

The interrupted world: Surrealist disruption and altered escapes from reality

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The Interrupted World: Surrealist disruption and altered escapes from reality

Abstract

Following Breton's writings on surreality, we outline how unexpected challenges to consumers' assumptive worlds have the potential to alter how their escape from reality is experienced. We introduce the concept of "surrealist disruption" to describe ontological discontinuities that disrupt the common-sense frameworks normally used by consumers, and that impact upon their ability to suspend their disbeliefs and experience self-loss. To facilitate our theorization, we draw upon interviews with consumers about their changing experiences as viewers of the realist-political TV-drama *House of Cards* against a backdrop of disruptive real-world political events. Our analyses reveal that, when faced with a radically-altered external environment, escape from reality changes from a restorative, playful experience to an uneasy, earnest one characterized by hysteretic angst, intersubjective sense-making and epistemological community-building. This reconceptualizes escapism as more emotionally multi-valenced than previously considered in marketing theory and reveals consumers' subject position to an aggregative social fabric beyond their control.

Keywords

Assumptive worlds, binge-watching, Breton, escapism, realism, surreality, suspension of disbelief

Introduction

The increasing dread we feel about the world... is reflected and stirred up by this series [House of Cards season 5]. Watching it will not give you any respite. A show that was once a pulpy piece of escapism now feels rather weighty, even important.

Edward Tew, *The Guardian*, 6th June 2017

Escapism, in its many forms and representations, is often achieved through appealing to what is knowable, comprehensible, and therefore *realistic*, to consumers (Schwartz, 2006; Seregina, 2014). Escapist spaces or story worlds, such as the ESPN zone for example, are theorized to function according to real-world “cues” or themes (such as sports) which speak to a familiar, discernible order that allows for a “worldlike quality” and ensures that the experience becomes “instantly decodable” (Kozinets et al., 2004: 661). Comparably, story worlds such as the “mountain man rendezvous” operate according to fantastic but familiar real-world structures and adherence to mass-mediated representations of a semi-mythic past (Belk and Costa, 1998). Even heterotopic and rarefied adventure challenges, where participants experience feelings that are radically different to those that they might encounter in day-to-day life, are made decodable by adhering to common and familiar tropes of the real-world such as friendship, endurance and success (Scott et al., 2017). In many of these cases, the real-world is approached as a stable, knowable and static index that individual consumers can draw from, learn from, and use selectively to coordinate and make sense of their escapes from it. Accordingly, under the assumptions of a coherent, decodable, and knowable reality, marketing theory has placed emphasis on the variety of personal and social motivations that underpin individual consumers’ escape-seeking behaviours (see Goulding et al., 2009; Kerrigan et al., 2014; Tumbat and Belk, 2011) rather than on the variability of reality itself or how it is perceived and escaped from.

Building on Askegaard and Linnet's (2011: 387) invitation to better situate "acts of consumption... in a world that reaches beyond the subjectivity of the agent", in this paper we theorize the dynamic conditions of reality and explore how violations against consumers' "assumptive worlds", which comprise their bases for understanding and internalizing reality, impact upon their experiences of escapism. To facilitate our analysis, we draw upon an empirical investigation of consumers' escapist experiences through binge-watching the Netflix realist political TV-drama *House of Cards*. Between its fourth (Netflix, 2016) and fifth seasons (Netflix, 2017), audiences of *House of Cards* witnessed unprecedented real-world events that outpaced those produced onscreen in terms of improbability, not least the ascendance of real-estate magnate and reality TV star Donald J. Trump to presidential office in the United States, the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, and the rise of far-right populism internationally. As queried by one correspondent writing for *The Financial Times*, "What on earth can the scriptwriters do to match what's actually happening? Especially in a series that was dreamt up in one political climate but reaches us in a completely different one" (Dalley, 2017), or another writing for *The Guardian*: "What happens now that House of Cards has become a sunny version of the material it intended to make dystopian?" (Loofbourow, 2016).

In response to the surge of historically aberrant occurrences in the real-world, 'surreal' became one of the most searched for terms in 2016 and declared Merriam-Webster's word of the year. Following this cultural insight, we borrow from aspects of André Breton's (1924) original theorization of surreality to assist in our consideration of how the nature of escapism itself, and the functions it serves, change for consumers when common-sense assumptions loosen their grip and an unprecedented change to the fabric of their taken-for-granted worlds is experienced. This leads us to our research questions: (1) How do surreal conditions alter the consumption of escapist texts that are modelled in relation to the 'real

world?; and (2) How do the functions of escapism change for consumers when their assumptive worlds are violated?

In undertaking this research, we derive a new theoretical perspective on consumers' experiences by inscribing them within the potentialities and limitations of the assumptive worlds that individuals use to orient and stabilize their lives. In a related theoretical vein, we show that during periods of disruption to consumers' fabric of assumptions escapism produces variegated emotional and intellectual effects stemming from heightened self-awareness, critical sense-making, and efforts to reconstitute the world around themselves. Hence, we depart from previous work in marketing theory and consumer research that positions consumers' escape attempts as generally playful, "self-loss" activities that result in carefree abandon and release from the pressures that everyday life places on their selves (Belk and Costa, 1998; Cova et al., 2018; Goulding et al., 2009). Escapism, when reality itself is under scrutiny, becomes less about the pleasures of "losing it" and more of a sobering process of "finding" what was lost to oneself. Our research here helps to map out the less obvious and ambiguous effects of consumer escapism which fits with calls to consider the more unintended consequences of consumer experiences (Lanier and Rader, 2015).

Theoretical Underpinnings

Escapism in Consumer Research

Though escapism has been deployed as a term in marketing theory and consumer research for quite some time (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Hirschman, 1983), only in recent years has its major theoretical forms and functions been formally crystallized. Kuo et al. (2016), in recognizing that "escapes" are central to the consumer experience literature but remain appreciably undertheorized, set about positioning escapism as a relativistic concept, arguing that "escapism is highly idiosyncratic with regards to individual differences" (p.503). They

separate “passive” forms of escapism, which are mostly observational like reading comic books and watching TV, from more “active” variants, which are interactive like playing videogames or physical sports. Both forms operate by immersing consumers in some activity, with stress-relief emerging as the key motivator for “escape”, but only active forms allow consumers to confront, rather than simply avoid, the specific nature of their stressors through affirmation and control. Active forms of escape have attracted a disproportionate amount of attention in consumer research, resulting in a corpus of studies that centre on highly participatory and extraordinary experiences through which consumers seek transcendental release from the structures of their day-to-day lives (Belk and Costa, 1998; Goulding et al., 2009; Tumbat and Belk, 2011) and even the logic of the market itself (Kozinets, 2002). However, in an attempt to introduce a more comprehensive and inclusive conceptualization of escapism, Cova et al. (2018: 456) suggest, “escape is not always grandiose. Escape also lies in the ephemeral and unremarkable instants of dis-identification”. They suggest that in addition to the anti-structural dreamlands most typically accounted for in consumer research, consumers seek to disidentify with various aspects of their lives – including their own *selves* – through absorption into “mundane experiences like binge eating or binge watching” (p.455), “restorative” experiences such as a trip to a local café (p.452), and even “warlike, painful experiences” like obstacle races (p.455). For Cova and colleagues, these less extraordinary forms of escapism centre on circumventing one’s self-awareness and engaging in a type of “self-suspension” or “losing oneself”.

Elsewhere, Kerrigan et al. (2014: 148) in their analysis of listening to music whilst running provide us with an account of what they call the “multifaceted experience of pleasurable escape” whereby there are deeper and less apparent facets or layers of self-suspension at play. Their analysis illustrates how consumers might engage in activities like running to escape the monotony and inactivity of everyday life while also layering music “on

top of this escape” in order “to escape further” from the pain that their body experiences when being active (p.161). The end result of these various facets is that pleasure can be derived from escaping deeper “into” inner worlds rather than simply “from” the outside world (p.155). Comparably, Jafari and Maclaran (2014) in their treatment of the escapist potential of make-up practices and routines find consumers escape not only *from* boredom, but also *into* the aesthetics, intricacies and fantasies of their creative efforts.

Importantly, while the contributions of these various authors provide useful and fine-grained conceptualizations of the many types and facets of escape – whether in “active” or “passive” forms, in anti-structural or more familiar environs, through processes of “self-affirmation” or “self-forgetting”, or moving “into” inner worlds beyond departing “from” outer worlds – escapism is nevertheless universally understood to result (to varying degrees) in intentional and positive states of abandon. Regardless of how it is achieved, escape is theorized to bring about “a means of gratification that could offset the frustrations of everyday life” (Cova et al., 2018: 451) and has been frequently conceptualised as a “form of refuge” from the humdrum of existence (Jafari and Maclaran, 2014: 371) and as “a way of releasing stress and breaking free” (Kerrigan et al., 2014: 150).

Consumer research frequently emphasizes how individuals achieve pleasure and renewal by removing themselves from the coordinates of their known reality – “real work, real friends, real facts, in other words, the real world” (Calleja, 2010: 335) – in favour of encountering an “alternative world” or “alternative reality”, however ephemeral this may be (Belk and Costa, 1998: 236; Seregina, 2014; Tumbat and Belk, 2011). The separation between one’s real life and alternative worlds has been interchangeably referred to as a dichotomy between “everyday reality and a correspondingly unreal experience” (Belk and

Costa, 1998: 219), “everyday reality and fantasy” (Kozinets et al., 2004: 664), or “the ordinary and the wondrous” (Calleja, 2010: 350).

These dialectics of reality-unreality manifest in consumer research are useful for emphasizing escapists’ imagined distance from reality however some have argued that escape, in practice, is never fully separated from the real world; rather fantasy is achieved through its negotiation with elements of reality (Seregina, 2014). In the notable case of Belk and Costa’s (1998: 232) exploration of the escapist mountain men rendezvous, the authors admit that, “[p]erhaps surprisingly in light of the unreal character of the modern rendezvous, [a] key ingredient to accessing the power and fantasy of the mythical mountain man is having not only appropriate symbolic objects but also objects deemed authentic”. To be fit for escapism, the rendezvous must *feel* real; it cannot be total fantasy, rather it must correspond to some “authentic” and true to life reality. The theoretical dynamics of this are considered in detail in the next section.

External Realism & Experiencing Escapism

Beyond the parameters of consumer research, commentators within literary and media studies contend that reality is never truly abandoned during moments of escapism; for escapist goals to be met some threshold of realism must be reached (Bruner, 1991; Busselle and Bilandzic, 2008; Schwartz, 2006). In most cases, consumers’ ability to become “transported” to even the most wondrous, unreal places is contingent upon these places being made credible and realistic; congruous with what can be known and made imaginable. Television is recognized as a wellspring for escapism because of “its ability to carry a socially convincing sense of the real” (Fiske, 1987: 21). Soap operas, which operate under realist principles for instance, “attempt to reproduce a series of elements (urban and rural landscapes, fashion and culinary patterns, linguistic behaviour, moral values) which viewers will accept as ‘proximate’”

(Castello et al., 2009: 467), or rather, *close* to what they are familiar with. Realism thereby acts as conduit for invoking familiarity, understanding and recognisable experiences, all of which allow the consumer to become enthralled and committed to fictive worlds, thereby increasing their ability to withhold their judgements (i.e. ‘suspend their disbeliefs’), lose self-awareness, and achieve escapist goals (Green et al., 2004).

One key tenet of experiencing escapism through story worlds is the level of “external realism” we see reflected in them, a phenomenon Busselle and Bilandzic (2008: 256) define as “the extent to which stories or their components are similar to the actual world”. Consumers approach escapist texts by applying pre-existing schemas and assumptions about the external (actual) world to the textual narrative. Accordingly, there is a need to look beyond components of the text itself and examine the wider, protean conditions and contexts that underpin and shape real-life. Perceptions of external realism – and the subsequent ability to escape – may be compromised as much by events in the consumer’s world, including vacillating ideological circumstances, social structures and historical conditions, as by inconsistencies or failures in the production of the text itself. As Propst (2009: 332) points out, all narratives remain open to further inspection, resulting in the consumer “reassessing” and reinterpreting story worlds to account for “the context of the reader’s situation”. It is this final point that leads us to consider the concept of surreality and its usefulness for theorizing the emergence and manifestation of defamiliarizing conditions in the actual world.

Surreality & Assumptive Worlds: Introducing Surrealist disruption

The surrealist intellectual movement that took root within Europe in the early 20th century brought with it the revelation that ‘reality’ is a mutable phenomenon couched in the fragility of taken-for-granted assumptions. Contemporaneous with the Russian artistic techniques of de-familiarisation or estrangement (“*ostranenie*”), the surrealists sought to champion the

erasure of the bourgeois value of rationalism through displacing the familiar and challenging the common-sense and normal. Subversive art, accounts of dreams and hallucinations, and nonsensical writings were all valued by the surrealists as mechanisms to challenge people's expectations and threaten their sense of coherence and stability, ultimately hastening the advent of an over-arching 'surreality' (from the French *sur réalité* meaning above or *on* our reality, but not *within* it) (Cardinal and Short, 1970; Dell'Aversano, 2008).

Surreality, as a state which destabilizes rational assumptions and a socially-produced 'known' reality, is described by surrealist pioneer André Breton (1924: 14) as the "resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*". Breton speaks of surreality being assembled from a "fabric of adorable improbabilities" (1924: 16) – a sequence of unprecedented and fanciful occurrences in the actual world which accelerate the disintegration of trust in realist principles or what he refers to as "le regne de la logique" (reign of logic) (1924: 9). Being faced with conditions of great uncertainty may serve to beget a feeling that one's personal grasp on reality has been undermined, and thereby hasten what Breton (1934: 129) refers to as, a "crisis in consciousness".

While Breton is parsimonious with exact definitions, it is here that the concept of "assumptive world" (Beder, 2005), helps to reveal what precisely is affected during a crisis of consciousness. The assumptive world can be defined as "an organized schema reflecting all that a person assumes to be true about the world and the self on the basis of previous experiences; it refers to the assumptions, or beliefs, that ground, secure, and orient people, that give a sense of reality, meaning, or purpose to life" (Beder, 2005: 258). Because of its capacity to orientate and secure us, the assumptive world resonates with Breton's assertion (1924: 10) that we are "protected by the sentinels of common sense". Comparable to

Bourdieu's writings on "habitus" (1990 [1980]), common sense is borne from internalizing and forming expectations about the world we live in, such as the experiences we have had, the places we grew up, and the media that we consume. In this sense, assumptive worlds are understood to be cumulative or as Breton puts it, "the sum of the moments of reality" (1924: 11). The cumulating nature of assumptive worlds also fits with Emirbayer and Mische's (1998: 971) notion of "the iterational dimension" of human agency; the acquiring and reactivation of "past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time".

Despite their ability to structure and stabilize social experience via the conditioning quality of the past, assumptive worlds can be challenged and violations can and do occur. This happens when some things (or even everything) that the individual assumes to be real is undermined and disruption enters his or her life (Kauffman, 2002). In health philosophy, for example, Bury (1982: 169) provides us with the concept of "biographical disruption" to explain how conditions such as diagnosis with a chronic illness can serve as "a major kind of disruptive experience... where the structures of everyday life and the forms of knowledge which underpin them are disrupted". Such conditions which engender a destabilizing effect upon one's assumptive world have been referred to elsewhere as "critical situations" (Giddens, 1979), "moments of dislocation" (Howarth 2000), and "moments of disconcertment" (Verran, 1999).

Through "the breaching of common sense boundaries", Bury (1982: 169) discusses how disruption of the "explanatory systems normally used by people" catalyze a fundamental rethinking of what is considered to be *real*, and forces individuals to try and make sense of "an altered situation" (p.170). Taking this logic forward, we suggest that the onset of

Breton's surreality serves as a particularly disruptive force in consumers' lives, capable of altering their assumptive worlds by introducing dramatic improbabilities to their social universe. Rather than being a discrete endogenous catalyst (e.g. illness) for a single individual's biographical disruption, surreality instead encompasses the dislocatory effects of various exogenous events (e.g. previously unimaginable changes to the external environment) on a whole aggregate of individuals' engagements with the material world. The ability of consumers to fall back on their own schemas and approach what they consider to be real, or what they appreciate as real, under some Bretonian sense of surreality is compromised. We now turn to our empirical case – *House of Cards* and the events occurring around its release – to explore how such ostensibly “surrealist disruption” can impact upon the consumption of realist television and alter the nature of the escapism consumers achieve through it.

Contextual Background: House of Cards

In February 2013, the first season of the realist-political drama *House of Cards* (*HoC* hereafter) was released by Netflix, with all 13 episodes simultaneously made available. *HoC* functions as a chiaroscuro representation of the ruthless pragmatism in American politics and invites audiences to observe the real-life, present day state capital of Washington DC populated with Machiavellian characters and motives (Klarer, 2014). The drama follows Francis (Frank) Underwood, a Democrat Congressman, and his struggle for power, which ultimately culminates in his inauguration as President of the United States. From the outset, *HoC* was intended to appeal to the assumptive framework of audiences and the show achieves external realism by depicting characters who fulfil real-world positions at the White House (e.g. the President, Chief of Staff, First Lady) behave in public as these figures are expected to, and engage with political issues that closely resemble and reflect current events occurring in the real-world (e.g. national election campaigns, economic issues, domestic

terrorism, international affairs, the media). The series sees Frank Underwood do whatever it takes to get ahead in his political career and engage in practices that may surprise audiences including blackmail, murder, and vote-rigging – but always executed with the clandestineness, cunning subterfuge and guile we might consider conceivable for a career politician. The audience also achieves “imaginary proximity” (Propst, 2009: 344) to Frank through the show’s close coverage of his complicated relationship with the First Lady (Claire Underwood) including their unhappiness in their marriage and readiness to engage in extramarital affairs.

The fourth season of *HoC* was released in March 2016 to coincide with the backdrop of the real-life American presidential election. Promotion included a spoof presidential campaign for Frank Underwood that aired during a CNN debate among real Republican presidential candidates, and Underwood writing a piece for *The Times* newspaper advocating Brexit in the UK (Horton, 2016). Despite such overt efforts to intersect more closely with the TV show’s real-world surrounds, 15 months later when *HoC* season five launched (30th May 2017), reviewers detected a growing gap between *HoC*’s content and the reality it tries to emulate. Spencer Kornhaber of *The Atlantic* (30th May, 2017) specifically contrasts the characters of *HoC*’s temperamental poise and perceived competency against the lack of restraint or forbearance amongst their real-world counterparts in the Trump administration:

The Donald Trump era obviously places *Cards* in a new context... *Cards* has never felt farther from reality... Its vision of politics is one of competence, in which everyone from junior staffers to presidents have veneers of poise.

Comparably, James Poniewozik, writing for *The New York Times* suggests: “The Trump administration shakes ‘House of Cards’ hard... the idea that adults are still in charge, that the Presidency is still beholden to a pretense of decorum, has been disrupted by the election of a TV star” (June 6th, 2017). Moreover, in discussing the effects of such a dramatic

shift in political reality prior to the upcoming release of *HoC* Series 5, Mark Lawson of *The Guardian* (26th May, 2017) proposes: “The challenge for House of Cards now is whether its depiction of a preposterously exaggerated president will work as a comically cathartic commentary on Trump or may seem dull and understated in comparison to the nightly news bulletins”. Common amongst these correspondents’ reports is the observation that it has become more difficult for consumers to suspend their disbeliefs when watching *HoC* now that their assumptive worlds have been collectively disrupted by real-world events. This has implications for how the show is received and the type of escapism that its loyal consumers derive from it.

Methods

The data for this research stems from a larger study on the motivations for and meanings of consuming long-form TV series within situated ecologies over concentrated periods of time i.e. “binge-watching”. *HoC* was chosen as the case for analysis because we required an established TV series where viewers were both familiar with and invested in its characters and storylines. *HoC* was embarking on its fourth season at the beginning of our study in early 2016 and was set to be released in a full-season “binge-ready” format by Netflix making it an ideal context. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling facilitated by a combination of word-of-mouth in the lead author’s social networks and an advertisement poster that was displayed offline across the campus notice boards of a UK University and online through social media. The sampling call invited individuals who had watched *HoC* over multiple seasons and intended to binge-watch season four to participate in an interview (released March, 2016). From an initial pilot sample of seven participants, the lead author was introduced to others willing to share their experiences of bingeing *HoC*. The study

consisted in total of fifteen participants, ages 23 – 69 (see Table 1) who self-profess to be fans of *HoC*.

The purpose of an initial first round of interviews in early 2016 was to gain an understanding of participants' life worlds, their motivations for consuming *HoC* in a marathon-viewing/binge-watching format, and the role of both the show and their binge behaviour as potential resources for escaping aspects of their lives. The interviews began with grand-tour questions (see McCracken, 1988) pertaining to their general life conditions, their media consumption, and the motivating as well as environmental conditions for consuming TV shows in marathon sessions. We invited participants to tell us about any rituals and habits that accompany their binge behaviour as well as the possible role of escapism in their binges. We then shifted the topic to *HoC* and asked them to elaborate on why that show lends itself particularly well to bingeing, their experiences of engaging with its narrative world, and its relationship with the real world. In addition to the interviews, the first author – in recognizing the value of mobile phones in supporting and enhancing consumer research (Hein et al., 2011) – encouraged participants to record short diary entries and take photos on their smart phone devices of their binge-watch experiences of *HoC*. These materials were shared with the first author through text messages sometimes before, during or after a marathon session and helped to record the context of “being there” (Hein et al., 2011: 264). Permissions to use participants' content were readily granted and this helped to provide further insight into their experiences.

Nine of the original fifteen participants agreed to take part in a second round of interviews to coincide with the release of *HoC* season five scheduled for a year later (30th May, 2017). Contact with these nine participants was maintained for the fifteen months between the releases of *HoC* season four and five. This contact was facilitated by

asynchronous text message conversations between each participant and the first author (Bowden and Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015). The use of asynchronous text communication provided a useful platform for participants to share any observations and opinions related to *HoC* that emerged in real-time. This included spontaneous reactions to the trailers and promotions for the fifth season as they were released online. Messages from participants also included links to various press articles centred on the challenges of producing compelling political fiction during real-life political turbulence and fan-made memes of *HoC*. The text-based interactions revealed points of intersection between the consumption of *HoC* and disruptive real-world occurrences, therefore helping to inform and steer the lines of enquiry taken up in the second-round follow-up interviews in May 2017. These second-round interviews provided the research team with an opportunity to explore participants' experiences of bingeing *HoC* against the backdrop of changing real world events and the impact that these changes had on their ability to suspend their disbeliefs and experience escapism.

All interviews, from both rounds, lasted between approximately 40 to 70 minutes each, were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and issued anonymizing pseudonyms. Institutional ethical approval was gained for the study and with each interview, informed consent was obtained.

Table 1 *Study Participants*

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Education</i>
<i>Gary</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Government administrator</i>	<i>Undergraduate degree</i>
<i>Sue</i>	<i>58</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Copy writer</i>	<i>Undergraduate degree</i>
<i>Simon</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Musician</i>	<i>Master's degree</i>
<i>Camila</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Post doctorate student</i>	<i>Master's degree</i>
<i>Craig</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Retail manager</i>	<i>Undergraduate degree</i>
<i>Jhanvi</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Social enterprise manager</i>	<i>Professional qualifications</i>
<i>Lee</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Product designer</i>	<i>Master's degree</i>
<i>Sarah</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Primary school teacher</i>	<i>Teaching degree</i>
<i>John</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Retail assistant</i>	<i>Secondary school</i>
<i>Phil</i>	<i>42</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>University lecturer</i>	<i>Master's degree</i>
<i>Katie</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Solicitor</i>	<i>Master's degree</i>
<i>Robert</i>	<i>69</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Retired councillor</i>	<i>Secondary school</i>
<i>Jill</i>	<i>67</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Retired nurse</i>	<i>Nursing qualifications</i>
<i>Martin</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Recruitment consultant</i>	<i>Secondary school</i>
<i>Steph</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Sales manager</i>	<i>Undergraduate degree</i>

Inductive analyses of the combined data were undertaken in a “hermeneutical back and forth between part and whole” approach (Spiggle 1994: 495) to reveal a number of provisional categories. In the tradition of previous interpretive studies that have approached consumer escapism (Goulding et al., 2009; Kerrigan et al., 2014; Kozinets et al., 2004), no preconceived hypothetical framework was used to guide or constrain our analyses. Instead, the categories were allowed to emerge inductively through open and axial coding and these were developed into themes in conversation with explanatory concepts from the literature as we found them. It was through this emergent design that we were first led to writings on surreality and the current project’s analytical focus became crystallized. Surreality, as our emergent and principal theoretical lens, helped to sensitize and frame three final thematic foci that reveal changes in how escapist texts like *HoC* are engaged with when the conditions around them change. As a final step in analysis, these themes were further developed and refined with secondary theoretical materials which helped to label, abstract, and integrate of a number of occurrences (Spiggle, 1994). After abstracting our descriptions to conceptualizations and achieving confidence in their meaning and importance, we were able

to identify the theoretical link – what we came to call surrealist disruption – between our themes. The results are presented in detail in the following sections.

Findings

Our findings are organized to reveal how consumers' experiences of escapism through *HoC* have been altered by changes to their assumptive worlds. First, we outline how surrealist disruption has changed the nature of our participants' escapism from a trivial pleasure into one punctuated with 'hysteretic' angst. Second, we explore how escapism takes on the character of a sense-making activity during times of crisis in the real world. Third, we explore how escapism, during such times of crisis, becomes more of a community-based experience rather than an individuated one, thus enabling intersubjective ways of overcoming an epistemological purgatory and collectively rebuilding the assumptive world.

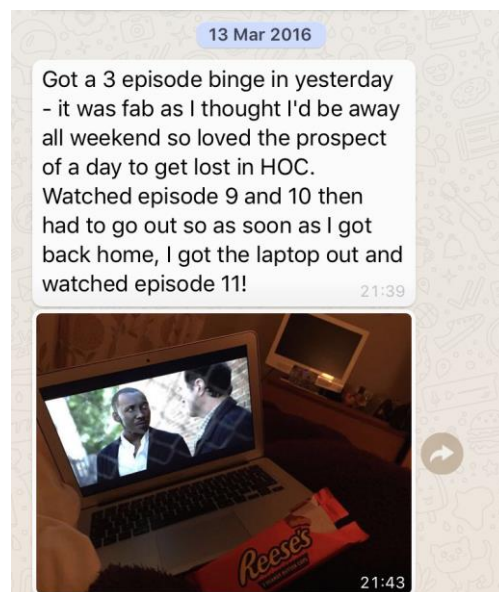
Hysteretic angst: An uneasy escape

Instead of experiencing a "pleasurable escape" (Kerrigan et al., 2014: 148) or allowing consumers to enter a "more desirable state of being" (Jafari and Maclaran, 2014: 371), our data reveals how activities like binge-watching *HoC* amongst a backdrop of surreal conditions trigger anxiety about the reality they are escaping from. Here, Bourdieu's concept of "hysteresis" – the angst that arises "when a field undergoes a major crisis and its regularities (even its rules) are profoundly changed" (Bourdieu, 2000: 160) – helps us to explain the transition of escapism from an experience of pleasure to one of anxiety. Under such circumstances, the "old" habitus that a subject has built up over his or her life no longer 'fits' the new field conditions that he or she must consume within. The effect is not dissimilar to dissonance or "trained incapacity" (Burke, 1984), and our data suggests shocks to

consumers' assumptive worlds necessitate a traumatic reappraisal of reality thus making it difficult to uncritically suspend their disbeliefs when seeking escape.

As context for this theme, before the mid- to late- 2016 political watershed period changed their field conditions, participants generally described their binge-watching experience of *HoC* as a fun, uncomplicated and relaxing form of escape. This is reflected particularly well in a text message sent to the first author by Sarah, a primary school teacher, around the time of our first stage of interviews wherein she enthusiastically describes spending a day marathon-viewing *HoC* and attaches an image of her reclining on her bed with a laptop and snack food:

Figure 1: Enjoyment from binge-watching *HoC*.



At that point in the research, Sarah associated her enjoyment of *HoC* with the opportunity to “*get lost*” signalling self-loss or, specifically, the tenets of narrative transportation such as engrossment, immersion, and captivation (Batat and Wohlfeil, 2009; Green et al., 2004; Kuo et al., 2016). Moreover, Sarah’s discursive tone (“*it was fab*”, “*loved*

the prospect”) indicates that this was felt and experienced as a generally pleasurable departure from one’s own world. Similarly, in the first round of interviews, Sue, a copywriter, suggested that she had typically consumed *HoC* in multi-episode binges – often at the end of a workday or the weekend – as an easy and accessible escape from the quotidian pressures of her work life. While the amount of time she committed to her marathon viewing of *HoC* was voluminous, the nature of the escapism she achieved, she suggested, was quite perfunctory, light-hearted, and restorative:

“Oh, it was great, and after a hard day, it was time to sit and enjoy the thrill of the narrative and the storyline really gripped me from the start... At the weekend, I figured I could probably fit five in and I think I did six”.

Such insights are consistent with observations that people engage in increased consumption in a condensed period, like bingeing of various kinds, as an accessible and unchallenging way to “suspend their reflexive self” and turn attention away from personal life conditions (Cova et al., 2018: 456; Goulding et al., 2009). Upon returning to Sue fifteen months after the initial interview (May 2017) however, she described how her ability to retreat absentmindedly into the diegetic world of *HoC* was no longer possible:

“My experience of watching it [HoC] will have changed completely. In a way, all of our lives have changed, the world has changed politically, here and in America since I watched the last one. I’m kind of worried that things in the real world are so bloody awful... I am concerned that I will get sucked into the fantasy of HoC and prefer that life that is in there instead of the reality that is playing on the news reels in regular life and there is a danger there.”

Instead of being able to suspend her disbeliefs while watching *HoC* and lapse into a mindless state of self-loss, Sue’s critical faculties are put into full operation and a type of angst or

worry now hangs ominously over her. Comparable to Bourdieu's hysteresis, wherein a subject experiences a "counter-adaptive 'lag'" (Kerr and Robinson, 2009: 833) that impedes their adaptation to new and unusual conditions, Sue is conscious that the reality she lives in (and that *HoC* tries to emulate through its realism) has changed drastically around her. Sue fears being "sucked" into and possibly preferring the fantasy world of *HoC* and this corresponds with Breton's (1924: 47) suggestion that "existence is elsewhere". In this case, a more "real" existence for Sue appears to be found in the world of *HoC* rather than the real world and watching *HoC* becomes a constant reminder of this unsettling fact. The inability of *HoC* to keep up with the new 'rules' of the world means bingeing *HoC* no longer serves the same form of escape that it once did. When she watches season five of *HoC*, Sue is not just confronted with the hard truth that *HoC* is now out of touch with reality, but that she is out of touch:

"It's going to be weird to make sense of HoC now. The world has gone mad and it makes fiction more challenging to accept. I want to re-engage with the narrative of HoC, but there is a less of a connection between HoC and reality and perhaps that is my worry, I need some detachment from real life... I'll be unhappy if I watch it and get scared of the reality of the world. Real life is scary enough on its own."

Elsewhere, Jhanvi has experienced similar hysteretic experiences from consuming *HoC* amongst the backdrop of real-world disruption. Jhanvi, who worked as a news correspondent for a major British broadcasting group during the Tony Blair era of British politics (1997 – 2007), suggested in her first interview in 2016 that the political realism of *HoC* appealed to her originally at the level of professional interest. *HoC*, at that point, mapped cleanly onto Jhanvi's assumptive world and fulfilled her expectations about how the

real-world works, thereby providing her with a compelling, straightforward and accessible form of escape:

“I remember looking and thinking oh yeah it is 3 o’clock in the morning and I don’t have to do anything, and you finish one episode and it will say you have about 10 seconds before another one starts. I then just have to watch it cos you are completely taken in, and you completely forget what’s going on in your own life and completely involve yourself in someone else’s (...) Well you feel like, and especially with series four that it is real and you are not just watching a drama, you are watching a real political event unfold which is quite interesting (...) I did home affairs stories and you just know from the media side that politics is ruthless. It’s ruthless, and from watching HoC it’s interesting to see how the media works now. Alistair Campbell and that level of ruthlessness is what I remember. It is so accurately portrayed in HoC.”

Upon returning to Jhanvi in the second round of interviews however, we found her appraisal of *HoC*’s realism to have changed drastically. In 2017, she was keen to relay to us her concerns that the fictive world of *HoC* no longer reflects the reactionary and chaotic discord of the political climate springing up around her and serves as a reminder what has been lost for her personally:

“I remember thinking, can I really watch this series, considering the soap opera of Trump? It will be hard to believe Frank Underwood is President. I have been quite depressed about it cos you think well, watching the American election unfold and seeing what happened with the Muslim ban, and obviously being of Muslim origin it was so pertinent. I got back to thinking about [HoC], and it will probably not be as exciting as anything in real life, so my feelings have changed to it, cos of the way the Trump administration operates”.

Breton (1934: 118) speaks of surreal events being capable of the “unrolling of historical realities” and, for Jhanvi a Muslim woman, the Muslim travel ban ordered by the real-world US President in January 2017 constitutes a major unravelling of historically established truths and constitutional protections. Such unravelling disconfirms Jhanvi’s expectations about contemporary statesmanship, diplomacy and democracy therefore disrupting her ability to engage with fictive treatments of these concepts in *HoC*. She mentions being “*quite depressed*” because the show makes her think about the current state of affairs and, accordingly, Jhanvi’s transportation into the world of *HoC* is no longer experienced as a self-suspending form of escape.

Re-stabilizing assumptive worlds: A sense-making escape

The second theme to emerge from our data centres on how consumers when faced with surreal conditions use escapism as a way to help them understand their present, real-life circumstances. Breton (1924: 18) posits that in order to come to terms with surreality, subjects are compelled to engage in “further inquiry” and, despite the futility of doing so, will try to impose reason upon strange, uncharacteristic circumstances; “our brains are dulled by the incurable mania of wanting to make the unknown known, classifiable” (p.9). In accordance with this phenomenon, our data suggests that, following shocks to their assumptive worlds, consumers experience escapism not necessarily as a way of “getting lost”, but instead as a way of searching for hope, “finding themselves”, and making sense of their surroundings. Breton (1924: 10) speaks of the potential, here, for surreality to provoke a “human explorer” instinct, a propensity to carry out investigation – or a “search for truth” – assisted by *the imagination* rather than more rational traditional means. In our data, we see consumers attempt to re-stabilize their assumptive worlds through the imagined world of

HoC. Beyond just using *HoC* as fodder for playful, mindless escapism, it offers our participants a chance to reorient and reproduce their reality “as it was” and perhaps how it “ought to be”.

During the second round of interviews, Phil, a lecturer in entrepreneurship studies, discussed how watching *HoC* has, since the radical disturbances in real-world American and British politics, provided him with an opportunity to reaffirm his thoughts about deference to ‘normal’ political governance:

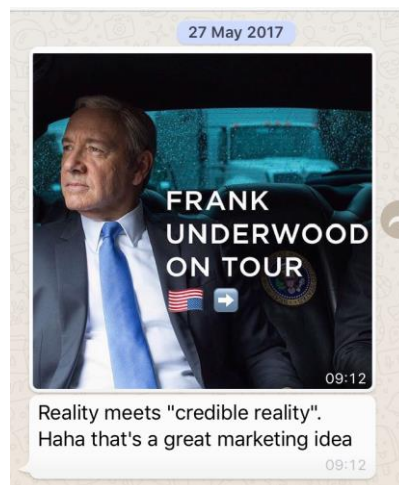
“I guess the show is aware of what’s happening in reality and that will feed into some of the show’s themes... House of Cards needs to be like the shining path almost, the moral lesson, the better way, because that educates the audience to aspire for that better way. Watching it might actually restore your faith, and it should be the other way around.”

Phil’s appreciation of *HoC* as a “shining path” that intentionally sits outside of the surreality going on around it indicates that it is no longer experienced by him as a simple facsimile of reality but, in a post-2016 world, as a sense-making tool; a vestige of a more sensible time and a framework to educate consumers about returning to a “better way”. Under conditions of surreality people are “seeking after new values in order to confirm or invalidate existing ones” (Breton, 1934: 118) and Phil believes *HoC* – because it now stands at odds with the reality it has historically tried to mirror – functions as a “*moral lesson*” in refining and improving that reality.

In advance of the release of *HoC* season five, Lee, a designer and part-time wedding photographer sent the first author a text message with an attachment of a photo featuring “Frank Underwood on Tour” (Figure 2) which coincided with the real President, Donald Trump’s, first official foreign tour. The image was part of a publicity stunt whereby the actor

that portrays Frank Underwood, Kevin Spacey, was photographed by a real-life former White House photographer, Pete Souza, during a tour of Washington DC. Lee captions the image with “*Reality meets ‘credible reality’*” which, when taken in context of when the message was sent, implies that life under the fictional President Underwood presents a more sensible or believable scenario than the real-world Trump administration.

Figure 2: Participant comparing *HoC* with Reality



Here, Lee’s musing that the prospect of Underwood touring as President confronts us with something more “*credible*” than reality suggests a case of “[c]rossing the line from fiction into life” (Bowman, 2006: 279).

The irony is that while *HoC* was originally conceived as a darker chiaroscuro version of the real-world political landscape, it has become for some of our sample a less improbable version of reality. Accordingly, our participants draw on the narrative world of *HoC* as a platform to compare their displaced reality against and it becomes a search for hope. This is expressed clearly by Gary, an administrator at a local government office:

“What’s happening in real-life will play on my mind when I’m watching it now. That’s a good thing about House of Cards, is it does make you think... I’ll be looking

for positive outcomes on the show, and probably be thinking, well why aren't the government doing that? And when you finish watching it, you are thinking, oh could that happen? The real world will probably seem less sensible. When you see the news, the natural reaction is to turn to somebody and say, you know what happens next? In House of Cards they did this, or that."

While Gary once binge-watched *HoC* as a restorative switching-off activity, since the rise of populism in the UK and abroad, he now considers the show more closely and in tandem with real-world problems. By watching *HoC* under the alienating conditions of surreality, Gary and others now seek out a "knowable" space with its own discernible structure and internal logic to anatomize their fears and to locate "*positive outcomes*" from the show. Disruptions to their assumptive worlds have ensured that our participants' escapism through *HoC* is deepened in terms of its cognitive and critical demands. *HoC* is consumed in the post-2016 world almost as a way to find "reminders of the past" and to locate something that may be invisible or absent in reality.

In the second-round of interviews in 2017, Camila, a South American research student, declared that she has stopped watching the news on TV altogether. Frustrated by a media agenda heavily focused on reporting Brexit and events in Washington DC, what she considers to be "*political Deja-vu*", Camila now spends her down-time retreating into long form television series:

"I now see House of Cards as a serious version of the American political system, compared to what is happening right now. I feel like the real life one is a cartoonish version of what politics should be. I feel that Frank Underwood is doing a serious job and I'll watch it to remind me of how Presidents should behave."

Rather than becoming disillusioned with *HoC* and its increasing distance from the events of the real world, Camila explains how *HoC* serves as a more serious depiction of politics and governance. Escapism into *HoC*, for her, centres less on forgetting the “cartoonish” real world or losing oneself in another world (Goulding et al., 2009; Kerrigan et al., 2014), and more on remembering how things ought to be. This corresponds with Cova and colleagues’ (2018: 459) recognition that we should not always consider “self-forgetting” as “a *sine qua non* condition for escapism”. Participants, such as Camila, who are reminded of how Presidents “*should* behave” when watching *HoC* have their long-standing assumptions re-stabilized by the show. Rather than providing an opportunity to forget the world, escape through *HoC* during moments of dislocation offers assurances of how institutions, like governments, once functioned, ought to function, or may function again in the future. The idea that people prefer to seek out what they know and are familiar with confirms Breton’s (1924:10) view that “forbidden is any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices”, and our participants’ expectations operate in accordance with their established, assumptive frames. One of our participants, Simon, a bassist in a blues band, for example reflects on the terrorist attack in Manchester (UK) in May 2017, and oscillates between former and fictional Presidents as a standard for judgement:

“The Obama administration was well run, intelligent, thought out and diplomatic... If you just look at the way Frank can hold a conversation, the intellectual capacity he has to manipulate and even take something that is horrendous and actually use it in a positive advantage and then a couple of days ago you had the Trump speech on the bombing in Manchester and that speech was like a schoolboy in a schoolyard”

Camila, Simon and others no longer watch *HoC* to experience what they might once have considered to be extraordinary villains. They now, ironically, watch the show to reflect upon credible characters, such as President Frank Underwood, that are “somewhat different from what they have... [in] reality” and as a way to “consciously or unconsciously shape one’s behaviour and experience of the world” (Bowman, 2006: 278-279). Here, the escape into the show is to remind themselves of how things can (once again) be.

Resolving Epistemological Purgatory: A communal escape

The final dimension of our analysis centres on how the onset of surreality has shifted escapism away from largely individuated, atomized consumption towards a need for collective, shared activities characterized by critical intersubjective discourse and debate. Breton (1924: 35) acknowledges that the effects of surreality will catalyze “the effort to be social” leading to discussions about “disorder” with others whereby “there is no conversation in which some trace of this disorder does not occur”. This also fits with literature that suggests disruptive events actuate increased social contact with others (Perry and Pescosolido, 2012).

Many participants spoke about coming together with other consumers to try to contextualize, problematize, and adapt their reading of *HoC* to the changing spectrum of real-world conditions around them and, as a group, achieve some kind of escape through immersion in dialogue and debate. Such collective action discursively addresses an “epistemological purgatory” which can be defined as a situation where subjects’ assumptions about reality are out of step with current conditions leading to doubt about “realness of their experience” (Barker, 2002: 281). Being situated in epistemological purgatory means consumers cannot “simply assume that a fictional world functions like the actual world” (Busselle and Bilandzic, 2008: 259), thereby compromising their ability to suspend their

disbeliefs and escape. In coming together to discursively address and move past the deadlocks of this purgatory, our participants escape reality through protracted and meaningful conversations *about HoC* rather than simply *through HoC*. For them escapism takes on a more complex, relational character than by direct consumption alone.

Some of our participants spoke about the depth and longevity of “after-show discussions” with friends and colleagues in the hours and days after watching *HoC*. Lee suggests *HoC* will open up conversations with people about the nature of the reality that the show is trying to reflect:

“HoC is very relevant to the world at the moment. It’s kind of informative... thinking about what might happen in reality. You learn about political systems and activities in America, so I think it is a good form of information. I think it will make way for a lot of conversations with mates and people you work with, given that it might be reflective of what’s going on.”

Lee’s consumption of *HoC* acts as catalyst to seek out others, to share his experiences of *HoC*, and these communal discussions allow for his acquired knowledge from watching the show to be validated socially by an “epistemological community” (Whelan, 2007: 958). An epistemological community comes into being when individuals who share a body of specified knowledge, and are in possession of the standards for developing, evaluating and problematizing this knowledge, engage in discourse. Such communities are particularly useful for freeing oneself from the self-doubt and uncertainty that stem from being in the liminal state of epistemological purgatory. As Barker (2002: 281) suggests, “epistemological purgatory is the springboard for [a] vast self-help and support community... a central aim of this loosely organized community is to address... self-doubt and alienation”. For Lee, an epistemological community enables a collective interpretation of *HoC* and, in doing so, helps

him to think through disruptions to his assumptive framework and ‘relearn’ a world that is different from the previously known one (Kauffman, 2002).

Another of our participants, Simon, recognizes binge-watching *HoC* in the current political climate provides him with “*intellectual capital*” and a source of knowledge to enable him “*to understand what is going on, and being able to discuss it afterwards*”. The knowledge he acquires from watching the show may be considered an “epistemological foundation” (Whelan, 2007: 960). In other words, it gives him sufficient “experiential credentials” to access an epistemological community which can involve “drawing comparisons between members’ experiences... that shares particular beliefs, categories, terms” (Whelan, 2007: 960). This communal analysis of *HoC* takes place post-show to extend escapism beyond the initial viewing experience into immersive and sustained interactive discourses with others. Importantly, the epistemological communities that Simon, Lee and others engage with are qualitatively different to the types of consumption communities traditionally accounted for in marketing theory (Cova and Pace, 2006; Cova et al., 2007). Consumption communities constitute social, proximate groupings who cohere around a shared consumption activity to experience – and escape – together and express their identities as part of some kind of dedicated and collective emotional action (Goulding et al., 2013). In contrast, the epistemological communities revealed by our data are constituted by individuals who have engaged separately in their own independent consumption (i.e. watching *HoC* privately, alone) later finding opportunities to utilize insights gleaned from their consumption mostly within the parameters of conversation with others about larger but related issues.

Sarah explains how she met up with some long-distance friends, and, by chance, their mutual interest in *HoC* emerged as a useful conduit to engage in conversations about the real-world political turmoil around them:

“I met up with some friends from Wales and we hadn’t seen each other for a while and we were chatting about stuff, and I said I had been watching House of Cards and then suddenly everyone got super animated because people are so invested in this show, especially with the American election coming up and Trump running for President. It was great to get other people’s views on what the hell is going on.”

In this case, knowledge of *HoC* provided not just fodder for its own deconstruction and analysis but helped facilitate immersion into an analysis of reality more generally. Here, we can see archetypal aspects of escapism – investment and immersion - achieved through “*super animated*” social discourse rather than discreetly watching the show alone. Consumers enter a space for “communal sociality and solidarity” (Goulding et al., 2009: 759) that serves as an escape from their own epistemological purgatory. Engaging with one another to address “*what the hell is going on*” helps them to attenuate their uncertainty and become what Whelan (2007: 963) refers to as “knowers”. This coming together as epistemological agents, in the hope of achieving a better understanding of the real world, indicates a new relationship between the escapist space and reality, and supports Scott et al.’s (2017: 40) suggestion that it is “impossible to determine exactly when people may be engaging in escapes”. Following Scott and colleagues, we recognize that escape is not always easily detectable; it can occur in a multitude of obscure and less obvious ways including through various forms of social interaction. Consumers, in this instance, achieve some kind of escape after watching *HoC* through connected, passionate conversations with others. This

post-consumption discussion helps consumers to come to terms with disruption and, in doing so, offers its own form of departure from anxiety and concerns.

Discussion

Recent work has suggested that as a theoretical construct, “escapism has not enjoyed a uniform definition in the consumer research literature, and consequently, its usage has been inconsistent” (Kuo et al., 2016: 498). At the heart of this inconsistency, we argue, is that the protean relationship between escapism and reality is seldom considered. Specifically, the aggregate of shifting structural conditions, which impact upon and interact with individuals’ personal life experiences to confirm or disconfirm assumptive frameworks of reality, has not been sufficiently factored into theoretical accounts of escapism. This paper set out to theorize how moments of dislocation in the external environment – what we have termed surrealist disruption – have the potential to alter how escape from reality is experienced. Our findings reveal that when reality is perceived by consumers to have been disrupted in some unexpected way, those marketplace resources that serve as an effective means for escape are subject to their own disruptions leading to changes in the character and the functions of escapism. Overall, these insights have allowed us to present two important contributions for marketing theory.

First, our analyses reveal that rather than being a continuously ontologically secure author of one’s own reality and any attempts to escape from it, each consumer is limited and constrained by the inflexibility of his or her personal assumptive worlds. This, we argue, has bearing on the meanings and functions of one’s consumption experiences when a potential mismatch between what one assumes to be real and unreal, or between one’s expectations of reality versus its manifestations, is encountered. Many of our participants expressed awareness that reality ‘feels’ different to them; that they are hostage to dislocatory events and

issues outside of their immediate agency and control, and that this has impacted their experiences of escaping from it. This has parallels with Lambert's (2019: 342) observations that consumers living through the current epoch of (post-)postmodern neoliberal capitalism "feel as though they *should* have agency" but ultimately, when reflecting on life in general, "do not feel that occurrences [are] necessarily under their control or their choice". Accordingly, beyond consumers' capacity to "use consumption to experience realities" (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: 875), we would add, reflexively, that *realities are drawn upon to experience consumption*. This ontological reversal is an important way of thinking about the relationship between the consumer and consumption, as it recognizes the mutable nature of reality itself as a mediating influence that can overturn, subvert and challenge the assumptions individuals bring to their consuming lives, and potentially lead to forms of action, feeling or thought that connote, for them, unintended results and experiences. Put differently, the changing conditions that shape consumers' reality around them have the potential to structure and constrain their ways of being and acting in relation to the material world in unpredictable and less intentional ways. As we have seen from our data, consumers' intention to escape can be disrupted by structural events that result in the emergence of unexpected and ambiguous experiences, such as hysteretic angst, sense-making and epistemological community-building. This problematizes the often tacitly held view that reality is a relatively stable, consistent construct from which escape is under total agentic command, and highlights consumers' epistemic inability to fully appreciate and predict the effects of unstable, inconsistent contextualizing situations which are made available to them, rather than of their making. The real theoretical value of our study is, thus, in revealing the consequences of dislocatory events in consumers' realities and the potential emergence of alternative experiences that are not necessarily disappointing. We identify the conflict between the unquestioning reproduction of schemas and the ambiguities of new and

unforeseen circumstances as a cause for unintended functional consequences – or what have been referred to elsewhere as the “anti-functional” dimensions – of consumer experiences (Lanier and Rader, 2015).

As a second contribution, our analyses continue in the spirit of providing a more multifaceted understanding of escapism (Jafari and Maclaran, 2014; Kerrigan et al., 2014) by revealing the emotionally multi-valenced nature of escapes within mundane settings. We suggest that escapism, however ordinary the context might be, is capable of invoking negative feelings for consumers beyond the more positively valenced emotions one would typically anticipate. Cova and colleagues (2018: 450) recently classified activities like binge-watching TV series as “mundane escapes” that “[comprise] the small everyday escapes facilitated by technology and especially digitalization”. They theorized that mundane escapes are considered to be unambiguously “playful”, a clear “means of gratification that could offset the frustrations of everyday life” and an accessible way to “prevent experiencing actual anxiety” (Cova et al., 2018: 451-452). On the contrary, our findings reveal that, under certain conditions, these types of escape are capable also of distilling and amplifying the frustrations and anxieties of real-life thus resulting in less playful gratification and more of a conflicted and uneasy experience for consumers. We contribute here with the addition that when the reality that one desires to escape from has lost its predictability, then ordinary, mundane escapes can centre less on abandonment and more on sense-making and rediscovering the coordinates for one’s existence. This helps to complicate and provide parameters to Cova and colleagues’ assertion that mundane escapes “allow [consumers] to escape from self-awareness”, to “lose themselves into an activity”, and provide some kind of “search for self-suspension” (Cova et al., 2018: 452). While self-loss may very well be the intended outcome that consumers seek from mundane escapes, if there is disruption to their assumptive frameworks then escape itself can (whether intentionally or not) become experienced less as a

case of losing oneself – quite simply, because the consumer is already ‘lost’. Ironically, escape may then become more about reconstituting, or re-*finding*, the world around oneself.

This, we argue, ensures that escapism during periods of discontinuity or dislocation in the external environment has the potential to become a sobering and thoughtful experience characterized by recognizing the collapse of one’s own assumptive world and critical reflection on the structural constraints over one’s ability to adapt. Our suggestion that escapism has multi-valenced complexity is consistent with recent work that prompts reflection on the more cynical and dissenting feelings consumers encounter within a ‘postemotional’ marketplace than those that are purely hedonic and sanative (Cronin and Cocker, 2019). As argued by Illouz (2009: 394), “it is unreasonable to assume that one single emotion is at the heart of consumer culture”. Only by recognizing the potential for encountering diverse, and oftentimes unintended, affective results through marketplace-mediated behaviours and circumstances, can marketing theorists appreciate the full range of functions and effects that experiences like escapism are capable of producing.

As a note for future research, we encourage continued exploration of the unintended, improvisational and anti-functional experiences of altered escapes. While our attention centred on how escape can potentially be disrupted by structural events leading to unexpected consequences, more can be learned about the full range of emotions and behaviours felt and undertaken by subjects during their altered escapes. Moreover, our singular focus on the context of binge-watching has revealed only the contours rather than the full complexity of the entanglements between consumers, escapism and reality. A number of dualistic categories have emerged at both explicit (e.g. real versus surreal) and tacit (e.g. confinement versus escape) levels throughout our analyses. In full recognition of the limitations that accompany such potentially reductionist ways of categorizing phenomena (see Canniford and Shankar,

2015), we urge future researchers to think more complexly about the continua or dimensions between the poles of dualisms identified here. Theorisations undertaken at that level, we advise, should not necessarily centre on identifying separate and discrete categories of escapist experiences but rather on unpacking what happens phenomenologically for consumers across the many, fluid and varied ways they attempt to escape various states, conditions, circumstances and environments.

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