identity and meaning.

The symbolic power of material goods is closely related to the apparently universal tendency that humans have to adopt material possessions as a part of the extended self.[8] Subtle psychological processes – the consumer researcher Russell Belk calls this process "cathexis" – slowly blur the concept of self to include our most immediate possessions. Ownership turns to attachment and becomes bound up in the idea that particular objects, styles, colours, or brands and are "part of us". It is well-documented that people experience emotional loss when they become separated from their physical possessions, particularly if this separation occurs through force or other adverse circumstance.[9]

It is a short step from this process to the idea that material possessions "say something about us"; and this link creates a fascinating dynamic through which consumerism is bound up with our identity. The evocative power of stuff provides the means to tell a continually evolving story about ourselves and our lives. Material possessions help us construct and maintain a desired self-image, create the means for self-transformation,[10] and help us build our individual (and collective) sense of identity, stability, belonging, uniqueness, continuity and esteem.

In the following paragraphs we develop these ideas further, highlighting in particular how material possessions facilitate processes of identity formation, value deliberation and the creation and maintenance of meaning.

Identity: "I am what I own"

The project of creating and maintaining self-identity is fundamental to human existence. It begins in childhood with a process of separation from the mother, and continues throughout our lives. "Who am I?" becomes one of the most fundamental questions we ask of ourselves and of the world. Our sense of self in relation to others and to the world around us; our deepest seated values; our understanding of our role in the community; our attempts to regulate our behaviour in relation to our own expectations and the expectations of others: these are the critical features of human identification processes.[11]

We can think of identity maintenance as an ongoing narrative project: our attempts to tell a coherent story to ourselves and to others about who we are and our place in the world. This idea of narrative identity encompasses both the desire for psychological stability and the need to adapt to change. Dan McAdams, a developmental psychologist who has done much to popularise narrative psychology, portrays human identity development as a process of personal mythmaking process and highlights common narrative themes across the life cycle.[12]

As infants, we begin to differentiate ourselves from our parents and later our siblings. As children and adolescents we forge key aspects of our personality in the crucible of peer pressure, become mothers and fathers, teachers and builders, create affiliations to our nations, our communities, and our football teams; and navigate our twilight years in reflection of our achievements. The processes of identification also include aspects of evaluation: how intensely we experience different parts of ourselves; how clearly we see ourselves as a coherent whole; how consistently aspects of our identity occur; and how stable we feel within these roles or traits.[13]

Personal identity can be experienced in multiple ways. Individuals will have a sense of their cultural identity, group identity, family identity, professional identity. They will also have a more or less clear identity history, and will draw on this to help them to describe and orientate themselves. These multiple identities can be related, over-lapping, unrelated, or opposing each other, and different identities can be "salient" (come to the fore) at different times.

Managing multiple identities entails an inherent element of anxiety. We may be assailed subconsciously by concerns about acceptance by our peer groups to enable a sense of belonging; about being subsumed by a group; about losing our identity; about being insufficiently unique; and about our ability to match up to the socially-defined expectations of others, or indeed of ourselves.

This evaluative part of identity management is of particular pertinence for our broader aim of exploring identity-motivated consumption. The process of evaluation is structured around a comparison between our perceived sense of who we are (our "actual" identity) and our perceived sense of some "perfect" or ideal identity. It is often in measuring actual identity against ideal identity that self-esteem is negotiated.

As mothers, for example, we inevitably receive a perception of a "perfect" mother, defined by impressions we pick up from our own mothers, from other mothers, or from stories, television, magazines and the media. Our evaluation of ourselves against these ideal versions and the gap we perceive between a perfect ideal and our own identity can cause psychological discomfort. Sometimes the object of comparison is not a perfect ideal, but a version of motherhood that we (or others) feel we ought to achieve, or that we might achieve in the future. A constant comparative process adjusts our perceptions of our own identity against the ideals around us.[14]

All these comparisons, albeit unconsciously made, can lead to emotional discomfort, and when any kind of discomfort of this nature is experienced, there is usually an instinctive drive to reduce it. Where there are perceived gaps or shortfalls, this will mean striving to fill or reduce the gap. Material goods can form a part of this process precisely because of their symbolic power in social communication.

Buying and displaying goods that are symbolic of the social group to which one seeks to belong, for instance, serves to align the internalised identity of a social role, with the social role itself. To follow the example of being a mother, the desire to belong to this social group could express itself through numerous visible consumption choices. A large car with notable safety features supports our idea that we care for the safety of our children. Cooking and cleaning implements are not exclusively functional, they also symbolise our care for the family. Buying children's clothes becomes, beyond a certain functional point, an act of demonstrating love and sometimes status. In other circumstances of course, we may seek out products that give the impression that we are not parents at all. The classic example is probably the attraction of a two-seater sports car to a middle-aged man. These signatures of

role are not always exclusively outward signifiers. Sometimes they are as much an affirmation to the self as social signals to others.

In constant interplay with the need for belonging is the need for uniqueness, and material goods can be used for this purpose also. The sports car is a classic example. Discomfort is not confined to the idea that we fall short of some idealised identity. It can also emerge when individuals perceive themselves to be too similar, or lacking uniqueness in relation to others. Psychologists suggest that we experience a continual tension between belonging and distinction, with a culturally specific optimum when we feel we are moderately distinct.[15]

Consumption choices can be used to frame this tension. For example, if we wish to belong to the social group of tennis players, we purchase the appropriate clothing and equipment, but to avoid being subsumed by the group, we display our uniqueness by seeking brands, styles or colours that help us to nonetheless stand out as a unique individual. A role for material goods is therefore to facilitate the display of uniqueness, individual differentiation, or self-expression.[16]

This could manifest in the desire for scarce, innovative, or customised products.[17] The retail chain Gap recently launched a new ad campaign that speaks strongly to the current social norm of using material goods for the expression of uniqueness. Ironically, it was called "dressing normal", but the implication was not, as the name suggests, to dress like everyone else. Instead the campaign encourages finding and expressing one's "authentic self". Seth Farbman, Gap Global Chief Marketing Officer put it: "Finding your own version of 'dress normal' is an art – my normal is different from your normal, and that's the essence of the campaign".[18] We found in our research that branding can help to form a sense of identity, possibly more so when there is a lack of clarity over one's own sense of self. A (male) respondent in one of our studies put it like this: *"you buy a product that's just had an amazing ad campaign and because everyone's seen it, it's like you're then part of that campaign".*

It is important to point out that most consumption has this dual characteristic – simultaneously functional and symbolic. Understanding consumption in this light is intended neither to demonise nor to excuse either shopping itself or compulsive over-consumption. But it allows us to see how dynamics are created which can lead to pathological behaviour.

These dynamics become particularly pernicious when aligned with the concept of identity dissonance (or discomfort). This discomfort can arise whenever our perception of ourselves does not match with who we feel we ought to be, could be or would like to be. When we purchase consumer goods with the aim of reducing dissonance, we are motivated in part by the desire to reduce this underlying discomfort. Such behaviour is not itself pathological, or inherently wrong. It is simply a part of the way that we negotiate our place and our identity in society.

It is clear that the use of material goods for this purpose is not the only resource at the disposal of individuals for lowering discomfort. Indeed, some of the proposals we arrive at in this essay are intended to offer alternatives to this material resource. However, it is clear that material products represent a visible and easily available resource in the current consumer culture.[19] It is therefore no surprise to find that consumer goods and the activity of shopping itself have become widely adopted and actively promoted for this purpose. The overwhelming sense emerging from empirical work in this area is that, especially if materialistic values are held, the distance perceived between who we feel ourselves to be and who we would ideally like to be is a fundamental factor in predicting buying behaviour.[20]

Managing the discrepancy in this way may include presenting a false front, in other words, using clothes and other material objects to "pretend" to be someone we are not, or to show characteristics or feelings that we are not experiencing internally. This is by no means an unusual experience. Dressing appropriately for a job interview may help to convey confidence, even when our inner experience of the situation is far from confident. One of the respondents in our own research captured this sense of pretending something she did not feel eloquently:

> *"I preserve this front. You know, I'm always the Mum at the school that's baked all these cakes, you know, I wouldn't miss a thing like that. (…) even when I'm feeling too tired to even be doing it, but I couldn't spoil the, well I, it's not the image 'cause I wouldn't want to let my children down, for them to turn up without a cake or whatever it is they're demanding. And yet I then come home and feel absolutely shattered, ill, irritable (...). So it is this complete dichotomy I suppose, two completely different people."*

Psychological implications follow from this tendency to display a false front. The process can lead to anxiety, since we fear showing an inconsistency to others and being "found out"; it is associated with low self-esteem; and it leads to loneliness and isolation since we lose the ability to fully reveal ourselves.[21] Since we also know that many people (including compulsive buyers) manage emotions through shopping, there is a secondary impact on consumption levels stemming from the attempts to manage identity issues in this way.

The process of creating and maintaining narrative identity can involve us in multiple identities, and lead to multiple discomforts to be negotiated. The salience of individual identities will also alter, and thus if material goods are the means by which discomfort reduction is attempted, the specific material good sought may also change. But over time, there are also ever-changing and infinite ways that individuals can express themselves.

This restlessness of personal and social identity resonates with the temporariness and infinitely inventive nature of the material goods themselves[22]. Individuals may therefore experience a lack of clarity over who they believe themselves to be, or experience a need to continually reinvent themselves, and can use consumer goods to achieve this. Another respondent argued:

> *"But you sort of want to live this double life, you know, I mean, I look at my wardrobe and I think, there's loads of clothes that I hardly ever wear that were bought on the basis that I'm a different woman, really. (...) it is like leading a double life, there's this woman who goes shopping all the time, who's buying things for a, to be a woman, some other woman, and then there's me that's, you know, that doesn't really know who I am any more, don't know, you know, what I've done it for."*

Much of the discussion above can also be linked indirectly to self-esteem, which is another aspect of relating to ourselves, evaluative in nature. If there is a feeling of using the symbolism of material goods to present an ideal-self, a high-status self, or a reinvented self, and these symbols are acknowledged by others, then these are all likely to provide a boost to self-esteem, even if it is ultimately brief and not sustained. In our research, some participants talked at length about the symbolism attributed to items related to buying, in this case shopping bags, and that enabled self-esteem difficulties to be assuaged. For example, one participant described their experience as follows:

> *"by the time you get home you've got like five different bags, and you know, you're kinda walking along and you think "yea, people can see I've been*

shopping" and I feel like I've had a good day here, especially with the nice bags (…) with the string and everything, not plastic ones, and that that makes me feel like you've done something worthwhile."

The bags symbolically represent having *"done something worthwhile"*, in other words, they alleviate feelings of worthlessness. She may also have been boosting her self-esteem, reducing feelings of insecurity, or symbolically displaying evidence of status and wealth, all of which illuminate a discrepancy between her perceptions of herself versus the more ideal version of herself.

It is worth commenting briefly on the symbolic nature of consumption in relation to self-efficacy and control. Efficacy-related concepts turn out to be central to the relationship between self and material goods. In investigating the meanings of personal possessions throughout the life-span it has been found that one of the reasons why possessions are psychologically meaningful is their ability to provide control and mastery. The gain in control or efficacy via material goods comes through the experience of controlling objects; through objects controlling the environment; or through objects being instrumental in experiencing personal autonomy[23].

Respondents in our studies certainly echoed the idea that we use shopping to experience control: *"I was trying to make myself feel better and actually have control over something else"*. But the addictive nature of buying can also generate a loss of control: *"I could feel myself, it sort of escalates and gets carried, I get carried away, and almost to the point where I'm so hyped up in a shop that I get, I'm not really sure of what I'm doing"*.

In short, there are multiple ways that consumption activities relate to the experience and expression of identity. These include both individuation and affiliation processes and are strongly related to the project of narrative identity. In a landmark essay, published in 1990 entitled *Why the Self is Empty?* the psychologist Philip Cushman offers an insight into the construction of the self in late modern society.[24] He describes how people continually seek to "fill" the perceived emptiness inside them, with food, consumer products, and celebrity. He also charts the role of advertising and psychotherapy in reinforcing this sense of emptiness without ever being able to actually satisfy it.

Perhaps most importantly, the success or failure of narrative identity has powerful implications for personal and social wellbeing. It feels good when we live congruently with our internalised sense of ourselves, and when we experience a sense of identity stability, self-esteem, belonging and uniqueness, and when we feel that we are autonomous, efficacious individuals.[25] It feels uncomfortable when we do not. We return to the broader significance of this issue later in the paper.

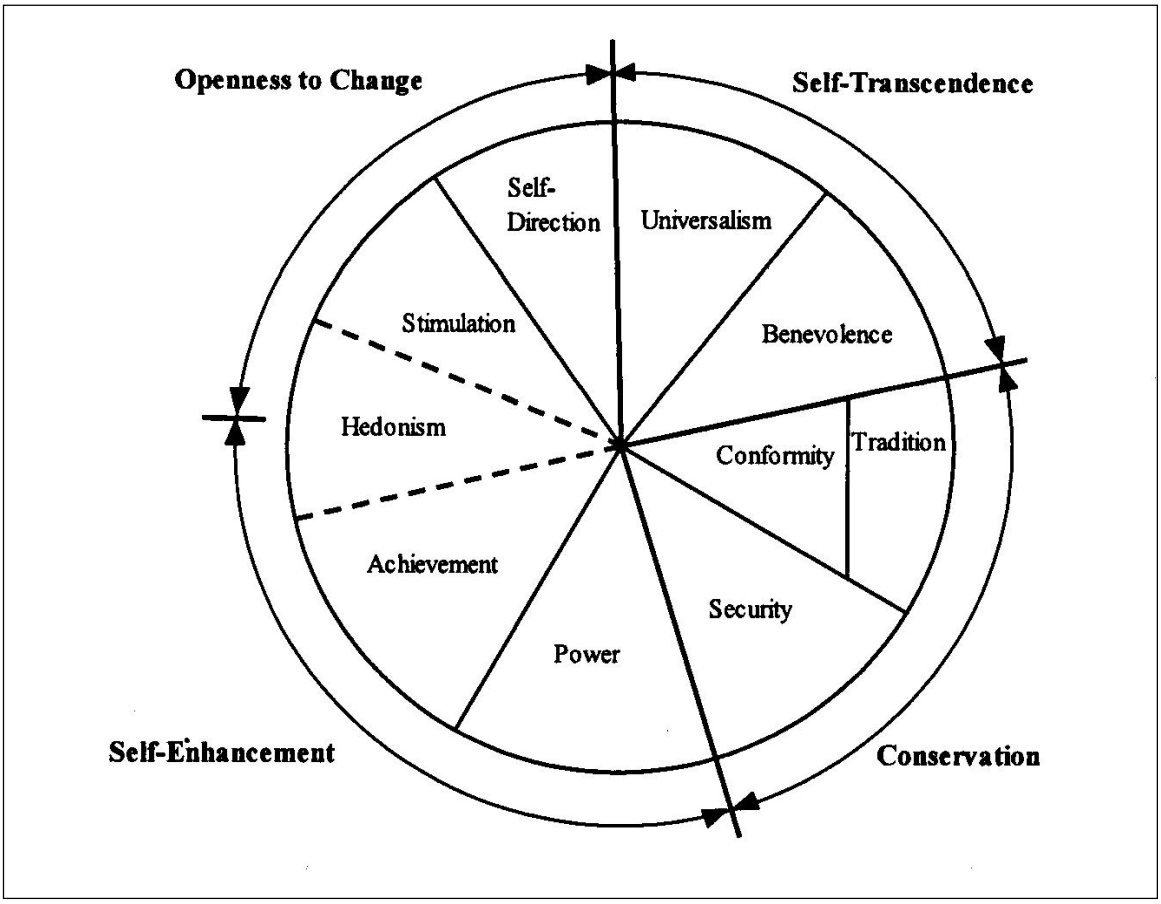
Values: "I'll show you what I value through what I own"

A critical part of the psychological architecture within which we negotiate identity and meaning are the (often unconscious) values that guide our consumption choices. Values can be thought of as enduring beliefs that pertain to desirable end states or behaviours, transcend specific situations, guide selection or evaluation of behaviour and events, and are ordered by importance.[26] In this sense, they are impossible to divorce from our sense of how we experience ourselves. Our sense of our identity will inherently include the values by which we live.

Through considerable multi-cultural empirical research, social scientists have established a set of around ten values and life goals (see Figure 1 and Annex 1).[27] These values are organised around two distinct tensions in our psychological makeup: the tension between

selfish and other-regarding behaviour; and the tension between novelty-seeking and tradition. Both poles of each of these tensions are likely to be present within most individuals, but the degree to which they come to the fore (their salience) and their overall importance within our self-concept, are likely to vary considerably across individuals, situations and cultures. Some cultures will be more altruistic than others. Some individuals will care more for tradition than others. In some situations, we will find our self-regarding values more prevalent than in others.

Figure 1: The Schwarz Values Circumplex[28]



Values offer us potential clarity over our actions, morals and sense of ourselves, but can also be contradictory, confusing, and anxiety provoking. The importance and salience of our values are likely to influence our consumption: we are probably most likely to invest in material goods that fit with at least one of our values, or a value grouping.

Another characterisation of values which has been influential in helping to understand consumerism is the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic values. Extrinsic values include end states or goals that are focussed on external reward and social praise, and therefore might include aspirations for financial success, popularity, or having a socially desirable image.[29] If our values are extrinsic in nature, and those values are salient at the time of the purchasing decision, then we are likely to invest in clothing, cars, furniture, and holidays that enable us to present an image of financial and social success.

Conversely, intrinsic values have more internal qualities of self-acceptance, growth and self-actualisation, and thus include good interpersonal relationships (affiliation) and positive community feelings, such as the intention to make the world a better place.[30] If our personal values tend towards those that are intrinsic, then we may well purchase gifts that reinforce

relationships; choose fairly-traded goods that support global equality; buy books to enhance our learning; and consider the environmental impact of our purchases.

Broadly speaking the extrinsic-intrinsic characterisation of values aligns along the self-enhancement to self-transcendence axis of Schwartz's circumplex (Figure 1). Extrinsic values are most closely related to self-enhancement. Intrinsic values are most closely related to self-transcendence.[31]

Another, related characterisation of values concerns the degree to which we are or are not materialistic. Materialistic values are "beliefs about the role (and hoped for) psychological benefits of material possessions",[32] in other words, the belief that "possessions will bring happiness".[33] In empirical work, it has been found that holding materialistic values is associated with a tendency towards maladaptive buying behaviour, such as impulsive and compulsive buying. Materialistic values have been shown to relate positively to self-enhancement and negatively to self-transcendence.[34]

Values are changeable, they often lie below the level of consciousness, and they influence our purchasing decisions. Values have also been shown to hold an inherent relationship with well-being. For example, empirical work by Tim Kasser and his colleagues has shown that individuals expressing higher intrinsic values are found to be happier and with higher well-being as measured by vitality, anxiety measures and daily measures of mood.[35] A whole body of research consistently shows a negative association between materialistic values and well-being.[36]

Although necessarily brief, this summary serves to demonstrate that certain values are related to consumption behaviours that are supportive of environmental and social goals as well as well-being, and this is a helpful body of evidence and conclusions for our later discussion on how we can challenge these associations and facilitate value formation and salience that are supportive of lower levels of consumption.

Meaning: "I own things that carry meaning"

It should be clear from our earlier remarks, and the discussion in the previous section that a part of how we experience ourselves is through the sense of meaning we seek or attribute to our lives. Not surprisingly, the pursuit of meaning can also be related to our consumption behaviour. Whilst there is no specific psychological theory that links meaning explicitly to identity and values, there is an experiential understanding for many people that these are important facets of our sense of ourselves, and our interface with the wider world is strongly influenced by these intertwined concepts.

Defining meaning is no trivial task. We adopt here a pragmatic perspective, in which the things that give our lives meaning encompass activities, attitudes, or outcomes that include or provide us with a sense of significance, point, substance, purpose, quality, value and direction. The corollary, meaninglessness, would imply the opposite of these, but also a sense of emptiness.[37]

That we require meaning in our lives is evident from the myriad ways that humans have sought for meaning throughout the ages. Religious belief systems offer a clear example where humans have sought meaning (some would say created meaning), and it is helpful to use this example to unpick meaning into some of its constituent parts and functions. One aspect of religion is that it offers us a place to turn when tragedy, pain, injustice, or other suffering occurs in our lives, as it inevitably will. It also offers ways to manage anxiety related to day-to-day matters, or in the management of the ultimate anxiety, our own mortality. We

have in religion, a set of stories, beliefs and communities that provide comfort, order and meaning.

Many have written about the transference of our meaning-making from religion to consumption, and this is certainly relevant for our discussion here.[38] The foundation for this transference is the symbolic role of material objects. A cross, for example, is a very strong symbol for millions of people that carries enormous meaning related to their religious belief. Consumer goods can replace religion as a source of meaning in several empirically supported ways. One of these is reward, which will illustrate the point. Within religion, reward for leading a "good" life is offered by a belief in a post-death existence that is eternal, beautiful and trouble-free. Consumerism offers a different reward for leading a "good" life: one of financial and material success and comfort, celebrity status, and social achievement.

The loss of a belief in an eternal heaven that religion can offer means that we must also face our mortality and the loss of the eternal, which is our ultimate source of anxiety. Instead, consumption offers in-the-moment experiences and concurrently, the promise of the eternal within the goods themselves. Hankiss has offered perfume advertising as quintessential of this paradox, with, for example, the perfume Roma offering the "breath of eternity"; and Scherrer's Perfume promising both "the passion of the moment" and "eternal femininity".[39]

Consumer goods are ideal for in-the-moment experiences, whether generated through shopping, the immediacy of spraying a perfume, or internet browsing for product details. But consumer-related activities can also offer a sense of the eternal, such as visiting the architecturally cathedral-like structure of a shopping mall, or knowing that our most treasured possessions will be passed to loved ones after we die (or in the inheritance of items from those we love offering a sense that they are still with us in some way).

A recent interview on BBC Radio 4 highlighted this latter point in an interesting way. The interviewee was describing the death of her much loved mother, and her treasuring of the items she inherited. But she also spoke of her atheist beliefs, and was suggesting that in the absence of a belief system to provide support, comfort or a sense of an eternal life-after-death, the material items had taken on an even greater significance for her: "this is *all* I have left".[40]

It is of course not only religion that offers people a sense of meaning, and purpose and significance can be felt through one's work or vocation, through creative projects, through raising a family, through affiliation to groups or teams, or through making a meaningful contribution to society. Meaning can also emerge through consumption itself.[41] Objects can convey personal and collective meaning; and for some, shopping and the pursuit of material goods offers them a kind of meaning if to them it is an activity to which they attribute significance, purpose and direction.

In a collectivist culture, meaning tends to be associated more strongly with belonging and affiliation. In more individualistic cultures, part of what becomes tricky is that we are asked to create our own sense of meaning from within ourselves (i.e. often without the structures of religion, strong family/community bonds etc), and in addition to take responsibility for that process. So whether we seek meaning in shopping, through creating art, through group activities or through collecting, we may also experience the anxiety of having to take responsibility for that without deferring to a larger structure.

Within these complex, culturally and individually specific meaning creation processes, consumer goods can be utilised in a myriad ways. It is particularly interesting to consider how shopping for and owning consumer goods can help us to avoid or suppress feelings of meaninglessness, by taking up our time and attention, through the alleviation of boredom,

and through the management of anxiety, both in relation to the task of finding a sense of meaning, but also in terms of our existential anxiety. It goes without saying that a life devoid of, or lacking in meaning, is not one optimally configured for well-being.

Beyond the lure of consumerism

In this section of the essay we have sought to explore the role of identity, values and meaning as three related psychological concepts, complex to understand and often lying in part below our cognitive radar, but each playing a vital role in our sense of ourselves and our understanding of our role in the world. Specifically we have provided some insights into the seemingly intractable role of material goods and consumption behaviour in these three areas, both in the use of material goods to manage and express our sense of ourselves, but also in the management and attempted alleviation of anxiety related to them.

These insights are vital in understanding the social and psychological lure of consumerism. It is probably no exaggeration to say that we cannot hope to change the current reliance on consumption and material goods without this understanding. This is not however to suggest that consumerism itself is intractable. Indeed this understanding offers the tantalising possibility that finding appropriate (less materialistic) mechanisms through which our identity, values and meaning can be expressed might be a powerful way to combat pathological consumption.

3 An Introduction to Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a simple concept aimed at improving our awareness. Its provenance as a meditative practice is from eastern cultures where neither individualism nor consumerism is as enhanced as it is in the West. Our hypothesis in this essay is that it is uniquely placed to offer some hope for alleviating the seemingly intractable over-consumption of material goods that haunts modern western society. We offer several *prima facie* reasons for proposing this idea.

Firstly, mindfulness operates at a level of consciousness that can reveal the underlying social and psychological drivers of consumption practices discussed in the previous section: identity, value, and meaning. Mindfulness can bring these inner drivers into awareness, and thereby offer us choices about how to act on them.

Secondly, mindfulness can help us begin to explore our sense of ourselves without requiring material goods to facilitate this experience. For instance, mindfulness aims to contribute to our understanding of who we are. Sometimes it may increase the clarity and stability of our sense of identity. At other times it may help to soften and loosen a fixed sense of who we are and bring us the freedom to change. Likewise, mindfulness may enable us to act on values that support lower consumption. It can help us remain discerning about societal values, less prone to external norms and more resistant to cultural cues such as advertising. It can help us adhere more closely to our own intrinsic values.

Mindfulness may also offer us a sense of meaning through an increased connectedness with ourselves and greater interconnectedness with others and the wider world. In this sense, our exploration of mindfulness has some resonance with Roman Krznaric's exploration of empathy.[42]

One of the fundamental aims of mindfulness is to facilitate living in the present, experiencing the moments of our lives rather than living in the past or future. One could surmise that this focus on the present could enhance consumerism, but a clear distinction should be understood between living *in* the present (as encouraged by mindfulness), and living *for* the present (which would support rampant consumption without regard of the consequences). The implications of present-moment living are further explored below.

Finally, mindfulness is becoming more familiar as an idea, known and practised by many (including in government). As an increasingly popular and contemporary secular technique, it is nonetheless firmly rooted in ancient practices, through the experience of many generations. It has a clear structure for training, teaching, deployment and support.

To begin this discussion, we will define what we mean by mindfulness, and then offer some perspectives on how it relates to the identity, values and meaning discussion above. In Section 4 we draw on our empirical work in this area.

Defining mindfulness

Mindfulness originates in Buddhist writings as one part of the path to enlightenment.[43] It is translated from the original Pali word, *Sati*, which carries meanings of awareness, attention, remembering, heartfulness, and self-reliance.[44] Yet it should not be understood as purely a Buddhist concept as many other religious and spiritual teachings and practices contain concepts that can be likened to mindfulness. Mindfulness has been extracted from these religious roots and brought to contemporary applications as a standalone secular set of practices and techniques[45] enabling their psychological benefits to be realised by a wider audience.

The general intention with mindfulness is to stay consciously with the experience of the present without being distracted by thoughts, which might include absorption or rumination on the past, or plans, fantasies or anxieties about the future.[46] Mindfulness is a multi-faceted "quality of consciousness" that involves developing a relationship with our emotional, physical and mental selves such that we are aware of our experience; we are less judgemental about it; we are less reactive to external and internal stimuli; and we can retain attention on one object.

In a modern secular context, mindfulness is commonly taught through a training programme that uses meditation techniques to create the opportunity to practice returning to the present moment (see Box A). Typically a point of focus is identified, such as the sensations of one's own breathing, or feelings within the body, and the practice in its early stages is simply to notice when the mind has wandered to thoughts about the past or future, and to return to the point of focus.

The typical mindfulness training that is widely available in Western settings is based on the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, who devised the 8 week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course. This was later modified by Segal, Williams and Teasdale to include more emphasis on relating to thoughts in the treatment of recurrent depression. This became known as the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) course.

Both courses emphasise learning meditation as the means by which to practice returning to the present. The initial focus is on increasing awareness and sensitivity to the body and breath, but meditations are also included that bring attention to sounds, visual stimuli, emotions and thoughts.

Typically, beginners go through stages in their learning, understanding and application of mindfulness. There may be an initial phase of incredulity regarding the "monkey" mind, and concentration is very challenging. This settles, and a kindly approach develops such that individuals know that the mind will wander from the focal point, but they notice more quickly when this occurs, are able to bring their attention back to whatever is present, and can do that without judgement or self-recrimination.

Developing awareness, focus, a non-judgemental attitude towards experience, and a level of acceptance as encouraged by the practices, impacts on all areas of life, enabling a different relationship with self and others to emerge. Of particular relevance here is that the development of awareness will impact on the level of choice we have over our thoughts and behaviours. Conversely, if we are unaware of our habits or level of automaticity, there is no option to do things differently.

Box A: Mindfulness Training[47]

Beginner courses tend to last for a couple of months, but ongoing practice is required to continue to benefit from the technique. Long-term practice is often supported by advanced courses, meditation groups, and retreats. This description of learning mindfulness could convey the impression that it is simple, and so in concept it is. In practice of course it is not so easy, and tends to throw up paradoxes and confusions that are symptomatic of the underlying complexity of the concept.

So for instance, although there are some very good suggestions, there is as yet no definitive understanding of what is occurring psychologically when mindfulness is learned that brings benefits to mental, physical and emotional health. From studies of the brain, it is believed that brain "plasticity" effects are utilised through mindfulness training to change the function and structure of various regions of the brain. For example, parts of the brain related to reactivity and fear reduce in activity, and parts of the brain related to learning and memory

processes, emotion regulation, self-referential processing, and perspective taking become more active, and increase in grey matter density.[48]

The increase in awareness that comes with mindfulness means that aspects of our experience that were below the level of consciousness become available to us, including insights into our sense of who we are, our habits, and the other underlying factors that are driving our emotions, our thought patterns and our behaviours. These include, of course, the motivations for our buying behaviour and our relationship to material goods. It is from an enhanced awareness of these motivations, in particular, that the benefits of mindfulness in relation to consumerism might be expected to flow.

Mindfulness and identity: "I am who I am"

There are a number of direct links between the practice of mindfulness and the concept of identity, discussed in the Section 2. For instance, the definition of mindfulness as a deliberate intention to stay aware of experience includes awareness of identity projects as "people's experience of themselves [... and] their perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about themselves".[49] To this extent, mindfulness is inherently connected with identity.

Mindfulness, like identity, is often thought of in individualistic terms. But like identity, it has an inherent social element to it.[50] A large part of mindfulness practice is to develop awareness of one's internal and external landscape. The external landscape is naturally inclusive of social elements. But the internal landscape is also very often created and mediated by socially constructed ideas, language, expectations and notions of acceptability.

By practising mindfulness, it is often claimed that "we *become*",[51] implying that our sense of ourselves is more available to us. But there is an interesting distinction between mindfulness and identity. Whereas processes of identity formation imply a psychological attachment to a particular sense of self, mindfulness incorporates the development of a rather different understanding of how to view experiences. Specifically, one is encouraged to develop the sense of being a non-judgmental and accepting observer, not holding an over-identified belief that these experiences *are* us. The non-attachment derived from mindfulness allows us both more freedom to understand and navigate our own identity narratives and also to become less reliant on them for our sense of self.

There is then a sense in which mindfulness can free us from over-rigid socially-constructed representations of who we should be, and open the way to a more flexible relationship between the individual and society, with multiple possibilities for change.

Mindfulness and values: "I become aware of my own values"

Mindfulness brings a powerful spotlight to bear on our habits, and our tendency to act and think automatically, without awareness. Habits are very powerful influences in our lives, and effectively rob us of choice. When we become aware of habits and automaticity through our practice of mindfulness, we offer ourselves the opportunity to choose whether we will continue to act or think in those ways, or whether we will instead be more attuned to the present moment experience of ourselves and our environment.

Enhanced awareness of our underlying motivations feeds into our ability to act according to our values. Values are conceived as the underlying beliefs that pertain to desirable end states and that guide our behaviour. But these values are not always consciously known and understood by the individual. Mindfulness helps that which is subconscious to come into awareness. In this way intrinsic values are brought more fully into our decision-making

practices. We become more aware of which values are salient in any given situation and more capable of setting these in the context of our overall goals and motivations.[52]

There is a sense then in which mindfulness enhances our ability to act in accordance with our values. Individuals experience this increased sense of choice as empowerment. It is a form of emotional and behavioural self-regulation, which has been found to have positive well-being implications.[53]

There is clearly a question raised by this approach. What if the underlying subconscious values revealed by mindfulness, far from enhancing pro-social or pro-environmental choice, instead promote more hedonistic or more selfish behaviours? These too are part of the lexicon of human value systems. Is it appropriate to promote an enhanced awareness of values that tend more towards achievement, power or hedonism?

From our point of view, there are some good reasons why mindfulness might mitigate the potentially damaging impacts of selfish materialism. The first is that these more selfish motivations are very clearly signalled all around us, all of the time. They frame most, if not all of our consumption choices, and are continually present in the context of our lives. A myriad of social signals creates a cultural landscape in which reward, pleasure, achievement and social acceptability are continually framed in terms of materialistic success. It is against this backdrop that the more pro-social motivations, which psychology tells us are an intrinsic and important part of our nature, become suppressed and under-prioritised.[54] Mindfulness is capable of re-prioritising them and increasing our resilience to the psychological asymmetries that consumer culture demands of us.

Research findings tend to support this idea. Mindfulness is found to support our intrinsic motivations and in doing so to lead to a higher level of subjective wellbeing.[55] Evidence also finds that it is linked to a greater degree of environmentally responsible consumption behaviour.[56] In his think-piece on empathy for Friends of the Earth Roman Krznaric also reports how an intrinsic value orientation can help to “immunise” us against consumer culture.[57]

Further than this, there are also reasons to suppose that mindfulness offers new frames of meaning that can counteract the more materialistic frame imposed on us by consumer culture.

Mindfulness and meaning: “I choose the meanings in my life”

There are several distinct ways in which mindfulness relates to and potentially enhances our sense of meaning and purpose. In the first place, awareness and attention can help distinguish between what is intrinsically meaningful to us and what is imposed on us from the outside. It is easy in the face of ever present social signals, or performance anxiety driven by social comparison, to forget or relegate the importance of our own goals, whether they are related to family or to creativity or to personal development. In bringing our awareness not only to our own motivations but also to the distractions that we face from these goals, mindfulness can reconnect us with personal meanings and individual purpose.

Secondly, mindfulness plays a role in enhancing our sense of connection.[58] We know that when we feel connected to others in a deeper more resonant way, things feel better. This sense of connectedness creates a sense of meaning in our lives through the ability to share ideas, engage in joint activities, to be seen and valued, and to experience community engagement. Researchers from numerous fields including poverty research, psychology, sociology and political science have emphasised how prosperity itself consists in part in our ability to participate fully in the life of society.[59]

When we consider ourselves part of larger groupings, such as a family, friendship group, or community, a sense of meaning comes from the sense of shared purpose larger than simply fulfilling our own needs. It becomes meaningful to love, to care for others, to work for the benefit of others, and to feel fulfilled by those connections and bonds. We know that mindfulness impacts positively on relationships, partly through increased empathy, but also from improved communication, emotional sensitivity, and the ability to give and to care.[60] The same applies to our sense of connection with ourselves, which we also know is changed by mindfulness training.

Mindfulness enables us to explore this interconnectedness and interdependence with others and with the world from a variety of different perspectives and scales. At one end of the spectrum, mindfulness practice can enhance the sense of actually inhabiting our immediate environment: noticing a scent, someone's expression or the light patterns created by a piece of architecture; and witnessing the impacts these impressions have on us in the moment. At the all-encompassing end of the spectrum, mindfulness can help develop a sense of interconnection with all beings and the whole planet, and take on board the understanding that all actions have implications far beyond our immediate sphere.

These insights have far-reaching implications. Mindfulness offers the opportunity to live more fully the moments of our lives. It gives us the ability to avoid prematurely committing to classifying situations, thereby keeping options, innovation, creativity and a sense of possibility open.[61] Mindfulness can be seen as contributing toward a wider move towards conscious living, where we can actively choose to reappraise situations or create meaning (as a form of self-regulation), and where our sense of worth and value no longer come from shopping, buying, or owning material objects as symbols of our qualities, but increasingly come from deeper relationships, satisfying work, and through making a meaningful contribution to society.

Finally, there is a sense in which mindfulness allows us to approach our deepest existential anxiety and to negotiate a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives. An important development in psychology emerged in the 1970s, primarily from the work of Ernest Becker, whose book *The Denial of Death* gave rise to a field of psychology known as terror management theory. At the heart of this work lies the idea that the human condition includes an existential anxiety about death – our own death and the death of those we love.[62]

As social beings, we manage this existential anxiety through culture, and in particular through forms of culturally constructed meaning. In the pre-modern era these meaning structures were broadly religious in nature. The promise of an after-life, at least for the well-behaved, provides a powerful antidote to the threat of personal extinction and the loss of our loved ones. But as the sociologist Peter Berger demonstrated clearly in his book *The Sacred Canopy*, these meaning structures can also have entirely secular forms. Consumerism itself, it has been argued, is a kind of secular meaning structure, promising a brighter, shinier future for us and our children, in spite of the loss and anxiety that haunts us.[63] Mindfulness offers instead, a sense of meaning through fully engaging in the moments of our lives, and through connection and interconnection, awareness, empowerment and embodiment.

4 Mindfulness and compulsive shopping

Our empirical work was motivated by a simple hypothesis. We have seen how consumer behaviour is inextricably bound up with complex psychological and social motivations. Mindfulness is a technique which aims to bring us greater awareness. Might it be possible to use mindfulness at the very least to allow us to become more aware of these underlying motivations and in becoming more aware, to change them? Consumer behaviour is bound up with the creation of identity and the pursuit of meaning. Mindfulness also approaches these psychological goals – albeit from a different, and less materialistic perspective. Might it be possible, through mindfulness, to reduce our dependency on material consumption?

We decided to test further the potential benefits of mindfulness in reducing materialistic consumption through a variety of studies. One of these was a large-scale survey across a random sample of the public to establish correlational relationships between mindfulness and several consumption-related variables. The second involved a study of non-clinical mindfulness course attendees, to explore their experience of mindfulness training. Finally, we conducted an in-depth intervention study with a small group of self-confessed compulsive buyers, to test whether mindfulness was helpful in reducing their compulsive behaviours (see Annex B).

In the following paragraphs we summarise some of the findings from these various studies, concentrating in particular on the work with compulsive shoppers, which illustrated both the potential benefits and also some of the limitations of mindfulness in addressing consumerism. The findings are structured around our three motivational themes of identity, values and meaning.

Mindful narrative identity

The relations between mindfulness, identity, and consumption are varied and complex, and we have further divided the discussion into four (related) sections, all emergent from the data that we collected during our empirical work.[64]

Repairing the fragile self

In Section 2, we discussed the challenges of negotiating identity when the sense of self is experienced as fragile or changeable. This fragile sense of self is well-documented amongst self-reported compulsive shoppers and our own research confirmed this fragility. We also found however that mindfulness practice offered some stabilising of a fragile sense of self. It seemed to create a greater clarity around who our sample experienced themselves to be, as suggested by these quotes from the compulsive buyers, extracted from interviews which took place after they had undertaken a two month mindfulness training:

> *"before I wasn't really sure what I liked and what I didn't like [laugh], I just bought"*
>
> *"it just felt calmer, the actual decision [regarding a work promotion], but maybe that's because I was clearer about where I'm at with myself."*
>
> *"I can be me"*
>
> *"I think I'm more positive, and stronger I think, you know, stronger as a person"*

This sense of reducing the fragility of the self-context is potentially rather odd as an outcome from mindfulness training. Buddhist thinking suggests that suffering comes when individuals

attempt to hold on to a static idea of their sense of self, rather than remain open to the unfolding of experience moment by moment;[65] hence one of the roles of mindfulness is to introduce the concept of impermanence regarding a sense of self.

There is clearly something of a paradox here: on the one hand, mindfulness is supposed to allow us to see the self as transient and not fixed, as something less solidly identified with; on the other hand, it appears in practice to have the effect of strengthening and reifying a sense of self.

Our answer to this paradox is that mindfulness potentially offers both. Neither a reduction in fragility nor an increased sense of transience need be a sole outcome to the exclusion of the other. It is more likely that there is a progression from a fragile and ill-defined sense of self to a more clearly defined, (apparently) stable self, to finally beginning to understand the transience of this self through mindfulness practices. Such a progression is neatly summarised by Jack Engler's phrase "one has to be somebody before one can be nobody".[66] We do not currently know whether the linear progression implied is really what occurs and there is clearly room for more work here. But since we are discussing mindfulness in relation to identity-related consumption, anything within mindfulness that changes the relationship and experience of ourselves is likely to also impact on identity-motivated consumption.

Learning acceptance

One of the core principles of mindfulness is that of acceptance, and in particular of self-acceptance. The increased awareness of experience reveals aspects of thought and behaviour that would otherwise be habitual, automatic and unconscious. Mindfulness encourages a non-judgemental attitude to these revelations. This can be transformative in that it leads to individuals having a greater acceptance of themselves, their experiences and their situations.

Acceptance in its turn can lead to a reduction in perceived self-discrepancy and dissonance. It will be remembered from Section 2 that this sense of discrepancy or dissonance is one of the core drivers for continual material consumption. Material goods are supposed to fill the gap between who we believe we are and who we would ideally like to be. They offer an apparent means to strive towards a perfect vision of oneself, our ideal identity. Acceptance of ourselves, as we are, has the potential to reduce these feelings of discrepancy and disempower the lure of consumption as an imagined route towards perfection.

In feeling more accepting of oneself, it naturally follows that there is less need for a false front to display the supposed ideal-self, we would otherwise have sought for. Several advantages flow from this. Presenting a false front is associated with anxiety, low self-esteem and loneliness and these are immediately reduced. Creating the false front places a continual pressure on our need for material goods; this pressure is greatly relieved. One of our study participants had described always needing to dress for work such that she could portray the sense of professionalism, competence and confidence that she felt was needed, but that she did not feel inside. After practicing mindfulness, she commented:

> *"you can do a good job without having to rush off and buy all these things to make yourself successful, 'cause that's not what's going to make you successful, not having a hundred and one outfits, you're going to be successful because of what you do within your work, … or as a person."*

Negotiation of the social self

We all experience competing drives, on the one hand to attain a sense of belonging to one or more social groups, and on the other for a sense of our own uniqueness. There is fascinating empirical evidence to support the notion that both of these drives are less dominant when we practice mindfulness. The mechanism for this reduced pressure on us seems to come from greater feelings of completeness. Mindfulness encourages greater self-acceptance and facilitates reduced self-discrepancy. These lead to a greater potential for self-reliance, increased confidence and self-esteem. At the same time, mindfulness brings with it a sense of connectedness with all other beings and nature and these in their turn offer a pervasive sense of belonging that is less fragile than the one we attempt to negotiate through a restless consumerism.[67]

This has potentially far reaching implications, which were evident in our research. Firstly, there is a reduced motivation to comply with perceived social norms. If we consider that most in society do not necessarily consider environmental or social impact when they shop, to encourage individuals to act outside of these social norms may have a positive influence on overall sustainability goals. Of course, acting outside or being less influenced by social norms might also be expected to lead to a rejection of polite and considerate behaviour. But evidence seems to suggest that this is unlikely. As we discuss in the following subsection, mindfulness appears to reinforce pro-social values and underline moral and ethical frameworks.

Secondly, when people feel more complete, confident and connected, they are less likely to make social comparisons, or to require positive exchanges with others for approval. The participant in our intervention study quoted above in regards her work outfits also described how she no longer compares herself to others she perceived as "better", and no longer judged someone else's competence in a job based on what they wear. Another participant described how she no longer required her friends to comment on her new clothes to feel good about herself.

Thirdly, we note that there is an increased experience of authenticity when mindfulness is practiced. Self-knowledge increases, and we have a better sense of times when we are inauthentic or displaying a false front. This sense of remaining authentic is described in the literature on mindfulness as being "embodied". Going through life as an embodied being has huge consequences for health, well-being, and for relationships. It also has positive implications for the development of empathy, which, as Roman Krznaric describes, is in itself a valuable route for encouraging change towards a sustainable society.[68]

Challenging symbolism

As our experience of our own sense of identity changes and we develop a more resilient sense of identity and a stronger sense of self-esteem, there seems to be an interesting knock-on impact on the symbolism attached to material goods. Specifically, culturally embedded symbolism appears to weaken and lose its persuasive power and functionality assumes a greater importance.

This was evident in our data in various places. One of the respondents in our intervention study noted this shift from symbolic power to functional relevance following participation in the mindfulness training in the following way:

> *"I sometimes just look at things and think, you know "what's the point now of having", you know, even like a saucepan "what's the point of having that nice shiny new saucepan when I've got saucepans that will do the job?" That idea of having to have something new, I think, has changed."*

The decline in the persuasive power of symbolic value leads in its turn to a reduced need for continuous reinvention by having new or novel items. The lure of the new itself steps back from the limelight, leaving room for a more considered response to functional needs.

When there is a greater confidence in oneself, there is less need to believe adverts and marketing that try to communicate that we require certain goods to be acceptable, attractive, or to belong to a particular aspirational social group. One of the study participants described marketing messages in the following way: *"[They are] just so unrealistic,"* she said*, "I do know that now, well, I always knew it at the back of my mind, but you suppress that realistic thought"*

Interestingly, advertisers know that it feels good to live a life where we are connected to our sense of ourselves, and they use slogans to give the impression that it is the material good itself that can bring about that connection. A tea manufacturer claims that its tea *"gets you back to you"*.[69] A car manufacturer asserts that "*to become one with everything you need one of everything*".[70] Marketing plays an incredibly powerful role in shaping identities, lifestyles and culture.[71] Mindfulness allows us, at the very least, to become more aware of these influences on us, and potentially to choose to be counter-cultural, act on our own values, and shape our own lifestyle.

Mindful value expression

A first fascinating finding that mindfulness can bring about a shift in expressed values, came from our large scale survey, which showed a correlation between higher levels of mindfulness and lower reported materialistic values in a general population sample.[72]

We also noted a shift in the salience of pro-social values in our generic study of mindfulness students (with no particular consumption-related difficulties). One of our respondents in this study expressed the experience in the following way:

> *"I think [practicing mindfulness] enhanced [my desire to buy ethical products]… it all comes down to a realisation I had quite near the end of the course, which is that, this kind of wanting to respect the world and the people in it, is something that I've had for ages, but it's very hard to have that sort of relationship with everything around me, if I don't have the relationship with myself. And [I] go back to this whole having built up more of a relationship with myself thing, then I'm now finding it easier to open that up to the world around me and the people that I'm interacting with"*

This participant's insight is that the value (ethical purchasing) was always there, but that it was not always salient, and that she did not always act on it. Interestingly, this change comes about in her experience because she has a better relationship with herself, which she describes in ways that resonate with the discussion above and reduces to three aspects: the removal of judgement towards her own experience; the acceptance of situations and of herself within them; and the awareness of her own needs and desires separated out from social influence.

In this participant's experience, mindfulness has not created a new pro-social value, or even increased the importance of such values. Rather it has increased the salience of a pre-

existing value and reduced the dissonance of having to ignore this value in favour of meeting societal norms. There is a clear sense that she is more comfortable inhabiting an identity that encompasses pro-social and pro-environmental values.

A widening circle of moral concern

In the quote above, it can been seen that the participant's value salience was changing, and this allowed the consideration of, as she put it *"the world around me and the people that I'm interacting with"*. Another participant from another study described "*seeing"* in the cellophane wrapping around garage forecourt flowers, the faces of people who had grown them, thereby connecting her to their potential suffering, and the environmental implications of growing flowers in locations where they do not naturally grow.

We also gathered correlational data from our large-scale survey which positively linked mindfulness with reported ethical consumption. These data enable us to connect mindfulness with growing empathy levels, and to begin connecting a mindfulness practice with a widening of the circle of moral concern. Both of these tendencies appear to impact directly onto our consumption choices, reframing them as moral choices, bounded by our empathic concerns for others. Mindfulness does not invent this framing; but it reveals it to us.

These data also help to diffuse a possible misconception of mindfulness: that the emphasis on self-focus and self-connection leads to selfishness and self-absorption, and increases a sense of individualism. Drawing on what we know about the mechanisms of mindfulness and the data from our studies, we offer an alternative perspective on this. The self-focus encouraged by mindfulness is to do with self-awareness and self-knowledge, both of which are qualitatively different from selfishness and self-absorption. Greater self-connection offers higher confidence and a better sense of embodiment. This inner stability and strength facilitates our ability to reach out to others, and to consider people and places far removed from us in our decisions and choices. Instead of taking an individual view of ourselves and our place in society, mindfulness can help us to view ourselves as global citizens, and to concurrently appreciate both our insignificance and our magnificence.

Mindful meaning creation

In Section 3 we identified three specific meaning functions that might be enhanced through the practice of mindfulness. The first of these was the ability to identify our own intrinsic priorities and to live more in accordance with them. This sense of better maintaining our own personal meaning was clearly identified by some of the respondents in our intervention study. One of them described the aftermath of her mindfulness training in relation to a day spent with her children:

> *"It's not the same rush that I get with the shopping, or that initial [sense],"* she said, *"But the overall experience gives a much nicer feeling… Whereas with the shopping it's that initial rush, all that excitement and then you've got all the coming down from that, and all the worry and everything afterwards, this might not be the massive rush at the beginning, it's a more gentle gradual process in that you plan it, you go off, we do it, we have fun. (...) So the buzz was less I suppose, but it went on for longer and lasts, and it didn't have this awful crash afterwards"*

This renegotiation of personal meaning is facilitated first, by freeing the individual from pathological behaviour, and secondly by re-establishing priorities which are more deeply held in relation to family and friends. This experience also illustrates the importance of the

second meaning function offered by mindfulness training, the sense of connectivity with others and with the world. For this respondent the connection was to do with her children and the quality of the time she spent with them. For another, shopping had become her principal social activity, she saw shop assistants as her main circle of friends. After undertaking mindfulness training she was able to relate more easily to other environments in which she could negotiate social meaning.

For some of our respondents, shopping had become a way of filling a desperate inner emptiness, an almost existential anxiety. This is reminiscent of the third meaning function that mindfulness can promote. In section 3 we noted how psychologists have identified terror management as one of the principal tasks for human beings in response to our own mortality and the mortality of those we love. Researchers have also begun to explore how we respond to what they called heightened 'mortality salience' – particular cues from the environment that made us suddenly more aware of death and our own mortality.

What this research shows is that people tend to react defensively towards this enhanced awareness of mortality. Firstly, they tend to try to reassert their own importance; secondly they try to reinforce the culture that supports their own sense of meaning. In a materialistic culture, it is now clear, these two defensive responses lead to an increase in materialism.[73] This response is almost exactly the one President Bush once demanded of the American people in the wake of 9/11: faced with our own mortality, we tend to go out shopping!

Perhaps surprisingly, there is some clear evidence that mindfulness can mitigate this tendency. Recent work has shown that participants subjected to mortality salience cues are less likely to respond in materialistic ways, when they score more highly on mindfulness scales. More work is needed to unravel the exact mechanisms for this finding. But interestingly it seems to have something to do with the fact that mindfulness allows us to face stress and anxiety more directly. Those who scored more highly on a mindfulness scale in one of the studies were able to write for longer about their death anxiety following mortality cues.[74]

Mindfulness may also contribute to a (counter-cultural) meaning creation process that finds purpose in the connectivity of the whole rather than in the materialistic pursuits of the individual. At any rate, it is clear that mindfulness can support and enhance our sense of meaning and purpose in life in a variety of ways. As such, it holds out promise of arriving at more satisfying and less dysfunctional processes of meaning creation than those proffered by consumerism.

5 Towards a mindful society

We are living in a material world. But our motivations, hopes and dreams are never exclusively material in nature. The love of our family, the respect of our friends, our ability to participate meaningfully in the life of society, our sense of purpose: these are amongst the highest aspirations held by human beings. The most fundamental conceit of the consumer society is that each one of these 'goods' can be delivered through material consumption; that our lives will be better, the greater our access to consumer goods and services.

This elision of the social with the material, of story with stuff, is achieved through a powerful conjuring trick – the evocative power of material things. From the first teddy bear of our youngest child to the last totem of a lost loved one, material objects are redolent with personal and social meaning. One of the early pioneers of marketing, Ernst Dichter, described this symbolic power of material goods as seen in the eyes of refugees fleeing their homes. "*Hollow hands clasp ludicrous possessions"*, he wrote in 1964, *"Because they are links in the chain of life. If it breaks they are truly lost…"*[75]

Dichter's confessed aim was to equip marketers with the tools to enhance and strengthen the ephemeral links between sheer stuff and our deepest desires – and to create it from nothing, where this link does not already exist. So was born a highly profitable industry that sought to place this symbolic relationship at the heart of the global economy. Consumerism is the conceit that the meaning of life itself resides in shopping.

For all its power, such a conceit is clearly pathological. Material goods are fickle pacifiers and inaccurate signifiers. They are, in reality, no substitute for the love we offer our children, our strength in adversity, or even our generic preparedness to fight for survival. Their quality shifts and fades over time, causing more anxiety in the process. In the hands of profit-oriented advertisers, the very charm that they had yesterday will make them obsolete tomorrow. Our attachment to them puts us at the mercy of others, whose interests rarely coincide entirely with our own.

What makes consumer society so powerful and persuasive in these circumstances is its promise of continual innovation. As yesterday's icon fades, tomorrow's is already waiting in the wings, subtly undermining the incumbent totem. The success of consumer society, as Grant McCracken once remarked, lies quite precisely in its failure ever to provide us with lasting satisfaction. The market for symbolic goods can never entirely be saturated. Faced with an economic structure that demands continual consumption growth to achieve stability, this restlessness might be considered a good thing. Faced with resource depletion, ecological destruction, unacceptable inequality and crises of health and wellbeing, it is clearly dysfunctional.

Mindfulness has the potential to disrupt this dysfunctional conceit. Its mechanism is a very simple one: the enhancement of our attention, not just to the outer world, but also to the inner world; and perhaps most importantly to the relationship between the two.

Mindfulness offers us a different way of approaching the continuous project of negotiating our personal and social identity. It supports our intrinsic value orientations, and helps us navigate our own priorities in the face of powerful extrinsic forces which threaten to undermine pro-social behaviour and privilege selfish hedonism. It allows us to negotiate meaning: personal meaning through an enhanced understanding of what matters to us; social meaning through greater connectedness with the world around us; and perhaps even

existential meaning, by allowing us to face up to our own mortality and the mortality of those we love.

The potential of mindfulness to address the pathology of consumerism rests on three main characteristics. Firstly, the act of enhancing awareness and directing attention can make us more conscious of the effects of prolific materialism and enhance our concern for its impact on others. Much of the power of advertising resides in its ability to stir up motivations beneath the cognitive radar and to create emotional links that are hard to understand, let alone resist. Bringing these motivations into the light of day allows us to make more conscious choices in consumption; it empowers us to resist the lure of novelty and the promise of a materialistic salvation.

Secondly, mindfulness has the potential to provide psychological resources for the project of negotiating the self. It allows us to confront the flawed mechanisms of materialism and negotiate our own evolving identity on our own terms, against the backdrop of our own intrinsic values. Far from creating a narrow individualism, the evidence suggests that this engagement deepens our concern for others and for the world around us by offering a sense of connectedness in the wider project of a shared society.

Finally, mindfulness offers the resources to strengthen our sense of meaning and purpose by allowing us a safe space to confront our deepest, most existential fears. The denial of death operates as a powerful force in favour of a materialistic society. Mindfulness, with its roots in religious practice, brings to the secular world a new resource for overcoming this denial. In doing so it offers the potential to rob anxiety of its destructive power and return us to a more balanced understanding of our place in the world.

These are of course ambitious claims. To the extent possible we have based them on empirical work: studies that we and others have carried out to explore the potential for mindfulness to improve our lives, to reduce anxiety, to resist addiction and to overcome consumerism. But there are clearly limitations to extrapolating from such studies to the project of creating a more mindful, less materialistic society.

In the first place, mindfulness is not easy to practice, and the simplicity of its definition belies many challenges and paradoxes that emerge when mindfulness is practised over the long term. Formal mindfulness practice requires time, preferably daily, and changes are usually fairly gradual. Providing adequate training and support for this process is challenging, although there is now an emerging structure of training programmes, supervision, and ongoing support that should ultimately ensure adequate quantity and quality of teachers.

The quality and distribution of these training opportunities is far from perfect. In secular western society at least, it appears that mindfulness training is predominantly in the domain of the white middle classes. It is beyond the scope of this essay to assess the impact of this or to envisage ways to make mindfulness more attractive or available to ethnic minorities or to other classes. Education however clearly has some role to play here. Access to mindfulness training from an early age might well be a policy recommendation from this essay. Studies have shown that teaching kids mindfulness can increase focus and concentration, and can improve self-awareness, resilience, empathy, emotional intelligence, and social skills.[76]

Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer highlights the value of mindfulness in avoiding early commitments to a particular outcome, thereby enabling creativity and innovation to be kept alive.[77] Since one impact of mindfulness on adults is to help overcome habitual and automatic thinking and behaviour, it is worth theorising that teaching mindfulness to adolescents and children may reduce the formation of habitual and automatic thinking and

behaviours. This could be particularly pertinent in relation to identity formation and its relation to consumption behaviours.

It is important to re-emphasise here that shopping for and owning material goods is not in itself bad. Our inherent relationship to the world is a material one. It is inevitable that it remains this way. We all need to shop and consume and we will continue to do so, even in a more mindful society. Our suggestion here is that, through mindfulness, the gains we hope for in consumption can be more firmly rooted in realistic visions and values. And that our legitimate needs to negotiate our social identity, to live in accordance with our values, and to pursue a meaningful life are based on less materialistic (and more successful) strategies and resources.

Some of the evidence on which we have built this case comes from working with people whose addiction to buying has reached almost clinical proportions. Clearly it is instructive to explore the potential for mindfulness to alleviate the distress caused by this addiction. But it is not particularly constructive to pathologise this small minority of people. It is also potentially misleading to infer from the success of this strategy that we have "cured" the addiction or solved the problem.

From our perspective, the problem of compulsive shopping is an inherently social one. In a society in which we are overwhelmed with messages encouraging us to consume and bombarding us with signals that align material consumption with social status, it is almost inevitable that a minority will fall into addictive forms of pathological consumption. If mindfulness is able to alleviate these conditions for some, that can only be a good thing. But there is a clear danger that without a wider cultural shift this improvement is likely to be both temporary and limited in its scope. Indeed, in our intervention study there were clearly signs that some of the improvements noted immediately after the mindfulness training were eroded over time.[78]

Even in those circumstances in which selected individuals have successfully reduced their addiction by using mindfulness, the ecological outcomes may not always be unilaterally good. Much depends on how the time and resources freed up from pathological consumption end up being used instead. In our study of compulsive buyers, for example, one participant informed us that they were experiencing a reduction in their consumption. But it turned out that the money they had saved from shopping was to be used instead for going on an overseas holiday, which potentially has far greater ecological impact.

Mindfulness can never in itself be a "cure" to the wider social problem of overconsumption. Nor can it be regarded as a simple palliative to be applied to the self-inflicted wounds of a pathological society. To create a more mindful, less materialistic society, it is not enough simply to make mindfulness training available to those who most fall foul of consumerism's duplicitous charms. Society itself must change.[79]

An economy that demands consumption growth for its stability will always need the restless appetites of insatiable consumers. In such an economy, industry can only thrive if materialism reigns; marketers will inevitably promote a culture of symbolic attachment to stuff; and governments will be powerless to intervene. People's lives will continue to be characterised by social pressure, stress, inequality and poor working conditions. A minority will continue to find themselves in a spiral of addiction and debt. Applying mindfulness like a sticking plaster over a gaping wound will change nothing. The most fundamental task in this regard is to develop an economics fit for purpose on a finite planet, in which economic stability no longer relies on rising consumption.[80]

But some of the necessary changes could indeed come from mindfulness. Mindfulness training could be made accessible in schools, in universities, in the workplace, and in health institutions. Mindfulness should in particular be a component in addressing the pathologies and addictions of late modernity: over-consumption, over-spending, over-indebtedness. It would also be useful to explore the extent to which mindfulness can inform broader agendas of wellbeing, civic participation and leadership, particularly given how these in their turn are implicated in patterns of consumption.

Mindfulness is clearly not a cure-all for a broken society. But it is a way for individuals (and perhaps for society) to set out on pathways of change, to 'be the change' they wish to see in the world. Our work with compulsive shoppers suggests that mindfulness can indeed offset the most pernicious damage inflicted by consumerism on the most vulnerable individuals. Mindfulness also offers the potential to create a culture in which identity, value and meaning are negotiated in less materialistic and more satisfying ways. That at least is the promise held out by this essay. An increasing weight of evidence suggests that mindfulness has huge potential to free us from consumerism, if it is correctly supported, compassionately taught, and situated in a more robust economic structure.

Annex A: Schwartz's Ten Human Values

Value	Description
Self-direction	Independent thought and action; choosing, creating, exploring
Stimulation	Excitement, novelty, and challenge in life
Hedonism	Pleasure and sensuous gratification for oneself
Achievement	Personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards
Power	Social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources
Security	Safety, harmony, and stability of society, or relationships, and of self
Conformity	Restraint of actions, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms
Tradition	Respect, commitment, and acceptance of the customs and ideas that traditional culture or religion provide the self
Benevolence	Preserving and enhancing the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact (the 'in-group')
Universalism	Understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature

Annex B: Mindfulness and Compulsive Shopping: background to the study

Study 1

A survey was developed that measured mindfulness (using the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire, FFMQ), materialism (using the Materialistic Value Scale, MVS), compulsive buying (using the Compulsive Buying Scale, CBS), ecological concern (using the New Ecological Paradigm), satisfaction with life (using the Satisfaction with Life Scale, SWLS), reported pro-environmental and pro-social behaviour, and meditation. The survey was administered to 1000 random household, University students and staff, and known meditators. The usable sample size was 468, and positive correlations were found between Mindfulness and Satisfaction with Life and Reported Ethical Purchasing; and negative correlations were found between Mindfulness and Materialism and Tendency to Compulsively Buy.[81]

Study 2

University staff experiencing stress were offered an 8 week MBSR course. At the end of the course, those willing (N=12) were interviewed about their experiences of learning mindfulness, and about any changes that they noticed in their relationship with material goods or their buying behaviour. They also completed the same questionnaire as for Study 1. Findings include a perspective on how awareness develops; insight into the changing relationship with themselves; and a changed relationship with others and the world, including recognising empowerment and the increased salience of pro-social and pro-environmental values.

Study 3

Compulsive buyers were specifically recruited, half of whom (N=6) completed an 8 week MBSR training, and half of whom (N=6) were the control group. Quantitative measures taken of both groups include Mindfulness (FFMQ), Compulsive Buying (CBS), Impulse Buying (Impulse Buying Scale), Reported Ethical Buying, Obsessive-Compulsiveness (Obsessive-Compulsive Inventory), Depression (Beck Depression Inventory), Anxiety (Beck Anxiety Inventory), Affect Experiences (Positive and Negative Affect Scale), Self-esteem (Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale), Identity Self-Discrepancy (Self-Discrepancy Index), Negative Self-Image (Habit Index of Negative Thinking), and Materialism (MVS). Those in the experimental group were interviewed at three time points: before the mindfulness intervention, immediately after it, and 3-4 months later. The interview data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analytical techniques, with the quantitative data providing triangulation. The results offer a unique and detailed insight into the experiences of compulsive buyers learning mindfulness, and of the mechanisms of change. Changes to emotional buying, symbolic buying, and to the addiction itself were evident. [82]

Notes

1 Douglas and Isherwood 1996.
2 Lebow 1955.
3 Steffen et al 2015.
4 Soper 2008.
5 Dittmar et al 2014
6 Crompton and Kasser 2009.
7 Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981.
8 Belk 1988.
9 Ibid.
10 Belk et al 2003.
11 Leary and Tangney 2003.
12 McAdams 1993, 2001.
13 Rosenberg 1989.
14 This paragraph describes what Self-Discrepancy Theory makes explicit. This is a theory relating to the evaluative element of identity processing, and postulates that we often compare the self that we perceive ourselves to be (our actual-self) with an impression of an ideal-self or an ought-self. The ideal-self is the perception of an identity that we aspire to and wish to achieve. And it is our evaluation of ourselves against this ideal-self and the gap we perceive between this and our perception of our actual-self that causes psychological discomfort, in this case, the theory postulates, dejection-related emotions such as dissatisfaction, disappointment or sadness. The ought-self, as the name suggests, is the perception of our identity as we feel we ought to be. Again, this can be defined by social cues, but can also be as direct as our families telling us we ought to be "better" in some way. When there is a perceived gap between our perceived actual-self and ought-self, Self-Discrepancy Theory states (and is empirically backed-up) that this leads to agitation-related emotions, such as fear, threat or restlessness (Higgins 1987, Higgins et al 1990, Higgins et al 1992).
15 Snyder and Fromkin 1980.
16 Ruvio 2008, Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981, Dittmar 2005.
17 Lynn and Harris 1997.
18 Online at: http://www.gapinc.com/content/gapinc/html/media/pressrelease/2014/med_pr_gapbrand_dressnormal.html
19 Belk 1988.
20 Dittmar 2011, Dittmar and Bond 2010.
21 Rosenberg 1989.
22 Bauman 1998.
23 Beggan 1991, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, Furby 1978, Kamptner 1991.
24 Cushman, 1990.
25 Coleman and Williams 2012.
26 Schwartz and Bilsky 1987.
27 Schwartz 1994.
28 Ibid. See also:Basic Human Values: An Overview. Available at: http://segr-did2.fmag.unict.it/Allegati/convegno%207-8-10-05/Schwartzpaper.pdf
29 Crompton and Kasser 2009.
30 Ibid.
31 For a discussion see for instance: Pepper et al 2009.
32 Dittmar 2005.
33 Belk 2001.
34 Pepper et al 2009.
35 Kasser and Ryan 1993.
36 Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002, Gardarsdóttir et al 2009, Jackson 2009, Kasser and Ryan 1993, Kasser and Ryan 1996, Sirgy 1998.
37 Eagelton 2007.
38 Jackson 2006, Jackson 2013, Jackson and Pepper 2010.
39 Hankiss 2006.
40 BBC Woman's Hour 2014, podcast.
41 Jackson and Pepper 2010.

[42] Krznaric 2015.
[43] Goldstein 2003.
[44] Siegal et al 2009.
[45] Kabat-Zinn 1990/2008.
[46] Brown and Ryan 2003.
[47] Kabat-Zinn 1990/2008. Segal et al 2002/2013.
[48] Hölzel et al 2011, Siegel 2007.
[49] Leary and Tangney 2003, p8.
[50] Kramer 2007.
[51] Fulton 2009.
[52] Scott Rigby, Schultz and Ryan 2014, Brown and Kasser 2005.
[53] Bandura 1997.
[54] Kasser et al 2004
[55] Armstrong 2012. Brown and Ryan 2003.
[56] Amel et al 2009. Armstrong 2012.
[57] Krznaric 2015.
[58] Cohen and Miller 2009. Kramer 2007.
[59] Douglas 1976. Dittmar et al 2014, Jackson 2009, Nussbaum 2006, Townsend 1979.
[60] Block-Lerner et al 2007, Kramer 2007. Shapiro et al 1998.
[61] Langer 1989.
[62] Becker 1972. See also Giddens 1991.
[63] Berger 1969, Jackson 2006, Jackson 2013.
[64] Armstrong, A 2012.
[65] Trungpa 1973.
[66] Engler 1983, Engler 1986.
[67] Howell et al 2011, Shapiro et al 1998.
[68] Krznaric 2015.
[69] Online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChxzFDi2nWg
[70] Quoted in Goldstein 2003, p.35, emphasis in original.
[71] Hurth et al 2015.
[72] Armstrong 2012.
[73] Arndt et al 2004.
[74] Adams 2007, Kashdan et al 2011, Niemiec et al 2010.
[75] Dichter 1964.
[76] Oman et al 2008, Rosenzweig et al 2008, Shapiro et al 1998.
[77] Langer 1989.
[78] This finding implies a clear need for a sustainable approach to marketing of consumer goods and services. See, eg Hurth et al 2015 for a discussion of this issue.
[79] Some ideas for such changes have been discussed in other essays in this series. See Hurth et al 2015 for instance for a discussion of sustainable marketing and Krznaric 2015 for a discussion of empathy learning.
[80] See Jackson 2009 and FoE 2014.
[81] Baer et al 2006, d'Astous et al 1990, Diener et al 1985, Dunlap et al 2000, Pepper et al 2009, Richins and Dawson 1992.
[82] Baer et al 2006, Beck et al 1988, Beck et al 1996, d'Astous et al 1990, Dittmar et al 1996, Foa et al 2002, Monahan et al 1996, Pepper et al 2009, Richins and Dawson 1992, Rosenberg 1965, Smith et al 2009, Verplanken et al 2007, Watson et al 1988.

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