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Bullshit consumption: What lockdowns tell us about work-and-spend lives and care-full alternatives

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Abstract
COVID-19 disrupted 'non-essential' work and consumption, providing an unparalleled opportunity to examine work-and-spend culture, which we do via 44 in-depth interviews that capture experiences and reflections during UK lockdowns. Deploying Graeber's conceptualisation of 'bullshit jobs' and related critiques of consumption, we first consider the possibility that contemporary work-and-spend lifestyles may deny the normative separation of work as worthy toil and consumption as its pleasurable opposite. Within such experience, and in addition to Graeber's bullshit jobs, we find a parallel in bullshit consumption *at work*, *in order to work*, and *because of work*. Yet our findings also highlight that when freed from bullshit, participants engage in more caring practices for the self, others, *and* their possessions. We propose that much of our work-and-spend lives might be bullshit: routines that promise status, virtue, freedom, and pleasure, but feel meaningless, while displacing satisfying experiences of care. We conclude that a focus on subtractive logics – cutting the bullshit! – can activate both new critiques and optimism about societal arrangements.

Keywords
Bullshit, care, consumption, lockdown, work-and-spend

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Introduction

In March 2020, when coronavirus struck and lockdowns were introduced, government advice was to buy only essential goods and undertake only essential work. This revealed tensions between what we need and want to buy, or do, and what we do not. For example, although off-licenses remained open, fashion outlets and mobile phone stores were forced to close, and although news outlets reported 'panic buying' of toilet paper, paracetamol and canned goods, other reporting claimed that the police cautioned people for trying to buy compost or Easter eggs (Lukfin, 2020). Toilet paper, pain killers, beer, wine and whisky *were* apparently essential, while clothes, tech gadgets, gardening and chocolate were not.

Parallel issues emerged relating to work. Low-paid delivery, care and supermarket work were essential, whereas aspirational and high-paid management occupations were furloughed along with jobs in hotels, airlines, restaurants, gyms and cinemas. Much service labour – previously defined as vital to a developed economy – was suddenly apparently unnecessary.

In the context of a global environmental crisis, and so beyond both the react-cope-adapt consumer response of the pandemic itself (Guthrie et al., 2021) and possible policy errors, this also begs the question of why society entertains apparent non-essentiality in the first place. The normative explanation is that these things may not be *essential* but do enhance people's lives. We *can* do without them, but that would make our lives redundant and miserable.

But what if subtracting aspects of work-and-spend culture actually improved people's lives? Drawing on 44 in-depth interviews undertaken during the lockdowns, we seek to better understand what people want from work and consumption, and what they do not, and enabled by Graeber's (2018) conceptualisation of bullshit jobs, we suggest related bullshit consumption. Just as bullshit jobs challenge the normative view of work as necessary and virtuous (Graeber, 2018), related bullshit consumption contrasts with the standard narrative of consumption as the hedonistic, pleasurable opposite of work (Campbell, 1987; Graeber, 2011). This invites us to think of those aspects of life that are not bullshit, and participants' stories reveal care-full alternatives, allowing us to discuss what people might do when not engaged in bullshit cycles of working and consuming.

We now review how research has dealt with changes to work and to consumption during COVID-19, then consider work and consumption hybrids that challenge their separation and opposition. We then consider bullshit jobs and the possibility of bullshit consumption, with care as an alternative to both. We then present our methods and findings, focussing on participants' experiences of and reflections on the absence of bullshit during lockdowns, and the increased presence of care, suggesting that when liberated from bullshit, people may adopt more care-full ways of living.

COVID-19, work, and consumption

It is hard to provide anything other than a selective overview of COVID-19 research, but in doing so, we highlight three things: (1) that work and consumption changed a lot; (2) that issues of care emerged; and (3) that beyond immediate impacts on health, financial hardship, loneliness and stress, studies recognise the possibility of longer-term social change. This sets up our agenda to consider how people experienced the absence of work and consumption as a presence of care, and related reflections on social structures.

COVID-19 provided an opportunity to study societal responses to a significant disruption to human lives including transformations in public and private space, modes of living, operations of work, and global dynamics of capital (Searle et al., 2021). For example, Rose-Redwood et al. (2020)

highlighted the tremendous global efforts of mutual aid and solidarity, suggesting that the result may be a desire for more meaningful and authentic ways of living, beyond material possessions. Focussing on Canada, Abeolenien et al. (2021) further argued that responsibilisation – care for the self and others – emerged in reaction to risks during COVID-19. Similarly, Kulow et al. (2021) revealed how social support and solidarity was manifested by essential workers through personalised consumption practices, and Kwon et al. (2022) further noted how people sought marketplace offerings that connected them to others. Consumer researchers also considered those sectors impacted by COVID-19, noting resilience of household and food spending, and the negative impact on categories such as vacations, luxury goods, restaurants, clothing and cosmetics, with a possible longer-term trend towards an emphasis on 'life and living', rather than the pre-pandemic focus on accumulating material things (Mehta et al., 2020).

Other authors separately emphasised workplace changes. Kniffinet et al. (2021) reviewed the rise in homeworking and virtual teamwork, advising employers to mitigate the resulting loneliness and work-related stress by providing opportunities for social interactions and by 'caring' for their employees, while Slutskaya et al. (2023) observed how waste management workers experienced new recognition as the pandemic surfaced the value of marginalised and stigmatised essential occupations. Alternatively, Hadjisolomou and Simone (2021) showed how front-line managers' decisions *challenged* workers' wellbeing and safety under the umbrella of efficiency and productivity.

The picture is mixed, but along with the significant concerns raised by COVID-19 itself, we can observe changing consumer practices that emphasised care for self and others, and changes in work that focussed on the appreciation of essential work and employee wellbeing (despite possible managerial resistance), along with reflections on the social systems that support both. This provides a context for how we might approach understanding the experiences of people in the United Kingdom who we interviewed.

Work and consumption hybrids

The emphasis on wellbeing and care seen in COVID-19 research can be compared with the dominant assumptions about work and consumption that highlight working hard and buying stuff. Theory tells us that work is obligatory but virtuous, takes place in the workplace during working hours, and is rewarded based on its value (Graeber, 2018), whereas consumption is voluntary and pleasurable, occurs outside the workplace, in free time, and is paid for based on both the utility and pleasure it affords (Campbell, 1987). We too easily assume that we must work harder, so we can then buy more of what we need and want for a good life (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2020). Although this is normalised in political narratives tied to economic growth, such logic is problematic when the lockdowns are considered: those working the hardest were not the most materially rewarded, and, as we shall see, the absence of consumption did not necessarily diminish people's quality of life. This suggests a need to reconsider the role or work and consumption, and their interrelatedness in people's lives.

Indeed, Coleman et al. (2021: 206) note that consumer research has 'tended to artificially separate consumption and production spheres' and call for more research that connects the two. One way to look at this – borrowing from Latour's (2012) metaphor – is to recognise that we have never been workers or consumers, because even as such subject-positions have been theoretically detached, we have been confronted with hybrids that challenge or deny such separation. We might think of at least four such hybrids: (1) *prosumption*, where companies work with consumers who provide intellectual and promotional ideas to co-produce value (Cova et al., 2015; Ritzer and

Jurgenson, 2010); (2) *consumer labour*, where production work is passed onto consumers who do it for free, for example in IKEA's flat-pack model, although Dujarier (2016) has also observed similar labours within manufacturing, service and tourism sectors; (3) *consumption work*, required to buy, consume and dispose of goods, including researching options, collecting, unpacking and preparing goods, maintaining and repairing things, then eventually recycling or disposing of them, high-lighting just how much of daily life revolves around 'consumption' activities that ensure corporate profits without hedonistic pleasures (Glucksmann, 2015); and (4) *consumption of work*, where workers immerse themselves in customer-centric logics and practices that invite corporate iden-tification (Chertkovskaya and Loacker, 2016), and where meaning is produced and consumed via employee branding associations (Gabriel et al., 2015).

Such hybridity highlights the interrelatedness of work and consumption. If we give up metaphors of 'using up' value to describe pleasurable consumption (Graeber, 2011), and definitions of work as its paid opposite that creates value (Glucksmann, 2015), and instead ask what people think is valuable, important, or essential in their lives, this might suggest alternative ways of understanding how society is or could be structured. In short, what we have come to assume as opposites may be understood as different parts of the capitalist structuring of everyday life that were challenged by lockdown measures, which seemed to simultaneously suggest that aspects of work and consumption may not be essential, at the same time as inviting people to reflect on how they want to spend their time and money.

Bullshit

The essentiality of work and consumption is taken for granted in public policy: productive em-ployment ensures economic growth through subsequent increases in consumption as a measure of social progress. A good life is one where we maximise work to buy everything we need and desire, or risk being considered a failure (see Bauman, 2007). Oddly, what seems to be essential is a life divided between long hours of paid work, followed by a frenzied consumption of goods and services, which we still need to do work on (Glucksmann, 2015). As Graeber (2018) suggests, this is not what was promised by years of technological production efficiencies, and indeed would have seemed very strange a few hundred years ago. The point of increased productivity was once a *reduction* in working hours. Yet, with some irony, Graeber notes that not only are we working *more* hours, but society pays proportionally less for the most necessary and meaningful work, while many work in bullshit jobs which do not need to exist. Technology has neither reduced work, nor improved the labour value work that cannot be automated. Instead, we have highly paid unnecessary jobs, while underpaying for essential labour (Graeber, 2018).

We might immediately suspect a parallel in consumption. Why, given that technology has massively advanced production efficiency, have we ended up with many unable to afford the essentials, yet a society that relies on fast-food, fast-fashion, disposable furniture, short-lived tech, growth in luxury markets, and a burgeoning experiential and service economy? Why do people work meaningless jobs in order to buy such things, especially given that they have so little leisure time to do so?

Graeber (2018) argues that a socio-historic explanation for bullshit lies in the religious belief in work as the purpose of life, and so necessary, redemptive and virtuous. Self-worth and dignity have become tied to jobs because of historic moralising about work. Capitalism has then recreated structures of labour that resemble feudal hierarchies, rather than efficiencies that might render labour unnecessary, while a failure to engage with work remains stigmatised (and punished through public policy). For Graeber (2018), bullshit jobs therefore maintain status hierarchies as senior managers

accumulate subordinates to improve their competitive status and power. This is not to suggest a direct relationship between pay and pointlessness, but rather that the link between essential and meaningful tasks, and their financial reward has given way to bullshit jobs (although Graeber speculates that virtuous work has become seen as autotelic, and so does not require high pay). This is a problem because Graeber (2018) observes that bullshit work reduces care in favour of instrumentality and cynicism, describing it as a scar on our collective souls. As workers *themselves* report their work as pointless and even demoralising, bullshit is not an external moral position on certain jobs, however, but rather a phenomenological one. So, if some or much work is no longer virtuous or meaningful, why do so many put up with it? The answer should lie in consumption.

Consumption has been described by Campbell (1987) as the Romantic alternative to the Protestant work ethic, giving us consumption as the location of our desires, only requiring work to pay for them. For example, just as managers seek symbols of status at work (Graeber, 2018), the wealthy have long sought more extravagant consumption to differentiate themselves from others (Veblen, 1899). Compare the excess of managerial personal assistance and office space with the same structure in business class travel and expensive restaurants. An implication is that any assumed connection between value and essentially is long absent as desire (for status) becomes the most valued attribute of goods and services.

Bullshit jobs might therefore be justifiable in a teleological way if those at the top of hierarchies experience an abundance of pleasure in their lives, but this does not seem to be the case (see Csikzentmihalyi, 1999). Just as the apparent virtue of hard work has given way to bullshit, the assumption that consumption remains pleasurable is also open to debate. As Shankar et al. (2006) note, whereas marketing may once have increased standards of living, more recently even choice itself may be making people miserable through a permanent sense of lacking. So, work *should* be virtuous, and consumption *should* be hedonistic, but it turns out that increasingly they are not, even as those promises of virtue and hedonism remain as legitimising discourses in emerging work-consumption hybrids.

However, there is always a risk in imposing definitions of virtue, needs, or desires resulting in a moralising discourse on right or wrong behaviours. Elaborating on the financial crisis, for example, Bradshaw and Ostberg (2019) note how consumers were blamed for mismanaging their finances in the pursuit of their desires, and responsibilised in the refocussing on austerity. Similarly, Aboelenien et al. (2021) noted how responsibility for the common good was passed from policy makers to corporations, then to individual consumers during COVID-19. Governments and corporations further their own interests when behaviour is moralised in this way.

Nevertheless, Baudrillard (1968) has argued that from the 1960s consumption became individualistic and atomistic, eroding social solidarity as productive forces paved the way to consumer culture as the main means of communicating status to others. Fromm (2013) further observed that a psychological move towards 'having' (the desire to possess things and others) replaced 'being' (the recognition of the self and others), but also made us miserable. Bauman (2007) concludes that consumption has therefore become our main 'occupation', but that we are also all commodities as a resource to further others' goals. Care is thus replaced by instrumental convenience and manipulation. Like work-and-consumption hybrids, such critique somewhat overshadows consumption as the pleasurable other that justifies work.

Before we conclude this section, however, we might recognise counterarguments to this 'consumption makes us miserable commodities' conceptualisation of our work-and-spend culture. Perhaps most notably, Miller (2010) has argued that things themselves are not the problem, and that our relations to others and ourselves are in fact captured in the material things we accumulate, such that our capacity to care is seen in both people and stuff. As we shall see, this is an important caveat,

reminding us that experiences of bullshit do not equate to more general critiques of our consumer culture.

Graeber's (2018) use of the term bullshit provides an accessible, contemporary reference point for activity in society that is worse than non-essential as it is alienating and demoralising. Yet he neglects the role of consumption, and we already know that work and consumption are inextricably linked and increasingly blurred. The pandemic confirmed Graeber's idea that the low-paid nurse, delivery driver, care worker, or shelf filler are essential to keeping society going, while an army of well-paid middle managers may be harmlessly furloughed. How people feel about what they can and cannot buy in a lockdown may therefore also tell us about bullshit consumption in contemporary work-and-spend lifestyles.

Care

Bullshit is a problem because it displaces care (Graeber, 2018). Although the concept of care has oscillated between neoliberal manifestos, commercialised self-care campaigns, and community-driven practices that strengthen eroded webs of social and environmental welfare (Hamington and Flower, 2021), the global pandemic further surfaced an apparent global crisis of care (Chatzidakis et al., 2020a, 2020b; Rose-Redwood et al., 2020). Although corporations adopted 'caring' campaigns that blurred the boundaries between essential work and their own responsibilities, while demonstrating very little care for their front-line employees (Hadjisolomou and Simone, 2021), the pandemic alerted us to the interconnected nature of care (Chatzidakis et al., 2020a), including aspects of consumption. It is almost as if once non-essentiality was prohibited, attention (re)turned to care.

The call to re-consider care in society is made by Chatzidakis et al. (2020b) in a manifesto to put it at the heart of politics instead of the current emphasis on individual desires. This includes a transformation of how we organise work through co-operatives, localism, and nationalisation, and the expansion of caring places through the reclamation of public spaces. It also puts care at the centre of our relationship with the natural world. Chatzidakis and Shaw (2018) further recognise that caring attitudes are not converted into action due to structural barriers dictated by neoliberal agendas, that is, that our work-and-spend culture prohibits care, and that this needs further investigation. The emerging care agenda is therefore more than an additional critique of over-consumption because it insists on political change. Indeed, Graeber's (2018) proposed solution to bullshit jobs is also political. If people are secured by a universal basic income, and so not forced into bullshit jobs, they might do something more meaningful, and caring instead.

We have therefore put forward three positions. Firstly, that we should not assume work and consumption as opposites – virtuous toil and its hedonistic reward – because doing so misdirects experiential evaluations of both. Secondly, if aspects of work can be bullshit, so might aspects of consumption. And thirdly, although bullshit may represent contemporary neoliberal social arrangements, these can be changed for something more caring.

Methods

We adopted a qualitative, interpretivist approach to understand how life was experienced during the first two UK lockdowns. We recruited participants via social media networks and personal networks, inviting people to talk about their experiences of lockdowns, and placed no other restrictions on participation. Before conducting interviews, we reflected on our own behaviours at the time, in particular our lack of attention to shopping other than that related to lockdown circumstances (e.g.

food and entertainment), how we missed meeting with family, but also how we did not miss going into work. We were then careful to avoid preferencing *our* experiences, bracketing them in favour of what was significant to participants. Like Graeber (2018), we suggest that if listened to, people can make their own judgements on what they need or should care about in work and consumption, and we can learn from these.

We conducted 44 interviews with 26 people, ranging from 35 to 130 min and resulting in 54.7 h of data. Eighteen participants were interviewed twice, first in May or June 2020, and then again later in November 2020. Fourteen participants were female, and ages ranged from 22 to 72 years. All participants lived in the United Kingdom, some worked, including from home, while others were furloughed. Occupations included teacher, management consultant, charity worker, chef, engineer, strategy officer, and therapist, while two were retired and three were students (two final year undergraduates and one PhD). Interviews took place using video messaging software, were recorded with participants' permission, and then transcribed verbatim. Institutional ethical approval was granted before data generation began.

Initial questions related to participants' living arrangements, how they felt about COVID-19, and how they spent their days. Later questions considered what they eat, what they do with their time, and whether they have experienced missing something. We then asked about shopping and how they felt about any changes in what they bought. At the end of the interview, participants were asked to reflect on how their lives had changed, and if there were any aspects of their lives they would not like to return to. Participants showed us their homes and gardens on video, including things they bought, and renovations they made. They also talked about their careers and shared reflections about themselves, others, and society. We allowed participants to direct the conversation to any aspect of their lives whenever they wanted to.

An inductive thematic analysis was then conducted. The research team independently read transcripts and descriptively coded the data, for example, noting specific activities (cooking, cleaning, exercise, videogaming, gardening, renovating, or working), reflections on what was bought and for what reason (food, games, clothes, and for hobbies, for work, as gifts), and how the day was re-structured (getting up late, not commuting, not going shopping, cooking more, exercise, reading). We noted that participants spontaneously connected changes in patterns of consumption with changes in work arrangements as they expressed how COVID-19 had impacted their lives. This led the research team to consider studies on work-and-spend culture and non-essentiality, and we drew from a range of texts on work and on consumption, including Graeber's (2018) 'Bullshit Jobs: A Theory', to explore our data further.

For many people, the lockdown caused significant distress, and essential workers often faced dangerous labour conditions, however, our participants generally described a 'good' lockdown, at least in the sections of the interviews that we deal with here. Although some knew friends or relatives that had been hospitalised and expressed various concerns about the pandemic, including financial worries, our focus was not on these stories. We acknowledge that our narratives therefore represent more privileged experiences from mostly financially secure people in the UK, and that these will differ greatly from those in precarious work and living arrangements. Although we did not seek out any particular group, our participants might be described as secure working-class and lower middle-class. We did not therefore capture all that happened to people during COVID-19, and do not want to deny the considerable hardships that many experienced. Rather, we restrict our interpretation to what stories from lockdown can tell us about non-essentiality and care-full alternatives. In doing that, we further acknowledge that the 'experiment' did not create perfect conditions in the removal of non-essential work and consumption because lockdowns focused on social distancing. Nevertheless, the conditions were sufficient to allow an exploration of work-and-spend lifestyles and their alternatives.

Findings

We first present what participants told us about their work-and-spend lifestyles that suggest bullshit, noting the spontaneous inseparability of work and consumption in stories related to consumption *at work*, *in order to work*, and *because of work*. We then consider how this led to narratives related to care that included *care for the self, care for others*, and *care for things*.

Bullshit consumption

Despite concern about the impact of COVID-19 on friends, family and those directly affected by the virus, participants also expressed positive statements about their lives during the lockdowns, such as: '*my life is a lot better because I'm at home*', '*my life has become much easier since the lockdown started*'. Work was a key reference: '*that's what the lockdown meant for me, the relief that I did not have to go in anymore*'. They also noted that: '*there is much more time for reflection, to think about what I really want to do*'. This led to spontaneous contemplations about the intersection between work and consumption. Indeed, we noted that as we only asked about what they had been doing, connections between work and consumption emerged naturally. For example, Emma, a 29-year-old administrator, relates stories about not having to work, and shops being closed, before reflecting:

> We were always in such a rush. We don't have the time to think about really how we shop. Now we've got more time to live life. We spend so much time working to aspire to buy a big house and have a nice garden. But when do we ever get to sit and do anything in that big house and nice garden when we're too busy working and having other people look after our kids?

'We' seems to refer to societal norms as Emma expresses a feeling that people work to buy 'nice' things that represent success but may not benefit from them. As she considers the irony that people never have time to enjoy these status symbols, she notes the impact that such goals have on familial relationship, specifically, care for children.

Participants described their lives before the pandemic as *'rushed'*, *'on hold'*, *'behind',* and that lockdown gave them permission *'to catch up'* with *'things they put on the back burner'*, or to *'reset'* their lives. They also connected work and consumption in their narratives through recognition that they had *more* money because they bought less (despite reduced pay in many cases). Three such connections between working and spending stood out: (1) the absence of consumption *at work*; (2) things that were no longer consumed *in order to work*; and (3) not having to buy things that compensate for working long hours, or *because of work*.

Firstly, participants told us that they do not miss buying coffee, snacks, or lunch *at work*. Diana, a 45-year-old teacher and artist, gives this example:

> Going for coffee…it was such a big part of my life. But then, it's evaporated. It's like, I forgot about it. Marks and Spencer, which is next door to my studio, they had a little cafe […] If I was set up at work, I would just nip out, and I would get a nice coffee from Marks and Spencer. And so, the cafe is closed, and I haven't missed it.

Others identified similar changes such as not buying snacks, or coffee on the way to meetings, or not lunching with colleagues, or buying food to eat at their desk. Participants further reflected on how much such spending add ups, yet how pointless it now seemed. Consider this in context of satisfying desires (Campbell, 1987). Consumption was determined by the proximity to work,

convenience and habit, and its evaporation might suggest that both 'need', or 'want' overstates the justification for it. Without work, it became pointless and forgotten.

Secondly, such reflection extended to *consumption in order to work* as a much larger category. This included the commute itself, and participants told stories of money saved on fuel and maintenance for private cars (and frustration at 'pointless' car leases and loans), on parking fees, and on train or bus tickets. Participants further recognised that they had not previously considered such consumption, accepting it as a necessary *part of work*. Its absence was suddenly experienced as a 'benefit'. This again deviates from accounts of consumption as a form of hedonism enabled by work (see Graeber, 2011). Yet participants experienced anxiety that such consumption may be forced on them again. Rather than longing to consume, they fear they will have to:

> *I really would not want to see the morning rush hour come back. Uh, I don't think there's any need for it* […] *unfortunately, I think we are kind of held captive to that, it's just become such a normal part of life. It's very difficult to break away from it, you know, even if we'd probably prefer to.* (David, chief strategy officer)

David experiences such consumption as obligatory – literally captive – and the lockdown as therefore counterintuitively liberating. Similar narratives extended into clothes, and consumption related to appearances:

> *I've made a very big point of not buying any clothes at all, and really rethinking 5–6 times whether to buy anything new at all* […] *When I would go into the office, and I would see my colleagues, I wanted to make sure that I wasn't wearing the same outfits.* (Andrea, a 36-year-old IT support engineer)

> *I normally have my hair done every 4–6 weeks* […] *mainly because you're going out there in business* […] *I'm quite conscious of that. Actually, I have been so much more relaxed about it being at home. You know, you haven't had to wear face makeup.* (Antonia, a 58-year-old management consultant)

Both Andrea's and Antonia's roles are cited in Graeber's (2018) stories about bullshit jobs. As neither obviously require specific clothes or hair (e.g. a uniform, PPE and hair cut for safety or hygiene), we might also label such consumption obligations as bullshit. Andrea cleared out her overflowing wardrobe of outfits bought only to impress colleagues. Antonia stops getting her hair done now that she is not meeting clients and colleagues face-to-face. The aesthetic labour of self-commodification and grooming in/for the workplace has been documented (Mears, 2014), and our participants recognised such work as meaningless, or even anxiety-inducing. Despite its prevalence, consuming *in order to* work has been largely silent in studies on work-consumption hybrids. Whereas Gluckman (2015) notes how people must do work in order to consume, here we see how they also need to consume in order to work.

Thirdly, participants note even more extensive forms of consumption that compensates for time spent commuting and at work, or *because* of work. Anne, a 66-year-old self-employed tour-guide, explains:

> *What and how we eat changed totally during lockdown. Before, we were, I would say 95% down to 'ping' meals* […]. *Ping, ping, ping! So, one ate at the table, one in front of television* […] *It developed, this stupid eating ping meals* […], *so my husband was still in the police force, I was working tour guiding, and* [daughter's name] *was at school. So, he was working shifts, I was working horrible times, morning times, afternoons, whatever. And I came home from school at 4:30 during the week. And there*

was no set time, nobody was there for a meal and then, well, it developed into 'ping meals, and then it stuck to 'ping' meals.

The lockdowns restructured food consumption practices that were previously defined by work. The burgeoning ready meal market presents itself as satisfying consumers' need to save time, and potentially their lack of skill in preparing meals, but makes absent that both are a result of working practices. The whole 'convenience industry' (including childcare and housekeeping) has developed to ostensibly facilitate the life of time-starved workers, allowing them to work longer hours unencumbered, even if, as Graeber (2018) suggests, some or much of that work feels pointless. Freed from their work shifts, Anne's family modified their meal prepping, consumption, and inter-family socialisation practices (see Yodanis et al., 2015) by cooking and eating together. James, a 33-year-old property manager, expresses something similar with cleaning:

I used to pay a cleaner to come and clean once every 2-3 weeks, which I don't do any more […] I can wash and clean the bathroom myself […] And I realised that I enjoy cleaning, and the truth is that I do a better job. You clean your house with passion, no one else can do it the way you do it by going in every single corner. It helped me rediscover my house […] I noticed we use a lot of chemicals, and I wish we could have some natural products […] This is my next research, looking at organic cleaning materials.

Housekeeping is routinely outsourced in middle-class households with high working hours (Cornelisse-Vermaat et al., 2013). For James, this was normal, yet he was surprised that he enjoys cleaning his home, feels he does a better job at it, and sees it as an opportunity to learn about natural cleaning products. James's reflection also recognises a hierarchy of labour consistent with Graeber's bullshit jobs. Given his middle-class status and the low cost of cleaning labour, James 'should not' do it himself, yet he gets meaning from it. We noted, with some irony, how little James talked about his job, and certainly without the same enthusiasm. Anne and James experienced prior routine consumption as suddenly unnecessary when they spent less time at work. Just as significantly, both spontaneously started to care for themselves and others in their new approaches to cooking and cleaning.

Our final illustration takes this idea further. Francesca, a parent-child group director – a job that exists because parents work long hours – enjoys being at home during lockdown, experiencing it as somehow better than a holiday:

I spend my time with my family, so it's much nicer […] I feel a bit guilty really, because my life is so much nicer than it used to be. It's like the summer holidays, really. But even less pressure than the summer holidays because you don't have to go out anywhere [...] I don't really think of myself as being in a lockdown, you know, a lockdown sounds like someone's locked. I just think of myself as just being on a summer holiday.

Other participants articulate similar feelings suggesting that if they lived as they did during the lockdown, they would not need to take a holiday away, yet consistent with the idea of work as virtuous, Francesca experiences guilt. An implication is that holidays exist to compensate for long hours at work. Participants similarly noted that going out and taking a leisure break, are also responses to spending so much time at work but become irrelevant – bullshit even – if work-as-toil is not required. Holidays may therefore highlight an absence of leisure in people's daily lives, as a period of consumption squeezed between work commitments, which when reflected on, is not necessarily as pleasurable as just having more time at home.

Care-full consumption

With more free time, participants told us about the books that they read, crafts and activities they re-embraced, and newfound interests in DIY. They either let their hair grow or cut it themselves. They wore only comfortable clothes. They continued with skincare but stopped wearing makeup. They told stories of appreciating what they have, and realising that they may not need more: *'this whole thing has been quite an eye-opener; you don't actually need that much'* (Antonia). They reflected on their possessions, noting a new emphasis on what these mean to them. This is significant because their narrative is not anti-stuff, quite the opposite, they suggest that stuff can and should be meaningful, but often is not because they don't have time for it (cf. Miller, 2010). Participants revealed what we might refer to as 'care-full consumption', that is: (1) *caring for things*, both existing and new possessions; (2) *caring for the self*, with an emphasis on skills, pleasure, and wellbeing; and (3) *caring for others* through both actions and gifts.

Firstly, as participants tidy and clean their homes, they come to discover things that need attention and start to care for them. Diana explains:

Who needs to repair scrubbing brush? Nobody, but I did. I really enjoy that you can't order things, or you can't order everything you want, like with DIY and stuff like that. [My husband] *and I wanted to build a raised bed. So, we broke apart a pallet and we built the raised bed out of reclaimed wood.*

George, a 44-year-old chef, provides another example:

I was fixing the deck, I got a new roof for the shed […] *there were a lot of things that you needed to fix, and when I was working, it was difficult because in the restaurant you know when you start, but you don't know when you finish. So, you don't have time to make a schedule to do your own things at home.*

Home improvement and other DIY activities were not considered chores (unpleasant consumption work), but rather an opportunity to engage in work as a meaningful activity (Brayham, 2015). Diana tells us how she gained satisfaction from repairing an old scrubbing brush that would have been simply discarded before lockdown and replaced with a new one, consistent with the idea of work on cleaning, repairing, and maintaining as the creation of meaningful possessions (Belk et al., 1989). George tells us about his work around the house that he could not previously do because of his job. Participants use the time saved from not working to reflect on what their things mean to them. Consistent with Miller's (2010) emphasis on the importance of material things in people's lives, they care for even the most mundane items because they have time to.

Shopping did not stop, however, but the emphasis is different. For example, even when apparently luxurious purchases are made, they are made with care. Anne explains:

The kettle was first the first item we bought during the lockdown. I said: 'Sugar, I'm not doing my normal shopping. I can spend money on a kettle' […] *it plays tunes to me in the morning, which is quite cute. It's one of these SMEG kettles. It can change the temperature as well, and it's playing tunes in the morning, which makes me quite happy, to be honest* […] *That is the kettle, look at it, it makes music! I would have not normally bought that expensive kettle, but that was really lockdown time, yeah, I treated myself.*

For Anne, the lockdown meant that an otherwise mundane kitchen appliance purchase becomes enchanted. It is carefully considered, and understood as a treat to the self, something that brings her pleasure. This is significant because it highlights how careful consumption does not deny hedonism

and so bullshit consumption is not an externally defined moral judgement on a sector, or of a type of extravagant or wasteful consumption. Indeed, a characteristic of bullshit consumption is that it is *not* hedonistic (contains no care for the self). Anne has both time and money to buy and enjoy an expensive designer musical kettle.

Secondly then, with more time, participants started to cook and garden, and in the process, discovered that they were caring for the self, gaining pleasure from the work that was otherwise paid for in the service economy:

> *I don't waste anything, so it's a little bit more mindful, I'm a little bit more organised, but then I've got more time, so I've got a lot more time to plan the food, so it's much easier to then make interesting food. We're having wraps tonight.* (Francesca)

> *When I was working in London every day, I didn't cook very much at all. My husband used to, sometimes we would go out and eat. Certainly, in this lockdown period, I've done loads of cooking and experimented with stuff* […] *I am experimenting with cooking and enjoying cooking because I have time.* (Antonia)

Others learnt a new language, or how to play a musical instrument. Adults report playing games together. Parents played videogames, including with their children. They read more, got fit and focussed on self-improvement.

> *I've been focussing a lot on self-improvement, on self-help books, and on my mental health. And part of that means reading a lot of non-fiction books.* (Andrea)

> *I've been running a lot, like I've been averaging like 25 km a week, so it's been really good* […] *And I don't see any stopping it, because I really enjoy it. I'm losing weight as well.* (Arthur, a 28-year-old consultant)

In contrast to the demoralising commute, seemingly pointless office clothes, convenient ping meals, and even recuperative holidays, the emphasis is on 'hedonistic' *self-care*. Note how Andrea focuses on herself (not how she appears to others, or on her status). Arthur further takes pleasure from being active.

Thirdly, participants reported *care for others*, not only through their cooking and playful interactions, but they volunteer to do things for strangers and donate what they do not need. People report buying 'thoughtful' gifts for friends and relatives (they have time to think about what others might want), and again take pleasure in doing so, or especially enjoy giving their time and skill:

> *I've offered free relaxation sessions* […] *I've got too many seedlings, so I'm planning to put those in little pots and leave them outside, and let people take them.* (Francesca)

> *They're* [neighbours] *giving away blenders, they're giving away bike helmets, whatever extra they have.* (James)

Although participants explain that they miss bars, restaurants and coffee shops, this is presented in the context of it being where they meet others, that is, they recognise that it is the pleasure of social interaction that is desired, not the drinks. The holiday away *was* mentioned as being missed during lockdown, but with the emphasis being time with others. George sums up his feelings:

Maybe we learn to be better human beings after this in terms of relationships, and how we act towards each other, and how we care about the environment. We've been dicks, not respecting people, a lot of selfishness lately. Everything is about Me, Me, Me, I don't care about the rest, I don't care about the environment. I feel like probably some people can change their point of view after this, you know, being a little bit more responsible about what you do. I hope that if that is happening, it is going to be a very good future. Maybe people have time to think about what we need to do for a sustainable world. Sustainable in every single aspect, not just the environment. Also, about work, how we're working until now is not sustainable. We are destroying ourselves.

George's reflection is not about externally imposed responsibilisation as way for corporations to pass the buck onto consumers, but rather it is about taking on responsibility for others. Whereas responsibilisation adds to the burden of what people should do, George indicates a *subtractive logic*: a desire to remove the reasons why people do not care, seen in work as well as selfish over-consumption. Reflection also leads to a resentment of any return to normal. Francesca says:

At least for now, people can see that caring value, and the thinking of other people […] It is very hard to change, and I think the political structures, the economic structures, are so ingrained […] Um, caring isn't rewarded. If you're a nurse, if you're a cleaner in a hospital, you could hardly be doing a more important job, really. Well, you'll get paid basic minimum wage, and you won't be valued at all. Your status will be very low in society. But somebody who runs a company who is helping to destroy the planet will get paid gazillions of pounds.

Francesca recognises the problem that Graeber (2018) articulates in terms of the inverse relationship between care-full work and remuneration and seems to intuitively sense the need for political change. Reflection produces a transformatory imagining of what might be possible:

Do we all just want to be constantly busy and in a rush, and always thinking about work before anything else? So, it [the pandemic] *has brought out some of the kindness and qualities that we would like to have as a society away from this individualism, or capitalism, towards small community, awareness and caring.* (Emma, 29-years-old, administrator and community activist)

So, I think people would have a lot more time and a lot less pressure if they didn't have to constantly work to maintain what they have. If they had less and shared more, then they wouldn't need to [work]. (Mike, 31-years-old geography teacher)

Emma and Mike draw the same conclusion: that they (and everyone) might be better off working less, buying less, and caring more. Participants expressed their desire to work less and put care at the heart of society (Chatzidakis et al., 2020a). We might see this as a subtractive logic that can be contrasted with the calls to work harder to buy more.

Discussion

We now discuss: (1) the relationship between work and bullshit consumption; (2) care-full consumption as the opposite of bullshit; and (3) implications for our work-and-spend lifestyles.

Bullshit consumption

Graeber (2018) notes how bullshit jobs do not satisfy the Protestant ethic that legitimises work, resulting in the potential for a humiliating, ersatz existence. In contrast, bullshit consumption does not satisfy the Romantic ethic either (Campbell, 1987), resulting in feelings that it is obligatory, yet adds little meaning to life. If bullshit work is the experience of the absence of virtue (self-sacrifice for the sake of others), bullshit consumption is the absence of pleasure (hedonism) including as care for self, others, or one's possessions. Both can be understood as activities that do little more than satisfy capitalist structures, while displacing care. For example, the nurse, or teacher *may* gain meaning through caring for others (virtuous work), but risk an inability to care for family, or for things, through the bullshit consumption that comes from having little time. Alternatively, a bullshit office job may mean a lack of care for self or others at work (an absence of virtue), even if it allows for care of self or things (pleasurable consumption) outside work. For some or many though, life may be structured through both bullshit work and bullshit consumption and reflections during lockdowns expressed concern that pre-pandemic life was dominated by bullshit *'worksumption'*.

Bullshit consumption therefore emerges from the collapse of the disciplinary separation of work and consumption in the structuring of life through work-and-spend cycles. People do not just do various forms of 'free' labour as consumers (Cova et al., 2015; Glucksmann, 2015; Mardon et al., 2018; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010), but consume goods and services as an obligatory and integral part of their working lives. People recognise it as meaningless, often frustrating, sometimes un-healthy, and especially wasteful.

A criticism of Graeber's position is that people might report a job as bullshit because they do not understand what it contributes to society (all jobs *are* virtuous, but people may not understand their value). That is a harder argument to make about bullshit consumption. Would we say that although participants *think* that wearing a suit to travel on the tube to buy an expensive coffee and sandwich, while a stranger cares for their children, who they feed a ping meal to when they get home, is bullshit, all this *is* actually a source of pleasure, but they just do not realise it? Reports of bullshit consumption seem to provide good evidence for the broader existence of bullshit in social ar-rangements. No doubt it would be possible to both refine and extend our initial understanding of bullshit in consumption on this basis (there may be a lot more bullshit out there).

Such framing can be considered in the context of the multi-billion-pound efforts by corporations to insert themselves in consumer lives despite persistent complaints about the negative impact of our consumer society (Baudrillard, 1968; Bauman, 2007; Fromm, 2013). When lockdowns removed both the burden of work (and going into work), *and* most promotional communications, the veil over our over-consuming and over-working lifestyles lifted. It is even possible that the more expensive forms of bullshit consumption require and justify the highly paid jobs that Graeber (2018) suggests are often bullshit. The focus on societal hierarchies therefore means that although those at the bottom may struggle with bullshit worksumption, even those higher up may recognise its futility. A tragedy of the middle-classes then is that their social status may still deny them opportunities to care.

Care-full consumption

The second contribution is therefore to expand on the idea of care as what emerges if you subtract the bullshit that takes up so much of people's time and energy. *Care-full* consumption is different from the *care for* appearances seen in descriptions of bullshit consumption of clothes, cars and makeup as part of the structuring of our lives around jobs. People intuitively know what is not

bullshit, and when it is removed, they may move towards lifestyles that may seem like 'downshifting', or 'voluntary simplicity' (Elgin, 1981), or activities such as recycling, or repurposing (Wheeler and Glucksmann, 2015). But a care-full life is also not the same thing as a frugal, or austere one. Unlike moralising calls for simple ways of living and the abandonment of 'wasteful' luxury goods, our interpretation suggests allowing more time and/or money for things that bring meaning into people's lives by removing bullshit.

Participant reflections are also consistent with calls to place care at the centre of policy (Chatzidakis et al., 2020b), but more aligned with care at a local-level, or even a sort of anarchic care (consistent with Graeber's politics) that rejects the need for government or market structuring of care in society. Participants cook meals from fresh (without legislation on ultra-processed food), fix old things (without legislation on a right to repair) and learn new skills (without recourse to an apprenticeship levy). Somewhat ironically, just as the market does not want to pay for meaningful work (Graeber, 2018), consumers may not actually need to pay much for care-full consumption, even if it involves the odd luxury kettle. Whereas bullshit consumption may be wasteful of both resources and people's lives, care-full consumption is meaningful, characterised by a focus on agency/skill, freedom from the obligation, and especially that which is relational and pleasurable. Such a position resonates with growing voices that call for the adoption of practices that contribute to compassionate wellbeing and resilient communities (Chatzidakis et al., 2020a).

Return to bullshit?

Although the narratives participants provided made sense during lockdowns, as many of our participants feared when 'normality' was re-imposed, prior practices regained their legitimacy. We cannot 'blame' people for doing nothing more than living within the logics of the institutions in which their agency is bound. Lockdowns only temporarily foregrounded the logics of care and work-and-spend culture has returned with full force. As Chatzidakis et al. (2020a) highlight, capitalism is antagonistic to care, because care - as expressed in our data - may deny profit.

Yet care-full consumption did not result from normal and ongoing approaches to external consciousness-raising activities, or nudging, coercing, or compelling consumers into sustainable practices. Indeed, many calls for sustainability are either *prohibitive* (insisting that we do not buy, or use plastic, or take flights), *substitutive* (demanding we buy something different and more sustainable, such as electric vehicles, or plant-based 'meat'), or even *additive* (asserting that we work to build more windfarms, solar panels and electric vehicle charging infrastructures). In contrast, *subtractive logics* suggest the removal of bullshit that people do not want, allowing time for care to emerge. Such subtraction has the further benefit of increased wellbeing and standards of living, even if it shrinks the economy through less work-and-spend. It is therefore consistent with the idea of degrowth (Demaria et al., 2013) and inherently political, but should not be read as a justification of austerity for the many, while unsustainable hierarchies are maintained, including through the co-opting of careful consumption as a new Bourdieusian mode of status distinction (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020). The middle-class may in fact be amongst the strongest advocates of cutting bullshit from their lives.

We have therefore expanded the political language of care by defining bullshit as something that displaces it. We do not need to be anti-work or anti-consumption to assert the benefits of care, just anti-bullshit. The political call is to 'cut the bullshit in society'. Although we should not overstate any changes resulting from participants' lockdown experiences, some did achieve a transformatory imagination that captured alternatives to work-and-spend lifestyles (cf. Bauman's 2007 loss of imagination). Participants did not wish for *more* work, or *more* consumption, or even for *more*

sustainable consumption, or even a better balance between work and consumption – for example, in calls for a 4-day-week (Laker and Roulet, 2019) - but for *less* of the parts of work and consumption that are bullshit, that dictated their unsustainable work-and-spend patterns, and that prevent the positive changes they have experienced from continuing once 'back to normal'. The removal of bullshit, just like the care manifesto, requires changes to existing social structures, for example, Graeber's (2018) suggestion of universal basic income.

The pressure to return to the office can be explained by relationship between work-and-spend and economic growth (Quinio, 2022). Yet companies are facing pressures to maintain remote work (O'Connor, 2022), and 'quiet quitting' has become a positive meme. Lockdowns revealed how capitalism structures daily life, but also its vulnerabilities. The virus reassembled life around *care*, and reflections on this allowed people to imagine what might be possible in their lives. Although perceptions towards working hours and leisure time have been previously discussed (Donkin, 2010), participants' accounts revealed that bullshit is not a natural way of acting in the world. Yet if it can be reduced, people would still do paid and unpaid work, and would still consume, but with a care for things, self, and others. To put it differently, they might do more work on themselves, their living space, and their communities, consuming as a form of caring, and so organising a society that is more fulfilling, and – almost as a side effect – more sustainable.

Conclusions and future research

Businesses justify profits because they create jobs (a desirable political goal) that in turn offer the 'good life' through consumption. Yet the limitations of such totalising arrangements may be revealed when people gain a reflective space. Indeed, living, working and consuming in the turbulent socio-economic aftermath of the pandemic seems to enhance the necessity to reflect upon alternatives to current work-and-spend arrangements. While we recognise the risks of celebrating our participants' narratives as some sort of moral awakening, inflation, military and energy crisis, and growing unease about climate change should prompt further research on both work-and-spend practices and possibilities of more care-full use of time and resources. Bullshit consumption does not therefore simply re-constitute well-discussed critiques of excess consumerism but invites ways of thinking about how we organise our lives by *subtracting* bullshit more generally. The hope for a post-pandemic Great Reset, and a return to more humane and sustainable ways of being may have evaporated under the perma-crisis that followed (Spicer, 2022), but our participants' reflections highlight a need to revisit the taken-for-granted social arrangements. Future research might therefore explore societal bullshit, and perhaps especially the experiences of the most vulnerable, those 'losing' the capitalist game who are not well-represented in here.

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