

Vectors of disease and symbolic self-consumption: Transformation through COVID-19 control

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Abstract

The hyper pluralised consumer context of late modernity has brought forth perpetual processes of self-consumption; the individualised quest for personal authenticity constitutes a 'pick and mix' of symbolic meaning expressed through conscious consumer choices. The plethora of products being consumed are marketized specifically towards the relationship of 'the self with itself': fast cars, sexy underwear, and even spiritual practices offer rapid remedies to an ever-pervasive need for self-improvement. As COVID-19 has spread throughout the globe, the process of symbolic self-consumption has mutated, with social distancing, face masks, self-isolation, and other governmental policies serving to transform the individual into a potential disease vector. Such a transformation elicits a new spectrum of modalities in which the self is consumed, as new socio-cultural standards emerge pertaining to (non)adherence to governmentally-imposed measures. This work affords a critical, socio-cultural commentary on how such modalities subversively manifest in day-to-day forms.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought forth a unique and confusing situation for everyone on the planet. The fluctuating daily rates of death and infection, the ever-changing patchwork of travel restrictions between countries and continents, and the highly politicised production and rollout of the various 'brands' of vaccine are just some of the tangible contributors to what is now experienced by many (if not all) as a COVID-saturated worldview. The principal focus of this feature is to reflect on another pertinent outgrowth of the COVID-19 pandemic: the governmental implementation of various pandemic control measures. By examining how these measures have had a transformative effect on symbolic processes of late modern self-consumption, this feature looks to elicit a critical, socio-philosophical understanding of some of the emerging consequences of life amidst this socially transformative 'lockdown' period.

Self-Consumption and COVID-19

This feature takes late modernity as the cultural container within which the present pandemic is occurring; the fragmented world of competing identities, contrasting lifestyle cultures, and fluid social relations that transform the individual into a reflexive, multiple self (Giddens, 1991). Moving away from traditional, institutional adherence and encouraging more privatised individual concerns, late modernity also fosters a 'turn to the self' dominated by the industrialised values of novelty, rapid change, and personalised satisfaction (Wattanasuwan, 2005). As this relationship of 'the self with itself' is commodified and distributed according to the same market criteria that defines the prevailing model of material exchange, the self is subsequently made consumable as a social product (Kelly, 2013; Rindfleish, 2005). The varieties of self-consumption that follow thus transcend cosmetic, spiritual, and ideological boundaries; symbolic self-meaning is endlessly derived from consumer choices whether

pertaining to beauty, identity, ideology, or anything else (Gabriel & Lang, 1995). It is this pervasive, late modern logic of self-consumption that the present feature uses as a theoretical springboard, to position the discussion that follows in such a way that will invite more critical understandings of the pandemic control measures and their transformative effects on social behaviour.

It is to be argued here that the governmental implementation of COVID-19 control measures has had a profoundly transformative effect on the already pervasive processes of self-consumption described above. In stressing the importance of maintaining physical distance, reducing occasions of close contact, and avoiding large gatherings, together with good respiratory hygiene practices, regular handwashing and use of face masks, the measures have catalysed a responsibilization of the individual citizen as an infection spreading vector of disease. Burdened with the gargantuan task of slowing down the spread of the virus, reducing the strain on the healthcare system, and ensuring the safety of everyone else around, the individual inevitably consumes themselves in this 'vector' form as the inverted relationship of 'the self with itself' is mobilised towards its responsibility for pandemic control. Consumption of the self as a vector of disease can manifest in a plurality of social actions and behaviours, but this feature will discuss two distinctive conceptualisations: *noble snitching* and *viral victimhood*. It is argued that, in keeping with the symbolic process of self-consumption outlined above, these behaviours are not operationalised solely for their utilitarian value but for the cultural meanings they carry and communicate; the self as a vector of disease is consumed through an exploitation of meaning that demonstrates one's (correct) social position within the culturally constructed world (see Wattanasuwan, 2005).

Noble Snitching

Throughout the lockdown period, regional police forces across the country have encouraged the reporting of coronavirus rule breaches by way of anonymous digital form or telephone call. Speaking of "the individual duty to collective health", policing minister Kit Malthouse spoke to the Telegraph in September 2020 to explain the continued implementation of non-emergency hotlines for people who had concerns regarding rule-breaking gatherings. Such anonymous reporting has been constructed as helping to inform police patrols, encourage mutual community monitoring, discourage eventual incidences of rule breaching, and act as a vital tool for stemming the spread of coronavirus and bringing about an earlier end to lockdown measures (Guardian, 2020). Most importantly, such 'reporting' is resolute in its framing of both the reporter and transgressor as disease spreading vectors; individuals are no longer private social entities, they are vectors of infection to be monitored and scrutinised by one another. The calls for snitching have been answered the world over, with hundreds of thousands of reports being made across the UK (Guardian, 2020).

The act of informing the authorities about someone else's COVID-19-related law-breaking fits with the definition of snitching afforded by several authors, with acknowledgments being made to the specific contexts in which such snitching occurs; witnesses testifying against an offender, an offender testifying on their associates, or a community reporting illegal activities in their neighbourhood are all considered instances of snitching (Clampet-Lundquist et al., 2015). Such disparate instances are typically unified by their occurrence in situations that

pose difficulties for law enforcement, either because of group norms regarding solidarity (e.g., the idea of *omertà* and 'prison code') or due to the limited resources of enforcement institutions (Copes et al., 2013). In respect to the nationwide enforcement of social distancing measures on a population of over 66 million people, it is obvious that UK police resources are severely limited in their capability to effectively monitor such measures and the call for anonymous snitching is therefore unsurprising. A more critical observation is how those who are breaching regulations are framed as problematic and transgressive, and the way in which anonymously snitching is encouraged as a noble contribution to nationwide efforts at curbing the pandemic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the concerned citizen was encouraged to secretly report members of their community to bodies of state control. The perpetual process of self-consumption mutates once more as the individual consumes themselves as a noble servant of the state acting on behalf of the greater civic good; moral and ethical questions pertaining to snitching and semi-authoritarian behaviour are neutralised in favour of conformity to the demands of bodies of state control (Bergemann, 2020). The utilitarian value of snitching on someone else is therefore located in becoming an extension of state power, as one acts in correct accordance with the cultural construction of the COVID-19 disease spreading vector. Critically, in consuming the self as a noble snitch, attention is rallied towards an inverted suspicion of our own communities, rather than directed at the governmental and institutional apparatus responsible for managing the pandemic.

Viral Victimhood

In consuming the self as a vector of disease, the individual is led to further exercise a hyper-vigilance towards proximal transmission risks. If one does not properly follow the government instructions regarding social distancing measures, one is likely to succumb to the contagious effects of COVID-19 and, potentially, pass it on to family, loved ones, and other strangers. This debilitates broader efforts at stemming the pandemic on both the national and international stage. The hyper-guarded, hyper-vigilant surveillance of social proximity that follows exacerbates the development of a 'viral victimhood' – a new kind of moral culture in which differential adherence to social distancing measures elicits a new dimension of socio-moralistic response. Moral codes are adhered to at different degrees by different people, and others judge by punishing or rewarding them accordingly (Campbell & Manning, 2018). Committing a morally transgressive act lowers the moral status of the perpetrator, as does the punishment that typically follows; conversely, engaging in praiseworthy acts and subsequently being rewarded raises one's moral status (Cooney, 2009). In some cases, being the victim of an offence might elevate one's moral status irrespective of whether one has committed any moral 'good'; holding the victim of an offence in high moral regard can mobilise a reversal of the negative effects they have experienced and, by the same elevatory process, punish the offender that wished or intended to harm (Campbell & Manning, 2018). This is the essence of victimhood; a moral status constructed around the suffering individual.

A study by Graso et al. (2021) describes in detail the moralisation of the COVID-19 health response and, in their analyses, reveal that heightened personal concerns over contracting the disease are associated with greater asymmetries in human cost evaluation, such that

public shaming, deaths and illnesses, and police abuses of power are deemed acceptable so long as they result from efforts to minimise COVID-19 health impacts. This illustrates how, in consuming the self as a vector of disease and a morally superior viral victim, one subsequently nurtures an indifference towards the deliberate chastising and ensuing plight of those that fail to adhere to the governmental social distancing measures.

Viral Others

What connects the two manifestations outlined above is the way in which they both involve a definitive process of 'viral othering'. Though this feature has primarily focused on the internal process of consuming the self as a vector of disease, we must acknowledge that an externalisation of a viral threat is also an instrumental factor. To consume oneself as a vector of disease is to consume the other in the same way, with the governmental restrictions and social distancing measures doing much to bolster this two-way process. As the discussion has shown, this sentiment has been stirred up by individuals symbolically self-consuming as disease spreading vectors, leading to heightened tensions mixed from emotion, anxiety, and hostility that have subsequently drawn divisive lines through public and private communities. Future emergencies, occurring on a national scale, are likely to rouse the same latent hostility that was stirred up by these governmental pandemic control measures and the state itself will likely take little issue with encouraging processes of inverted public vigilance. In such instances we can expect symbolic processes of self-consumption, entrenched as they are throughout late modern society, to once again expediate these processes by mutating and manifesting into new sociological behaviours.

It is at this stage appropriate to observe some of the limits of what has been discussed throughout this feature. There are questions pertaining to the universality of the conceptualisations formulated throughout, particularly in respect to population demographics such as age, political views, rural-urban classification, and so forth. Similarly, though symbolic-self consumption is posited here as the 'meta' explanation behind the behaviours discussed, it is important to acknowledge that such behaviours may be experienced and constructed by individual perpetrators in radically different ways. A full consideration of these limits would require a degree of qualitative analysis far beyond the reach of this feature, involving a much larger, more specific data set and dedicated discussion. For the scope of the present paper, however, a stimulation of these reflections and any further critical considerations remains a welcome, fruitful outcome.

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