

Living with nothingness: Consumer intentionality and meaning-making in the no-where place

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Living with nothingness: Consumer intentionality and meaning-making in the no-where place

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Abstract

Building on and extending Susie Scott's theoretical lens of social nothingness, our paper examines how people in the English town of Wigan create meaning within a living condition of persistent "nothingness". To facilitate our theorisation of social nothingness, we draw on ethnographic accounts of participants' lived experiences in Wigan, a post-industrial town characterised by long-term economic scarcity, and enduring sociocultural and geopolitical insignificance. Rather than treating nothingness as momentary and aesthetic consumer choice, we consider it as a persistent and normalised lived reality continually negotiated and navigated through acts of *accepting*, *disregarding* and *wandering*. In doing so, our study extends understandings of consumer intentionality by moving beyond the dichotomy of commissive and omissive acts, toward the intersections and ambiguities between them. We also argue that transformation and progress in consumer culture is not always necessarily overt and positive; experiences of being 'stuck' or 'lost' can also serve as important sources of meaning making in consumer life.

Keywords

social nothingness, intentionality, acts of commission/acts of omission, absence/presence, consumer meaning making

No cathedral, nothing to spend on... No one cares 'cause we're from Wigan. Where even is that? ... But we make the most of it.

John, 36, participant

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Introduction

The myth of consumer culture asserts that consumption is a liberatory force (Cronin and Fitchett, 2021; Gabriel, 2015; Shankar et al., 2006) and a consumer society asks the “common person to want, to expect, and to dream of an ever higher and more prestigious life” (Cherrier, 2009: 187). An assumption exists that incrementally improving lifestyles is driven by what Cronin and Fitchett (2021) call “market-based progress ... the ideology that the market offers the most legitimate framework through which individuals can approach an ‘ideal future’” (p.4). However, as Cronin and Fitchett suggest, this ideological fantasy is significantly flawed, and a consumer society is never universally progressive. Arguably, a positive vision encompassing societal optimism and opportunism has increasingly eroded away (Coffin and Egan-Wyer, 2021) and this is accompanied by an acceptance of how ‘the world really is’ (Žižek, 2009).

It is within this erosion of progress and spirit of de-romanticising the market (Fitchett and Cronin, 2022) that our study situates itself by turning attention to the often ignored and avoided “real world” where voids, lacks, and absences shape everyday life. Consumers are not merely passive dupes, but neither do they continuously advance toward brighter futures. Instead, they encounter gaps and voids that extend beyond the hollowness of market promises, which rarely materialise in meaningful ways (Ahlberg et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2025; Hoang et al., 2023). Such experiences of lack and absence are not limited to consumer markets but spill into everyday life. They appear in missed opportunities (Emslie et al., 2007), unfulfilled desires (Belk et al., 2003), disrupted or lost family ties (Bardhi et al., 2010; Patterson et al., 1995), or the erosion of communal or cultural spaces that once offered stability or meaning (Goulding et al., 2018; Lanier and Rader, 2017). These lived experiences of lack and loss, shape how people navigate their realities. In this context, cynicism and critique are increasingly directed at the fantastical projections of progress (Cova et al., 2018; Fisher, 2009; Žižek, 2009), leaving behind an ambivalent experience where feelings of loss, incompleteness, and absence sit alongside pragmatic ‘making do’.

In this paper, we examine such an experience of loss, absence and lack through Susie Scott (2018, 2019, 2020, 2022) concept of social nothingness. As Scott (2022) describes how people encounter a “range of lost, unlived experiences of which the person is aware ... subjective awareness of social nothingness may be direct and immediate or latent and delayed. It occurs when individuals notice something that they have not done, has not happened or is missing from their lives” (p.198). For Scott and others, while such encounters are often framed negatively, they can still be experienced as meaningful (Goulding et al., 2018; O’Sullivan, 2022). Here, intentionality becomes central – human consciousness is always directed toward something, even when that “something” is marked by absence, lack, or loss. Drawing on Scott (2018:5) distinction between acts of commission, whereby people “choose to avoid doing/being something, through conscious disengagement or dis-identification”, and acts of omission, where individuals “passively neglect or fail to act, ending up in another position by default rather than conscious intention”, we further examine the lived experience of social nothingness and its relationship with intentionality. In doing so, we pose our main research question: How do intentional acts shape the way people navigate and make sense of the nothingness of their lived reality?

To provide insights into the analysis of the creation and experience of social nothingness, we conducted on-site ethnographic research to explore the lived experience of people dwelling in a small English town, Wigan. As a post-industrial town, Wigan provides a complex context shaped by a rich history and shifting cultural identity. Once a thriving coal mining and textile town, it became symbolic of industrial decline following deindustrialisation in Northern England. At the same time, Wigan is a distinctive place in Britain’s cultural imagination through George Orwell’s *The Road to*

Wigan Pier Orwell (2001) which portrays the town as emblematic of working-class hardship and economic deprivation, and through iconic landmarks such as Wigan Pier and the internationally renowned Wigan Casino that represents the heyday of Northern Soul (both of which have since been demolished). These overlapping narratives of decline, absence and loss, alongside resilience and reinvention, make Wigan a rich setting for examining how residents experience and negotiate their lived conditions in nothingness.

We examine how residents in Wigan create and reflect upon the meanings of living in a ‘no-where place’, as defined by Scott (2022), a place that is physically or symbolically emptied or neglected yet is still experienced as meaningful. While concepts such as precarity (insecurity and uncertain futures), deprivation (deficits and disadvantage), stigma (judgement and negative visibility) and left-behind geographies (neglection, stagnation and lack of mobility) compound disadvantage and are apparent in our various participants’ experience of living in Wigan, Scott’s (2022) concept of social nothingness allows us to interrogate the reflexivity of people living with and navigating these conditions. Whether nothingness is experienced first-hand, or through memory or imagination (Scott and Lockwood, 2024) how consumers navigate nothingness and what can emerge out of nothingness and absence is our core focus. Scott (2022) contends that when nothingness happens, “anything is possible and something vital could emerge” (p.207). However, rather than treating nothingness as a discrete category, we reveal its character as relational, ongoing and its potential presence is to be lived with and maintained, rather than anticipating or seeking for ‘something’ else to emerge.

Our analysis of the lived experience of Wigan as a no-where place extends the theorisation of nothingness in marketing theory from a temporal and aesthetic encounter to an enduring lived reality. Rather than simply escaping or overcoming conditions of lack, loss and absence (Hill, 2002), consumers find meanings within these normalised, lived experiences of nothingness through the continually negotiated emotional and motivational acts of accepting, disregarding and wandering. In doing so, we complicate existing understandings of consumer intentionality by suggesting that it does not exist solely as distinct commissive or omissive acts (Scott, 2018, 2022), but it can also be fluid and unbridled (Chaney and Goulding, 2025). Such an internal and reflexive view of intentionality extends previous accounts of consumer agency that have tended to emphasise either empowered resistance or passive submission (Cherrier et al., 2011; Gabriel, 2015). We further suggest that consumer meaning making does not necessarily derive from progress and transformation (Mick, 2006). Instead, being physically and mentally stuck, especially within enduring experiences of nothingness (loss, lack, absence), can itself become a way of inhabiting and ‘making do’ with life.

Theoretical underpinnings

Experiencing meaning in nothingness

Nothingness is a concept that has been widely discussed in philosophy, sociology, theology, physics, and psychology. Firstly, the idea of ‘nothing’ has been conceived as the complete absence of substantive matter (Richmond, 2007; Scott, 2022) whether that is physical, material, ideals or symbolic and the narrative of nothing has often be framed as a judgement of negative subjective value (Scott, 2019). Ritzer and Ryan, 2003 argue that we are witnessing the ‘globalisation of nothing’, whereby “empty forms that are centrally conceived and controlled and relatively devoid of distinctive content” (p.51) have seemingly drained places of local meaning and authenticity – what is globalised is ‘nothing’. Ritzer and Ryan, 2003 cite an example of the globalisation of

nothing, as a shopping mall (centre) that is an easily replicable, empty structure which can be filled with an endless array of mass-produced and commercialised consumer goods and services. Continuing with architectural, man-made structures and the concept of nothing, Augé (1995) in his text, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* speaks of non-places. Non-places include modern servicescape environments, office blocks, or airports, for example, and are characterised by the passing through of people (movement), who never leave their trace, nor ever inhabit the place. Augé (1995: 63) explains that a place which “cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place”. Augé (1995) argues that non-places represent the urgency of the present moment, devoid of history, and local references. The individual, when temporarily occupying a non-place is reduced to the role of a spectator, “without paying much attention to the spectacle” (p.70) because super-modernity privileges the reversal of the gaze – advanced images, managed expectations, formulated rules, words and texts in the non-places we move through and inhabit (Augé, 2005).

Nothingness on the other hand is the absence of something more specific (Scott, 2022) and has been perceived as the absence of existence or a state of non-being and is associated with something that is missing or absent (O’Sullivan, 2022; Richmond, 2007; Scott, 2019, 2022). To claim that something is absent is to acknowledge the existence of something – the very something that is missing (Ranasinghe, 2020). However, what might be conceived as being missing may never have actually been experienced or be entirely clear to the consumer, who regardless, may claim that they are experiencing a sense of nothingness. Despite a non-presence of something, nothingness can still be visible in our thoughts and retain emotional significance (Scott, 2018). Scott (2018) refers to ‘hypothetical potentials’ and these potentials can still be vividly wondered about and influence our present understanding of ourselves – imaginary or possible futures (Scott, 2020).

Nothingness has a duality, in that it can be simultaneously felt as being ‘nothing’ and ‘something’ at the same time (Ranasinghe, 2020) and is considered to be the *felt* presence of absence (Green, 2011; Ranasinghe, 2020). This echoes the posthumanism view that consumers live in a world of “present absences” where fixed presences give way to fluidity, and existence unfolds through ongoing process of appearance and disappearance (Botez et al., 2020). Bergson (1998) argues that “there is absence only for being capable of remembering and expecting” and consumers may remember something, such as a cherished place, a favourite object, or a way of being, and expect and hope to encounter it again. However, if consumers encounter something else instead, they may experience disappointment from unfulfilled expectations (Bergson, 1998). The reality to which one apprehends can also yield a disappointment, a sense of nothingness, or a void (Richmond, 2007) and to speak of a void is to “speak not simply of absence but of nothing” (Ranasinghe, 2020: 301). Sartre (1958) expresses similar sentiments, and the experience of nothingness is conditioned by human expectations and our expectations about what we are going to see, and experience makes a difference to what we in fact do see and consequently the notion of nothingness is derived from the idea of negative judgement.

In marketing theory, this concept of nothingness is relatively new. This is largely because of its roots in Western perspectives, where nothingness is often viewed through a lens of negativity due to its associations with unholiness or adverse emotions such as anxiety, boredom, isolation and loneliness (O’Sullivan, 2022). An incapacity for the market to constantly deliver ‘something’ can manifest into feelings of nothingness (Lupinacci, 2021). As a result, the antecedents of nothingness can result in consumers feeling a profound loss and Ranasinghe (2020: 301) suggests this can result in consumers experiencing “significant meaninglessness in their lives” and ignites an existential question about *being*, and the need to contend with a feeling of loss, thus the continuous negative framing of nothingness.

Moving beyond the binary relationality between nothingness and somethingness, or being and non-being, Preece and colleagues (2023), however, draw on Eastern philosophical positioning, specifically the Kyoto School, of nothingness. It treats nothingness and somethingness as existing in a dynamic, dialectical relationship (“being-and-nothingness”), with nothingness understood as a fundamental ground through which being, selves and relations become possible. Building on this perspective, the authors develop a selfless epistemology, arguing that this dynamic relationship between nothingness and somethingness can lead to the transformation and liberation of the self. In a similar vein, Goulding and colleagues (2018, 2023) investigate how absence and presence, two seemingly opposite or contradictory elements can coexist, and this co-existence can evoke strong emotions and contribute to multi-dimensional place atmosphere and consumer experiences.

Recognising this coexistent and relational understanding of nothingness and somethingness, other researchers have also highlighted the significance of nothingness in understanding consumer culture and market dynamics. Banister (2025) explored non-consumption practices and how *not*-doing and *not*-being are powerful elements of identity work with respect to whom one is not, and nor does one wish to become (Scott, 2020). Cronin and James (2024) suggest a feeling of nothingness might be appreciated when “there is something present where there should be nothing” (p.258) and as such, an eerie feeling can result. O’Sullivan (2022) explored how in the government enforced, lockdown period of the Covid-19 pandemic consumers grappled with an indeterminate state between nothingness and potentialities. Optimistically, O’ Sullivan (2022: 18) suggests, “encounters of nothingness can be creative in that they, similarly to anti-structure play, generate new formulations of ‘as if’ reality” and he suggests future possibilities are imagined and considered.

To explain consumers who experience an everyday, lived sense of nothingness, and in recognising the deeper and more multi-faceted understanding of nothingness, we turn to Susie Scott’s concept of social nothingness.

Scott’s social nothingness

The concept of social nothingness was introduced by Susie Scott (2022) to explore how individuals experience and make sense of ‘negative’ social symbolic objects – things that are absent, overlooked or no longer present. Using a phenomenological approach, Scott’s work contrasts with the Mead-Blumer tradition of focusing on the (positive, real) social symbolic objects that carry shared, significant meanings (Scott, 2019). For Scott (2022: 197), ‘negative’ social forms characterised by objects, people, events, and places that disappear (no longer there), fail to emerge (not yet there) or are conspicuously absent (not at all there) can also be “experienced and perceived as subjectively meaningful”. Contrasting to her earlier work on ‘nothing’ as the total absence of everything, such as complete silence, a missed comment, a skipped action (Scott, 2018, 2019, 2020), Scott (2022) claims that nothingness is a subjective awareness of ‘nothing apparent’, or the ‘absence of something’, but continues to have meaning in individual life. She categorises these forms as ‘no-things’ (lost or broken objects); ‘no-bodies’ (identities we did not or cannot become); ‘non-events’ (events that are unintentionally designed), and ‘no-where places’ (places that are physically or symbolically emptied or neglected).

Nothingness and (negative) intentionality. Central to Scott’s (2022) work is the examination of the relation between subjective experience and its ‘negative’ social phenomena, and the authors questions how such nothingness comes to hold meaning in everyday life. In response, Scott highlights the dynamic interplay between intentionality and nothingness, showing how motivational feelings and attitudes creates meanings to status of nothingness. For Scott, our engagement

with the world is fundamentally structured through meaning, use or purpose. These characteristics emerge from our objectives within goal-directed action, with this directional orientation termed intentionality (Husserl, 1912). As Husserl (1912) notes, how things appear and disappear is dependent on the observer's positioning and viewpoint, namely, their 'intentionality' toward objects of importance. Building on this foundation, Scott (2022) introduces the notion of negative intentionality: individuals can also purposefully engage with absent or missing objects, things, and places, and render them meaningful and significance through imagination.

Scott (2022) suggests that negative intentionality is accomplished and experienced through two distinctive ways: acts of commission and act of omission. Acts of commission involve intentional choices of "resistance, avoidance, refusal and rebellion" (199). In other words, people actively and intentionally disregard or distance themselves from unfavourable elements of a social context (Cook, 2022). Scott (2022) argues that commissive acts are more critical and often performative, such as saying no, or refusing to conform, leading to feelings of longing and yearning, estrangement or reconnection. In contrast, acts of omission "occur by passive default rather than conscious intentionality ... are framed in terms of lack, deficiency and unrealised potential" (199). These acts are more neutral and private, often occurring by default and tend to produce more introspective experiences and emotions such as missing, waiting or wishing. Scott (2019) suggests some may feel indifferent about what they could have actually done in acts of omission and consequently consumers may be afraid to speak out, neglect to voice opinions, or fear that they will not be listened to (Arcuri et al., 2026). Either through deliberate choice of not doing something as a way of expressing agency, or inaction through non-engagement or deliberate absence, both acts are agentic, not accidental (Leinonen, 2022; Scott and Stephens, 2018).

In marketing studies, it has been acknowledged that consumers deploy intentionality through their inherent agency and power, expressed in their deliberate choices across a spectrum of consumer practices. Some orient their intentionality toward choosing brands/products, or selecting neighbourhoods or tourism sites, adapting to certain culture (Hong and Vicdan, 2016; Rana and Paul, 2017). Others direct it toward resistance and refusal through boycotting, brand avoidance, or disengagement and non-participation (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Lee et al., 2011). Crucially, consumer intentionality never emerges in isolation, but is shaped by social interactions and the symbolic value attributed to particular roles, actions, and identities (Bagozzi, 2000; Foxall, 2013). In these studies, intention is typically framed as goal-directed, and as a definitive result or 'solid' outcome of (anti-)consumption practices (Decker, 2014). However, we argue that intentionality cannot always be shown in 'full presence' in consumer culture (Giovannoni and Quattrone, 2018). Instead, it can also be experienced and formed through contexts of ambiguity, indeterminacy and ongoing negotiation, especially within consumers' self-realisation and identity formation processes where intentions continuously evolve through lived experience rather than predetermined goals (McGowan et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2022). This perspective aligns with Varley et al. (2020) observation that "intentionality and individual agency are increasingly recognized as means to a subjective existential project of continual becoming, beyond the alienating experiences of modernity, rationalisation and commodified experience" (9).

Building on this perspective, we examine the lived reality in the status of nothingness through the analytical lens what Scott (2019, 2022) calls, 'negative social phenomena' of the no-where place – spaces that are physically absent or symbolically and socially overlooked (Scott, 2019, 2022); however, they still hold importance in memory, imagination and consciousness of denizens of a no-where place (Scott, 2019). These locations bring together "no-bodies", "no-things", "non-identity" and "non-events" (Scott, 2019), offering a more complex analytical context than event-based settings like self-isolation (Leinonen, 2022) or non-drinking (Banister et al., 2019). Analysing

everyday life in a no-where place therefore allows us to see how intentionality operates not only in purposeful resistance or clear goals, but also in ambivalence, resignation, and fragile negotiations of meaning.

Contextual background: Living in Wigan (a no-where place)

The context we focus on is the everyday life in Wigan. The town of Wigan, located in Lancashire, England, has a population of nearly 330,000 people and has experienced some of the highest levels of deprivation in the UK ([Office for National Statistics, 2023](#)). Like many UK towns that have felt left behind after the industrial revolution, Wigan has suffered high street decline, business closures and long-term disinvestment. Condemned buildings, uninhabited and empty shops, the erosion of its Northern Soul heyday and the collapse and receivership of Wigan Athletic football club (2022–23) have all contributed to Wigan's economic, cultural and social woes and captures what Cronin and James (2024: 259) call a “failure of presence” which accounts for the “discomfort we feel from encountering that which should be teeming with life but is instead lifeless, empty, or (fore)-closed”.

Historically synonymous with coal mines, and cotton mills, Wigan has become a template for understanding close-knit, working-class communities ([Catterall and Gildart, 2019](#)). George Orwell's renowned work *The Road to Wigan Pier* ([Orwell, 2001](#)) demonstrates this narrative, describing the town with brutal derision as “stagnant meaningless decay” (p.14). Orwell's bleak depictions of Wigan has cast a long shadow over the town. Unlike neighbouring cities like Manchester and Liverpool, which have successfully rebranded themselves through cultural industries and urban regeneration, Wigan remains in a state of symbolic suspension – neither historically vibrant nor future oriented ([Armstrong, 2012](#)). The town exemplifies what [Scott \(2019, 2022\)](#) calls a no-where place, that is socially and culturally invisible and economically discarded.

However, Wigan's apparent nothingness is far from meaningless. For example, in a counterpoint to Orwell, Liam Gallagher of Oasis has described the town and its people as “biblical” on Twitter (now X), which resonated with and liked and retweeted by many local residents. This research, therefore, unpacks how those born and living in Wigan, a town of nothingness defined by what it is not (like Manchester), what it no longer is (a cultural hub), and what it has never fully become (a place with clear future), actively make their lives meaningful, and for some, even ‘biblical’. This analytical context reveals how nothingness operates both internally through individual experience and externally through geographies of neglect, abandonment, and symbolic erasure.

Methods

Wigan was selected as our research context was serendipitous rather than initially planned. It started with an unexpected 3-day stay in the town by the first author. During this visit, participation in local activities and interactions and informal chats with residents sparked an interest in understanding the town's long history of industrial growth and decline, its complex cultural identity, and the ways inhabitants navigate the town's stories, memories and everyday life. To explore these complex lived experiences in depth, we adopted a narrative ethnographic approach. This allowed us to capture and represent the cultural and social narratives of our participants' lives in Wigan ([Ellis and Berger, 2003](#)).

In this study, as researchers, we adopt what [Timmermans and Tavory \(2012:173\)](#) describe as a ‘cultivated position’, a “disposition to perceive the world and its surprises”. While seeking to represent the experiences of participants faithfully, we aimed to minimise the imposition of fixed categories and stereotypes by remaining open to unexpected observations and interpretations. In

doing so, we were mindful that describing Wigan simply through narratives of economic or cultural scarcity risks reproducing deficit framings often associated with post-industrial working-class places in the UK (Engels, 2023). While these narratives emerged from participants’ own accounts of everyday life rather than being imposed analytically, we remained reflexive throughout the research, continuously considering alternative interpretations and how they might shape the analysis.

Narrative ethnography facilitated the use of various data collection methods. Data was collected by the first author in Wigan from 2020 to 2023 (see Table 1).

Semi-structured interviews

Sixteen participants (see Table 2) were recruited through snowball sampling. Interviews began with broad, open-ended questions (Creswell, 2006) about their relationship with Wigan, including the duration of residency and experiences of living, leaving and/or returning to the town. Importantly, although participants’ socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education, and occupation differed, we found that it was their lived experiences and relationships with Wigan (e.g. being a permanent or returning resident, being close to their family or not) as home that most strongly shaped their perceptions and attitudes toward life in the town rather than solely who they were. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their perceptions of everyday life in the town and feelings toward them. To gain a deeper understanding of participants’ perspectives, follow-up interviews were conducted. Of the original cohort, only three participants engaged in second-round interviews. This low retention rate was partially attributed to participants’ perception that there was nothing more to say about Wigan or their life there. This phenomenon of ‘disengagement’ inadvertently provided valuable data (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015), offering insights into the concept of ‘nothingness’ that some residents associate with Wigan and themselves. Interviews were

Table 1. Overview of data sources and their purpose in our study.

Method	Data source	Purpose
Semi-structured interviews	16 semi-structured interviews with residents of Wigan	To develop a comprehensive understanding of the perceived image of Wigan and residents’ life experiences of residing in the town.
Archival research	Books: <i>The Road to Wigan Pier</i> (Orwell, 2001), <i>The Road to Wigan Pier revisited</i> (Armstrong, 2012), <i>Wigan Pier Revisited: poverty and politics in the 80s</i> (Campbell, 2013) Online articles: e.g. <i>The Guardian</i> , <i>The Independent</i> , <i>Wigan Today</i> . Details see the reference list	To develop a better understanding of the historical, cultural and social setting of the town.
Ethnography: Onsite observations and researcher field notes	This included observations of the town, informal conversations with residents and the production of 129 pages of field notes.	To immerse the researcher in the daily lives in Wigan to help facilitate an understanding of Wigan residents’ experiences and narratives in a natural context.

Table 2. Participant Information details.

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Gender	Follow up interview?
Jude	46	Local historian	Male	Y
James	19	College student	Male	N
Gill	62	Local historian/writer	Male	N
Mat	36	Self-employed	Male	N
Susie	33	Post-graduate student/secretary	Female	N
Alex	34	Project manager, then self-employed	Male	Y
Jack	29	Not disclosed	Male	N
Katherine	18	College student	Female	N
Tommy	49	Musician	Male	N
Liz	40	School teacher	Female	Y
David	35	Pub owner	Male	N
Flynn	22	Uni student	Male	N
Caroline	26	Marketing professional	Female	N
Ann	41	Event promoter	Female	N
Leo	45	Truck driver	Male	N
Chris	31	IT professional	Male	N

conducted both via Zoom and in person, lasting between 40 and 90 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms.

On-site observations

To familiarise ourselves with the field, a comprehensive review of archival data related to Wigan and the life there was conducted, including media articles, books, reports and documentaries. Following the initial familiarisation phase, multiple on-site observations in Wigan were conducted, each lasting between 3 hours and 2 days. The first author immersed themselves fully in the town's environment and life, visiting famous sites, attending cultural events. Notably, a total of 24 informal conversations were conducted during the field visits, ranging from brief two-minute talk with residents or visitors on the street, to day-long conversations with families and friends during their gatherings. These informal conversations provided valuable ethnographic data that allow us to attune to the subtle and spontaneous narratives and interactions of everyday life that would have been difficult to capture through formal interviews (Goulding and Pressey, 2023; Steadman et al., 2021). These immersive observations facilitated the collection of rich, contextualised 'living stories' that encompassed not only verbal narratives but also emotions and interactions between residents and the researcher, as observed, experienced and felt in everyday life. While interviews were used as the main evidence for the findings and analysis, observations played a crucial role in contextualising participants' narratives, and offered opportunities for the researcher to reflect on the subtle feelings and attitudes that might otherwise have been imperceptible (Scott et al., 2017).

The data was coded and analysed through thematic analysis. Both authors participated in the data analysis, which involved moving between our data, emergent concepts and themes and theoretical framework (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). We adopted an inductive approach for the initial analysis, where the coding phase was exploratory, and focused on the stories and lived experiences

of Wigan residents. We coded the data line-by-line to capture recurring themes. At this stage, the concept of ‘nothing’ frequently appeared when participants described the town and their lives there, which gradually emerged as a salient theme in the dataset. In the second round of analysis, we developed broader interpretive codes that captured how participants respond to and live in the perceived ‘nothing’ of Wigan, such as ‘cherish mundane life’, ‘feeling bored’, ‘hope for the future’, and ‘make do’.

Once these patterns were established, we sought an appropriate theoretical lens to interpret the findings. After comparing and evaluating several perspectives related to the concept of ‘nothing’ and meaning making, we identified [Scott’s \(2022\)](#) social nothingness and its intersection with intentionality as the most suitable framework for conceptualising the participants’ life experiences in Wigan. We then adopted an abductive analytical approach, moving iteratively between data and theory to refine our interpretation. This combination of inductive and abductive analysis aligns with [Charmaz’s \(2009\)](#) qualitative approach that begins with inductive coding but moves beyond it to develop an “imaginative interpretation of studies life” (138). Through this process, the key themes including accepting nothingness, disregarding nothingness, and wandering in nothingness were identified to enhance our understanding of the multi-faceted and fluid meaning making process of lived nothingness.

Findings

In this section, we show how meaning is created, negotiated and navigated within the nothingness of Wigan – a lived reality rooted in economic scarcity and cultural and historical insignificance. Drawing on [Scott’s \(2022\)](#) theorisation on the experience of nothingness and its interplay with intentionality, our findings identify three distinct but interconnected ways (i.e. accepting, disregarding and wandering) of navigating long-term physical and symbolic absence and lack, showing how people create meanings in life through various commissive and omissive acts.

Accepting nothingness

While nothingness has been conceived as resulting in feelings of unfulfillment and disappointment ([Husserl, 2012](#); [Scott, 2019](#)), our participants reveal an acceptance and even appreciation for the lacking and absence in Wigan. For instance, Liz, a schoolteacher in her 40s who was born and raised in Wigan but moved away for several years for work, recently returned temporarily to look after her mother. When asked about her view on Wigan, she answered,

So, when I was growing up in Wigan, I never knew things like, going to the opera or going to the theatre ... And so going away, just opens up my perspective of the world and what is available to me, because I think in Wigan, I was brought up kind of more humbly than that to think exactly that this is my place ... If you came to work in town centre and you look around, there is nothing, you know, and even the bits that haven’t been knocked down, a lot is closed, and it is quite depressing ... But if you make the effort to look a bit closer, there are little things to appreciate, especially the community. People are really nice here.

[Scott \(2019\)](#) suggests, “when nothing demands our attention, we have the opportunity to stop, think and reflect ... explore new ideas, see different connections and configurations” (p.136). Indeed, having spent time living elsewhere, Liz is able to reflect on what is lacking and missing in Wigan – the limited cultural life, closed shops and the rundown high street. However, her reflection does not end with this sense of absence. Instead, she draws attention to the quieter and more

mundane aspects of the town, particularly its communal life. This appreciation is even more pronounced after her return, when nothingness is met with a deliberate “effort to look a bit closer” to “find beauty here” in less obvious ways.

Appreciating the nothingness of the town is also characterised through comparing. Participants actively frame Wigan in relation to nearby Manchester, highlighting their hometown as modest in order to give meaning to what might otherwise feel like ‘nothing’. For instance, the interview with Tommy took place after a gig by a local band that the first author attended in Wigan. Tommy, as a musician himself, expressed surprise that the first author knew the band and had come along to Wigan see them perform. As Tommy explained,

Manchester is obviously a big city, isn't it? There's a lot of city people. They've got lots of bands. They've got cinemas, shopping malls, clubs ... We're not like them. We don't have those things. We're Wigan, we're pretty simple. We like our beers and like eating pies, and that's about it really ... People here tend to find comfort in those small things ... the vast majority of people here are what people call the home pigeon or bird.

Interestingly, Tommy's excerpt shows the co-existence of passively accepting the lack and absence of Wigan, while actively seeking the value of the town. His intentionality moves between acts of omission and acts of commission (Scott, 2019). On the one hand, he omisively accepts what is missing in Wigan compared to Manchester rather than resisting or attempting to change it. On the other, he commissively pursues “something” in response to nothingness by finding meaning and enjoyment in the town's simple pleasures, such as good beer and pies, and being “the home pigeon or bird”. The simpleness and humbleness of Wigan and Wiganers, arguably shaped by living in a place where even basic amenities such as cinemas and shopping malls are limited, is also observed in our fieldnotes,

It was cold and I was starving, so I walked into the town centre looking for something quick to eat. There wasn't much choice except pies. I've never seen these many pie shops ... When I mentioned this to a participant, she laughed and said pies are one of the few things Wigan is good at. She also mentioned that people in Wigan are known for ‘eating humble pies’. The phrase originally mocked Wiganers during the miners' strike for being disengaged, but it somehow has become a local symbol for people being modest ... People here seem quite content with what their lives, even though it might not seem to be appealing ... They are definitely very humble and easy-going, but almost a bit ... lacking the drive to make any changes? (Fieldnote, author 1, 2022)

This fieldnote reflects a quiet acceptance of life in Wigan, where locals are content with simple routines. Rather than being frustrated by the town's limited opportunities, and its associated negativity, or feeling an urgency to make changes, many Wiganers actively and positively adjust their aspirations to fit the life there. In this way, everyday calmness and modesty become ways through which people endure and normalise the town's absence and limitations while maintaining a sense of ordinary stability.

While some participants actively try to appreciate the simple and mundane aspects of life in Wigan, others appear to accept its status of nothingness more passively. Chris, for example, is in his early 30s, who also identifies himself as a “music geek” who barely goes out, admitted that:

There's nothing to see in Wigan. There are no museums, there's no cathedral ... This is where I live ... I don't mind living here. I live on a farm, and no one disturbs me. It's quiet, and I don't normally go out. I live here just because I was born here, and my family are here. That's all.

This interview only lasted around 20 minutes despite being scheduled for 1 hour, as Chris repeatedly suggested that there was “nothing to say about Wigan”, or his life there. He further commented,

Why are you doing research on us? Such a waste of time. We don't have a choice but to live here, but I never understand why you'd want to study it!

His response reflects an act of omission where constrained environments are accommodated not by actively pursuing changes or resisting them, but by withdrawing and hiding away. Living outside the town centre allows Chris to distance himself from the visible emptiness of the high street and its disappointments. Although seemingly passive and inactive, Chris embraces this lifestyle as the backdrop of existence – an omni- way of living with solitude and absence that enables survival, but not fulfilment. As [Scott's \(2019\)](#) explains, no-where places accommodate non-doing in which “nothing happens, and nobody feels moved to do anything” (150).

Disregarding nothingness

The second theme to emerge from our data contrasts with accepting nothingness and centres on our participants disregarding nothingness by actively re-signifying the missing things. Here, participants show a stronger sense of agency, deliberately choose not to dwell on the absence of cultural icons and events in present Wigan, but instead invoking the town's former glory as a foundation of pride. For instance, Mat, a 36-year-old self-employed male with an obsession with the past music scene and subculture in Wigan remembered:

I think that was before my time, but you always hear stories about Northern Soul, about Donk scene in Wigan. I think people from quite far away used to, just travel to go to Wigan Casino and Wigan Pier and dance the whole weekend in Wigan. They don't exist anymore. I wish they did. That was all we had and what people knew about us ... They still play a part in how we remember Wigan though and why we are very proud of Wigan ... It's like we don't really focus on what's missing now but rather hang on to those old memories.

Venues such as Wigan Casino and Wigan Pier once positioned the town at the centre of the northern soul and rave scenes of the 1970s and 2000s, attracting visitors from across the UK and even the world. However, both venues have since closed, leaving behind ruins, tales, and hopes of regeneration. Nevertheless, rather than focusing on their absence, Mat chooses to not forget the cultural vitality of the past. This selective remembering transform bygone events into living symbols of pride and contributes to an affective connection to his hometown ([Cantone et al., 2020](#)). Like Mat, similar acts of commissive intentionality have shown in participants' nostalgic accounts of other lost or diminished cultural achievements – football. As our fieldnotes recorded,

I joined a group of people at a pub near the DW Stadium after a Wigan Athletic match. The team had lost that day, but most of the people still seemed quite relaxed and supportive. A man at the table waved his hand dismissively and said, ‘Ah who cares? We were good once, and that's all that matters’. The table erupted in

laughter. Then another man responded, ‘Yeah, you’ve got a point. We know we’re good. A bad game is better than no game’, and the conversation quickly moved on to discuss the next match. (Fieldnote, author 1, 2023)

As a team from a small town, Wigan Athletics’ unexpected FA Cup victory against Manchester City in 2013 remains a significant moment in the town’s collective memory. However, the club’s heyday has since faded, followed by financial struggles that nearly led to its closure (Kendrick, 2024). In the pub conversation, however, the participants reanimate this past through casual talks. By saying “we were good once”, they deliberately yearn for the town’s “yesterday”, the no-thing and no-where of Wigan is surrendered and reformed as some-thing and some-where that they are proud of. Rather than dwelling on the disappointment of the current loss, the participants quickly shift the conversation to the next match, showing that what matters is not simply winning the present, but creating hope through the glory of the past and anticipation for the future.

In the process of disregarding the nothingness of Wigan, some participants deliberately choose not to forget the past, while others choose not to remember it. Jude, for example, a local historian illustrated such an attitude when discussing the hedonistic culture (Goulding et al., 2009) of King Street in Wigan. As he walked with the first author along King Street, where many of the once-grand Victorian buildings now stood abandoned, or were occupied by homeless people and clubs, Jude signed and said with emotion,

So, King Street (Wigan), apparently only really comes alive about midnight till three o’clock or four o’clock in the morning. And that’s on a Friday or Saturday night. It is like being in the Mediterranean because all of a sudden, people are outside. And people are kind of falling out of bars. It’s like a holiday resort for those hours ... It was very much binge drinking and alcohol excess and ambulances, you know, picking people up and taking them to the hospital because of the fights and you know, drugs and bits and pieces. It’s kind of got a bit of a sordid reputation ... I suppose it’s a good escape from the life here, but it’s such a shame really ... people don’t want to talk about what King Street used to be. It’s almost like they forget what it once was. It’s like they just want to brush that off. Now it’s all about the drinking, the nights out, the chaos.

Jude is a passionate advocate for Wigan’s architecture, and he organised several cultural talks regarding the town’s history and heritage. In the interview, he speaks with a sense of regret about how King Street, once the legal and commercial centre of Wigan, and lined with the magnificent listed Victorian buildings, is now filled by alcohol abuse, violence and disorder by people who dwell here. In the meantime, though, such a hedonistic experience in King Street that Jude describes also creates a kind of temporary escapism from reality, as residents pursue temporary highs and forgetfulness and indulge in distractions and denial of the absence, lack and emptiness of their own lives through binge drinking (Measham and Brain, 2005).

Whether through not forgetting (nostalgia), or not remembering (reconnection), these commissive acts demonstrate autonomous agency by enabling resistance towards a status of living in nothingness that one cannot easily leave (Lee et al., 2011). However, although these acts of participants appear to be intentional, they also leak out unintentionality hiding under subtle gestures, practices, feelings. For example, as a local event promoter who regularly organises and hosts parties in Wigan, Ann openly stated,

What else can we do, eh? There is not much going on round here, is it? So you just come out, have a few pints, have some fun, and forget about everything ... This is our life, really. Not much to do, but we'll make a night of it anyway.

Ann's comment demonstrates a mix of humour and resignation, showing how seemingly intentional acts such as drinking and night out also function as ways of coping with the limited opportunities, and missing cultural heritage in the town. What may appear to be a deliberate choice to "have a laugh" simultaneously reveals underlying feelings of disappointment and unfulfillment, where escapism becomes a way of momentarily distancing herself from everyday realities (Jones et al., 2020). Living in such a condition of constraint and lack of alternatives, Ann's comment subtly acknowledges the experience of absence that making do with what is available. This raises questions as Banister (2025) suggests about what is considered to be 'something' of meaningful value in consumers lives and where hopes, and aspirations have diminished, the decision to drink alcohol, for Liz may be more about containment.

Wandering in nothingness

While many participants approach the absence, loss and lack of Wigan through acceptance and disregarding, either intentionally or unintentionally, others remain in a more unsettled state. These participants are still exploring the meaning of Wigan's nothingness aimlessly, while actively seeking for possibilities within the void and uncertain in their life. For instance, in a follow-up interview with Liz, the previously mentioned schoolteacher, she mentioned that she had decided to settle in Wigan after 2 years of being back, although she remained somewhat uncertain about how long she would stay. As she reflected:

See, I don't know. I think living here for the long term. I think there are things. Wigan has got a lot to offer, but it just isn't doing the big things or noticeable things very well at the moment ... We've got no plans immediately next year to do that. So, me and my brother, we are free. No ties now. But even so, we're not in a hurry to move. Maybe in the future, but we're not in a hurry to move. We do quite enjoy life in Wigan for the moment, but we will see how it goes.

Like Liz, some participants mentioned that they are 'unsure' or 'cannot make a decision' on how long they will stay in Wigan. They are unwilling to or unable to make a choice but let themselves drift between the possibilities of moving away or staying. Such 'non-decisions' found amongst residents are triggered by the fact that there is not anything in Wigan that appears relevant or appealing enough to keep people there (Scott, 2022). In response to this, they pause their life and look for signs to make the final decisions. Anderson (2003) distinguishes between procrastination and decision avoidance: procrastination refers to intentionally delaying the act of decision making, whereas decision avoidance reflects indecisiveness or not being able to decide. In the case of Liz, these two forms of inactivity overlap: she deliberately postpones the decision to leave as she wants to make sure it is the right step, yet at the same time she feels unable to act as her family ties keep her stuck in Wigan.

Interestingly, instead of a cessation of activity, such a pause is sometimes a transitional stage in which something better would take place (Scott, 2019). For instance, in an interview with David, who moved to Wigan to stay closer to his wife's family, he spoke about the potential of Wigan he sees. As an 'outsider' from Southern England, he sees Wigan with a different perspective. He suggested,

My family always think I'm insane for moving to Wigan, as people from the South have no clue where it is and what's there. Basically, it's non-existent to them. But I think this place has got some potential. There could be a lot of opportunities and money flowing into the town because of its location near Manchester ... The council is also building something in the town centre, and hopefully that will attract some attention to the town ... Is this the place I want to stay forever? Maybe not. But we will see!

Like David, other participants used the words 'It will be better' or 'we will wait' to demonstrate their hope for a brighter and easier future of the town. They recognise the limitations of the town, yet they keep imagining that things could improve over time. These participants reside in, as [Goulding \(2024\)](#) suggests, a 'mellotalgic experience', longing for a positive future to make justification for their present life decisions. Such an experience is not, however, in a static state, as people tend to waver between the present and future, longing and regretting, depending on the current condition of life ([Goulding, 2024](#)) and this contests [Rogers \(1947\)](#) notion that individual behaviours are largely motivated by the need to reaffirm one's desired self-image. Instead, consumers contend with tensions around future aspirations and attachment to something they know, rather than projection of a desired self. For example, in an interview with Caroline, a Marketing professional based in Wigan who works for an international firm and regularly travels for work, she reflected on the feeling of stuck-ness between her hometown and the wider world. The interview took place in a small but modern vegan cafe she had specifically chosen, and she started complaining,

I'm vegan, but I can hardly find a place to eat in Wigan! This is probably the only place I can safely eat ... I love my hometown and being close to my family, but sometimes I feel stuck, and can't find a way out. It was ok for me living here when I was a teenager, but now I want a bigger world, seeing more things, meeting more people. But I can't just leave my family behind.

Carolines' comment reveals a tension between attachment and constraint. While she desires the opportunities and experiences of a bigger world and brighter future beyond Wigan, she values the current closeness of home and family. She moves back and forth between her teenagerhood, and adulthood life, between hometown life and life elsewhere. Caught between these life statuses, she finds herself stuck in a dead end, trying to live spontaneously in the present and the imagined future, and between "here" and "there".

While such an 'oceanic float' experience ([Scott, 2019:110](#)) can create transitory hope and faith for some, it can also lead to sadness and misery for those who have fallen from the boat and struggled to climb back. A 34-year-old male participant Alex, who has moved away and back a few times from Wigan to juggle between work, relationship, friends and family, stated:

I still think there's nothing in Wigan. Nothing to do. Nowhere to spend money ... I hardly go out because there is nothing to do. I'm not sure where I live and who I am sometimes. I feel lost ... I don't make my life plans. I'm not attached to Wigan or anything like that ... It is sad, I know, and I do feel lonely sometimes. But it's also a kind of relief for me, though, that I am not attached to anything. I feel free. I would just move anywhere if I had reason to move anywhere, like for my business or relationship.

Similar to Caroline, Alex is also navigating the 'existential voids' ([Scott, 2019:109](#)) of Wigan, unsure of his final destination. Also, unlike Caroline, who retains some hope while wandering through Wigan's nothingness, Alex is mired in disconnection and apathy. This sentiment is prevalent among individuals who have left Wigan for a period and subsequently returned. As my fieldwork recorded:

A lot of ‘returners’ in Wigan don’t seem very connected to their hometown. As they have returned and chosen to stay, I’d imagine them being more content here. They just seem ready to leave at any time if they have a chance ... It almost feels like they recognise the place, but don’t fully connect with it anymore upon their return. (Fieldnotes, author 1, 2023)

For the ‘returners’, Wigan’s absence of magnificent things and events disillusion the mythical concept of ‘hometown’. Conversely, like Alex and other ‘returners’, participants in this study have experienced detachment from Wigan, a stark contrast to conventional attachments and pride to one’s hometown (Bardhi et al., 2010). In their experiences, living in such a place of lack and absence can lead to what May (2013:138) terms ‘a jarring sense of not belonging’. What the ‘returners’ experience here, however, is not about deliberately failing to fit into a foreign or unfamiliar setting, but rather about an unconscious drifting away from what is familiar.

Paradoxically, as Alex claims, this detachment also engenders a sense of freedom. This attribution process, or ‘story-telling process’, as Scott (2022) argues, serves as a mechanism for embracing and legitimising a sense of freedom in a non-place. This concept of ‘freedom’, as Miller (2024) distinguishes, is not the release from any particular burden or restriction, but the voluntary withdrawal from social obligations and mental constraints. For the ‘returners’ in Wigan, it manifests as the ability to navigate fluidly between personally valuable pursuits over traditional ties and responsibilities to family and hometown.

Discussion

From encountering to enduring nothingness

Drawing on Scott’s (2022) conceptualisation of nothingness (the absence, loss and lack of something specific), this study explores how people create meaningful life within a small town characterised by economic scarcity and cultural and social insignificance. By situating nothingness within the context of the everyday life in a ‘no-where place’ (Scott, 2022), we extend current marketing understanding of the theorisation of nothingness. Existing research has tended to focus on temporary and individual encounters of nothingness, such as the inner silence associated with aesthetic or spiritual moments (Dehling, 2023), ephemeral atmospheric absence within curated tourism sites (Goulding et al., 2018), the elective withdrawal from drinking culture (Banister et al., 2019), or the epistemological stance of non-self that researchers can adopt (Preece et al., 2023). In these studies, nothingness often appears as the end result of personal desire and will, something embraced, encountered and chosen by individuals. By contrast, our study sees nothingness as an ongoing process of negotiation between people’s intentions, feelings, memories, and coping strategies with the structural factors of economic decline, cultural erosion, and social invisibility.

We extend these studies by demonstrating how nothingness is not solely an internal or psychological experience, but also materially and spatially embedded within the built environment. In this context, creating meaning from what fail to appear or no longer present is less about aesthetics or self-expression, but more about negotiating constraints, filling time, and seeking modest ways of making life meaningful (Hamilton et al., 2019). Our findings therefore shift the theorisation of nothingness away from personal experience alone, highlighting how the material, cultural, and political environment also constrains and governs the ways individuals live with and make sense of nothingness (Scott, 2019, 2022).

By examining how people experience nothingness through multi-faceted and complex acts and emotions including accepting, disregarding and wandering, this study contributes to marketing

theory by showing how consumers negotiate and make meaning of long-term absence, lack and loss. Although using Wigan, a small, marginal town, as the context of this study, our findings on how consumers experience long-term nothingness also apply to high-profile urban settings. In large cities, nothingness may not arise from a lack of financial support or cultural presence, but from the absence or lack of intimacy, community and emotional support, where individuals endure distance, anonymity, and a persistent feeling of being unseen and abundant (Langegger and Koester, 2016; Tonkiss, 2003).

Beyond spatial contexts, our findings also contribute to a broader context of consumer vulnerability, where ‘destructive force’ of scarcity, invisibility, and loss, not episodic feelings and deliberate choice of identity expression, define the meaning of their lives (Gentry et al., 1995; Hill, 2002). Vulnerability research has shown how scarcity limits consumer choice and wellbeing, and how consumer cope under conditions of deprivation and exclusion (e.g. Gentry et al., 1995; Hill, 2002). Yet this literature has primarily framed vulnerability, a profound lack and loss, as a situational condition - something consumers encounter to and ideally move through. Our study extends these discussions by showing how long-term exposure to economic decline, cultural invisibility, and social insignificance does something deeper – it reshapes consumers’ existential relationship with meaning of vulnerability itself. Absence, lack, and invisibility are not merely experienced as a disadvantaged situation consumers find themselves in, but as a normalised condition of everyday life they are formed by. We move beyond dominant understandings of consumer vulnerability as a situational hardship to be overcome and dealt with (Hill and Sharma, 2020) towards the cumulative and relational experience of living within environments where more complex acts and emotions such as apathy, nostalgia, fantasy, detachment and boredom (Murphy et al., 2023) continually intertwine and persist, reshaping how meaning, identity and mundane life are experienced and understood.

Blending (negative) consumer intentionality

Though drawing on Scott’s (2019, 2022) work as our theoretical foundation, we also extend her conceptualisation of nothingness by blurring the distinction between ‘acts of commission’ (deliberate choices of nothingness) and ‘acts of omission’ (obtaining nothingness by passive defaults). Our findings show that these two forms of intentionality are not easily separable, especially within the enduring experience of nothingness. Instead, they continually overlap and intersect, as consumers move fluidly and ambivalently between decisiveness and indecisiveness, passivity and activity within enduring conditions of absence and lack. We therefore contribute to a more nuanced understanding of consumer intentionality in marketing theory, where intentionality has been treated in dualistic terms. While many studies position consumers as intentional, sovereign subjects – willing agents who actively consume, believe, or feel actively (Dhar and Sherman, 1996; Foxall, 2013) or, alternatively, resist (Cherrier et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2011), or escape (Cova, 2021); others highlighted the erosion of genuine consumer choice and intentionality per se under neoliberal capitalism where consumers are subtly governed by market systems (Zwick et al., 2008). Our findings, however, complicate this binary by showing forms of intentionality less driven by clear agency or total surrender, but more by fluidity and ambiguity and negotiation. Rather than asking *whether* consumers exercise will, our findings show *how* will moves, across commissive and omissive registers, across engagement and drift.

As Botez et al. (2020) argue, rather than considering consumers as logical and rational agents, they should be seen as being immersed in ever-changing environments where the strict and formal hierarchies, boundaries and subjectivity are constantly redefined. In this shifting world, individual

power and influence becomes unstable and elusive. Building on this, we argue that consumer intentionality is likewise not fixed, or fully empowered, but instead fluid and unbridled (Chaney and Goulding, 2025; Varley et al., 2020). It is “a delicate dance between optimism and pessimism” (Pavia and Mason, 2004:452), action and inaction, and appearance and disappearance in an ever-changing world.

Within the lived reality of social nothingness, we argue, consumers do not always act with clear purpose or direction, nor are they entirely passive. Rather, they oscillate between deliberate (dis) engagement and imposed stagnation, participants and non-participants (Banister et al., 2019; O’Sullivan, 2022). In this oscillation, consumers may replace instances of omission (neglect and decline) with commissive choices. For example, in our findings, Liz explains the fraying town she was born into (omissive), however, she describes how making “the effort to look a bit closer, there are little things to appreciate” (commissive) (Scott, 2019, 2022). We suggest that acts of omission have an air of reversibility about them, and this has the potential for a positive shift in narrative and trajectory. This finding also addresses a longstanding challenge in marketing research: acts of omission by definition are constituted through absence and disengagement rather than observable actions and cumulative intent, making them difficult to capture and interpret (Chatzidakis and Lee, 2013). By conceptualising intentionality as fluid, though, we show that rather than isolating omission as a fixed behavioural state, we can consider it as an ongoing movement between omissive and commissive acts as it unfolds within a single consumer’s narrative, as suggested in our data. Tracing this movement therefore gives marketing researchers an indirect but more overt way into a phenomenon that would otherwise remain covert to analysis.

We also recognise it may be less of a positive outcome and instead a tone or trajectory of ambivalence and indifference resides, as our theme on disregarding nothingness reveals. Subsequently, consumers adopt a more pragmatic position of ‘making do’ with nothingness. Making do with nothingness does not necessarily mean the consumer is not reflexive, rather they are resigned to how much, if any agency they have to endure the pre-existing structures that they live within (Ahlberg et al., 2021). These are consumers who know and feel excluded from the global neoliberal model of the market (Jones and Bradshaw, 2023) and are increasingly cynical of various promises of ‘neoliberal inertia’ (Davis et al., 2025) that has been pledged to them by various political actors. Whether that was Blair’s town funding (2002), Brexit promises (2016) or Johnson’s levelling up plan (2021), there is something pitiless about promises that never materialise and it has the effect of making the denizens of towns like Wigan complicit in maintaining the status quo – living with nothingness. Such cynicism can undermine belief in the future (Mazella, 2007) and much like Hoang et al.’s (2023) participants, a lack of faith in the system for change results in acceptance and a level of contentment is conceivable through one’s own self-directed action. Best summarised by our participant, Tommy, who suggested in our first theme (appreciating nothingness) that, “people find comfort in those small things”.

Being ‘stuck’ in nothingness

Answering the call from Fitchett and Cronin’s (2022:7) to “de-romanticise the market” by paying attention to the “deadlocks, challenges, and horrors” of contemporary consumer culture rather than continually reproducing narratives of empowerment, transformation, and self-expression, we join and extend this conversation by theorising what it means to live within a prolonged physical and mental “deadlock”. This differs from how liminality is theorised in consumer research, where transitional or in-between states, however painful, ultimately resolve into transformation and regeneration (Cheung and McColl-Kennedy, 2015; Mimoun and Bardhi, 2022). The deadlock our

participants encounter is not a threshold awaiting resolution, but a long-term condition where the promise of change, mobility, or “becoming” is not delayed but largely foreclosed.

Our findings suggest that stuck-ness is not only a matter of physically or structurally constrained living conditions, but also a mental and experiential state – one in which consumers remain suspended within constrained possibilities rather than moving towards renewal or reinvention. Within this condition, our participants are not simply ‘coping with’ the absence of progress in life through making improvement or avoidance (St James et al., 2011). Rather, they engage with and remain the status of stuck-ness through quiet and ongoing negotiation between engagement and disengagement, remembering and forgetting, leaving and returning. Our data shows, especially in the phase of wandering, meaning of life is not simply created through overcoming deadlock, but formed by inhabiting it, slowly and ambivalently, and often without resolution.

These findings move beyond the dominant progressivist view of consumer experience. Much of transformative consumer research has emphasised the importance of growth, improvement and self-actualisation in consumer life (Mick, 2006), especially for consumers living in the disadvantaged condition or setting such as poverty or emotional suffering (Blocker et al., 2013; Hamilton et al., 2014; Higgins and Hamilton, 2019). Even within critical domains such as anti-consumption or non-consumption consumers are often portrayed as transformative and purposeful, seeking for alternative identities, meanings or lifestyle (Cherrier et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2009). This research expands these views by showing that meaning in consumer life does not merely arise through aspiration, progression or resolution. Instead, it can also emerge through embracing the everyday repetition, identity suspension and stagnation within prolonged social nothingness.

Our study has primarily focused on the nothingness of Wigan and its inhabitants; we propose that future research could further explore this conceptual framework by examining how consumers navigate and find meanings in other enduring experiences and settings of absence, stagnation, or loss. Domestic silos might offer a fruitful avenue for future research, particularly people who are typically house-bound for sustained periods of time (for example, elderly-people, low-income groups, disabled people) and have to find a way of living with nothingness. Additionally, while this research predominantly concentrated on the individual and internal meaning-making processes, we recognise the structural conditions such as class and unequal access to resources also potentially shape how nothingness is experienced and how intentionality around leaving, enduring or staying are formed. Future studies might explore this interplay further by examining, for example, how class position shapes the reversibility of consumer’s commissive/omissive capacities within prolonged conditions of nothingness.

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