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# What's Deviance Got to Do with It? Black Friday Sales, Violence and Hyper-Conformity

Thomas Raymen and Oliver Smith

## Abstract

Based upon original ethnographic and interview data, this article presents an initial theorisation and analysis of the violence and disorder witnessed throughout UK high streets and superstores during the 2014 Black Friday sales. While the conduct of these 'extreme shoppers' appeared deviant, this article positions such behaviour as hyper-conformity to the cultural values of neoliberalism, embodying the competitive individualism, cultivation of envy and aggressive display of consumer items which characterises Western society in late modernity. In doing so, the authors explore the concept of 'deviant leisure', using the disorder of Black Friday to pose important questions about how the underpinning social and cultural values of neoliberal consumer capitalism pervades relatively mundane leisure activities, cultivating harmful subjectivities.

**Keywords:** Consumerism; Black Friday; Deviance; Leisure; Shopping

*"Oi, mate! If you aren't gonna grab anything then fuck off out the shop!"* —Comment from Black Friday shopper made toward the researcher

## Introduction

On 28<sup>th</sup> November 2014 British retailers, both online and real-world, offered a day of huge savings on a range of consumer products under the banner of Black Friday. Shops and superstores across the country opened either at midnight or provided extended opening hours, offering 'door buster' deals and significant discounts on a range of consumer goods. Despite being in many ways a conventional social event, a criminological reading can usefully be applied to the scenes of pushing, shoving, trampling and fighting which have become a familiar, even defining, characteristic of Black Friday in the United States. Scenes such as these were replicated across several cities in the UK (BBC News, 2014), with police called to stores in Manchester, Cardiff, Newcastle upon Tyne, London, Dundee and Glasgow, among others, to deal with reports of both criminal violence and anti-social disorder. While firm official statistics on arrests and injuries are hard to come by, Greater Manchester police confirmed making three arrests, with one woman suffering a broken wrist and head injury from a falling television during a confrontation (BBC News, 2014). Our data suggests that these were not isolated incidences whipped into a moral panic by a hyperbolic media, but a real and pervasive feature of Black Friday's 'violent shopping'. This article uses first-hand ethnographic observation and interview data from Black Friday sales in Newcastle upon Tyne, in which we witnessed several exchanges of physical violence and abusive behaviour to underscore the relevance of these phenomena to a realist criminology seeking to connect analytical themes of consumerism, deviance, and leisure.

The undignified scenes of violence and disorder undoubtedly shaped the media and popular reaction to events. However, in the following pages we attempt to contextualise the actions of these consumers beyond an explanatory framework that positions them as ‘animals’ (Glanfield et al, 2014) or alternatively as fiercely competing for a slice of what is often claimed to be an exclusionary consumer experience (Lea and Young, 1984). Instead, we position these behaviours front and centre of a consumer culture that is thoroughly *inclusive*. Beneath the surface appearance of what might appear to be anti-social or deviant behaviour but also in some cases criminal violence, we locate a deeper, more concerning aspect of these behaviours in the sense that they appear to offer a paradoxically hyper-conformist quality to the extent that they relate to and reflect the norms and driving forces underpinning a competitive consumer culture (Currie 1997; Presdee 2000; Hall et al., 2008). We can see this in terms of the way that fighting, pushing and shoving, while suggesting a *deviation* from conventional social norms, were expressed within the carnivalesque moment of Black Friday as a means to wrestle and fight to *pay* for their hard-won consumer commodities ahead of all others. Such displays of innovation, using acts of violence and anti-social behaviour to *conform* rather than deviate, raise interesting questions for criminology around the need to interrogate more closely the underlying drives, meanings and motivations at the heart of the quintessential consumer experience of shopping, and we subsequently locate this discussion within the broader context of consumer culture and leisure studies.

Our assessment of the contemporary context of shopping and consumerism revolves first around tracing how economic shifts in the UK over the past four decades have fundamentally transformed the nature of work, leisure and identity in late modernity (Hobsbawm, 1996). Consumption and the ornamental display of symbolic consumer commodities are positioned as both vital to the survival of post-industrial Western economies and constituting the central form of identity formation for the late modern subject in a social landscape characterised by precarity, fluidity and indignity (Hall et al, 2008). The article then moves to detail the notion of ‘deviant leisure’, exploring the contradictions of global capitalism and their manifestation in the increasingly blurred and uncertain boundaries between leisure and crime. This will lead into a more specific analysis of the leisure activity of shopping itself. This section will interrogate the meanings, motivations and underlying systemic violence involved in the cultural imperative to competitively purchase and display consumer items within a hostile social and economic context in which the means for establishing identity, dignity and self-worth are fragile, transitory and ever-changing in consumer society. The article will then go on to discuss how, in the absence of more traditional forms of identity formation, young adults are continuously

infantilised and drawn back to consumer markets to display cultural competence and accomplishment as a consumer, while battling to elevate the self by inspiring envy in others.

The perpetrators of the disorder we witnessed were not the criminalised 'other' or a specific population resolutely rejecting the social norms and values of 'law-abiding' society. This raises important questions for criminologists around the nature of what constitutes 'crime' in both starkly legal terms as well as more tolerable forms of socially-defined deviance. While we in no way intend to conflate crime and deviance, such behaviours committed by individuals from such a range of social demographics suggests a need to explore how harmful subjectivities associated with the logic of asocial accumulation might underpin and explain this wide range of behaviours. Answering these questions necessitates a determined interrogation of consumer culture and its attendant behaviours and activities, of which shopping is here our central example.

From the qualitative research conducted on high streets and shopping centres of Newcastle upon Tyne, the violent shopper appeared to come from a wide spectrum of ethnic, gender and age backgrounds, but what they all held in common was a deep, unwavering commitment to the ethos of hyper-consumption. This article offers neither a conservative account devoid of political, economic and social analytic context, which blames individuals as reckless irresponsible consumers; nor an account which negates the harm that is inherent in this behaviour or positions it as an expression of frustration toward an exclusionary consumer market. The events of Black Friday were merely the violent metastasis of neoliberal capitalism's deeper underlying drive to compete and win in the market ahead of all others, even if it means you have to punch for it.

### **Methodology and Theoretical context**

The authors hit the high streets and shopping malls in Newcastle seeking to develop insights into the connections that lie between leisure, deviance and consumerism. How might these forces play out in the feverishly competitive spaces of the Black Friday sales? We spoke to 27 people inside and outside of major retailers of clothes, electrical goods and large department stores. These interviews are also supplemented by initial field observations taken by the researchers in stores, high streets and shopping centres on Black Friday, 2014.

Due to the transitory nature of many of the shoppers, consent forms could not be handed out and signed. Instead verbal consent and interviews were obtained through a handheld Dictaphone. These impromptu conversations varied in length and detail due in no small part to the chaotic nature of the research site. Some shoppers wished only to give a few comments before moving on to the next store or to get out of the busy high streets, although most were

happy to remain amid the carnivalesque atmosphere and discuss what was unfolding around them. Participants varied in age, race and gender<sup>1</sup>; but due to the context of the research site we were opportunistic in the sense that we relied on whoever was willing to speak to us. Some were solo shoppers while others were couples or groups of friends.

Our assertions about the motivations and meanings around the behaviours of those involved with the events of Black Friday UK are based upon this ethnographic data in addition to a number of years researching the nexus between consumerism, leisure and deviance. We cannot deny that we began this article and the associated empirical research with a level of commitment to a certain theoretical perspective that has emerged from previous empirical research in the environs of consumer culture (see for example Smith, 2014). However, as others have argued elsewhere, commitment to theoretical ideas which have emerged from empirical research is fully aligned with the guidelines of a grounded theoretical approach (Winlow and Hall, 2006: 11).

This article does not claim to be the last word on the complexities of contemporary subjectivities and deviance, not least because the theoretical arguments made in this article are based on an extremely limited sample in only one city. However, read in the context of other theoretical and empirical accounts surrounding contemporary subjectivities, deviance and leisure (Banks, 2013; Hayward, 2004; Smith, 2014; Treadwell et al, 2013; Winlow and Hall, 2006), this article does suggest that the time has come for criminologists to begin to examine the deviance-leisure nexus more seriously and undertake more comprehensive theorisation of deviant motivation that is firmly and realistically situated within the broader political, socio-economic and cultural context of neoliberal consumer capitalism (see Hall et al., 2008). To this end, we employ an understanding of deviant leisure that discards the Manichean binary of 'criminals' and 'moral citizens' in order to attempt to address the forces that can drive ostensibly law-abiding individuals towards harmful social practices. Throughout the period of data collection we did not witness criminals displaying pathologically violent behaviour. Rather, individuals were jostling and pushing to *pay* for items. An understanding of deviant leisure in this context then, must appreciate the criminogenic potential of the need to garner envy in others through conspicuous consumption.

## **Rethinking Leisure and Crime**

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<sup>1</sup> Discerning social class without the time to develop appropriate background knowledge made the certainty of establishing a broad social class demographic difficult under these circumstances. Moreover, as class-based industries and traditional signifiers of social class and location in the social structure disintegrate with the increase of low-wage, insecure employment in the service economy; even in-depth studies struggle with discerning class-status (see Winlow and Hall, 2006).

Leisure has come to occupy a central role in Western society, and one which is intrinsically bound to consumer culture (Smith 2014). The importance of consumption to leisure is such that Bauman declares that the individual must 'be a consumer first, before one can think of being anything in particular' (2003: 26), a claim substantiated by the paucity of leisure activities that are truly distinct from shopping or other elements of consumerism. Broadly speaking, leisure and recreation are viewed as fundamentally positive in their pursuit and ends, leaving little room for a consideration of how harm and deviance can feature in the realms of leisure (see Franklin-Reible, 2006; Stebbins, 2009). Of course, exceptions to this understanding of leisure as fundamentally 'good' exist, and are generally grouped under the heading of 'deviant leisure', defined as involving 'behaviour which 'violates criminal and non-criminal norms' (Williams and Walker, 2006: 195).

While we must leave a more complex interrogation of the concept for another time, we would suggest that it is at this nexus of leisure and deviance that we see the contradictions and damaging nature of global capitalism brought to the fore. There is an increasing array of examples in which the line between harmful deviance and legitimate leisure is becoming increasingly blurred to the point of being imperceptible. The celebration of harmful forms of 'leisure' such as excessive alcohol consumption and its relationship with violence, drugs markets and sexual violence (Hobbs et al, 2003; Smith, 2014; Weiss, 2013); or the potential cultivation of harmful and desensitised subjectivities through graphically violent video games (Atkinson and Willis, 2007) all suggest that a commitment to consumerism and what Žižek (2002) describes as the 'cultural injunction to enjoy' trumps any other concerns about inflicting harm on others. It is therefore imperative that we critically interrogate how leisure, enjoyment and the consumption of culturally symbolic commodities occupy such a central role in contemporary culture and individual identity.

Our use of the term 'deviant leisure' therefore, refers to leisure activities or constituent parts thereof which have the capacity to cause harm. In this sense we can understand the disorder around Black Friday shopping as illustrative of deviant leisure, while simultaneously arguing that the violence witnessed was symptomatic of hyperconformity to the values ascribed to consumer society. While some of the activities and behaviours outlined and captured within this article display deviant characteristics, (such as a lack of behaviours likely to be identified as 'civilised' by the majority of consumers, practiced through turn-taking, queuing, and other forms of politeness and civility), the cultural norms of their actions are entirely in keeping with the demands of neoliberal consumer society.

Black Friday therefore, appears to offer an unparalleled opportunity to think critically about the nature of late modern consumerism, post-industrialism and its zemiological relationship with

crime and deviance. Fundamental changes in the nature of work, leisure and identity render symbolic interactionist explanations inadequate; and we require an analysis which looks at how structural changes in global capitalism, political economy and culture have influenced the subjectivities and desires of the post-modern subject. In the deindustrialised North East and elsewhere, the offshoring of industry created a vacuum of meaningful employment that was only partially filled by the rise of a consumer and service-based economy (see Winlow, 2001, Amin, 1994). These new forms of employment tended to be temporary, precarious, poorly compensated, characterised by zero-hour contracts and the sort of affective labour that saps the soul without filling the pocket (Cederström and Fleming 2012, Lloyd, 2013). This is in contrast to the traditional forms of industrial employment that were decimated throughout the 1980s. It is widely accepted that the traditional sites of industrial employment offered a great deal of stability, comprehensibility of reproductive working class structures and cultures (Hobsbawm, 1996; Willis, 1977). Moreover, without romanticising these industries, there is evidence to suggest that individuals derived solidarity, mutual understanding, political and class identity from them (Willis, 1979).

The subsequent flexibilisation of labour and the evisceration of these forms of collective identity grounded in family, relationships, class, community and politics resulted in the triumph of liberal post-modernism and the renunciation of, and scepticism towards, any governing ideology, codes, rules traditions or forms of collective identity. In the absence of many opportunities for collectivism, the only available option appeared to be a move toward individualism and self-expression (Epstein, 1991), while rules, codes, and traditional forms of identity have become viewed as burdensome and oppressive weights upon the unique individuality inside us all (Winlow and Hall, 2012). However, in being freed from such burdens, we have also been untethered from any sense of fixity, stability or symbolic means of making coherent sense of our world. The effect of this has been to create a void into which the polysemic possibilities of consumer capitalism has moved. Consequently, the consumer market offers an infinite assortment of artefacts that promise to provide a level of coherence, allowing us to make symbolic sense of our lives (Miles, 1998; 2000). All that is left is what Žižek (1999) describes as the 'cultural injunction to enjoy', where life is about the pursuit of pleasure, a pursuit to which almost all other rules, codes, ethics or morality is secondary. This is not to make a moralistic comment but to sketch out how changes in the political, economic and ideological landscape have influenced the postmodern subject.

A prime example of this is the commitment to low consumer prices. Through the adoption of neoliberal economic policy, wages stagnate for the working populace; with economic crises continually averted through the availability of cheap credit, and ever-cheaper consumer items

(Harvey, 2007). What is left is perhaps best described as the *opposite* of modernist welfarism. Historically, trade unions would have demanded better wages and conditions for their members. Today, celebrity money saving experts tell eager audiences how to get the best deals or Pizza Express vouchers, while consumer interest groups lobby MPs to break up monopolies so that consumers can benefit from lower prices. There is no clearer indication of the death of collectivist leftist politics in favour of a doxic commitment to perpetually low prices. This results in a continuance of wage-repression and, in turn, the empowerment of financiers and banking industries through the requirement to find ingenious and innovative ways to keep consumer-workers buying in the face of austerity (Harvey, 2014). Essentially, the constant push for low prices contributes to the reproduction of the capitalist order, intensifying rather than easing the material conditions of precariousness which plague increasing swathes of the consumer-worker population.

As the Symbolic Order<sup>2</sup> disintegrates and the compensatory comforts of commodities take centre-stage, the civility and manners of shopping, which have been apparent stalwarts in our collective sense of sociability (Mann, 1969) become dispensable in the face of consumerism's imaginary substitute order. This is exemplified in the words of Simon, a 32 year-old office manager, who reflects on the social fragility of the queue:

***Simon:** Queuing went out the window today. People half-queued at first, but as soon as the doors opened it all fell apart. That whole thing of British sensibility...you know...that we queue properly and that. That's bollocks. It's imaginary, mate. Day-to-day, yeah people queue. But as soon as you get something like today, or rush-hour on the Metro or something...goes out the window. So fuck queuing, nobody else is.*

The queue is an intrinsic element of the social order. It represents deferred gratification, as well as a form of collective efficacy that underpins at least a basic level of sociability. The discarding of queuing evidences in a small way the dissolution of something more fundamental. In Hall's (2012) terminology, the rejection of even such a minor ethical code as queuing exemplifies the assertion of *special liberty*. By rejecting the prosocial, individuals are acting in the belief that within a Randian context of wealth creation, individual drives and desires are prioritised, while the need to acknowledge the harms inflicted upon others is diminished. While Hall is predominantly using the term to describe the sense of privilege enjoyed by self-proclaimed 'wealth creators', it seems reasonable to suggest that it is equally pervasive throughout society among consumers who experience a 'right' to have what they desire. This is reflected in the

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<sup>2</sup> Jaques Lacan's term for the social world of communication, rules and conventions that allow us to make sense of the world we inhabit



experiences of Susanna, a 43 year old mother who appeared nonplussed by the events of Black Friday:

***Susanna:** It's quite disgusting really. People are going around like they deserve these things. I saw a grown man having a tantrum because the shop had ran out of stock of whatever it was he was after. He was saying 'I demand you bring me one. Or ship some in from another store', screaming at this poor girl who was just trying to do the best she could.*

Such attitudes drive an aggressive form of consumer culture to which consumer markets are central; and individuals increasingly understand and locate their social status in relation to the downfall of others. In this sense then, the seemingly innocuous pastime of shopping becomes an instrument of harm.

### **Shopping, consumerism and harm**

Shopping is an integral part of consumerism, intrinsically linked to aspects of identity and lifestyle. As a leisure activity, it promises to offer freedom of choice and an opportunity to exercise self-gratification, making an individual feel that they are uniquely creative (Zukin, 2005). Indeed, shopping can be viewed as a cultural practice that addresses a yearning to 'feel part of public life' (ibid: 7). Some research has even suggested that being seen to have shopped in an expensive store is a more potent status symbol than actual ownership of the goods themselves (Hall et al., 2008). In this way it differs from the act of simply 'buying'. Further, the pleasure in the seeking of novelty (Hirschman, 1984) and the hedonic stimulation encountered when the consumer feels they have got a bargain, contributes to the idea of shopping as a form of leisure. Some 'leisure' shoppers may well enjoy the broader pursuits associated with an unhurried stroll around the shops, meeting a friend for coffee or simply people-watching (Tauber, 1972; Roberts, 1987). However, for others, the 'leisure' lies in the competitive aspect; either at the point of purchase or later in the ostentatious display of bought items. These customers are most likely to be those that purchase on impulse (Iyer, 1989), indicating that the desire to purchase anything is integral to the overall shopping experience. This is carried through to an extreme in the well-documented case during the UK 2014 Black Friday sales of a woman who, being unable to buy a television, opted instead to put a Dyson vacuum cleaner in her trolley, rather than leave empty-handed (Neate, 2014).

In positioning shopping as a form of leisure, it appears that it could best be described as 'casual leisure' (Stebbins, 2007) requiring little in the way of practise, expertise or specialty knowledge. The ready availability of credit would suggest it to be a fairly inclusive activity, especially once we consider that many consumers express pleasure at the notion of 'window shopping', and the

proliferation of 'designer outlet' shopping precincts which significantly broaden the demographic reach of branded consumer goods. Other forms of shopping however, may be better described as 'serious leisure', requiring practice and dedication, incorporating clearly definable and visible signs of progress or success. Relevant examples of shopping as serious leisure would be online auctions, antiques markets or shopping in the seasonal sales. Similarly, Black Friday shopping appears to incorporate a number of elements which distinguish it as a form of 'serious leisure', including the apparent use of planning and tactics that would be more usually associated with hyper-masculine sporting activities, and the recurrent desire to improve performance for next time (Thomas and Peters, 2011). This tactical element that can be learned, improved upon and used to gain advantage is outlined here by Emily, a 26 year old woman working in administration for a construction firm:

*[I] Was one of the first in, like. Proppa shot in there quick when the doors opened, overtook about 4 people within the first few seconds. [She turns into commentator mode, using her hands to portray her movements and tactics] I spotted a little room on the outside of 'em and I snuck past dead canny like. I could see where they had these TVs stacked up. They had wrapping over them, but I knew by the shape and size it were them. I wasn't right at the front, but I figured it out. Other people further ahead for the first few seconds you could see they were trying to figure out where was what. Idiots. So I got in there. Those people I snuck past, as I had mine and I was trying to get out the way, I saw them get caught in a crowd. Ha! Swooped in!*

*Gotta use yer head. Luckily I'm a big lass so I can push people around a bit[...] It's a bit like wild kingdom in there. Survival of the fittest! Like I said, those people in front of me. Didn't think it through. They weren't ready.*

Similarly to Emily, Stefan, a 28-year old bouncer; James a 23-year old local student; and Keith a 32-year old colleague of Stefan, discuss their tactics in which the need to be a competent Black Friday consumer appeared to justify and necessitate the use of physical aggression:

**Stefan:** *Took it quite seriously as well didn't we?*

**James & Keith:** *Yeah, we didn't mess about.*

**Stefan:** *Well, we had planned. We had strategy. So James was the one who wanted to really go buy things. And Keith and I are big men. So we choose to go to James' shop first.*

**Keith:** *So basically James would pick stuff out and we'd basically go over there and just bowl people out of the way, like corner it off and that and then little'un here [James] would sneak in like a whippet and grab what he needs. He cleaned up! Worked a treat!*

A number of commentators have rightly acknowledged the changing landscape of the shopping experience, pointing toward the increasingly homogenised high streets, the ubiquity of online shopping and perpetual rationalisation (Ritzer, 1993; 2001). Online shopping in particular appears to have had a cultural and financial impact upon how purchases are made. However, not every element of the holistic shopping experience is reducible to a click of a mouse or readily mediated through a touch-screen phone. There is something about the process of entering a shop and purchasing consumer goods that fleetingly connects at the heart of the postmodern subject. Evidence for this comes in the form of the young working class males that form the basis of Hall et al's research (2008), and again in the actions of individuals interviewed by Treadwell et al (2013) in the wake of the 2011 riots. Here, individuals would sell stolen or looted goods in order to then legitimately access consumer markets, buying designer clothes, electronic items and accoutrements, finding meanings and cultural identity within the *legitimate* purchase of branded items. In this way they were able to elevate themselves above those who are unable to afford the genuine article and so buy knock-offs, inspiring envy among those who recognise the difference.

There is a suggestion that the societal impact of western culture's unswerving emphasis on and commitment to consumerism has had broad reaching effects on dominant socio-ethical norms, redefining:

"what is regarded as acceptable and unacceptable, proper and improper, legitimate and illegitimate, or praiseworthy and blameworthy behaviour in the light of the moral principles (e.g. justice... fairness, decency... authenticity, reliability)... changing the criteria by which people evaluate their own and each other's actions" (Weigertz, 2010: 124).

In this way, we can view the apparently destructive, antisocial behaviours associated with Black Friday shopping as an *intrinsic externality* of the dominant structural and subjective driving forces behind the political-economic landscape of neoliberal society, and in this way entirely in keeping with and mirroring the everyday, law abiding forms of consumption, credit and legitimised/sanitised incarnations of the consumer-finance economy (see Horsley, 2015). This view is espoused by one Black Friday shopper, Darren, a 34-year old IT engineer, who saw the aggressive consumption in an extremely utilitarian way: as an essential service to the economy:

**Darren:** *The way I see it, it's a good thing [...] Black Friday, it's a massive boost to the economy. Which is the key to everything these days. We need to keep the economy going and going well and I think Black Friday moving over here is key to that. I'm quite logical and rational though. I don't get caught up in the 'oh isn't this disgraceful' stuff. The amount*

*of money this pumps into the economy, I think it's worth the sacrifice of people acting like this.*

Darren epitomises the capitalist realist, for whom capitalism 'seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable' (Fisher, 2009: 8). In this sense, global capitalism has created a consumerist ontology, which is able to assert an unquestioned dominance within a post-political landscape which has seemingly given up the effort of looking beyond a liberal-capitalist society.

Key to understanding the motivations and describing the actions of the 'deviant shoppers' is an appreciation and incorporation of the hostile political and economic landscape against which the lives of many of the respondents are set. Perhaps most strikingly, the absence of political collectivism has been consumerism's most effective ally in capturing the socially atomised and economically marginalised subject. The threat of cultural irrelevance looms large over many of the respondents here and in similar cohorts studied elsewhere (Smith 2013, Hall et al, 2008, Miles, 2000; Treadwell et al, 2013). In the absence of clear, meaningful political alternatives to the dominant neoliberal consensus, consumer markets offer the only real option, promising identity, meaning and pleasure (Moxon, 2011). Objects within this cultural sphere take on almost mystical qualities. Marx refers to this process as reification, but this concept does not quite convey the extent to which consumer objects have the ability to act as reflective mirrors of identity and distinction, temporarily staving off the anxiety of cultural obsolescence and for the individual providing a precious sliver of relational security, if only fleetingly. The consumer, stranded as the social dissolves, can imagine herself as a member of a substitute group, a community of consumers. What we are witnessing is the attachment of 'social value' (the defining traits by which we comparatively measure the worth of individual lives in relation to others) to the acquisition and ostentatious display of consumer goods and commodified experiences. Bauman's notion of the consumer society (2007) demands that 'social identity' is attainable only through accepting the market as the source of self-determination which insists that those at the bottom of the pile should be vilified, an ideological standpoint with which a number of our respondents concur.

Connor and Jake who are both in their mid-twenties and old school friends, situated the excitement around Black Friday within the context of the mundane repetitiveness of tedious work in the service economy, offering an opportunity for pleasure and excitement.

***Connor:** Just life is bleak sometimes, especially up here. People got nothing to live for. Where I work, I work in a call centre. And people are just miserable. People have been propa looking forward to this. It's just like, something to talk about that isn't fucking X Factor.*

**Researcher:** *So you think people get into this just to spice things up?*

**Connor:** *Yeah a bit! [Laughs]. I know it sounds ridiculous but it's true. Especially the charvas [chavs]<sup>3</sup>. You look at the people who get proppa into it. That's who it is. It's kind of exciting I guess for them. Just like all the mayhem and that. Everyone just gets carried away by it.*

**Jake:** *You've got a point there, y'know. Everyone I know from school and that—[turns to Connor] no offence mate—but loads of people I know from school are so bored and pissed off and that...Yeah I reckon you have a point.*

**Connor:** *No but it's true though. People at work have been talking about this for ages.*

The following section will explore in more detail the processes that have been instrumental in embedding the individual within consumer markets. This inevitably must include a discussion around processes of cultural infantilisation, which engenders a level of puerility and childishness in human interactions and behaviours, but also appears to drive a wedge between more traditional forms of symbolic identity, as the market instils variety and mutability into a range of off-the-peg lifestyles.

## **Infantilisation**

A number of commentators have posited the close relationship between the dominance of consumer capitalism and a concomitant process of cultural infantilisation (see Barber, 2007; Heath and Potter 2006; Hayward 2012; Smith 2014; Hall et al, 2008). Children are being progressively deprived of the potential to identify with their parents, because their primary identifications are being distracted and redirected toward the seductive products of the culture industry (Stiegler, 2013: 82). Furthermore, their secondary identifications are oriented in the same way, as are the secondary identifications of their parents. The effect of this, Stiegler suggests, is for young people to increasingly adopt behaviour and identify closely with behaviours that are intrinsically entwined with forms of consumer culture. The vast and unrelenting consumer mediascape, permeated by a political consensus that constantly espouses stimulating consumption as a route out of financial crisis, effectively creates a barrier between the child and their parents. This has the paradoxical effect described succinctly by Hayward (2012) as 'life-stage dissolution' whereby children are dragged toward adolescence and adulthood at a rate dictated by consumer culture, while at the same time adults are drawn perpetually back toward adolescence through consumer markets which offer a range of cultural

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'chav' or 'charva' is a derogatory British slang term used to describe a young lower-class person who displays anti-social behavioural tendencies while also using consumer symbolism inappropriately or without taste (see Hayward and Yar, 2006)

artefacts that are interpreted as youthful. All of these various markets demand one thing – immediate consumption, and offer multiple ways of making that goal an achievable target, some of which can be viewed as illegal, deviant or harmful.

We can see evidence of this occurring from Black Friday research in the US context, where the chaotic disorder and potential violence is becoming romanticised as a family holiday ritual in the United States. Thomas and Peters (2011) illustrate how families discuss the disorder and ‘survival’ of Black Friday in sentimental terms; as an annual ritual and opportunity for familial bonding in the build-up to Christmas. This illustrates the ability of consumer capitalism to incorporate its own contradictions into new, niche markets, perpetuating a circulation of signs and symbols in a totalising process that leaves nothing external to it. The clearest example of how this works is by looking at the way in which even its own dissent is incorporated into the model. All apparent alternatives display an uncanny ability to be absorbed into the dominant system. Anti-capitalist movements based on notions such as ‘downshifting’ (Schor, 1998) or ‘decluttering’ do nothing to counter the prevailing dominance of consumerism, (instead forming the backbone of the hugely successful IKEA advert which demanded viewers ‘chuck out their Chintz’), while moves toward ethical consumption, organic foodstuffs or the like, simply become additional signifiers of middle-class distinction. In short, everything becomes commodified, even anti-capitalism itself. As Baudrillard asserts, such ‘alternatives’ to processes of growth and consumption are merely the inverted and complementary image of those processes’ (Baudrillard, 1998:180).

Shopping, the act of purchasing and taking ownership of a new item, is a form of intoxication. A bold claim, but one that appears to be supported by recent research from the neurosciences providing an embodied correlation between pleasure and loss depending on a combination of product and price (Knutson et al, 2007). Put simply, purchasing ‘bargains’ is felt as an adrenaline rush, an addictive and perhaps ultimately damaging process, destined to repeat in perpetuity. Furthermore, the instrumental use of consumer markets to sooth anxieties and problems in more material areas of life such as employment and relationships is represented in the account of Kelly, 32 salon owner, who discussed her and her friend’s decision to go shopping on Black Friday:

***Kelly:** Me and me mate, John, we’ve been friends for 20-year and we were chatting the other day about shit in our lives. His girlfriend—bitch—just left him for a job down South and I was moaning about how I’m gonna have to close me shop [hairdressers] because business is slow. We just decided fuck it. We’re gonna go and do some shopping and have fun together and tonight we’re gonna go out and get pissed. Because life is shite. Shopping online isn’t the same as going around the shops with your mates. I should be saving for*

*Christmas really, but I'm just here buying stuff for meself. But why shouldn't I? Life is shite. Got no husband or kids to save money for. Shop's closing. I could save and save and save [money]. But for what? Everybody else is having fun, always with a new wardrobe, going out having fun or whatever. What do I have to show for saving?*

Kelly discusses her intent to indulge in the intoxicating pleasures of multiple consumer markets within the context of an absence of more substantial and stable life structures from which identity can be derived; comforts and pleasures such as family, committed relationships, stable employment and collective politics. These are traditional markers of adulthood which have been dismantled and discarded in the wake of neo-liberalism's post-industrial disciplining and flexibilisation of labour, all of which serve the demands of capital accumulation. In the absence of any symbolic order or life-path that can offer cultural and material stability, the need of a set of symbols that can provide some kind of coherence intensifies rather than dissipates. In a society and culture in which meaning and value is assigned to symbolic displays of consumer commodities, there is a deepening of commitment to the very political-economic system which has cast the postmodern subject adrift. The sense that something is missing, the nagging feeling that something isn't quite right, can be assuaged by the right purchase. Kelly's dismay of 'what do I have to show for saving' displays the lingering anxiety that, in the words of Winlow and Hall (2012: 7), "*life was being lived by others somewhere out there*".

Of course, the sense of satisfaction is never fully realised, and the desire for an object is almost immediately replaced by further desires for other replacement objects in an endless parade of consumer artefacts and experiences that divert desires from other the more edifying realms of love, art, science or politics. In this way, the traditional maturation process is in effect hijacked by consumerism; an event that, contrary to Matza's (1968) dated notion of drift, shows little signs of dissipating as individuals mature. In the relative absence of distinguishable life stages, stable relationships, work and politics to mature into, it seems all that is left are the shops and the self as a lone competitor in the struggle for symbols that paradoxically represent both social distinction and conformity (see Miles, 2000). This on-going commitment to consumer symbols and the sublimation of more mature behaviour in favour of competing to 'win' consumers items was displayed by a fight observed by the researchers between two men in their thirties, and captured in the following fieldnotes, in which they verbally abused staff, physically assaulted one another and deliberately damaged property:

*Two men, probably in their thirties are fighting over a television. They swing around and one man loses his grip slightly - it's clear who is going to come out on top. As he realises he's about to lose out, he starts to kick out at the other man's leg, swinging repeatedly at the back of the knee. When this doesn't work, he turns his attention to the television, frantically ripping at the cardboard packaging, and*

*trying to yank it down toward the ground to stamp on it in an effort to sabotage his opponent's victory. Security finally intervenes, storming over and pulling the men apart, clumsily trying to move them to opposite ends of the store. As the loser is being pulled away, he swings his leg out and gets good contact, kicking the television and putting his foot through the cardboard. The television crashes to the floor between them, claimed by nobody, before another shopper goes up to inspect the damage and considers a potential 'steal' of a purchase. As the original 'loser' is pushed toward the exit he refuses to leave, demanding that they provide another television despite the manager making it quite clear that they're now out of stock on that particular deal - but that he could purchase one for a slightly higher price if he wished. The man refuses, standing defiantly and demanding the original deal for several minutes. He swears to himself, the staff and other shoppers, clearly irate, pacing in front of the security guard. Finally after a few minutes he concedes defeat, waving his hand dismissively at the security guard and stomps off.*

These tactics and forms of sabotage were not uncommon between competitive consumers, with the emergent theme being: 'If you can't win, make sure you don't lose'.

Some amongst the older generation who can still draw upon stable social networks of family, friends and the more critical perspectives of industrial modernism are perhaps less likely to be affected by the seductions of the consumer market. While the grey pound is perhaps one of the most sought after potential markets for a range of industries, there can be a discernible generational difference in attitudes to consumer society, at least for as long as viewpoints such those held by Geoff and Brenda persist:

**Geoff:** *People are getting hurt. Nobody takes it seriously. It's more of a 'that's just the way it is'. I watched an elderly lady, similar age to us, she got pushed over and fell to the floor. Now if that were to happen on any other day, that person would be considered disgusting. It would probably make the papers or something. But because it's Black Friday, it's OK.*

**Brenda:** *Because it happens on a day where everyone is being told to spend their money, nobody is bothered are they? Well...we're bothered, but we're a different generation. I just think in general we live in a less caring society now. Everyone just cares about themselves. Just look at what's happening with this Tory government. They don't care do they? Just like the Thatcher government. Just don't care. And I think it's infectious. It spreads to other people and eventually everyone just starts looking out for themselves!*

**Geoff:** *It's so frustrating because whenever I open my mouth about this stuff, our sons always tell us we're just living in the past. They say that 'things are different now' and you've just got to 'move with the times'. But what if the times aren't good? Just because things are different doesn't mean they're better.*



Geoff and Brenda, a retired couple, experienced a vastly different process of socialisation than many young people growing up since the 1980s. Theirs was an age where spending habits were largely constrained by the notion of deferred gratification, and the most common emotion associated with giving in to desire would most likely be experienced as shame. In Freud's terminology, the superego was able to induce a crippling guilt associated with the wanton pursuit of pleasure, of giving in to the Id. Today however, it is possible to discern what Žižek (2002) suggests is a re-orientation of the cultural superego: a shift in the balance between the commands of restraint and hedonism. Put simply, this means that individuals are more likely to feel guilty at their failure to avail themselves of opportunities – *missing out* is likely to provoke the feelings of guilt and shame that we would more traditionally associate with *giving in* to the desires of the Id. Nowhere is this more clearly vocalised than in the following response from Emily:

***Emily:** Me and my friends, we're gonna meet up 'neet [tonight] for a few bevvy's [drinks] and that and talk about what we got. What deals we got and that at the shops. And show each other our stuff and the prices and that. Like, we haven't said that's gonna happen. But that's what we're gonna do. I know I'm gonna do that! So if I didn't come, yeah—like for instance my other friend she's married and she like never comes out or does any of this, she's coming to these drinks and she's gonna be left out so much of the conversation. She's not gonna be able to talk about the deals she got, the stuff she got, she won't even be able to tell like funny stories and that about crazy stuff she saw. It's gonna be propa awkward.*

The omnipresent threat of cultural irrelevance facing young consumers (see Bakan, 2011) could be explained through 'strain theory' (Merton, 1938) or Lea and Young's Left Realist 'relative deprivation' (1984). Such analyses would frame the violence of Black Friday as an innovative or rebellious strategy to access and ostentatiously display symbolic consumer commodities, thereby achieving the cultural values and goals that are blocked by structural inequalities and the illusion of meritocracy. However, these frameworks struggle to explain how and why shoppers were violently engaging in both socially-defined deviance and criminal behaviour to *pay* for items.

The social pressure to conspicuously display the symbols of consumer items, along with the cultural reorientation of the superego has displaced the maturation process of 'drift' (Matza, 1968) that might once have prevented the extreme form of competitive individualistic consumption that dominated Black Friday lingering on into adulthood. However in a fiercely

acquisitive consumer society, many 'young people'<sup>4</sup> find that there is little to mature into outside of the latest set of identifying symbols attached to carefully selected seductive consumable commodities. As the words of Simon suggested above, the theme that emerges from many of our participants' justifications or 'techniques of neutralisation' (Sykes and Matza, 1959) is the notion that 'everyone else was doing it'

*Emily: Oh yeah! There's just no respect. Everyone is just acting like a wanker.*

*Researcher: But, to be fair, you did just shove a lady over there and elbow a fair few people in the face.*

*Emily: Hahaha! Oh my God! You saw that?! [More laughing] Yeah...Yeah I suppose I did. But like I say, everyone is doing it. I shoved people in the shop as well, had to.*

*(Emily, 26 years old)*

Emily vocalises a fear that was reiterated by a number of respondents—that if they did not join in, they would lose out because of the unfair behaviour of others. Here, competitive individualism and the lure of consumer items triumphs over any noble ideas of civility and solidarity

## **Conclusion**

Our concern in this paper has been to illustrate the importance of a critical analysis of consumer culture within the discipline of criminology. We have positioned the disorder, incivility and violence that characterised the Black Friday sales in the UK as illustrative of a broader culture of narcissism, underpinned by competitive individualism that is systemically violent and inherently harmful. In this context, the disorder associated with Black Friday can be understood as a visible flashpoint against a background of systemic violence and harm that is invisible, embedded within the social organisation of consumer capitalism.

We have highlighted the inadequacy of much existing theory in attempting to understand the motivations that underpin the disorder. We cannot position those grappling in the aisles for cut price consumer items as Bauman's 'flawed consumers' (2004). Rather the determined deviance from societal norms is best understood entirely in keeping with the values and demands of consumer capitalism. The individuals encountered here then, are not emblematic of a poor and socially excluded class, demanding access to the consumer items enjoyed by a wealthy elite. As shopping has become 'serious' leisure, linked with specialised knowledge, the often harmful tactics and strategies employed by those looking for a bargain depict extremely competent

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<sup>4</sup> See Hayward (2013) on 'life-stage dissolution' and the changing parameters of what constitutes 'youth', 'adolescence' and 'adulthood'.

consumers acting in accordance with the demands of consumerism. Readily available credit in the shape of payday loans, credit cards and store card ensure that they can access (even if only temporarily) the 'resources that socially approved consumer activity require[s]' to ensure that theirs is not an 'unlived life' (Bauman, 2007: 25). Rather, those willing to fight, bite and claw their way to the checkout ahead of all others are merely conforming to the central tenets of competitive individualism, envy and aggressive social and cultural life in the neoliberal West..

Consequently, while an in-depth analysis of leisure and consumption may appear to drift away from the traditional canon of theoretical criminology, we argue that it is necessary to analyse the act of shopping and consumption in order to understand the motivational drive and desire to not only buy a consumer item, but to feel the sense that they had 'won' their purchase or emerged with a bargain, discarding any vestigial attachment to modernist civilities to win the prize. Black Friday violence is simply the most extreme manifestation of a sublimated, violent culture of shopping, leisure and consumption, intensified by the time and stock-limited nature of the deals offered. Indeed, it is curious that annually predictable violence of Black Friday has elicited little comment from criminologists, perhaps because existing criminological theories which eschew analyses of shopping and leisure struggle to coherently explain such violence. In this sense, we argue that it is imperative that we turn our attention to the competitive, narcissistic drive that underlies neoliberal capitalism and can be found across the scale of harmful behaviours from Black Friday consumers to the corporate crimes of white-collar criminals.

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