



Reimagining the terrain of liquid times: Reflexive marketing and the sociological imagination

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Abstract

This paper has three objectives. The first is to deliver a critical review of the work of Zygmunt Bauman on *Liquid Modernity* and *Liquid Times*. I argue that Bauman's work can provide a useful starting point for analysing the 'unruly' forces of contemporary society. Bauman's work, as I have sought to reveal, takes us to the heart of liquid modern darkness. It forces us to take seriously the import of the sociological imagination and the insight that personal troubles are best understood as emerging public issues stemming from structural processes. The second objective, is to explore how consumer culture theorists have taken and in dialogue with these ideas sought to expand upon his initial ideas. Here I review the value of the concept of 'liquid consumption' and the 'fresh start mindset'. The third and final objective, is to demonstrate how reflexive marketing practitioners are responding to such liquid times through rethinking their practice and thereby extending the terrain of marketing. Here I detail how the promise marketing imagination starts not with the darkness of liquid modern times but rather with a far more hope inspired tale to enchant new markets and new audiences on the possibilities and 'solutions' of being future oriented and technologically savvy. Finally, it argues that the task of reimagining appears essential given the current zeitgeist, where the climate of anxiety, fear and uncertainty whether it be political, economic, environmental or social threatens to engulf us.

Keywords

Liquid modernity, liquid consumption, liquidity, hope, fear, anxiety, uncertainty

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Introduction

Theorists of consumer culture have identified the shifting dynamic and logic which underscores the reflexive practices of contemporary marketing. From Moor's (2003) work on branding spaces and the shift to so-called 'new marketing'; to Zwick et al.'s (2008) work on 'putting consumers to work'; to Hearn's work on the self-branding and the 'flexible entrepreneurial workplace' we glimpse how marketing practice responds to and brings in its wake shifts in consumer subjectivity and new forms of 'governmentality', through what Hearn terms 'the controlling interests of global flexible capital' (2008: 213). In Zwick et al. we find the argument that "marketers have developed new systems of representation whereby consumer identities are configured as a mutable, mobile and ever-shifting terrain" (2008: 171). This article seeks to contribute to such debates, and through a critical review of the work of Zygmunt Bauman on *Liquid Modernity* (2000) and *Liquid Times* (2007), I argue that Bauman's work can provide a useful starting point for analysing the unruly forces of contemporary society. Bauman's work takes us to the heart of what I term 'liquid modern darkness'. It forces us to take seriously the import of the sociological imagination and the insight that personal troubles are best understood as emerging public issues stemming from structural processes. The article, then explores how consumer culture theorists have taken, and in dialogue with these ideas sought to expand upon, his initial ideas. Here I review the value of the concept of 'liquid consumption' and the 'fresh start mindset'. Finally, the article explores the marketing imagination and the reflexive practices of contemporary marketing which operate in liquid times. I argue that marketing practitioners are responding to such liquid times through rethinking their practices and thereby looking to extend the terrain of marketing. Here I detail how the promise of the marketing imagination starts not with the darkness of liquid modern times but rather with a far more hope-inspired tale to enchant new markets and audiences on the possibilities and 'solutions' of being future oriented and technologically savvy. The task of reimagining appears necessary given the current zeitgeist, where the climate of anxiety, fear and uncertainty whether it be political, economic, environmental or social threatens to engulf us.

To the heart of liquid modern darkness

"The raw stuff processed by the sociological imagination is human experience."
(Bauman, 2002: 25)

The central problematic of Bauman's thesis of *Liquid Times* is an increasingly fraught market-mediated social form, in which organisational profits are calibrated to the exploitation of consumerist desires (Bauman, 2009: 17). His vision is of a consumer credit driven economy in which: "The prime source of capitalist accumulation [has] moved from industry to the consumer market" (Bauman, 2009: 24);

and central to ways of making consumers work and wish is the dynamic philosophy of money which underscores this system. Global consumer culture is thus fuelled and made possible by debt and credit. Here debt becomes a “permanent profit-earning asset” and credit “the magic contraption” with consumers caught within the gravitational pull of temptation and seduction.

For Bauman: “the offer of a loan must create and magnify the need for borrowing” (Bauman, 2009: 17). *Liquid Modernity* in other words produces forms of personal salvation which are engineered by commercial design. ‘Mortgaging the future’ for the present opportunity might be one way of thinking our current plight; for liquidity in economic and personal terms speaks of a willingness to live with risk and ambivalence as constant but unwanted companions rather than to adopt strategies of risk aversion. Or as Bauman suggests: “A credit card makes you free to manage your own satisfactions: to obtain things when you want them, not when you earn them and can afford them” (2009: 18). Here Bauman’s thinking chimes with that of Baudrillard who spoke of the inner logic of consumption as governed by forms of “magical thinking” (2003 [1970]: 31) especially credit as an ‘exemplary idea’; which is understood as a form of *socio-economic training* in “gratification, ease of access to affluence and a hedonist mentality” (2003: 81). Lazzarato in the *Making of Indebted Man* (2012) is equally explicit when he suggests that our subjectivities and social relations are now subsumed within the logic of debt and credit as forms of bio-political power, as he suggests: “Through consumption, we maintain an unwitting relationship with the debt economy” (2012: 20) where ‘freedom’ is closely wedded to capitalism, consumption and its associated forms of individualism (Bauman, 1988: 44). Such a focus and reimagining is necessary as a starting point and counterpoint to the ‘empowered, entrepreneurial and free consumer’ who is part and parcel of marketing practice (Zwick et al., 2008: 184). In *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Bauman articulates further this vision of ‘freedom’ in terms of its inner logic and dynamism:

Present-day consumerism, though, is no longer about satisfying the needs- not even the more sublime, detached (some would say, not quite correctly, ‘artificial’, ‘contrived’, ‘derivative’) needs of identification or the self-assurance as to the degree of ‘adequacy’. It has been said that the *spiritus movens* of consumer activity is no longer the measurable set of articulated needs, but desire – a much more volatile and ephemeral, evasive and capricious, and essentially non-referential entity that ‘needs’, a self-begotten and self-propelled motive that needs no other justification or ‘cause’. (2000: 74)

I quote at length to better capture the spirit and tone of his original ideas. Here consumption as a form of self-government is all consuming, with consumers petrified into actions of indebtedness:

Life organized around consumption . . . must do without norms: it is guided by seduction, ever rising desires and volatile wishes – no longer by normative regulation.

No particular 'Joneses' offer a reference point for one's own successful life; a society of consumers is one of universal comparison – and the sky is the only limit. (2000: 76)

In this manner practices such as shopping and global consumer culture itself can only in the final instance be addictive and compulsive, pathological and overheated – deployed only “to find an escape from the agony called uncertainty” (2000: 81). A site not for social redemption but for angst, disposability and the constant urge to quell “existential tremors” (2007: 10) in the never-ending pursuit of personal security. In this fear-laden vision, the task of advertisers and those with commercial ambitions becomes the offer of short-term succour and solace in a troubled present and fraught future.

In critique, Bauman can be read in this instance as a modernist in vision, with the dominant motifs in this rendering of contemporary social worlds those of uncertainty, fear and individualism; a vision in which the social and any hope for redemption remain foreclosed. Or as Marshall Berman in *All that is Solid Melts into Air* suggested: “To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are” (1990 [1982]: 15).

Bauman in his later texts is a social theorist in full critique mode wrestling with the new problematics underlying the experience of late modernity. A social theorist for whom consumption is best understood as diseased and pathological with little hope for therapeutic redemption. A world that the theorist at the height of their power conjures up, a world caught in the vice-like grip of panic, despair, and uncertainty where existential angst and suspicion of others rules supreme. This is not so much a mid-life or late-life crisis as sociological theorizing *in extremis*, with theorizing itself as a mode of thinking caught in a vice-like web of its own making. A worldview that in critique feels overly fatalistic and catastrophic in which any form of hope is expunged; or, as Lee remarks: “In this world of intensive deregulation and consumption, individualization accentuates a process that turns subjects into rudderless agents with no solid structures for lasting reference” (2011: 659). A world wherein as Binkley suggests

Social bonds, once a tonic for the anxieties of identity production in the context of ambivalence, are now scorned for the limits to mobility they impose, and for the drag on the perpetual flight of a self that cherishes disembeddedness as the stuff of its own sustenance. (2008: 608)

Strange then the disconnect between the fear-despair-ridden images of the world gone awry and Bauman's own view of the practice of *Thinking Sociologically* as the quest for “insight into the inner logic and meaning of forms of life”, in this account sociological thinking is best practiced as “an antifixating power . . . it renders flexible what may have been the oppressive fixity of social relations and in so doing

opens up a world of possibilities. The art of sociological thinking is we are told to widen the scope and the practical effectiveness of freedom” (Bauman and May 2001: 11); what Davis (2011) sees as *towards a sociology of hope*. Yet, when practicing such a form of cultural analysis and theorizing Bauman was less confident that people would challenge and contest the imperatives and seductions of liquid modernity; unable that is to find any forms of beauty and moral responsibility amidst the tattered remnants of a world of despair that the sociological imagination unfurls. Bauman’s imagining of *Liquid Times* bears witness to diagnosing the logic of the contemporary world as “incurably fragmented and atomized, and so increasingly uncertain and unpredictable” (2007: 14). A contemporary world that is rife with disposal: “the disposability of humans and things” (2007: 123) without much opportunity for succour or relief.

Over the course of his theorizing from *Liquid Modernity* (Bauman, 2000) to *Society under Siege* (Bauman, 2002) to *Liquid Love* (Bauman, 2003) to *Liquid Life* (Bauman, 2005), to *Liquid Fear* (Bauman, 2006), to *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Bauman, 2007), *Liquid Surveillance* (Bauman and Lyon, 2013), *Liquid Evil* (Bauman and Leonidas, 2016) it is as if the theoretical noose hardens and tightens leaving little space for hope or alternative tales of consumer culture in the making to emerge. This is not so much an emergent cultural condition, as Bauman might have glimpsed in his postmodern phase (Bauman, 1997; see also Smith, 1999¹) as an incurably diseased and pathological vision. Lee suggests in critique: “...liquidity delivers a sombre message of dim hope glossed over by deluded freedom and uncaring consumerism. Such a message can at best enjoin disdain for the cult of consumption but it cannot offer an effective analysis of opposing interests and re-solidification in contemporary society” (2011: 662). In this vein, Ray (2007) questions whether the heavy/liquid distinction can “capture the multiple complexities and diversities of contemporary life” (2007: 69). Lee observes the lack of a theory of resistance/scepticism in Bauman’s work (2006: 362); Bryant (2007) notes the lack of optimism in the work. Clegg and Baumeler (2010) question the omission of the “solid infrastructures of credit and organization” in the movement of capital; and Atkinson admits that his theorisation may in places be flawed but the ‘spirit’ of Bauman’s diagnosis “might still hold water” (2008: 14).

It is beneficial to untangle some of the key influences on Bauman’s thinking to better understand the importance of *Liquid Modernity*. Bauman’s first use of the term ‘liquid life’ can be found in his 1998 text ‘*Work, consumerism and the new poor*’ (see also Tabet, 2017: 119) where he details the ‘work ethic’. Here we find talk of the shift to ‘nomadic capital’:

... close to the top of the power pyramid circulate those to whom space matters little and distance is not a bother; people of many places but of no one place in particular. They are as light, sprightly and volatile as the increasingly global and extraterritorial trade and finances that assisted at their birth and sustains their nomadic existence.

At this point, Bauman refers to the work of Jacques Attali (*Chemins de Sagesse: Traie du labyrinthe*). I quote at length, to emphasise the importance of this link and its initial inspiration for his subsequent work:

‘Their wealth comes from a portable asset: their knowledge of the laws of the labyrinth’. They ‘love to create, play and be on the move’. They live in a society of ‘volatile values, carefree about the future, egoistic and hedonistic’. They ‘take the novelty as good tidings, precariousness as value, instability as imperative, hybridity as richness’. In varying degrees, they all master and practice the art of ‘liquid life’.

It is here where we see the thoughts of Bauman emerge from those of Attali. From this initial inspiration, Bauman was then to make his final impactful sociological intervention, the need to expand upon the human experience and new problematics of *Liquid Modernity*, his final ‘weighty’ vocation (cf. Bauman, 2004: 311).

In an interview with Chris Rojek, published in JCC (2004), Bauman explained his preference for the metaphor of ‘liquidity’ on the basis of “one trait all liquids share: the feebleness, weakness, brevity and frailty of bonds and thus inability to keep shape for long” (2004: 301). On a number of occasions in conversations Bauman, a method he favoured for its dialogic potential, employed Ralph Waldo Emerson’s idea that “speed is the salvation of those who skate on thin ice . . . speed is the salvation of surfers” (2004: 301).

In this brave new liquid economy darkness looms large, waste drives innovation and people accept as an unquestionable trait that things (including people, work) all have an increasingly short life-span of inevitable redundancy; networks and technology work in a similar fashion. I have employed the term ‘liquid modern darkness’ to refer to the general state of powerlessness and hopelessness which is endemic and systemic within Liquid Modernity, in such a condition the lifeworld is threatened, negative thinking abounds and fears of the liquidation of the self becomes commonplace. Such a usage highlights the crucial link between Liquid Modernity and declining mental health.

On liquid consumption and tales of hope

The discussion now moves to a consideration of how Bauman’s ideas have inspired consumer culture theorists in their own attempts to theorize ‘Liquid Consumption’ (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017) with its prescient organizational and strategic imperative which encourages consumers to live according to the rhythm of hyper-mobility, enlivened by a need for speed and the spirit of individualism. One such life-strategy becomes nomadic consumption engineered towards the logic of instrumentality and use-value.

Here global nomads are said to ‘choose’ a footloose and unanchored world of hyper-mobility so that they increasingly relate to things and stuff (the world, each other, and themselves) in flexible and disconnected ways; alive with the urge for

disposability, or as Max Weber (1991) might have suggested here it is *zweckrational* rather than the emotional community and its claims to security that comes to the fore. Bardhi et al. (2012), thus suggests that individual well-being and success in global nomadism is increasingly measured by occupational esteem and recognition which: “depends on how well one is able to adopt a liquid relationship to materiality as well as places” (2012: 525); we might add that liquid relations to others and ourselves, uncommitted and ever-strategic, become potential hostages to such fortunes built on the employment front. Such a view is echoed in a later piece (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2015) where use-value and situational value prevails over the singularization of consumption objects. When the works of Bauman become translated by consumer researchers the dark side and the dialectical sense of moral entanglement which is essential to the Bauman’s account is replaced by a tale of the opportunities to behold for those who most fully embrace the liquid modern mindset. Yet work on marginalized groups such as the Swedish Roma (Holmberg and Persson, 2016) reveals the cultural tale of constant mobility demands a form of refocusing, and we might add re-contextualizing, to better highlight the more nuanced forms of dwelling and social belonging practiced in *Liquid Times*; not so much by the global elites or those who have most to gain by this system of socio-economic organisation as for those who have are increasingly living a life of transience, precariousness and forced mobility. We should also bear in mind that economic uncertainty and precariousness are the common lot for the many rather than the mobility and forms of power wielded by the new power elites. Things change rapidly in a *Liquid Modern* world ruled by a ‘nomadic and extra-territorial elite’, for as Bauman suggested:

Hedge your bets; this is the rule of consumer rationality. In the life equations there are but variables and no constants, and the variables alter their values too often and too fast to keep track of change, let alone to guess its future twists and turns. This is a game of snakes and ladders; the road from bottom to the top, and even more from the top to the bottom, is abominably short – the rises and falls are swift like casting a die and happen with little or no warning. (2004b: 302)

For consumer researchers instead of focusing on such power games or the uncertain and debt-ridden character of liquid modern society the focus shifts to key advances in consumer research. Here studies of materialism, attachment and loyalty, we are told, can be reawakened as sites of academic interest. But the crucial sense in which our thoughts, ideas and actions may serve to change this world of ever-spiralling uncertainty is bracketed. Endless games of academic opportunity lie in the shift to theoretical contributions. We witness this urgency in work that strives to recreate such academic opportunity but glosses the crucial questions brought about by such cultural change. Here uncertainty becomes not a moment to fear but a chance to as Beilharz (2006) ‘build anew’. For we must not forget the words of Bauman on uncertainty and its possibilities: “uncertainty is the home ground of the moral person and the only soil in which morality can sprout

and flourish” (Bauman: 107). We should not forget that such uncertainty brings in its wake the seeds of hope, a new beginning and Beilharz’s rejoinder to read Bauman’s work for its ethos of ‘build anew’. It is this moral imperative which underlies the import of Bauman’s vision of *Liquid Modernity*. The argument of this paper is that the consumer research imagination reworks Bauman’s concept so that what gets most lost in the work on ‘Liquid consumption’ (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017) is perhaps its original and dialectical criticality – its incisive ability to unmask the structural conditions and deficits of the present. Beilharz best encapsulates this spirit of capitalism: “Life becomes serial, in various ways; and this, in turn, becomes normalized, becomes second nature. Change itself, like movement, becomes naturalized; but these are nevertheless the interstices within which we seek meaning, intimacy, and love” (2006: 112).

Here we might also draw attention to the work of Davis (2011, 2008) on Bauman’s ‘moral compass’ and its ‘spirited optimism’ which underscores the avowed pessimism. Bauman, in this regard, set himself the task of reimagining a world darkly to grasp the present ‘conjuncture’ (Grossberg, 2010), offering serious food for thought on the limits and possibilities of critical theory. Dawson in this manner considers his approach as a ‘sociology of hope’ (2012: 557). *Liquid Modernity* thus appears as a critical concept for unpacking the practice of Marketing and its consequences and contradictions. In many ways, Bauman was an academic soulminer of dislocation and ubiquitous fragmentation for whom the clarion call of critique, interpretation and insight was his very *modus operandi*. Bauman much to his benefit does not propose a systematic mode of grand theory (Elliott, 2007), but writes with a poetic and critical imaginary to the fore. *Liquid consumption* (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017) offers a departure and a useful application, as at its best it offers up the ways consumers practice, what Lee (2011) terms ‘re-solidification’, so that *Liquid Modernity* appears less a one way street and more akin to a pendulum. Although for Bauman “There is no prospect of re-embeddedness at the end of the road taken by (now chronically) disembedded individuals” (2000: 34). Here lies a crucial difference between the two approaches: whether one sees hope in the possibility of re-solidification or disembeddedness and dislocation as inevitable outcomes of change. Further, one could argue that the concept of ‘Liquid Consumption’ is itself an oxymoron, given that consumption itself has always been inherently liquid and reliant upon its imaginary constitution (Castoriadis, 2005).

In this translation, for example, Binkley’s earlier rendition of ‘Liquid Consumption’ published in 2008 is given short regard in the main consumer research work in this field. But it is in the work of Binkley that we find perhaps one of the best definitions of *Liquid Modernity* which encapsulates this embedded and embodied criticality: “the contemporary cultural and social condition of radicalized ambivalence, social change and institutional flexibility we currently inhabit, in which weakened social bonds and high levels of individual mobility develop new patterns of identity formation premised on the minimization of institutional commitments, the flexibility of interpersonal responsibility and the embrace of a

permanent condition of social disembeddedness (Bauman, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2007)” (Binkley, 2008: 602). For Binkley, in his reading of Bauman’s *Liquid Modernity*, the focus is on liquid subjectivity borne of consumption and its constant urge for innovation and transformation.

Binkley does mention ephemerality, but in a more critical way than one finds in Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017). Binkley reads ephemerality much closer to Bauman’s original thought as a weakening of social bonds and the ‘surging dislocations’ of liquid modernity, whereas for Bardhi and Eckhardt ephemerality simply illustrates global nomads who value possessions on a temporary basis. Binkley sees the marketplace itself as anomic whereas Bardhi and Eckhardt see the marketplace as part of the solution to uncertainty. When comparing such theorisations of liquidity it is as if blue, grey and black are the dominant motifs of social theory on *Liquid Modernity*; whereas consumer researchers paint a more optimistic portrait of the consequences of ‘Liquid Consumption’ and its ‘fresh start’ (Price et al., 2018) possibilities. In Bardhi et al. (2012) for example we find a focus on the situational lifestyles of mobile global elites. In Price et al. we get tales of hope in the ‘fresh start mindset . . . a belief that people can make a new start, get a new beginning, and chart a new life course in life’ (2018: 40). This focus is very much driven by a form of positive psychology without due regard to the financial, emotional and existential challenges that such a mindset might entail whereas for Bauman, it is consumption itself and its unyielding and never-ending logic of individualization which is the most troubling problem we must confront. For example, in *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman suggests:

That new openness recasts the outside world as a huge container of infinite chances and opportunities which may be gained or lost, enjoyed or bewailed, depending on the individual’s skills, ingenuity and effort. As such, the world is simultaneously a site of exciting adventure and a wilderness filled to the brim with *dark, horrifying dangers . . . an object of intense curiosity and desire, and a source of terror and the impulse to escape.* (2000: 109–110, emphasis added)

It is this sense of endemic ambivalence and systemic uncertainty which casts a darker shadow over Bauman’s thoughts on the human existential condition. In this account, the problematic of consumption is foregrounded, its contradictions, ambivalence and essential liquidity. Here as Elliott (2007) reveals a counter positive conception of imagination emerges, with its links to the work of Castoriadis (2005) as rooted in autonomy and self-questioning whereas in the hands of consumer researchers it is individual choice that appears to matter most. For social theorists we witness how individual choice is itself best understood as a systemic logic which masks its own moments of inequality and delusion. If social theory wields liquid modernity as a critical tool to unmask critical processes of social change and the tragic irony and unhappiness of the consumer condition; consumer behavior theorists looking through lens of ‘liquid consumption’ tend to foreground a return to business as usual, where the crucial questions revolve around consumer

loyalty, materialism and the shift to dematerialization. If consumer researchers encourage us to run faster, thinking in situational and entrepreneurial terms to embrace the 'need for speed'; Bauman's approach to *Liquid Modernity* (2000) encourages us to question the race itself, challenge the stakes and rules of the game and its forms of moral conformity.

There are moments of criticality to be found in Price et al. (2018) and Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) an acknowledgement of the import of neoliberalism and precarity, that downward mobility and liquidity has negative consequences (Ulver and Ostberg, 2014); but it never reaches the point of a full-blown critique likely to challenge and question the foundations of the emerging Liquid Modern order or a fuller spelling out of what those negative consequences may be mainly because there is still a lingering doubt that fear and uncertainty can be overcome and 'managed' by card-wielding global elites or by becoming more mobile and situational in our outlook. Here technology, mobility and even liquid consumption become choice and value driven rather than second nature, so that living by their incessant rhythms and demands becomes taken for granted and consumed as common sense.

Strange how the logic of consumer research chimes in an uneasy fashion with that of *Liquid Modernity*. So while consumer researchers are quick to dismiss the possibilities of escape; a *Liquid Modernity* subjectivity sees the illusion of escape as both vibrant and possible within the realm of consumption. For example, in *Liquid Modernity* Bauman tells us:

Increasingly, escape now becomes the name of the most popular game in town. Semantically, escape is the very opposite of utopia, but psychologically it is, under present circumstances, its sole available substitute. (2000: 104)

While consumer researchers throw out critical concepts or deploy them without embracing their criticality, social theorists dig deeper into their inner logic and their contradictions. Here we might suggest that consumer research rests and relies on what some might regard as solid foundations; the best example of this in action is our fetishizing of consumer choice, experiences and customer satisfaction as the holy grails of marketing action treating these concepts as if they are real and timeless rather than contingent and contested whereas social theorists are quick to unpack such concepts and the baggage that lies in wait when they are mobilised. At its best though the consumer research imagination as an academic field of knowledge appears essentially hopeful to counter the knotted and troubled vision of the sociological imagination. Bardhi and Eckhardt for example suggest: "We expect those who can manage it most successfully will be those who have mobile lifestyles, who are millennials comfortable with digital consumption, and who inhabit global cities and more Western consumer cultures" (2017: 592). But such a conclusion, fails to address the tensions and contradictions of 'progress'. For surely, it is the millennial generation who will be most subject to new forms of governmentality and new subjectivities attached to 'doing well' in *Liquid*

Modernity; moreover, it is this generation who will have to endure precariousness as a constant cultural condition given that their experience of indebtedness will be long lasting. Such solid commitments, much like the small print of long lasting contracts for debts, will not simply disappear, but will travel with this generation threatening their ability to ‘travel lightly’ unencumbered by the past; at the same time their chances of securing a long term contract for employment and in an industry not threatened by constant disruption will threaten to dampen any *joie de vivre* or resilience they may have felt. It is this generation who will most face the threat of liquidation and its solid consequences for deteriorating mental health and well-being. Such a generation may be the most mobile but they will need to face and live according to the constant demands and challenges of travelling lightly not through choice but as moral obligation and constraint.

The reflexive marketing imagination and liquid times

The language of snacking, binging and fast and easy takeaways chimes well with the emergent entrepreneurial spirit of liquidity. In this fashion, practitioners much like consumer researchers have become adept at coming to terms with the import of the Liquid paradigm shift. Perhaps this is because for their survival they have nothing else to rely upon other than to take continual cognizance of the changes that now threaten the business world. Thinking more critically though, perhaps this is because marketing practitioners see an opportunity to expand the terrain of marketing activity (Moor, 2003). We must also remind ourselves that marketing in its quest for understanding and insight is best understood as performative and an economic and cultural practice (Lury, 2004; Zwick and Cayla, 2011). In this vein, Michael Bayler’s manifesto for budding business leaders is titled, ‘*Liquid Enterprise: How the network is transforming value, what it means for business, and what leadership needs to do about it*’ which calls for new forms of business thinking in a world in which uncertainty now drives market opportunities. Dougherty (2016) in his aptly titled ‘speed read’ of the book suggests: “This book provides a radical rethink of how new network dynamics drive markets, the implications for brands, and how we can thrive in the chaotic environment of the marketplace.” The key ‘takeaway’ thus becomes: living comfortably with uncertainty, thriving in an accelerating world in which traditional thinking with its solid bias (beyond market segmentation), is no longer of use; the tried and tested no longer an option as consumers expect brands to be there anytime, anywhere with real-time relevance.

Digital advertisers are alert to the changing context of user experience for what they see as increasingly empowered ‘fluid’ digital consumers for whom choice and control are the guiding principles. They too champion the shift to a ‘liquid consumer’ and the need for new forms of ‘liquid creativity’. A world in which: “Liquid consumers flow inevitably toward their desire and render continuous judgment on the value exchange that advertising offers. Consumers are sophisticated about what constitutes a fair trade – what they give up in terms of time, attention, and

data, and what they get in return” (IAB, 2016: 9). In this context the goal becomes one of enhanced creativity through developing ‘engaging content’ to forge emotional connections, with the smartphone as the key battleground: “The goal from a creative point of view is to make ads where that subconscious math doesn’t even kick in, because the thing is so entertaining or so useful rather than something they have to endure.” In this Liquid world the practical imagination foregrounds positive user experience, or ‘content that seamlessly blends into the multiple of touch-points’ (2016: 8) given the nomadic qualities of the Liquid consumer. Offering Choice and control in a world in which a feeling of choice and control are constantly under threat may appear strange but squaring this paradox promises to be the next market opportunity to grant consumers the feeling and illusion of choice and control in uncertain times.

What we glimpse in these papers around the topic of ‘Liquid Consumers’, despite the fact that they fail to acknowledge the work of social theory and Zygmunt Bauman as the sociologist who offers most on theorizing this condition, is that practitioners are ever-adapting to this Brave New Liquid World looking to foreground the necessity of understanding for a changing business mindset and searching for new ways of operating through forging a relationship with the emerging liquid consumer. In part, this mindset and the marketing imagination feels driven by a logic of listening to users. In part, this mindset feels driven by a knowing fear, a fear of becoming dinosaurs to the expediences of the tsunami of cultural change. In part, this mindset feels driven by an acknowledgement of the wily and ‘on the move’ tendencies of consumers. Here practitioners would learn much from consulting Bauman on the logic of *Liquid Modernity* where:

... humans remain stubbornly addicted to choices that play havoc with extant rules and routines, and are therefore notorious for their habit of defying prediction, for the randomness and irregularity of their conduct, for inconstancy, vagaries and levity, and altogether for what any manager worth her or his salt would describe, outraged as the sin of undependability. (2000: 100–101).

It is such ‘consumer undependability’ and the havoc that it plays with the best laid plans of marketing strategists that may explain the urgencies and contingencies of the marketing imagination. Here practitioners remain ever alert to the shifting dynamics of cultural change and must dance to different tunes for their survival in the disruptive economy.

Brands too are not adrift from the consequences of operating in this liquid world in which the fears of losing relevance are paramount. For example, one brand which is starting to reimagine itself in terms of being a ‘liquid brand’ is Visa (Whiteside, 2015). Visa is in the business of facilitating payment transactions, its traditional and ‘solid’ means being credit and debit cards, and its goal being to stay in tune with shifting consumer experiences and expectations. For Visa, becoming a liquid brand is indicative of the business attitude which it adopts and expresses, as Chris Curtin, Chief Brand/Innovation Officer extols: “For us at

Visa, we're very, very focused on: how do we make sure that we live up to our promise, which is 'Everywhere you want to be'? And if you want to pay with your watch, if you want to pay with your card, we're going to be there." Other brands position themselves in terms of the cultural demands of liquidity. A roll-call of such liquid brands would include: AirBnB keep on holidaying; Apple keep on creating; Facebook keep on liking and posting; Easyjet keep on flying and imagining; Instagram keep on photo-ing; Netflix and Spotify keep on streaming; Nintendo keep on playing; Tumblr keep on connecting; Twitter keep on tweeting. Adverts too conjure up this cultural mood of spirited optimism and technological delight: from Uber's 'Doors are always opening'; to Visa keep on spending friction-free paywave and the 'magic beep'; to Samsung Galaxy 'The Future'; and finally, Apple's 'Welcome Home' where a weary commuter shifts from the drabness of everyday life to the technicolour world offered up by Homepod. Liquid brands and their devices thus come with a ready packaged set of cultural solutions: marketplace tonics and mythologies to enliven consumer culture and recast consumption as a site of hope and salvation.

Liquidity for practitioners of marketing is interpreted reflexively to confront the challenges and risks posed by cultural change and the threat of ever-new competitors, but this also suggests a form of marketing activity and practice that in its anxiety wants close proximity with the swiftly changing lifestyles of the 'undependable' liquid consumer. Such a strategic re-orientation to disruptive cultural change appears in line with an approach to financial desire which sees the status quo as problematic and the business as usual motto of resting on our laurels as in need of a radical rethink. The consultancy firm Accenture as business soothsayers are ever alert to the impact and pressures brought by smart digital services and the Internet of Things in this era of inflationary 'liquid expectations'; as Correreia (2017) suggests: "Consumer expectations are changing faster than ever and what people learn to love in one industry increasingly defines what they expect in others as well – we call this 'liquid expectations.'" In this era of liquidity, hope springs eternal and business hope lies in forging proximity to the ever-mobile liquid customer: "Every business will have to truly rally around the customer and become even more digitally savvy in order to take advantage of it." Business practitioners in this manner are ever alert to the key takeaways of the Brave New Liquid World in which they operate; fearful of the incessant demands and fickleness of liquid consumers; fearful of new competitors better able to thrive and adapt to a world in which uncertainty is the constant refrain. *Liquid Modernity* in this regard becomes a dog-eat-dog world of constant threats and incipient opportunities if ever the logic of liquidity can become embedded into the agile organisation as an adapt-survive-and-thrive principle. If not, the fear is one of a tsunami of disruption levelling the firm, making its brand promise irrelevant as fickle liquid consumers will take no prisoners; or as the newspeak of the business world suggests: 'In a continuous fight for relevance, those who persist in understanding and solving the complexities of the liquid consumer will win.' (IAB, 2016: 16). In the practical marketing imagination hopefulness and business positivity appears key as the shift to liquidity will

in their own terms be a win-win for those who can survive the disruptions and opportunities of liquid times. As I have sought to demonstrate in this section paying attention to the marketing imagination and its practical reflexivity is necessary as the art of market imagining starts not with the darkness of liquid modern times – such a nightmarish vision would never sell – rather what is demanded is a far more hope inspired mythology to enchant new markets and new audiences on the possibilities of being future oriented and technologically oriented. The alternative tale being that new communication technologies may be fostering a culture of over-working and burnout so that the costs to our well-being are significant (Davis, 2013).

Conclusion

Bauman's metaphor of liquid modernity continues to spread and influence a range of academic disciplines. From the study of entrepreneurship and the work of liquid entrepreneurs (Biraghi et al., 2018); to the study of flexible organisations (Clegg and Baumeler, 2010) and workplace cultures; to the study of the servicescape and the digital service space (Ballantyne and Nilsson, 2017) and retailing (de Kervenoael et al., 2018); to the study of tourism and the history of leisure cruising (Vogel and Oschmann, 2013); to the study of social work (Ferguson, 2006; Garrett, 2012), sleep (Kroll-Smith and Gunter, 2005) and wellbeing as a collateral causality of liquid modernity (Carlisle et al., 2009). What unites such work is a common endeavour to critique and apply his work for fresh insights.

Bauman's work takes us to the heart of liquid modern darkness and forces us to take seriously the import of the sociological imagination and the crucial insight that personal troubles are best understood as emerging public issues stemming from structural processes. Mills in the *Sociological Imagination* captured this insight well:

The first fruit of this imagination – and the first lesson of the social science that embodies it – is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances. In many ways it is a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one. (2000 [1959]: 5).

Walk into a supermarket and look and listen hard enough and you might just get a glimpse of how people carry the weight of the world on their shoulders. Be still, suspend your theoretical inclinations and you might just glimpse how feelings of poverty, hopelessness and the troubles of the economic and the political world become enfolded in action. If you catch this cathartic moment of illumination and exchange you might just feel its glow and sometimes how social relations blossom *in extremis*. Theory building and seeing the world anew starts with this moment when we become aware that consumer culture holds much promise and hope for its

treasures are fragile ones. To feel the weight of the world is painful but emboldening in equal measure. To feel hopes lost and squandered, to glimpse hopes thwarted by the weight of history its expectations, its follies and vainglory. Yet rest assured that hope like belief is rhizomatic. There is an art to life and the world of consumption and this paper has very much scratched at the surface of that art and practice, carried on by the urge to dig deeper into its tensions and contradictions to realise that structural changes and global processes must be worked out.

The tools and forms of imagination needed to understand this world still require much work. Here perhaps it is best to remind ourselves of Paulo Freire's injunction that: "Hope is an ontological need . . . Hopelessness paralyzes us, immobilizes us. We succumb to fatalism, and then it becomes impossible to muster the strength we absolutely need for a fierce struggle that will re-create the world" (2012: 2). Here reimagining becomes a critical reflexive practice as we seek forms of reassurance and the resources to critique and rebuild our worlds.

Further research should seek to explore these emerging cultural tensions, spirited hopes and their contradictions to better understand the links between the experiences of liquid times and mental health, what Bauman termed the 'anxieties of uncertainty' (2001: 26; 2002: 198). Forms of resilience and the art of managing the mind – feelings, thoughts and embodied responses - thus become critical for moving forward with a resilient mindset best able to survive and cope in liquid times. For some this will be the 'fresh start' mindset with its hope infused future-oriented optimism; for others living on borrowed time and in a world of increasing uncertainty an 'until further notice' mindset will better capture the way experiences serve to delimit and constrain action. Emotions matter in liquid times: to the emotions of envy and status anxiety (Illouz, 2009) we must add those of panic, uncertainty, fear and depression as cultural responses to the here and now; or as Mills cast the dynamics and new problematics of change, 'the unruly forces of contemporary society' (2000 [1959]: 13). Reimagining the terrain of liquid times is best understood as common ground for working through the present tensions, contradictions and unruly forces which beset us.

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Note

1. Smith in his reading of Bauman's work suggests that the themes of 'disillusionment, disappointment and even despair' (1999: 12) can be traced to this postmodern phase in his work.

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