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Chronic Consumer Liminality: Being Flexible

in Precarious Times

LAETITIA MIMOUN* (ESCP Business School)

FLEURA BARDHI (Bayes Business School (formerly Cass), City, University

of London)

2

Laetitia Mimoun is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at ESCP Business School, 79 avenue de la République, 75011, Paris, France, lmimoun@escp.eu. Fleura Bardhi is a Professor of Marketing at Bayes Business School (formerly Cass), City, University of London, 106 Bunhill Row, London EC1Y 8TZ, United Kingdom, fleura.bardhi.1@city.ac.uk.

3

ABSTRACT

This study introduces the notion of chronic consumer liminality (CCL) defined as a recurrently activated state of transition experienced when engaging in frequent, multiple, and nonlinear consumer life transitions. CCL is characterized by (1) reoccurring transitions, (2) ongoing self-transformation, and (3) the embracing of precarity. We find evidence of CCL in a multimethod qualitative study of the flexible consumer lifestyle. CCL emerges as a response to the liquidification of society and the rise of a marketplace ideology of flexibility. CCL is manifested and managed through three CCL navigation processes: destabilizing consumption routines, liquidifying consumption, and asserting control over time and money. Thus, consumers experiencing CCL tend to prefer variety seeking and serendipity over routine even for mundane choices, access-based consumption across domains, and a productivity orientation toward free time. Three skills also facilitate CCL: resilient optimism, adaptability, and self-preservation. This study contributes to research on liminality, consumption in liminality, liquid consumption, and precarity. We conclude with the managerial implications of our framework.

Keywords: chronic liminality, flexibility, life transition, liquid consumption, precarity, access-based consumption

> You're lucky when you're a temp because you can take your holidays whenever you want, you are free and you have the choice. You aren't stuck because you must plan them 6 months early. I'm really not settled, I have a place where I live, but it's a flatshare so it can change from one day to the next. The benefits of changing jobs regularly is that I can walk around [my workplace] and visit the local shops… and so I can buy stuffs to cook something new, I like that!… The other week, I was working in a Japanese neighborhood, they had good products from that country, I did a full week cooking all the things I could find in all sorts of small shops, I bought a lot of weird stuffs I didn't know their name.… I like to always experience new things… and go off the beaten track to feel better (David, 30, temp, pharmacist, Paris)

For the last three years, David has purposefully remained unsettled and living in a precarious state by chronically changing his job (at times weekly), house, neighborhood, and daily consumption to maintain his flexibility and, paradoxically, a sense of control over his life. He has been serendipitously exploring different areas of the city and varying his consumption according to local specialties. He also takes holidays whenever a new destination strikes his fancy. David boosts his variety seeking thanks to his voluntary and weekly job and workplace changes and his short-term, access-based home arrangement. With each new job, he separates from a role and mindset and integrates into a new position, adapting to a new retail environment and set of consumption possibilities. He lives in a state of chronic transition resulting from engaging in such frequent, multiple, and nonlinear life transitions and changes, which he purposefully activates and does not allow to normalize over time. David's transitions do not take place within a specific institutional context but rather across multiple aspects of life, from consumption to home to work. Mainstream society deems his chosen flexibility socially inferior because of its high uncertainty and precarity (Gill and Pratt 2008). The life transitions experienced by consumers like David are unique and cannot be explained

by prior literature. To understand these transitions, we introduce the notion of chronic consumer liminality (CCL) defined as a recurrently activated state of transition experienced when engaging in frequent, multiple, and nonlinear consumer life transitions.

We argue that these chronic, multiple, nonlinear life transitions cannot be explained by the existing notions of liminality and must be skillfully managed via the market and consumption. Indeed, these transitions do not constitute one linear life transition from a certain social position to another, as captured by the notion of rites of passage and liminality (McAlexander et al. 2014; Schau, Gilly, and Wolfinbarger 2009; Schouten 1991; Turner 1969; Van Gennep 1909/1960), nor do they constitute a never-ending linear life transition, as described by the notion of permanent liminality, which occurs within an established institutional context, such as the religious conversion that takes place in the Pentecostal church (Appau, Ozanne, and Klein 2020). Rather, they represent multiple life transitions that are perceived as voluntary and not socially appointed and that occur across various domains of life rather than within a well-defined and stable institution. Individuals must acquire skills to handle these transitions because they lack social guidance in comparison with other extended forms of life transitions that are guided by socially appointed ceremony masters (e.g., priest, line manager) and that assume certain beginning and end social positions (e.g., from impious to pious, from belonging to not belonging to an organization).

Even so, a growing number of individuals are embracing the frequent, multiple, and nonlinear life transitions of CCL to adapt to the neoliberal labor market and increasing inaccessibility of homeownership characterizing the post-industrial, knowledge, and digital society (Morgan and Nelligan 2018; Pugh 2015). Such transitions set apart some consumer lifestyles, such as those of digital nomads, creative workers, serial entrepreneurs, and flexible consumers. In these lifestyles, chronic liminality and its associated challenges are embraced as mechanisms of self-transformation and ways to manage professional and economic

precarity (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Price et al. 2018). CCL captures a distinct form of extended liminality where liminality is constantly re-activated via multiple transitions and where the challenges of liminality are embraced (rather than feared). CCL represents a novel approach to liminality, consumer life transitions, and related consumption.

CCL influences many consumers' decisions from everyday consumption (e.g., variety seeking via subscription services; modular and light home furnishings that are easy to pack, resell, or recycle) to their choice of accommodation (e.g., preference for access-based living including rental or shared apartments, Airbnb, Couchsurfing, or co-living such as The Collective), work (e.g., coworking, cafés), or even leisure (e.g., preference for on-demand fitness classes over a gym membership). Embracing CCL is manifested in a consumption constellation composed of access-based services (Airbnb, Uber, WeWork), self-development and organization apps (Coursera, Todoist, Calm), high-tech products (Apple, Google), easy to resell or pack objects (Ikea furniture, camping gear), and storage and relocation services. Consumers who engage in CCL are an important segment for many services, products, and brands, including in the sharing economy services, circular economy, travel and hospitality, subscription retail, and wellness and coaching services. We further argue that many consumers perceive CCL as a way to succeed in the contemporary labor market and society. Therefore, understanding CCL and its implications for consumer behavior is crucial.

To investigate CCL, we study the flexible consumer lifestyle, in which consumers purposefully embrace instability, change, and adaptability in many aspects of life. We aim to identify and develop the concept of CCL via a multimethod qualitative study of this lifestyle as a prototypical context. Our study addresses three research questions: What is the nature of transitions in the flexible consumer lifestyle? How do flexible consumers mobilize market resources to go through these transitions? What skills help consumers navigate CCL?

We find that CCL is an extended form of liminality characterized by (1) reoccurring

transitions, (2) ongoing self-transformation, and (3) the embracing of precarity. Consumers

embracing the flexible lifestyle seek CCL for professional- and self-development. While CCL

is perceived as voluntary and agentic, it is motivated by the marketplace ideology of

flexibility, which normalizes self-transformation and celebrates precarity. We identify liquid

modernity (Bauman 2000) and the marketplace ideology of flexibility as antecedent macro

conditions of CCL. CCL is challenging because it generates constant self-reflexivity,

vulnerability, and ongoing precarity. We find that consumers mobilize market resources to

navigate CCL across three consumption processes: destabilizing consumption routines,

liquidifying consumption, and asserting control over time and money. Finally, we identify

three skills that they develop to facilitate these processes: resilient optimism, adaptability, and

self-preservation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Questioning the Temporality of Liminality: From Temporary to Permanent

Research has used the liminal lens to understand life transitions, such as growing up (Cody

and Lawlor 2011; Noble and Walker 1997), getting married or divorced (Otnes, Lowrey, and

Shrum 1997; Schouten 1991), converting to or leaving a religion (Appau et al. 2020;

McAlexander et al. 2014), adapting to a chronic illness's diagnosis (Nakata et al. 2019), and

striving for one's ideal self (Schouten 1991). Liminality enlightens the middle phase of rites

of passage, the transition phase when the individual is outside social structure and

experiments with new social roles (Van Gennep 1909/1960). Liminality refers to an in-

between social space, "betwixt and between the social positions assigned and arranged by

law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner 1969, 95). Anchored in an understanding

of life as a social drama, liminality is usually conceived as a series of ritualistic performances (Turner 1969; Van Gennep 1909/1960). The liminal individual is guided through his or her liminal life transition by known social scripts, elders' examples, and socially appointed ceremony masters and usually connects with liminal others in a *communitas* (Turner 1969; Van Gennep 1909/1960). In life transitions, liminality is usually characterized as an experience of transition, out-of-ordinariness, and in-betweenness (Mimoun and Bardhi 2017).

In traditional conceptualizations, while liminality can be dangerous, it is always temporary and disintegrates with incorporation into the new social role or position (Van Gennep 1909/1960). Individuals and groups might attempt to perpetuate liminality, but they never succeed because the social structure reaffirms itself (Turner 1969). According to our reading of Turner (1969, 145–46), liminality disappears over time under the combined effects of normalization, institutionalization, and hierarchization. Normalization occurs when what was exceptional becomes taken for granted and ordinary, while institutionalization refers to the emergence of a structural system when shared implicit norms turn into rules and laws and when institutions are required to oversee their application. Hierarchization occurs as a hierarchy is established to manage resources and collaborations, undermining the homogenized and anonymous nature of liminal experiences and opening the possibility for conflict and rivalries. According to Turner (1969), the need for society to manage and organize itself makes permanent liminality unsustainable. Structure reasserts itself over time as individuals face increasing needs to manage their resources and coordinate themselves.

More recent works have begun questioning the assumption that liminality is always temporary (see web appendix A for an overview of the different streams of research on liminality). At a societal level, some have questioned this assumption in contexts such as political transitions, wars, and economic crises (Szakolczai 2017; Thomassen 2009, 2014). Szakolczai (2017, 233) suggests that such contexts give rise to permanent liminality, "a

temporary suspension of the normal, everyday, taken for granted state of affairs [that]

becomes permanent, generating a loss of reality, even a sense of unreality in daily existence."

For Thomassen (2009), the temporality of liminality falls along a continuum, from short-term

momentary to extended, epoch-long liminal transitions. At a societal level, permanent

liminality is generally considered "fundamentally negative" (Szakolczai 2017, 234), "the

ultimate destruction of every possibility of meaning" (Thomassen 2014, 162).

At an individual level, two streams of literature have tackled the question of extended

forms of liminality. First, organizational scholars use permanent liminality to explore the

experience of individuals situated at the boundaries among teams, organizations, and

corporate roles. They analyze the professional life of consultants (Czarniawska and Mazza

2003), temporary workers (Garsten 1999), and entrepreneurs (Garcia-Lorenzo et al. 2018) as

permanently liminal. For example, Garsten (1999, 603) argues that "[l]acking the structural

bond created by a regular employment position, yet drawn into extended circles of loyalty,

temporary employees share some of the interstructural and ambiguous characteristics of

liminality." This stream of research sets permanent liminality as an experience at the

boundaries of a clearly defined organizational context, in which the social norms to enter and

exit transition are set by the organization (e.g., working hours defined by a contract) and the

beginning and end states are certain (i.e., being part of the organization or not).

Second, Appau et al. (2020, 167) recently framed consumers' difficult life transitions

that "can span years and even a lifetime with no anticipated end" as an instance of permanent

liminality. In a study of religious conversion, they show that Pentecostal churches create a

social structure that forces converting individuals to remain forever in permanent liminality,

as they strive for an ideal moral self but can never fully separate from their past profane self.

Permanent liminality unfolds within a clearly defined social structure set by the Pentecostal

church and guided by a socially appointed ceremony master (i.e., priest and other church

service providers). The conversion can be viewed as a permanent liminal transition, as converts are stuck in a zone of indeterminacy in which neither separation nor incorporation is ever completed. Yet this liminal transition unfolds between two certain social positions: the past profane self and the ideal sacred self. Thus, permanent liminality captures an enduring linear identity transition, moving across the stages of preliminal, liminal, and postliminal.

These two research streams have advanced the literature on liminality by relaxing the assumption of its temporariness. They highlight that some consumer life transitions and organizational positions may lead to experiences of permanent liminality. Yet these analyses rely on three assumptions that may not hold in the context of liquid modernity: (1) the experience of liminality happens within a well-defined and stable institutional context; (2) the experience of liminality has certain, defined beginning and end social positions; and (3) the experience of liminality unfolds as a linear transition. We aim to explore the nature of consumer transitions and the forms of extended liminality that emerge in them, in the broader social context of liquid modernity in which these three assumptions do not hold.

Reconsidering Extended Forms of Liminality in Liquid Modernity

We suggest that scholars need to reconsider the experience of liminality in the context of neoliberal, liquid modernity. In liquid modernity, social structures are unstable and continuously evolving and cannot guide individuals' long-term actions and projects (Bauman 2000). Liquid modernity is characterized by a lack of stable or enduring identity projects, roles, or social positions; the absence of institutional guides to lead identity and life transitions; and the lack of designated spaces and separation between the sacred and profane market (McAlexander et al. 2014). In addition, we live in the age of neoliberalism in which individuals are made to feel responsible for their life choices even when these derive from

systemic issues (Giesler and Veresiu 2014), turning all aspects of life and work into an individual consumer choice (Bauman 2000). Some areas of social life are more exposed to the liquidification of social structure, as shown in the rise of precarious work, the knowledge economy, and contingent intimate relationships (Gill and Pratt 2008; Pugh 2015).

The liquidification of society challenges the understanding of extended forms of liminality because it relaxes the three core assumptions of the concept of liminality. First, prior research seems to assume that the extended liminal transition takes place within a well-defined and stable institutional context, such as a company or a church, whose social norms and roles are organized by a socially appointed ceremony master (a human resources department or a priest, respectively) (assumption 1). We argue that in liquid modernity, this does not hold in all social transitions. Indeed, in liquid modernity, the social structure itself—that is, the solid institutional constructs that used to guide individuals through liminality—is liquidifying. With the liquefaction of social structures and the acceleration of change (Bauman 2000), efforts to incorporate into something stable can be futile (Szakolczai 2017). The future is increasingly unknown, and individuals lack guidance and examples to imitate (Thomassen 2009). Thus, observers have argued that liminality is "an inherent trait of our time, rather than a passing stage between more stable and stationary positions" (Garsten 1999, 607; see also Thomassen 2009). As institutions and social structures liquidify, liminal individuals lack socially ordained markers to identify ceremony masters and taboos to circumscribe liminality (Thomassen 2009).

Second, prior research assumes the presence of established and certain social positions from and into which the consumer transitions (assumption 2). We argue that this may not hold in liquid modernity because the social positions from and into which the liminal transition occurs are increasingly uncertain and unstable. What may have traditionally been deemed periods or positions of stability before and after liminality may now be thought

unstable in liquid modernity. Liminality is rendered more problematic in periods of instability because the social positions from which liminal individuals are departing and to which they are returning can be changing, undergoing institutional or social negotiations, or unknown.

Third, some transitions may not follow a linear path from one social position to another and may not always be socially appointed (assumption 3). In the age of extreme individualization of society and precarity, individuals are required to engage in constant self-monitoring and self-improvement (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Bauman 2000; Price et al. 2018). Consumers are encouraged to regularly seek transformative consumption experiences to improve their life circumstances (Bauman 2000; Price et al. 2018). Thus, consumers may choose to engage in reoccurring transitions in multiple aspects of their lives to optimize the self (Cederstrom and Spicer 2017) and develop the necessary flexibility to succeed in liquid modernity. Creativity is also deemed the new currency in the knowledge economy (Morgan and Nelligan 2018), and as such, these consumers are potentially seeking and engaging in liminal transitions for their creative and disruptive potential (Turner 1974; Umney and Kretsos 2015). In other words, consumers are engaged in multiple, reoccurring transitions between often fluid social positions, and some transitions may be voluntary and embraced by consumers rather than socially appointed. This contrasts with the notion of permanent liminality (Appau et al. 2020; Garsten 1999) in which individuals are stuck in a stage of the rites of passage and cannot complete the transformation into a new social position.

In summary, we argue that to understand the experience of extended liminality in liquid modernity, we need to examine experiences of liminal transitions that occur without the stability and guidance given by a well-defined institution and lack a socially appointed ceremony master and certain beginning and end social positions (see table 1). To do so, we chose as a context a subset of consumers who are more exposed to society's liquidification given their lifestyle's precarity—namely, those adopting the flexible consumer lifestyle.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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THE FLEXIBLE CONSUMER LIFESTYLE

The flexible consumer lifestyle involves purposefully embracing instability, change, and adaptability in most aspects of life. Consumers engaged in this lifestyle (hereinafter flexible consumers) go through multiple and repeated non-socially-appointed transitions and experience constant changes in structures and institutions to a greater extent than consumers who prefer stability, such as by having a stable job in a single organization and a stable owned home (Pugh 2015). Flexible working and living conditions are no longer restricted to youth, the working-class, or specific industries and functions (Morgan and Nelligan 2018; Pugh 2015). Indeed, flexible consumers can most often be found in global cities, among the highly educated and knowledge, creative, and digital workers. Despite belonging to the new aspirational class thanks to their high education and profession, these consumers' lifestyle choices appear to be an adaptation to increasing precarity (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020).

We historicize the flexible lifestyle as being the result of macro shifts shaping contemporary Western society and normalizing precarity and uncertainty. By contrast, industrial consumer society was characterized by more established life trajectories (Bauman 2000). Stable careers, long-term employment with a company, and homeownership were key markers of middle-class membership, with a stable home and job being long-term anchors for consumers' identity projects (Pugh 2015). Since the 1970s in the West, with the gradual decline of industrial modernity, this sense of stability and security has gradually eroded (Bauman 2000; Pugh 2015), with traditional anchors of identity now ever-changing or absent

(Gill and Pratt 2008). Such a precarious existence in terms of traditional institutional markers of success (e.g., career, ownership) is particularly challenging for the highly educated, middle-class knowledge workers who can no longer expect the same stability and upward mobility as previous generations.

We highlight how the liquidification of work and home has intensified in the post-industrial, knowledge society, thus building a structural and ideological macro context that favors precarity and valorizes flexibility. First, the contemporary neoliberal labor market is increasingly characterized by precarity (Gill and Pratt 2008; Morgan and Nelligan 2018). Market-driven globalization, the weakening of trade unions, and the shift to the knowledge and digital economy have fostered work flexibility and professional precariousness in the past couple of decades by facilitating and encouraging contingent, casual, and contractual work, better able to answer international capital and demand fluctuations (Gill and Pratt 2008; Kalleberg 2009; Morgan and Nelligan 2018). Flexible work has been growing in the last 20 years and involves between 20 and 30% of the working-age population in the United States and EU-15, or up to 162 million people (McKinsey & Company 2016). This trend is further escalated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Second, home arrangements are becoming more flexible in some contexts, as shown, for example, by the spread of flat-sharing among older consumers (Litzler 2017) and the rise of work from home (Gruen and Mimoun 2019). Rising real estate prices have transformed homeownership from a typical symbol of adulthood to an unachievable aspiration (PwC 2015). Rather than being the stable, physical place where one grew up, the home is now changing and uncertain, situated among a network of social connections or even dispersed and deterritorialized (Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012). In the United Kingdom, for example, nearly 60% of 20-to-40-year-olds will be renting their homes by 2025 (PwC 2015).

In contrast with past forms of precarity, a unique feature of contemporary precarity is

that it unfolds without a shared ideological space. For example, early-1900s workers were guided in dealing with the precarity of the 1930s crisis by Marxist philosophy (Kalleberg 2009). The lack of shared ideological guidance is due to a societal shift toward extreme individualization, in which consumers are made to feel responsible for their work and life choices as well as solving societal challenges (Giesler and Veresiu 2014). Together with the lack of guidance from social structures and institutions in liquid modernity (Bauman 2000), these factors add to the uncertainty and insecurity of the current times.

As a result of these macro trends, flexibility has become highly valued in contemporary neoliberal capitalism, which promotes change and innovation as the path to success, with stability and commitment now feared (Bauman 2000). This valorization of flexibility is embedded in sociocultural myths related to neoliberal rationality and fresh starts, encouraging consumers to change their life for the better and be accountable for their happiness and success (Price et al. 2018; Sugarman 2015). Moreover, in the knowledge and digital economy, value is increasingly found in creativity derived from individual and immaterial labor rather than from bureaucratic and institutional innovations (Frenette and Ocejo 2019; Morgan and Nelligan 2018). Flexibility derived from reoccurring transitions in consumption, accommodation, and leisure is yet another way of producing creativity and making one successful in the contemporary economy.

In summary, we study extended forms of liminality to theorize nonlinear and multiple consumer life transitions that occur in the context of liquid modernity. To do so, we examine the growing flexible consumer lifestyle, in which work and life blur as work becomes another space of self-development, social connection, and consumption. Because of its precarity, this lifestyle is particularly exposed to liquid modernity. We historicize this lifestyle as resulting from broad trends that normalize professional and living precarity.

METHOD

To address our research questions, we combined three qualitative methods (see table 2): long interviews, archival analysis of news media, and participant observation. To triangulate and assess the lifestyle's essence beyond country specificities (e.g., cultural norms), we collected data in Paris and London, two global cities with an increasing flexible population and where liquidity is especially prevalent (Mimoun and Gruen 2021). We followed best practices to enhance data collection, maximize methodological rigor and trustworthiness, and handle the data ethically (Wallendorf and Belk 1989).

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Data Collection

We carried out 28 semistructured, long interviews (17 in Paris and 11 in London) with flexible consumers. We used three sampling criteria to identify typical flexible consumers who combine enduring contingent and uncertain conditions in major aspects of life. Informants needed to (1) be older than 28 years, to avoid the experimental phase of young adulthood (Weinberger, Zavisca, and Silva 2017); (2) have flexible working conditions (e.g., freelanced, project-based, temporary workers), not a permanent contract or a single employer; and (3) have flexible accommodation conditions, relying on access-based living rather than owning a primary residence (e.g., flat-sharing, short- and medium-term renting, coliving).

We recruited informants through convenience sampling, snowballing, and fieldwork.

We interviewed 14 female and 14 male individuals, whose ages ranged from 27 to 44 years (average 33) and income from €10,000/£18,000 to €48,000/£120,000 (average €25, 500/£50,450) in the French and UK samples, respectively. We used a maximum variation strategy to enhance trustworthiness by sampling informants with diverse family statuses, social classes, and types of employment and accommodation (see appendix for informants' details and web appendix B for more about the sampling). The interviews were fully recorded and transcribed verbatim and took place in coffee houses, collaborative workplaces, or informants' homes at their convenience (two occurred online at their request).

Following McCracken's (1988) long interview approach, we first asked general questions about informants' life trajectories to gain an understanding of when and how they adopted a flexible consumer lifestyle. We then asked about the transitions informants sensed in their everyday lives and, conversely, any elements that remained stable. We used two projective techniques (see web appendices C and D) to go beyond simple conversations into a space in which rational and emotional structures of meaning interact and to overcome social desirability biases and disclosure reluctance (Rook 1988). First, informants initially avoided talking about failures and insecurities related to their lifestyle. Thus, we used a meme-based projective instrument to tease out the various facets of the lifestyle and how they and others viewed it. Second, we used a Proust questionnaire–type projective instrument (Carter and Servat 2005) to focus informants on their consumption in an unobtrusive way and avoid social desirability reactions. This instrument helped overcome most informants' automatic responses to questions about consumption (i.e., to indicate a lack of care for such issues).

In addition, we systematically collected articles from French and British news media on the phenomenon of interest and related topics, such as collaborative living, flat-sharing, freelancing, collaborative working, and entrepreneurship. This allowed us to delineate the ideological background in which the flexible lifestyle unfolds. Finally, we conducted

participant observation, primarily within cohoming in Paris. Cohoming is an alternative to coworking, in which individuals give temporary access to their home to other individuals who use it as a workplace for a day and pay a small indemnity (Gruen and Mimoun 2019). We also attended events in which flexible consumers could take part (e.g., pitch sessions, professional fairs). Participant observation was crucial to set the boundaries of the phenomenon and understand the social field navigated by flexible consumers. Web appendix E provides more details on the media archival data collection and participant observation.

Data Analysis

We adopted a hermeneutical approach to interpretive analysis and followed the principle of iteration, in which data analysis is an ongoing process that develops in a parallel and interrelated way to the fieldwork (Thompson 1997). Long interviews follow a narrative approach (McCracken 1988), which helped us map out the individual trajectories and processes underlying the lifestyle. First, we mapped out the frequency and nature of each informant's transitions (see web appendix F for an example) before comparing them across cases as well as with prior theory on liminality. This allowed us to identify the notion of CCL and theorize its characteristics. Second, we sought to understand how our informants cope with and manage the challenges of their lifestyle. Our data consist of rich descriptions of how consumers organize their daily lives, plan and prepare for transitions, and cope with difficulties through their consumption choices and practices. We explored the data by examining how our informants' transitions emerged, developed, or terminated over time (Langley et al. 2013) to identify the processes through which they navigated CCL. We also compared informants who recently adopted the lifestyle with those who had been doing it for two or more years and looked for skills that helped maintain the lifestyle. These two

analytical approaches allowed us to delineate the processes and skills that the more "tenured" informants have developed to manage multiple, reoccurring transitions. Third, we contrasted and grounded the interview with the archival and observation data to identify the paths through which ideology is diffused and shapes informants' motivations and practices. Finally, we looked for differences between the London and Paris data sets. We discuss minor differences in our findings but do not find major differences in the lifestyle and its enactment, especially related to CCL. We show typical quotes in our findings and provide additional illustrations in web appendix G.

CHRONIC CONSUMER LIMINALITY (CCL)

We theorize the flexible consumer lifestyle as a space of CCL because it involves reoccurring cycles of transitions as consumers go through voluntary and involuntary market and work events that repeatedly suspend social structures. Figure 1 summarizes our framework.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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We define CCL as a recurrently activated state of transition experienced when engaging in frequent, multiple, and nonlinear consumer life transitions. Here, non-linearity indicates that transitions do not take place from one certain social position into another as in prior research. We find that these transitions take place across various consumption contexts such as housing, leisure, travel, and everyday consumption choices in addition to work. CCL is an extended form of liminality characterized by (1) reoccurring transitions, (2) ongoing

self-transformation, and (3) the embracing of precarity. We identify two antecedent conditions of CCL: the macro context of liquid modernity and the marketplace ideology of flexibility that underlines consumers' motivation to seek CCL. CCL is challenging, and we find that consumers deal with it through three CCL navigation processes. Specifically, they mobilize market resources to (1) destabilize consumption routines, (2) liquidify consumption, and (3) assert control over time and money. These three consumption processes constitute manifestations of CCL. CCL consumers adapt their consumption to facilitate being in transition (e.g., they prefer access-based consumption to remain flexible and intensify CCL) but also to activate transitions (e.g., they use variety seeking to transform daily routines). Finally, we find that our informants develop three facilitating skills that ease CCL navigation processes and mitigate the challenges and costs associated with CCL: (1) resilient optimism, (2) adaptability, and (3) self-preservation. Skills are learned abilities developed over time by experiencing CCL or through socialization (Moschis 1981) in the milieu of precarity and liquid modernity.

Characteristics of CCL

First, CCL is characterized by reoccurring transitions across multiple aspects of life. We find that our informants engage in frequent, reoccurring transitions of various temporality (e.g., daily, weekly, monthly) that are constantly reopened across multiple aspects of life (e.g., consumption, home, work). They structure their consumption around flexibility to activate and facilitate transitions. For example, they prefer access-based consumption over ownership for their home arrangements as a means to reopen transitions (see web appendix F for examples in other consumption domains). We find that changes in accommodation type (e.g., sublet, rented flat, flat-share, access-based flat, couch-surfing), location, household members (e.g., flatmates, hosts, guests), and stay duration (e.g., a few weeks to several months)

activate liminal transitions. These changes are often voluntary and at times caused by income loss or temporary unemployment periods. In this way, they differ from traditional liminal transitions, which tend to be socially appointed major life transitions, such as transitioning to adulthood or retiring (Noble and Walker 1997; Schau et al. 2009).

A typical case is that of Claudia (37, freelancer, marketing consultant/public speaker/lecturer). While she shares a rental with a flatmate in London, she chooses to occupy this flat only for half the year. During the other half, she travels constantly, stores all her possessions in a few pieces of luggage, and sublets her London bedroom for supplemental income. During this period, she consumes access-based accommodations from sharing economy companies such as Airbnb and Couchsurfing or stays with friends in London or with her parents in Italy. Claudia experiences a major liminal transition when she moves from a somewhat settled lifestyle in her London flat to a nomadic lifestyle in which she changes home and countries regularly. She explains how moving across these different types of home arrangements helps her increase her flexibility while leaving her feeling unsettled:

> I never bought a house in London so that means that I am renting a flat in Hammersmiths, but I am currently subletting my room. I am staying with friends and in different Airbnbs when I travel…. It feels very unsettling to sometimes wake up in different places in the space of a couple of weeks and having in your backpack with your work stuff for the day but also your toothbrush! Sometimes it goes as far as this [living out of a backpack]. So it feels very unsettled but this is what I wanted.

Like Claudia, many of our informants' consumption of home includes frequent periods of nomadic travel to challenge themselves and intensify their transitions. The sharing economy and discount travel services facilitate these practices. Yet, in some locations, market structures inhibit the pursuit of reoccurring transitions. Our French informants, for example, mentioned hiding their flexible work status from landlords to secure rental flats.

Chronic transitions are not however routinized or professionalized, in contrast with what is expected when nomadism is sustained over time (Noy and Cohen 2005). Rather, flexible consumers remain unsettled over time as they seek further surprising, challenging, and novel transitions. While Claudia presents this precarious home arrangement as her choice, it also reflects the intersection of structural and individual factors. She is enabled by her professional choices, which allow for remote working and mobility, but also constrained by these choices (i.e., reduced income), which prevent her from accessing homeownership and, at times, require the provision of free accommodation by her social network. These consumption choices create vulnerabilities and intensify our informants' instability because they must move regularly to avoid becoming a burden to friends or family for example. This also suggests that CCL requires active management and the acquisition of skills.

Second, CCL is characterized by ongoing reflexive self-transformation. Liminality constitutes a reflexive space with self-transformative potential (Schouten 1991; Turner 1969). Similar to traditional liminal individuals who have the potential to learn, develop, and transform through liminal transitions, our informants regard chronic transitions as desirable for an ongoing identity project of self-development. They seem to share a reflexive model of the self, within which their identity is always in the process of becoming and in flux, characteristic of late modern subjectivity (Bauman 2000; Braidotti 2012). Our data indicate that the pursuit of self-transformation is one of the motivations behind this lifestyle and the reopening of chronic transitions. For example, Claudia explains how this drives her choice of access-based home:

> You know it is a challenge to put yourself out of the comfort zone constantly, and I think that I like that, and I think that the fact that I don't have a flat is sort of motivating me to do that.… I have times when I ask myself: "Why do I do that?" but then I realize that this is where I want to be. You know the other day I text[ed] my friend saying:

"This is very unsettling but this is really where I want to be."

While this way of life can be more stressful, Claudia finds its challenges stimulating and favorable to her self-development, which she lacked in her past better-paid, full-time job. Our informants perceive the nomadism associated with an access-based lifestyle as a creative and reflexive space (Braidotti 2012) that helps them learn and develop new selves. For Claudia, each new home, whether she stays there a few days or a few months, is an opportunity to reinvent herself.

Karen (30, freelancer, performance coach/volunteer development officer) explains how she strives to constantly optimize herself in a never-ending effort at self-transformation:

It is the optimizing lifestyle or flexibility. It can be tricky but I am getting better at it… I do a lot of trials and errors, and so many people are trying to sell me their services. I need to find which could truly be useful… I am being reflexive constantly. I change, and I reflect on the changes I have made, and then I change again.… Because the changes I made in my life [are] a betterment. This is why I move so often, it's because it leads each time to better life conditions, more adapted to where I am now in my life.

Karen explains that her lifestyle fosters constant self-reflexivity, as she must always track her progress and reflexively work toward optimizing her daily consumption and productive ways (Cederstrom and Spicer 2017). To bolster her self-reflexivity and self-transformation, she chooses to regularly switch homes, either flatsharing or using Couchsurfing, and purchases multiple self-help tools, such as therapy apps like Moodfit or meditation apps like Calm. Our informants engage in trial-and-error consumption of all kinds of self-help and new-age spirituality practices with the aim to self-optimize. However, this constant self-reflexivity can be emotionally costly, as it means living constantly on the edge, being watchful of serendipitous opportunities, and being fully accountable for one's future.

Third, CCL is associated with an enduring precarity that our informants embrace as a

source of perceived freedom and empowerment (Standing 2011). This contrasts with

traditional liminality theory in which the ambivalence and uncertainty of liminal transitions

are feared and resolution (i.e., incorporating out of liminality) is sought (Schouten 1991;

Turner 1969). For example, when asked what he finds most exciting in his life, Michel, a 40-

year-old freelanced editor and teacher with two children, answered:

> It's not to know what tomorrow will be made of… you can go to the top very, very fast
>
> and drop down with a bang, and that's what's great in fact! You really have no routine
>
> at all…. I like the freedom made possible by the [freelance] experience and status.

Our informants seem to have become comfortable with precarity and ambivalence over time

and value them because of the sense of freedom they derive from unpredictability. They seem

to reject the middle-class life pathway (Weinberger et al. 2017) of their parents' generation,

with a stable full-time job, house, and marriage, craving instead to work on their own, outside

traditional structures (Standing 2011). The precarity of their lifestyle enables them to exercise

agency over their life and work. Like passion-driven creative workers (Umney and Kretsos

2015), our informants do not view this precarity as a temporary phase in their lives even if

they acknowledge the lack of economic capital that comes with it. We argue next that a

marketplace ideology of flexibility motivates and underlines our informants' seemingly

agentic lifestyle choice and helps them be comfortable with precarity despite its challenges.

Ideological Antecedents of CCL

Consumer motivations for embracing CCL are shaped by a marketplace ideology of

flexibility. Our archival data indicate that flexibility reflects a marketplace ideology

embedded in consumption practices (Mimoun 2018). We identify two popular discourses

disseminated by media that underscore flexibility as a marketplace ideology that shapes and

motivates such a lifestyle (see web appendix H for media references and full quotes). First,

self-development is portrayed as an ongoing everyday quest. Media narratives normalize

change and "starting over" as essential practices of being "competitive" and "successful" in a

job market replete with "numerous micro-jobs" in which learning continuously and being

flexible are key:

> The purpose, above all, is to prepare the next generation for a career in the future,
>
> which for many will be made up of numerous micro-jobs aimed at well-paid skilled
>
> workers, and not a single boss and company…. Instead of identifying your job role or
>
> description, you will be constantly adding skills based on what is going to make you
>
> more employable…. The biggest barrier to adapting to a micro-job is mindset. If you
>
> constantly hop from one project to the next, the change can be jarring and leave you
>
> without a clear path to benchmark success. (*BBC*/2017)

This quote from mainstream media argues that ongoing self-reinvention, which requires

pursuing many different jobs and passions, is the future marker of success. A new distinction

is made between those who can develop flexibility through self-transformation and those who

cannot (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020). Media also popularize the scientific ways to become

flexible and embrace change, such as by "shaking up [one's] routines and circumstances" as a

way to start over (*Medium/*2019). Overall, ongoing self-identity transformations are framed

as being about a positive self, growth, progress, and agency (*Ted Ideas/*2017).

Second, another ideological discourse celebrates precarity as freedom from normative

notions of success and its traditional consumption markers, typically associated with solid

consumption anchored in ownership and possession. Our informants seem to have embraced

this discourse and, in doing so, perceive the pursuit of precarity as an agentic individual

choice, because it conveys an experience of freedom and autonomy from being outside

traditional collective structures (Standing 2011). Such choices are a product of liquid

modernity, which favors subjectivities in flux (Bauman 2000; Braidotti 2012). In a future

framed as uncertain and full of risk, solid consumption is challenged as outdated, and

alternative liquid consumption forms, such as renting and accessing via sharing economy

services and the gig economy, are celebrated as solutions to uncertainty and inequality.

Mainstream media underscores this ideological discourse by, for example, encouraging

readers to "[f]orget ownership and stability: The new American Dream promises flexibility

and adventure" (*Forbes*/2015). Similarly, a recent article titled "Flexibility is the new great

workplace divide," exposes the difference between those who can choose flexibility (e.g.,

individuals embracing the flexible lifestyle) and those who have it imposed on them (i.e.,

marginalized individuals who would prefer stability) (*The Economist/*2021). In addition,

narratives of resistance to anchoring in or committing to places, relations, possessions, and

tastes, as well as a present rather than future time orientation, are presented as the new norms

in a world dominated by precarity (*The New York Times*/2019). Precarity is, thus, legitimized

in the knowledge economy through a perceived sense of agency and the pursuit of passion

that often underscore knowledge and flexible jobs (Standing 2011; Umney and Kretsos

2015).

This extends the notion that work can serve as a key ideological conduit (Besen-

Cassino 2014; Frenette and Ocejo 2019). We find that normative professional expectations

(e.g., "the typical freelancer lives from month to month," "frequent career changes are

necessary to remain creative") legitimize the myths through which marketplace ideologies

celebrating precarity are enacted. Succeeding in precarious occupations and meeting these

professional expectations are perceived as sources of status. Yet, unlike in Besen-Cassino's

(2014) study of precarious young workers, work does not need to become the main space of

social interactions to act as an ideological conduit.

CCL NAVIGATION PROCESSES

We identify three consumption processes through which consumers deploy market resources to navigate the many reoccurring transitions of CCL. We find that destabilizing consumption routines and liquidifying consumption intensify CCL while asserting control over time and money stabilizes it.

Destabilizing Consumption Routines

We find that flexible consumers destabilize, and even reject, the routinization of their daily consumption by seeking extreme variety and serendipity in their consumption. Destabilizing consumption routines intensifies CCL by reopening transitions and opposing normalization.

First, our informants destabilize routines by seeking variety in everyday consumption (e.g., constantly trying out different products and experiences) and mundane choices (e.g., frequently switching lunch restaurants or paths to work). For example, Elise (35, entrepreneur, psychologist/trainer), explains:

> I'm so much into this idea that I do things because they make sense at the moment. In contrast, having a routine, it is to take the risk to … to find myself doing something because I should, and that, I don't know how to do it! The "because I should": ha!… The only thing, the *only* routine I accept in my life…, it's to brush my teeth and to take a shower. But even taking a shower, can you imagine that in my shower stall, I have four different bodywashes, just to surprise myself in the morning.

Elise's pursuit of variety guides even the most mundane consumption decisions (e.g., buying several types of bodywash to shake up her morning shower). At first glance, this could mean nothing more than a form of hedonism (Kim et al. 2021). However, Elise's desire to be

surprised and to generate change in her life at all levels also motivates her choices of shifting

hobbies (e.g., magic practitioner, gin connoisseur, natural healing), professional projects

(e.g., counselor, teacher, trainer), and housing (e.g., new flatmates) every few weeks or

months. Cultivating new hobbies and trying out new consumption activities are a way to

explore various identity projects, with the potential for liminal identity transitions (Schau et

al. 2009). The market also provides products and services that foster destabilizing routines,

such as subscription boxes, a monthly home delivery of niche products chosen by the service

provider. Elise uses a subscription-catalog company to change her boxes and hobbies every

couple of months. We find that the pursuit of novelty and extreme variety in everyday

consumption serves to intensify the reoccurring transitions in informants' lives.

Second, flexible consumers attempt to systematically avoid routines because they are

perceived as "fixing" or solidifying their schedules, identity projects, and, more broadly,

lifestyle. Destabilizing their lives and avoiding routines is a way to encourage transitions and

ongoing self-reflexivity while avoiding integration into social positions. For example,

Edouard (33, freelance graphic designer/author/artistic director) elucidates:

> Having a routine, for me, it's the start of an enslavement to oneself, I'm pushing it a bit
>
> but [it's like] the reflex of Pavlov, when you will do [something] without questioning
>
> yourself…. If you aren't on constant alert, in a newness, I don't know what. I feel that
>
> you wallow in your small world and you aren't as open to the things around you…. I'm
>
> never satisfied by stable and lasting things. Whether it's about what I eat, in my daily
>
> rhythms. I try not to take the same journey when I go home from work every day, not to
>
> eat at the same place at the same time, to break the rhythm constantly in fact. That helps
>
> you see things differently, appreciate things that you didn't appreciate before.

Edouard explains that he changes the path he takes to work and the restaurants where he eats

lunch every day to remain self-reflexive and avoid normalizing his consumption. He

exercises a conscious effort to adopt a discovery mindset to stumble upon unusual places and situations and not to be seduced by the ease of habits. We note that seeking extreme variety and serendipity is different from a search for novelty, which characterizes, for example, the consumption of emerging adults as they try to accumulate encounters with otherness before settling down (Weinberger et al. 2017).

Finally, the lifestyle itself makes it impossible to maintain consumption routines (e.g., sport, mealtimes) because of reoccurring transitions (e.g., changes in schedules, workplaces, or homes). Linda (33, entrepreneur, digital education, biofuel, and start-up consultant), who lives at short-term rentals, her boyfriend's room, or friends' and family's homes, explains:

> I don't like to work in the same [café] every day. I am traveling like that, I don't have set routines. Sometimes I have breakfast meetings, sometimes not. I want variety … I live week to week, and I don't know where I will be next. I book flights four days in advance, so it's hard to plan stuff.… I used to have a routine, even if it doesn't look like it, in my week [where] I would fit in exercise and time with friends … but with my current living situation, it is tricky to exercise.

While Linda used to have exercise routines when she was working a more settled job, the constant transitions she experiences (e.g., changes in accommodation and schedule) make them impossible. This desire to destabilize routines contrasts with studies that show that consumers in precarious situations tend to hold on to routines (Phipps and Ozanne 2017) and anchor more in cherished possessions and brands (Rindfleisch et al. 2009). Our informants testified to fearing or avoiding routines because they sap their creativity and lessen their reflexivity and versatility. Their narratives are anchored in the marketplace ideology of flexibility, in which behavioral science is used to prescribe ways of destabilizing routines and constructing a new self. In doing so, flexible consumers reflexively engage with new identity projects and systematically destabilize consumption routines to prevent social norms from

fully asserting themselves and thus open themselves to reoccurring liminal transitions.

Liquidifying Consumption

We observe that flexible consumers liquidify consumption (i.e., shift toward ephemeral, access-based, and dematerialized consumption; Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) to weaken their connection with social structures and intensify CCL. They view ownership and possessions as anchors that tie them to specific identities and roles. They liquidify consumption to remove these barriers, thus intensifying reoccurring liminal transitions and embracing precarity.

Liquidifying consumption occurs through downsizing practices. In general, our informants own very little and engage in downsizing practices, not only when they started the flexible lifestyle but also every day to avoid accumulating possessions. They prefer to invest in consumption experiences over material objects, which they cannot store, and to prefer access over ownership, even for key possessions such as homes or cars. As regular movers, many of them have a clear plan for packing and storing their possessions (e.g., the number of containers needed to store all their possessions and a carefully designed plan to optimize their storage). For example, Claudia can fit all her possessions in a regular case, a small backpack, and four cabin-sized suitcases. The suitcases she stores beneath her bed during the half-year she rents out her room and travels. Like other informants, she explains how she reached this point by sorting through her possessions and not allowing them to accumulate:

> For me, the big turning point was the first time I went to Mexico for a month, and I brought only a backpack and it had all the things I needed. And when I came back [to London] and I realized all the things I had, I lived for a month, and I was completely OK and everything else felt a bit redundant. And that was the first time I had done something like that, I mean since I live in London, so since I am an adult…. And then

> when I went away for five months, and you realize: I have lived with that for five
>
> months so, the rest, I can do without. And then, of course, [I realized I could use]
>
> another pair of heels, so now I [added that].

Nomadism has taught informants like Claudia that possessions are not who they are. Like global nomads (Bardhi et al. 2012), our informants become reflexive about their attachment to possessions because of formative events (e.g., travel, job change) and begin minimizing their possessions. Moving home or traveling is deemed a way to generate and maintain flexibility and embrace precarity. Thus, having too many possessions prevents flexibility and brings familiarity and structure, which are undesirable. Indeed, a "detached and temporary relationship to possessions makes one more flexible and adaptable in dealing with the unpredictability and uncertainty" of CCL (Bardhi et al. 2012, 524). At the same time, liquid consumption is also celebrated by media discourses around flexibility that challenge the normative and social assumptions that liquid consumption is a "matter of necessity." Liquid consumption is rather framed as a way to free oneself from the burdens of ownership and make one more adaptable (e.g., *New York Times*/2019's quote in web appendix H).

Prior research has established that the disposition of possessions can trigger liminal transitions (Hirschman, Ruvio, and Belk 2012). Disposing of symbolic objects helps let go of past attachments (e.g., loved one's death, divorce) and past selves. We observe that detaching oneself from possessions and homes facilitates many microlevel transitions and encourages leveling. Leveling occurs when liminal individuals are detached from properties symbolizing status and tying them to past identities (Turner 1969). Embracing liquid consumption thus makes the deconstruction and reconstruction of identities through transitions easier.

Liquidifying consumption is an iterative process that allows a new self to emerge each time. For example, Valérie (44, freelancer, chief empowerment officer) regularly sorts through her possessions and culls as many as she can. She engages in a liminal transition that

moves her closer to her ideal flexible self (Schouten 1991). She explains that she first sorted

through her books, then her clothes, then other objects that had accumulated. Each time, she

selects things she can give away, sell, or discard. When asked if she keeps anything, she said:

> My relationship to things, for example I rent my flat as it is on Airbnb, I hide nothing, I
>
> lock nothing away…. Well, what would bother me [is] if someone stole my
>
> photographic films, it's the only thing which would truly bother me, my photos.
>
> Because everything else, books, files…. That's the only thing, and even that, as I tell
>
> you about it, I'm detaching myself from it too.... Well, if it has to burn, it will burn,
>
> that's the idea. I think that, I wonder: "If my flat was burning, what would I take?"
>
> Well, my keys, my wallet, but that's it. Because, you see, I think I would feel sad and
>
> everything but, until now, I was attached to the films, maybe I would leave with them,
>
> but I'm not even sure.

Valérie continuously tries to increase her detachment from objects, even from irreplaceable

possessions she used to care about. Because it is not an easy task, detaching from possessions

becomes a form of status consumption (Mimoun 2018) that proves one's ideological

commitment to the lifestyle. Though related to several taste regimes, such as minimalism

(Wilson and Bellezza 2021), we note that liquidifying consumption is first and foremost a

way to facilitate CCL rather than a matter of aesthetics.

Asserting Control over Time and Money

Flexible consumers manage CCL by asserting control over key resources such as time and

money. Asserting such control enables them to handle a precarious and constantly changing

lifestyle that seems at times out of control. While destabilizing consumption routines and

liquidifying consumption serve to intensify CCL, asserting control helps cope with CCL by

creating spaces to manage the intensity of transitions. Asserting control involves a variety of optimizing practices as well as a changed understanding of time off. This is such an essential practice for our informants that they are regular customers of wellness, fitness, and coaching services, products, and brands. However, asserting control is challenging and marked by recurrent failures due to the instability and ongoing changes embedded in CCL.

Flexible consumers develop a personalized repertoire of optimizing practices that allow them to control these resources. For example, Karen explains how she deploys a variety of practices, from time blocks to advanced cooking, to assert control over her time:

I need to shift my mindset and physiology. It's easy for me to shift from one mindset to another. I use a list of tasks and several apps, calendar, and time blocks…. I learned that I need to accept these transition periods, where I am less productive. When you are transitioning, there is a learning curve and I cannot work as fast.… This is my lifestyle now, I am optimizing, I am arranging things so it is the most efficient and productive and I can do more stuff. For example, to-do lists and time blocks and also with moving in with more like-minded-focused people. I also usually do meal prep for the week because it is healthier and more efficient, but these days I don't have the time to do that.

Using a variety of productivity-oriented products, including to-do lists and calendars (e.g., Todoist app), organizing technologies (e.g., Pomodoro apps like Forest), and packing cookware (e.g., Sistema), Karen constantly attempts to assert control over her time to ease the cognitive and physical load of transitioning. In the interview, she explained how she is progressively increasing her capacity to control her time by developing an analytic approach to time management (Cotte, Ratneshwar, and Mick 2004) through trial and error. This is the only area of their life in which some of our informants recognize attempts at building routines, even if they usually fail to stick with them given their lifestyle's unpredictability. This reveals a relationship to consumption routines that contrasts with prior understandings

(Phipps and Ozanne 2017). Rather than bringing stability, familiarity, and comfort, routines serve to facilitate change. Karen's aim when she attempts to establish rules and micro practices to organize the chaos of her day is to get things done despite the multitude of projects requiring her attention. The only routines that are acceptable to flexible consumers are those that serve the lifestyle and help develop transitioning skills. This can involve work-related routines (e.g., time blocks with Todoist app) such as those mentioned by Karen; accommodation transition routines (e.g., packing practices) mentioned by Dominic, Linda, and Claudia; and self-development routines (e.g., consuming online learning with Coursera, meal prep with Mealime app) mentioned by Pierre and Sébastien.

We also observe the emergence of a new understanding of time off, viewed as a symbol of freedom from structural constraints. Time off work is centered not on leisure, as usually conceived (Turner 1974), but on self-development and well-being and can include productive tasks (e.g., developing a personal project). For example, Pierre (32, freelancer, UX designer) is proud of his control over time and money. He explains how he purposefully divides his year between a period of work, during which he might go through a couple of work transitions, and a period of nonwork, during which he deliberately remains outside the workforce and lives off his savings:

So I started being a freelance two years ago. It was a huge change. I am [now] in

control of my professional life. I decided to change.… I don't have to work for the rest

of the year when I have reached 100K. So my reasoning is in terms of money, not in

terms of time. At the beginning of the year, I accumulate money, then I give myself

some freedom. I learn new things, I travel. I do online classes on programming, I read

books on design, on programing, on business. I try to develop myself … over the last

six months let me check my calendar. I did something like four, four and a half months

working and two months of holidays, one week was on a course and on admin stuff.

Pierre is the sample's highest earner: while he remains financially comfortable, he chooses to make less money than he could with a permanent contract or by working throughout the year. He also chose a more precarious lifestyle by leaving a high-status, high-earning permanent position. Pierre has adopted the flexible lifestyle to gain a sense of control over his time and ultimately life, something he feels was constrained by the demands of a traditional career. When not working, Pierre's life is about leisure, consumption, and personal development. His lifestyle allows him to transition between identities and roles (e.g., professional vs. leisure self) and explore new identity projects through education, travel, and hobbies. His choice is typical in our sample. Flexible consumers highly value professional development, which has become a status currency in contemporary society in which knowledge, rather than money or material possessions, signals status (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020).

Asserting control over time means controlling how it is used (e.g., for work, leisure, self-development) and setting one's own pace rather than having others (e.g., boss) do so. However, as evidenced, it is not about working less or having more free time. Many of our informants even acknowledge that they work more hours since adopting the flexible lifestyle. This approach to time contrasts with the lifestyle of digital nomads who aim to minimize their productive time and maximize their leisure time (Atanasova et al. forthcoming). Asserting control over money includes money planning (e.g., Pierre's living off his savings for half the year), but also renouncing a higher salary as a life choice.

LEARNING TO NAVIGATE CCL: FACILITATING SKILLS

By comparing informants who have recently adopted the flexible lifestyle with more experienced informants, we identified three facilitating skills: resilient optimism, adaptability, and self-preservation. Consumers develop these skills over time to navigate the complex

transitions involved in their experience of CCL.

Resilient Optimism

We define resilient optimism as the ability to see the positive even in downturns and maintain an unwavering belief that one will find one's way out of troubles. We find that resilient optimism preserves our informants' well-being by minimizing worry and helps them deploy a variety of resources to handle slumps. Resilient optimism supports each of the three CCL navigation processes and is built over time through experience. It provides internal sources of comfort and security despite the lack of routines and material symbols of success, and it boosts confidence in asserting control. We view resilient optimism as embedded in beliefs oriented toward self-development, such as the growth and fresh-start mindsets (Dweck 2008; Price et al. 2018), which are linked with self-efficacy, hope, and perseverance. Yet resilient optimism encompasses several such mindsets, as it does not favor one way out of downturns.

Whether they have a two-week or six-month vision, our informants have limited plans for the future. They are acutely aware that crises and downturns are likely to happen at any time as they remain at risk of losing their income, jobs, or homes. Many have already experienced these crises. Mathieu (31, freelancer, journalist/community manager/producer/ news director), who has six years of flexible lifestyle experience, explains without showing any anxiety that he just learned that he lost the contract responsible for most of his income:

> I feel that I have this ability to tell myself: "Well, if you have to adapt yourself for a
>
> few months, you'll figure your way out of it." Even now, I'm not afraid at all of what's
>
> going to happen. I think that some people, they would be scared stiff. For me, being
>
> flexible means that you can tell yourself: "Shit! I hadn't planned that, but I can find a
>
> way out of it." And it works for your work but also for your home, your relationships,

many things.

While his not-flexible colleagues worry since the news of their team's termination, Mathieu remains confident that he can adapt to sudden changes and welcomes them as serendipitous opportunities rather than threats. Resilient optimism involves accepting failure and risks as part of everyday life rather than as the end of the journey (Ehrenberg 2014). Thanks to his skill and past experience with a precarious job market, Mathieu knows that opportunities will present themselves and that his future will be bright. Because he perceives his social status as anchored in his capacity to be flexible, he does not mind "taking any odd job" to pay the bills until his other projects are back on track (Umney and Kretsos 2015). Resilient optimism is crucial to flexible consumers as it preserves their ability to prosper during economic slumps.

Resilient optimism also relates to our informants' confidence over money issues. Despite losing most of his income, Mathieu keeps consuming as he always has because he believes that money will come along. For example, he still planned to go on a cycling road trip and a four-day yoga retreat the next month. Despite significant income loss, he does not switch to a consumption logic of necessity (Holt 1998). Even when faced with increasing precarity, our informants' consumption remains typical of high cultural capital taste (Holt 1998). For Karen, a Polish-American freelancer living in London, adopting the flexible lifestyle made her deviate from her low socioeconomic family background:

> In terms of what changed for me, I was educated with a scarcity mindset from my parents; they were immigrants from a communist country and with five kids, so we were always looking for the cheapest. I used to do that, always spending the time searching for the best deals. But now I don't feel that it is worth it. Sometimes I will just go and buy the thing. Because it is really a balance with my time.

Karen refuses to consume following the logic of necessity but invests in status consumption associated with the aspirational class. Our informants maintain their focus on experiences

oriented toward well-being, self-development, and self-expression. This consumption is seen not only necessary to sustain their social status but also a way out of precarity by allowing them to develop skills and assert control over life (see Thompson, Henry, and Bardhi 2018).

Several informants recognize that they acquired resilient optimism over time, as they learned to become comfortable with having no income, being unemployed and even "homeless" (Claudia), and gradually framing precarity as an opportunity. David, who chose to be flexible in a sector in which permanent and stable contracts are the norm, explains:

Sometimes, there's no demand, because you're not always in demand, and that means that there are times when you don't do anything. It can last a week, once it lasted a month and a half, two months…. I'm fine with it because, now I'm adapted to it and I'm more ready than I used to be in the first few years…. The first years can be scary, the first times when you don't have work for a day, two, a week, two weeks, you tell yourself, "Shoot! How am I going to cope?" … Now, I'm more adapted and I know it's no big deal, it's just a low in the rhythm. I'll find work again soon.

The informants who have recently embraced the lifestyle are more anxious and vulnerable when faced with income loss, as David notes. Many of our informants reflect that they have developed resilient optimism over time through their professional and personal experiences that allowed them to accumulate self-confidence and resources. For example, David developed this skill by enduring several unemployment periods and Meena (32, entrepreneur, start-upper/financial and entrepreneur coach) by having "ditched everything" and "started from scratch five times already." Being able to rely on one's social network is also crucial in building resilient optimism. By contrast, Annabelle is a negative case and the only informant who perceives her flexibility as being endured rather than chosen as it used to be. Even if she claims to still aspire to flexibility, she cannot sustain her flexible lifestyle and its downturns because of a conjunction of circumstances (i.e., having a baby and her partner losing his job)

and especially because she has no social network to fall back on to find work or housing. In such cases, resilient optimism can come to support a state of cruel optimism (Berlant 2011) that, by sustaining fantasies of an idealistic future, hinders acting to limit present precarity.

Adaptability

Flexible consumers also manage CCL by developing adaptability, or the ability to easily adjust to transitions on short notice by changing their way of life in size or scale. By acquiring this capacity to scale their life up or down, flexible consumers can more readily manage the precarity and transitions of CCL. Adaptability fosters a readiness to continuously change and helps develop a scalable infrastructure of facilities and systems that enable flexibility. In doing so, adaptability facilitates liquidifying consumption and asserting control.

 For example, Linda explains how acquiring adaptability over time helped her accept the uncertainty and unsettledness that her recurrent moves and job transitions foster:

> There was a lack of control and of my own space, I was scared and worried…. My life is [still] not settled at all but I [have become] very good at working with uncertainty and change…. I don't need [anymore] a stable location, I am OK with changeable locations.

To cope with CCL, Linda learned how to adjust easily and quickly by abandoning a desire for being settled and stable. Learning adaptability helped her gain a greater sense of control over her life, even if it remains unpredictable. Our informants develop over time the knowledge and scalable infrastructure to be comfortable with the unknown and the frequent changes of their lifestyle.

 Adaptability is fostered by a scalable infrastructure, which facilitates recurrently attaching to and detaching from identities, roles, possessions, and homes. For example,

Dominic (32, zero-hour contract, web developer) who comes from a French working-class background, explains how his adaptability is demonstrated in his constant readiness to pack and go facilitated by functional gear as a scalable infrastructure:

> I live [out of] my suitcases … it's minimalistic. It's the style of the web or designer experience…. Because you must be mobile, you are always looking for the smallest things. You end up buying camping equipment to make coffee or as towels…. It corresponds to my flexibility.

Dominic has developed adaptability over time to maximize his capacity to live with very limited possessions. He highlights how his natural tendency toward adaptability has been fostered by his CCL experience, but also by professional norms (e.g., of the IT industry) and popular market aesthetics (e.g., minimalism). By adopting a pragmatic approach to limiting and storing their possessions, our informants improve their readiness to continuously leave and enter social spaces, whether that means changing jobs, houses, or countries.

Adaptability also facilitates the process of liquidifying consumption by increasing our informants' capacity to vary the liquidity or solidity of their consumption as needed (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). Dominic further explains:

> Because I work from home, I want to be able to have fun. I bought a digital piano that I had to sell [during my last move] and that was kind of difficult…. The usual objects, you can't transport them easily with you, you must know how to travel with them. Especially how to take a plane. For example, with a guitar. I did it once, and I can't remember that I had any problems…. Here, I don't have a piano, what I bought is an acoustic guitar.

After going through the trouble of buying and then reselling a second-hand piano during his last move, Dominic has now invested in a guitar because it enhances his adaptability and ease of transitioning. These possessions are not singularized, even if they serve as temporary

anchors for a home. Our informants sell and replace them as needed. This contrasts with singularized, sacred possessions used to anchor identities during traditional liminal life transitions. They differ, for example, from transitional objects that usually constitute security blankets for liminal consumers who use them to reassure and protect their self during moments of ambiguity and ambivalence (Noble and Walker 1997). In that sense, flexible consumers also diverge from the typical minimalistic consumer, as they do not end up worshiping possessions (Wilson and Bellezza 2021).

Adaptability also helps flexible consumers deal with the cycles of higher and lower intensity of CCL. Alexa (29, entrepreneur, architect) needed a separate space for her bedroom where she could be herself and escape the constant demands of her life, which she had to put in an ex-dressing room because of limited space. Our informants acknowledge the exhausting nature and effervescence of flexible living while needing safe spaces that are only theirs to facilitate the process of asserting control over consumption resources (time and space in Alexa's case). Within safe spaces, they can slow down and recharge when the rhythms of life spin out of control. Adaptability helps Alexa develop a scalable infrastructure that admits her need for a safe space while encouraging fluidity and transitioning in other parts of her flat.

Self-Preservation

The third skill needed to navigate CCL is self-preservation, defined as the ability to shield and care for the self in the face of well-being threats. The self narrative of consumers embracing CCL is constantly challenged by their frequent experience of professional failures and of social marginalization. Self-preservation ensures that they can craft a resilient justification about the self, preserving their well-being and self-esteem and shielding them from the stigma associated with their lifestyle and precarity. Self-preservation supports

liquidifying consumption by maintaining self-esteem without relying on normative markers of success and limits the costs of potential failures at asserting control. Our informants mobilize the marketplace ideology of flexibility to build narratives of self-preservation.

Our interviews are full of extended justifications of the choice of precarity, such as retold by Cyril, a highly educated entrepreneur who adopted the flexible lifestyle two years before. He is used to criticisms of his choice that he recognizes is unconventional, especially in France where professional precarity remains stigmatized and outside the norm:

I've always loved to create, I love to paint, to draw…it's what resonates with me. To be able to work doing this, it's pure happiness!… I want to build for myself the life that I want to build for myself, and not the one, I wouldn't say the one that they are imposing on me but it's kind of that, the one that the system gives you while saying: "it's that and not something else…." I want to live my life like that. And maybe it's not normal in France, because I'm French, but my life is totally normal and healthy as a human!

Cyril has built a strong positive narrative about his self, which fetishizes work as a space of consumption dedicated to self-actualization. His narrative reflects the ideal of creativity and the rejection of bureaucratic management systems associated with corporate jobs, typical of knowledge workers (Morgan and Nelligan 2018). Frenette and Ocejo (2019) note that the lure of creativity and autonomy attached to precarious jobs is central to their attractiveness but tends to result in disenchantment after everyday reality sets in. By contrast, we observe that our informants do not face this disenchantment because they develop skills and infrastructures of consumption that allow them to shield their selves from such threats.

Self-preservation not only produces a positive self-narrative but also sustains it when challenged, as shown by Thomas (29, entrepreneur, nomad gallerist/start-upper):

[Regular workers] envy me because I can make my passion, my job. Some of them stay in their organization, they aren't happy, they don't like their job, but they don't dare

> [leave].… I have my independence; it creates more meaning and value in my life. I got a head start in comparison to others. There are several alumni who are now doing that…. Me, from the start, I made my own choices. To put together projects is not an easy task, there are a lot of issues, it takes time, you have no money.

Like Thomas, our informants know that their lifestyle is a difficult one, but they are convinced that it is the only way for them to reach happiness and well-being. To overcome the social sanction associated with their lifestyle, they often develop extensive justifications based on their uniqueness as a new elite who can have fun at work and follow their passions but also survive such a daring lifestyle. This contrasts with traditional corporate office jobs, which are often disenchanting and alienating. Thomas frequently faces pushback from his family and friends who judge him by common indicators of success (e.g., permanent job, stable salary). Yet he believes that other people envy him because they are not brave enough to make the same choices as he did or are following his example as they, finally, decide to become flexible. Because freedom is scarce and difficult to attain, accepting the challenges of precarity not only makes freedom possible but also makes the lifestyle valuable and exclusive. For our informants, the unpredictability of their future tasks, homes, and income is not only desirable but also a source of personal achievement. This robust self-narrative fits in contemporary society's ideological framing of work as the field in which to enact a culture of heroism (Ehrenberg 2014). Self-preservation helps flexible consumers perceive themselves as valorized and enviable heroes.

Self-preservation also involves a continuous renegotiation and reframing of normative ideals, scripts, and traditions of what it means to be successful in the contemporary knowledge society. While much of it is directed toward the self, self-preservation is also often other-targeted, as shown, for example, by Meena:

> My parents understand nothing about my life, but now they are reassured because they

know that they can trust me to bounce back. I think that they get it now, but it was a

very long time coming. I had to write an article about it, about starting from scratch,

bouncing back, and someone wrote a blog article about me. Then they became aware

that it was something normal, that it could even be cool to start from scratch. I think

that after this article, they understood that I might switch careers 20 times and that I am

OK with it.

Like Meena, our informants' lives contrast with that of their parents' generation or others

with stable jobs and solid lives anchored in ownership and enduring networks of strong

loyalties. To justify and legitimize their lifestyle, they often rely on external sources, such as

media or PR. Media appearances, as in Meena's case, convey discourses celebrating precarity

and the flexible lifestyle and connect them to an affluent network of other flexible workers

like themselves. They become another source of legitimacy and status in precarious lifestyles,

as they allow for upward networking as well as associations with prestigious brands, such as

the popular coworking brand WeWork (see also Besen-Cassino 2014).

DISCUSSION

Contribution to Research on Liminality

We contribute to the recent conversation on the temporariness of liminality in consumer and

social sciences (Appau et al. 2020; Czarniawska and Mazza 2003; Garcia-Lorenzo et al.

2018; Ibarra and Obodaru 2016; Thomassen 2009) by identifying and theorizing a particular

type of extended liminality—CCL. CCL represents an adaptation of liminality to liquidified

institutions and the neoliberal labor market. In contrast with other extended forms of

liminality, CCL unfolds without a well-defined and stable institutional context, socially

appointed ceremony masters, or certain beginning and end social positions. CCL provides a

continuous potential for self-transformation and change through reoccurring transitions,

ultimately becoming a source of flexibility and creativity, which are increasingly valued and

demanded in liquid modernity (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020; Morgan and Nelligan 2018). The

ongoing pursuit of self-transformation is characteristic of neoliberal and liquid modern

subjectivities in which identity itself has become a highly individualized, entrepreneurial, and

existential consumer project (Bauman 2000). Because of such macro demands on the nature

of the self, even liminality, which was traditionally feared and socially appointed, has become

a desirable individual pursuit thanks to its transformative and creative potential.

We demonstrate that CCL is a form of liminality because it captures an experience of

transition, out of ordinariness, and in-betweenness (Mimoun and Bardhi 2017). The chronic

type of transitions embedded in the lifestyle we study can generate liminal transitions

(Hirschman et al. 2012; Ibarra and Obodaru 2016), and these transitions are "out of the

ordinary" in relation to socially prescribed, traditional anchors of success (e.g., ownership of

luxury brands, second home), a typical professional life (e.g., career, stable job), or the

middle-class life project (e.g., ownership of a home and car). Although the flexible lifestyle is

framed as popular in global cities such as Paris and London (Mimoun and Gruen 2021), we

find that it is usually not well-accepted by society and can be stigmatized as not the "norm."

Finally, our informants strive to remain in transition and outside established social categories

(e.g., job titles, professional affiliations, career trajectories) and, thus, in-between, with the

ideal flexible consumer portrayed as free to act outside society's rules and norms.

CCL contributes to the important conversation on consumer life and identity

transitions in four ways. First, CCL expands this body of work (Noble and Walker 1997;

Otnes et al. 1997; Schau et al. 2009; Schouten 1991) by explaining transitions that are

relatively voluntary, in that individuals choose transitions to provoke reoccurring periods of

liminality because they deem these periods valuable in developing the self and in maintaining

flexibility. These are different from liminal life transitions that are socially appointed, such as

growing up (Noble and Walker 1997) or retirement (Schau et al. 2009). Thus, CCL tends to

be experienced as more agentic than other extended forms of liminality. Second, CCL is an

everyday liminality; that is, some of the transitions experienced by chronically liminal

consumers are less drastic than major life transitions typically associated with liminality and

investigated in consumer research. Third, because the sources of CCL occur in multiple

domains of life, CCL differs from organizational permanent liminality (Garsten 1999) that is

restricted to the work domain and leaves space for stability and certainty in other domains.

Fourth, we argue that CCL may also capture other consumer transitions in which the

boundaries between various domains of life (e.g., work and leisure) are blurred, such as those

experienced by digital nomads. We encourage future research to explore the applicability of

CCL to other consumer lifestyles and different cultural contexts.

We further contribute to the core debate around the temporality of liminality by

showing that CCL needs to be intentionally sustained. Traditional conceptualizations of

liminality assume that liminality is always temporary (Noble and Walker 1997; Schouten

1991) as structure reasserts itself over time through the processes of normalization,

institutionalization, and hierarchization (Turner 1969). We identify three CCL navigation

processes that maintain, intensify, and manage CCL without allowing for structure to reassert

itself. First, we show that consumers destabilize consumption routines by pursuing extreme

variety seeking, or the propensity to seek diversity in consumer choices (Ratner and Kahn

2002), and serendipity, or chance encounters in the market (Kim et al. 2021), in their

consumption. In doing so, they encourage or reopen transitions, thus avoiding the

normalization and institutionalization of CCL. Second, liquidifying consumption removes

symbolic possessions and barriers hindering transitions, thus discouraging hierarchization.

Third, asserting control is a critical maintenance process that makes CCL possible by creating spaces to manage its intensity. However, the questions of whether and when extended forms of liminality end or normalize are relevant areas that research has only begun to explore.

Consumption in Conditions of CCL

CCL affects consumer behavior in three ways. First, it encourages relying on access-based consumption across domains, including to meet basic needs (e.g., home). Second, it fosters a productivity orientation toward free time (Keinan and Kivetz 2011), as reflected in, for example, the intense consumption of professional and self-development experiences and tools as well as a preference for using time productively even during holidays and nonwork periods. Third, consumers experiencing CCL favor variety seeking and serendipity over routine, including for everyday choices and despite the associated increased cognitive load.

In this way, we also contribute to consumer research on variety seeking and serendipity by showing that they constitute important triggers of CCL, as they destabilize consumption routines. Variety seeking is usually associated with individual motivations, such as avoiding satiation, satisfying curiosity and need for stimulation, and serving impression management (Ratner and Kahn 2002). Similarly, serendipity in the market enhances consumer enjoyment (Kim et al. 2021). First, we extend the understanding of the motivations behind these forms of consumption and suggest that they can create built-in risks and uncertainties in everyday consumption patterns to reopen or maintain transitions. Second, we find support for recent findings that present variety seeking as a means to reassert a sense of agency (Kim and Drolet 2003) and control (Levav and Zhu 2009), as it helps consumers learn to deal with precarity. Third, we find that intense variety seeking can become an enduring way of life, rather than a transitory phase before settling down as experienced by middle- and

upper-class young adults who accumulate diverse experiences to build an attractive resume (Weinberger et al. 2017). Our informants' preference for variety seeking and serendipity also questions the nature of consumer-brand relationships and loyalty in CCL as these are purposefully rejected or disrupted. Future research is needed to examine consumers' brand relationships under conditions of CCL.

CCL consumption differs from the consumption associated with traditional liminality in three ways. First, whereas prior research on liminality has focused on how consumption facilitates the end of liminality (i.e., incorporation) (Noble and Walker 1997; Schouten 1991), we explore the opposite: how consumers deploy market resources to reopen and intensify liminal transitions and embrace their challenges (e.g., precarity), with the goal of self-transformation. Incorporation into fixed and certain social roles and identity positions may not always be possible or a consumer goal in a world that is constantly shifting (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Morgan and Nelligan 2018). Second, because CCL captures an everyday type of transition, consumers do not rely on singularized and sacralized transitional objects to ensure a sense of security and continuity during their liminal transitions as would be the case in traditional liminality (Noble and Walker 1997). Rather, they prefer liquid consumption, and even key possessions remain resalable and/or disposable. Third, we find that chronically liminal consumers engage in ongoing self-development consumption (e.g., travel, mindfulness training via apps) to self-transform rather than in ritualistic consumption around major milestones as characteristic of traditional liminality (e.g., graduation ceremony, wedding party) (Otnes et al. 1997; Schouten 1991).

Implications for Liquid Consumer Lifestyles and Precarity

We contribute to the domain of research on liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017)

in three ways. First, our findings suggest that liquid lifestyles (such as the flexible lifestyle) tend to emerge as a way to cope with the normalization of precarity. We do not paint a rosy picture of precarity or liquid lifestyles. Rather, we identify liquid consumption and lifestyles as one of the ways some consumers are adapting to contemporary times. Indeed, embracing a liquid lifestyle helps manage, but not avoid, precarity. For example, flexible consumers must deal with uncertain and irregular income, unstable housing, occasional reliance on their social network (e.g., family, friends) to meet basic needs (e.g., housing), lack of belonging, and marginalization. They also experience unsettledness and ambivalence caused by reoccurring life transitions. All these challenges, however, are justified in the name of gained autonomy, flexibility, and creativity, which are framed as markers of success. Our findings thus contrast with prior research on precarity (Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013) that states that consumers cope with precarity by solidifying their lifestyle (e.g., home and car ownership, savings, long-term jobs). Yet they also support the idea that "consumers facing … professional precariousness often turn to liquid consumption, as it facilitates the professional mobility and flexibility demanded of them" (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017, 589).

Second, we contribute to the research on managing the challenges of liquid consumption by identifying three skills that facilitate living in liquidity: resilient optimism, adaptability, and self-preservation. These skills provide consumers with the confidence and abilities to manage downturns and succeed in precarity. They also develop the adaptability, for example, to take up temporary jobs to compensate for income gaps or "pack up" their life in one locality to engage in temporary nomadism in another. Contrary to expectations from consumer research on life in precarity (Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013; Thompson et al. 2018), our informants do not engage in downward mobility, nor do they change their consumption style because of precarity, temporary unemployment, or industry shift. Furthermore, we find that consumers embracing a liquid lifestyle also deploy social support networks, consisting

mainly of friends and family, to cope with economic downturns or temporary loss of accommodation. Overall, we observe that social support networks, technology, sharing economy services, travel and hospitality services, and storage systems are combined in an infrastructure of liquid lifestyles that enables our informants to sustain CCL transitions. We expand the idea of an infrastructure of liquidity (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) by empirically delineating the fundamental facilities and processes that support the sustainable function of a liquid lifestyle. While insights into liquid lifestyles are invaluable, they were not our core purpose here, and future research should systematically unpack such lifestyles.

Third, we complement prior research (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) by providing an until-now-missing ideological explanation for the shift toward liquid consumption. We show that liquid lifestyles are motivated and shaped by the marketplace ideology of flexibility. Our archival analysis indicates that media discourses normalize self-transformation as an ongoing daily quest and celebrate professional precarity as providing autonomy and freedom from bureaucratic corporate jobs and normative markers of success. These ideological discourses encourage consumers to abandon solid consumption and embrace liquid consumption as a prescription to be successful in the contemporary labor market. We also observe that liquid lifestyles have become attractive to both working- and middle-class consumers, in contrast with studies that find that their risk aversion leads working-class consumers to prefer to stabilize as soon as possible (Weinberger et al. 2017). The marketplace ideology of flexibility partly explains this generalized appeal. Finally, as CCL serves the demands of liquid modernity and the marketplace ideology of flexibility, it may conflict with the consumerist market system. CCL consumption embodies a consumption ideology conflict (Schmitt, Brakus, and Biraglia 2021) between flexible consumers' desire to minimize and liquidify consumption and the system of consumerism that promotes accelerated consumption. Potentially, the skill of self-preservation can help CCL consumers manage the stigma of not

being "mainstream consumers" and access market solutions that facilitate chronic transitions. Thus, CCL can also constitute a consumption ideology (Schmitt, et al., 2021) and we invite future research to explore this proposition and its implications.

With this ideological stance, precarity is normalized, embraced, and experienced as a choice and an empowering experience through which to grow and transform. We find revealing that embracing the marketplace ideology of flexibility, rather than resisting its influence and continuously desiring an elusive stable and secure life, allows our informants to valorize their situations, persevere, self-actualize, and enhance their well-being. For example, these discourses are promoted by our informants who use them as symbolic resources for self-preservation and to justify the challenges of a liquid lifestyle. In defending their agentic position and valorizing their lifestyle choice, consumers accept and may potentially reverse precarity into a privilege (Standing 2011).

Nonetheless, these ideological discourses can become toxic, as they foster a never-ending quest for change, novelty, and creativity, minimizing the dangers of such pursuits. For example, despite acknowledging the lack of realism and/or feasibility of the professional expectations of their lifestyle (e.g., "you must do something new every day"), our informants still disseminate them and judge themselves against them to some extent, especially lifestyle newbies. The pursuit of self-transformation creates an immense pressure to constantly reinvent the self without clear guides or institutional support on which to rely. These ideological discourses also encourage a very individualized approach to cope with precarity, thus preventing collective action to gain security. In contrast with traditional liminality, for example, we do not find a sense of *communitas* shared among CCL consumers, nor is there a shared ideological platform to reframe and enable action against precarity (Kalleberg 2009). Because understanding the role of the marketplace ideology of flexibility in sustaining precarity is crucial, we suggest that future research should critically unpack the marketplace

discourses that legitimize and reframe flexibility and precarity. Further research is also

necessary to understand how consumers manage life and consume in conditions of precarity.

Managerial Implications

We advance a new perspective on consumer life transitions and liminality which has

implications for many market sectors, including the sharing economy, the circular economy,

travel, real estate, subscription retail, and the wellness and training industry. These sectors

range from living solutions (e.g., access-based living, coliving) to workplace solutions (e.g.,

coworking spaces, atypical workplaces), storage services, everyday products (e.g., furniture,

clothing), and self-development tools (e.g., routine-building apps, meditation apps). For

example, Airbnb, Couchsurfing, Uber, WeWork, Ikea, Casper Mattress, Apple, Coursera,

Todoist, and Calm are brands commonly used by our informants, constituting the lifestyle's

consumption constellation. We identify an important consumer lifestyle in which consumers

embrace chronic liminal transitions to self-develop and manage precarity, delineate this

lifestyle profile, and elaborate on its specific needs and motivations.

Our study suggests that firms that are targeting CCL consumers should design and

offer solutions that help activate and sustain liminal transitions in most aspects of life while,

at the same time, manage CCL challenges. Firms should emphasize the values of change,

flexibility, mobility, and variety in their marketing mix. For example, our archival data

suggest that marketing communication can promote flexibility as a form of consumer

empowerment found in the perceived autonomy from bureaucratic, socio-temporal, and work

norms as well as in control over one's life choices. The CCL approach also suggests that the

market can provide numerous opportunities for transition activation not only via marketplace

experiences, but also in everyday consumption choices, routines, housing, and work. Rather

than focusing on traditional notions of brand loyalty, consumers who embrace CCL should be retained via solutions that facilitate and sustain chronic transitions. For example, rather than focusing on a single long-term gym membership, CCL consumers prefer to subscribe to a platform that facilitates convenient access to numerous and varied gym classes across locations. A similar approach can be taken for workplaces, hobbies, and skill training.

Finally, our framework suggests that marketers can use the three CCL navigation processes to identify this consumer lifestyle and its associated market solutions. In Table 3, we propose strategic implications for firms that follow each CCL navigation process. Each process opens various market opportunities for designing products and services that help destabilize routines, liquidify consumption, and assert control over time and money.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The first author conducted all of the in-person fieldwork herself from December 2016 to June 2018, until theoretical saturation was reached and additional data were unlikely to change the interpretation. The second author acted as a confidante throughout the process. Both authors conducted the archival data collection independently and equally from 2016 to 2021. Data were discussed and analyzed on multiple occasions by both authors using the first author's interview transcripts, field notes, and photographs, and both authors' media text files. The final manuscript was jointly authored. All notes, recordings, and associated data are currently stored in password-protected folders in our university computers under the management of the first author.

APPENDIX
INFORMANT CHARACTERISTICS

Name[a]	Age	Gender	Marital situation	Education	Income	Accommodation	Employment[b]	Job title[b]	Social class of origin[c]	Experience[d]
Paris data set										
Alexa	29	F	In a relationship	Master's	NA	Owned flat	Entrepreneur	Architect	Middle	2 years, Y
Annabelle	35	F	In a relationship 1 child	Master's	32K€	Rented flat	Freelancer/part-time salaried/copyrights	Journalist	Working	5 years, Y
Christelle	35	F	In a relationship 1 child	Professional diploma	NA	Rented flat	Unemployed/freelancer	Makeup therapist	Middle	<1 year, Y
Clément	38	M	In a relationship 1 child	Professional diploma	20-30K€	Rented flat	Freelancer	Graphic designer	Working	7 years, Y
Cyril	29	M	In a relationship	Master's	20K€	Nomadic	Freelancer/entrepreneur	Multimedia creative	Middle	2 years, Y
David	30	M	In a relationship	Master's	30-36K€	Flat-share	Temporary worker	Pharmacist	Upper	3 years, N
Edouard	33	M	In a relationship	Master's	25-30K€	Flat-share	Freelancer/copyrights	Graphic designer, author, artistic director	Middle	6 years, Y
Elise	35	F	Single	Master's	15K€	Flat-share	Entrepreneur	Psychologist, trainer	Upper	9 years, N
Janet	35	F	Engaged	Master's	38K€	Rented flat	Freelancer/part-time volunteer	Consultant, connector, ecosystem manager, president, community manager	Working	5 years, Y
Mathieu	31	M	Single	Master's	32K€	Rented studio	Freelancer	Journalist, community manager, producer, news director	Middle/working	6 years, Y
Meena	32	F	In a relationship	Master's	NA	Rented flat	Entrepreneur	Start-upper, financial coach, entrepreneurship coach	Middle	4 years, Y
Michel	40	M	Married 2 children	Master's	30K€	Rented flat	Freelancer	Editor, teacher	Middle	6 years, Y
Sébastien	28	M	Single	Master's	36-48K€	Coliving	Independent	Entrepreneur	Middle	<1 year, N
Tatiana	33	F	In a long-distance relationship	Master's	24K€	Borderline-legally rented studio	Entrepreneur/contracted freelancer	Organizational coach	Middle	<1 year, Y
Thomas	29	M	Single	Master's	10K€	Parents' home	Entrepreneur	Nomad gallerist, start-upper	Upper	6 years, N
Valérie	44	F	Single	Bachelor's	15K€	Owned flat & flat-share	Freelancer	No title, chief empowerment officer	Upper	9 years, Y
Victor	31	M	In a relationship	Professional diploma	12K€	Rented studio	Freelancer/co-op	Digital communication, influencer	Working	4 years, Y
London data set										
Claudia	37	F	Single	Master's	45K£	Flat-share/at friends' and family's	Freelancer	Marketing consultant, public speaker, lecturer	Middle	2 years, Y

Dave	35	M	Married	Master's	50K£	Rented flat	Freelancer	Marketing consultant	Middle	<1 year, Y
Dominic	32	M	Civil union	Master's	35-55K£	At friends'	Zero-hour contract	Front-end web developer	Middle/working	2 years, Y
Ilham	36	F	Single	Doctorate	48K£	Flat-share	Contractor	Adjunct lecturer	Upper	4 years, N
Ines	31	F	Single	Doctorate	48K£	Flat-share	Freelancer	Adjunct lecturer	Middle	6 years, N
Karen	30	F	Single	Master's	27K£	Flat-share	Freelancer/temporary	Volunteer development officer, performance coach	Middle	2 years, Y
Linda	33	F	In a relationship	Bachelor's	65K£	Short-term rentals/at friends' and family's	Entrepreneur/freelancer	Director	Middle	2 years, Y
Mary	30	F	Single	Master's	18-30K£	House-share	Freelancer	Director	Middle	2 years, Y
Oban	37	M	Single	Master's	NA	Coliving	Contractor/freelancer	Behavioral economist	Middle	3 years, Y
Pierre	32	M	In a relationship	Master's	100-120K£	Renting	Freelancer	UX designer	Middle	2 years, Y
Will	34	M	Single	Bachelor's	35-50K£	House-share	Entrepreneur	Director	Working	3 years, Y

[a]Names are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the informants. We chose the pseudonyms to reflect the cultural origin and spirit of the original names as best possible. [b]The labels of job titles, employment conditions, and contracts correspond to those with which the informants identify. [c]We determined social class of origin using informants' reports of their parents' profession and education status. When parents were retired or dead, we used the last profession they occupied. [d]Experience represents the total number of years the informant has spent living the flexible lifestyle. Y (N) denotes that the informant has (has never) had a "traditional," salaried experience.

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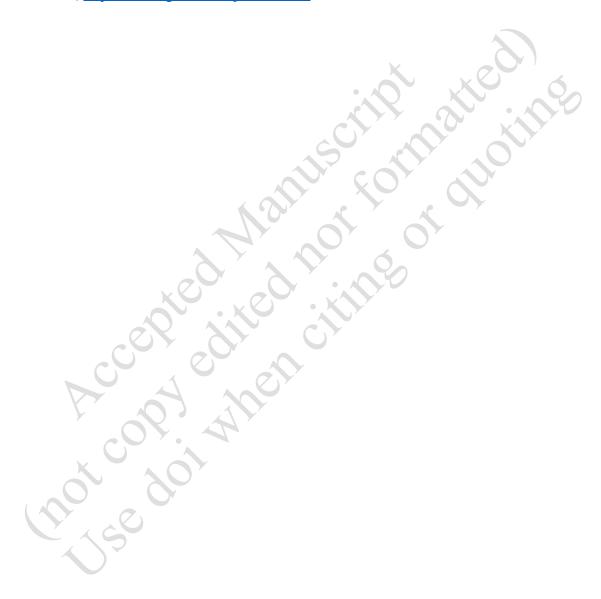   Research*, https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucab038.

TABLE 1 COMPARING NOTIONS OF LIMINALITY

	Traditional view	**Organizational permanent liminality**	**Consumer permanent liminality**	**Chronic consumer liminality**
Key examples	Turner 1969; Van Gennep 1909/1960	Czarniawska and Mazza 2003; Garsten 1999	Appau et al. 2020	This article
Temporality	Fixed end	Never ending	Never ending	Chronicity
Institutional context	Well-defined and stable: small tribe	Well-defined: one or more organizations	Well-defined and stable: Pentecostal church	Liquidified institutions
Ceremony master	Socially appointed (e.g., shaman)	Socially appointed (e.g., human resources or line manager)	Socially appointed (e.g., priest)	None or self-chosen
Transitioning social positions	Certain	Certain	Certain	Uncertain
Nature of transition	Single, linear transition	Single, linear transition	Single, linear transition	Nonlinear, multiple transition

TABLE 2 RESEARCH DATA SOURCES

Technique	Type of data	Data set size	Purpose
Long interviews	28 recorded interviews with flexible consumers, ranging from 45 to 119 minutes (average length 76 minutes)	1107 double-spaced pages of transcripts, 20 sets of projective instruments	To understand the lived experiences, motivations, narratives of the self, and consumption practices of flexible consumers
Archival analysis	Articles from *Forbes, The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *Medium*, and others	635 media articles	To contextualize the lifestyle in market and media discourses
Participant observation	Fieldwork at cohoming, coworking, incubator, and associated events	156 double-spaced pages of field notes, 190 photos	To understand the social space and the phenomenon's boundaries

TABLE 3 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

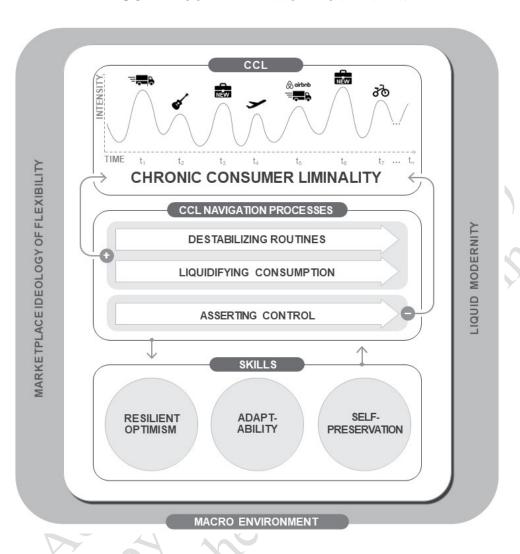| CCL navigation process	Market opportunity	Illustration of strategic implications for product/services
Destabilizing consumption routines	Foster variety seeking and serendipity via products, brands, and experiences Challenge the routinization of your brand's consumption	• Design apps that help and encourage consumers to randomize leisure alternatives • Offer subscription services around hobbies or routines where products/brands change monthly • Offer daily to monthly surprising and novel experiences • Design a location-triggered app that provides reminders to alter leisure activities, workplaces, mealtimes, etc.
Liquidifying consumption	Develop solutions that facilitate downsizing, storing, packing, and transporting of possessions Provide products and services that constitute liquid rather than solid consumption	• Target CCL consumers via access-based services (e.g., sharing and rental options) of various temporalities from hourly to weekly to monthly (rather than annually). • Provide market storage solutions as part of product/service solutions • Facilitate accessibility of hybrid workplaces (e.g., digital platform of coworking places that can be accessed daily to monthly) • Design home products that are easy to resell (e.g., sustains being disassembled/reassembled repetitively) or recycle (e.g., cardboard furniture) • Design functional, minimalistic, and portable digital/tech, clothing, furniture, kitchenware, and other products (e.g., extend camping/traveling gear to everyday and professional use) • Provide recycling or resale solutions to help consumers downsize/circulate their possessions
Asserting control over time and money	Develop consumer competence for resource saving and allocation under conditions of uncertainty	• Communicate roadmaps with goals and guidelines for resource planning • Design gamified planning tools to train novices and build relevant reflexes • Incorporate job finding and skill training as part of product/service solutions

FIGURE 1 CCL FRAMEWORK OVERVIEW

The horizontal axis represents the various temporalities of transitions, lasting from a few days to a few months. The vertical axis represents the level of intensity of liminality.
Icons illustrate the multiple sources of transitions and are representative of brand and product choices from our data.

HEADINGS LIST

1) LITERATURE REVIEW

2) Questioning the Temporality of Liminality: From Temporary to Permanent

2) Reconsidering Extended Forms of Liminality in Liquid Modernity

1) THE FLEXIBLE CONSUMER LIFESTYLE

1) METHOD

1) CHRONIC CONSUMER LIMINALITY (CCL)

2) Characteristics of CCL

2) Ideological Antecedents of CCL

1) CCL NAVIGATION PROCESSES

2) Destabilizing Consumption Routines

2) Liquidifying Consumption

2) Asserting Control over Time and Money

1) LEARNING TO NAVIGATE CCL: FACILITATING SKILLS

2) Resilient Optimism

2) Adaptability

2) Self-Preservation

1) DISCUSSION

2) Contribution to Research on Liminality

2) Consumption in Conditions of CCL

2) Implications for Liquid Consumer Lifestyles and Precarity

2) Managerial Implications

1) APPENDIX

1) REFERENCES