Laurence Godin’s (2022) piece is a very welcome and commendable attempt to provide a broader synthesis of the current literature on care and consumption, and to generate some critical insights for future work in this area. I am drawing on Godin’s article to make some further observations. These are threefold, pertaining to our current understandings of care, markets and consumption respectively.

Key words care • commodification of care • consumption • neoliberalism • sustainability

To cite this article: Chatzidakis, A. (2022) Care and consumption: further steps towards a more expansive and conjunctural understanding, Consumption and Society, XX(XX): 1–5, DOI: 10.1332/OBSV1057

Although several anthropologists, sociologists and marketing scholars have pointed to ways in which everyday consumption and care may be intricately connected, there are surprisingly few attempts to explicitly scrutinise their genuine intersection. Laurence Godin’s (2022) piece is thus a very welcome and commendable attempt to provide a broader synthesis of the current literature on care and consumption, and to generate some critical insights for future work in this area. I am drawing on Godin’s article to make some further observations. These are threefold, pertaining to our current understandings of care, markets and consumption respectively.

First, what is care? I welcome Laurence Godin’s invitation to think with scholars such as Joan Tronto (1993; 2013), who have long insisted that we should stop presuming that care is simply the care for those who are incapable of caring for themselves (Tronto, 1993). Building on Tronto, and along with the Care Collective, we have argued for a more ambitious, capacious understanding of care that applies to all human and human-nonhuman relationships, across all scales of everyday life (The Care Collective, 2020). I would further argue that such expansive understanding is particularly useful for thinking about the intersection of care with consumption. We can, for instance, begin by recognising that most commodities are bought with others in mind, and that they may even be ‘acts of love’ (for example, Miller, 2005) but we should not idealise such observation. At a more cultural and political level, it should by now be clear that caring for ‘one’s family’ or ‘one’s own’ or even ‘people like us’, is
not adequate in a more radical vision of a caring world (The Care Collective, 2020). We urgently need to expand our caring practices across difference and distance, to revert what Doreen Massey (2002) has metaphorically described as the ‘Russian Doll’ model of care: the idea that care – is and/or should – always reach outwards, starting with the family, moving on to the community, the city and the nation. We should cultivate more promiscuous models of care (The Care Collective, 2020), ones where ‘strangers like me’ can, at least under some circumstances, replace ‘people like us’. Ultimately a more radical model of care is based on our shared humanity and planetary fate. The fact alone that we do care for some people – not least via everyday consumption – is not enough.

Furthermore, narrow models of care often fail to place everyday consumption and care within the broader socioeconomic context in which they are both enabled and constrained. As Godin observes, the global North has long relied on numerous global care chains (Hochschild, 2003) to sustain more privileged lifestyles. The same of course applies to our consumption of everyday commodities and essential services, posing further challenges to what may come under more ethical and sustainable consumption projects. For Holly Lewis:

> Each of us … has a network of invisible caretakers scattered across the globe, fulfilling tasks once performed within the community. People we don’t know stitch together our underwear, mine the metals used to make the machines that make our bicycles and pots, harvest our grain, grind the sand to make our drinking glasses. Sometimes our invisible caretakers live in town: lifting boxes from pallets, grading our term papers, preparing food in the backs of restaurants, cleaning our shit off public toilets. (Lewis, 2016: 10)

It is only through expansive understandings of care (despite potential analytic shortcomings; for example, Esquivel, 2021) that we can begin to see such interconnections, challenges and contradictions. Flows and chains of care and carelessness are endemic to all our everyday consumption activity, but often remain invisible.

Second, the intersection of care with consumption is obviously enabled through ‘markets’. For many good reasons, most feminist scholars have traditionally been very suspicious of markets. Beverly Skeggs, for instance, has emphasised that:

> [C]aring that is offered as a gift beyond exchange relations is of a different form to the relations established to promote and reproduce the logic of capital. Caring offers us a different way of being in the world, relating to others as if they matter, with attentiveness and compassion, beyond exchange. (Skeggs, 2014: 13)

In this sense, care and market logics are fundamentally incompatible (The Care Collective, 2020). Taking care and consumption seriously, however, also involves drawing a distinction between markets as an institution (for example, the ‘market logic’ that under neoliberalism underpins almost every realm of daily life; Skeggs, 2013; Sandel, 2012) and markets as places of exchange (for example, Neveling, 2021). It involves often drawing on their second meaning, or at least recognising the possibility that some markets may be more (un)carrying than others. In my view,
this is primarily because not all markets are equally driven by the pursuit of capital accumulation, and therefore they are not always subjected to the instrumentalising and quantifying logics that strip care of its non-market attributes such as compassion, attentive listening, affect and empathy. There are numerous alternative markets and solidarity economies that have the capacity to foreground rather than undermine or corrupt care, from Modragon – the world’s largest worker-owned cooperative – to the bottom-up solidarity economy structures of Greece and Italy. Such initiatives have already enacted eco-socialist alternatives to current capitalist markets, counter-proposing exchange arrangements that are infinitely more democratic, solidary and caring across local, national and, ultimately, international levels. Furthermore, I partly agree with Esquivel in asserting that ‘markets are here to stay, and there is no way out without reconciling markets and care. We need to make markets work to care’ (Esquivel, 2021: 846). Rather than outrightly demonising markets, we need to come up with better, more sophisticated ways of re-embedding them within a progressive societal and planetary context. As Kate Raworth (2017) and the Care Collective (2020) put it, we need to find ways of re-regulating, re-embedding and re-socialising them.

Third, as consumer researchers interested in the intersection of care with consumption, we should also beware of the different meanings of consumption and consumerism (Gabriel and Lang, 2015). We are, for instance, de facto consumers of care, in our capacity as everyday participants in markets, but we are also consumerist, in the sense of being interpellated by the ideology of consumption. The latter, as Laurence Godin rightly points out, invites us to think about the extent to which markets cultivate individualist subjectivities that are incompatible with more radical, collectivist models of care and caring. Likewise, I have argued elsewhere (Chatzidakis, 2022) that we need to expand our understanding of the multiple ways in which the subjectivity of the consumer – as opposed to say the pre-modern ‘faithful’ or the early modern ‘citizen’ of the West (for example, Firat and Dholakia, 2017) – enables logics and practices of carelessness across most institutions of care provision, from families to local communities to nation states. Put differently, our phantasmatic construction as consumers has fundamental implications not only in terms of our sense of personhood and place in the world, but also of the ‘ideologies of care’ that we naturalise (Dowling, 2021). At the familial level, for instance, we may grow accustomed to competitive individualist logics of helicopter parenting and ‘concerted cultivation’ of children (Lareau, 2000), the idea that parents should do all that they can to enhance their children’s social, cultural and economic capital. Similarly, within our local neighbourhoods and communities, we commonly engage in what Steve Miles (2010) identifies as ‘complicit communality’, the artificial revival of a largely bygone community ethos in commoditised spaces that deep inside we know are not communal or caring enough. We are, in other words, habituated into the pleasures of consumer culture, even while remaining aware of their potentially uncaring and anti-democratic nature. Finally, we are often complicit in the marketisation of our state-run and/or collective care infrastructures – what Manuel Castells (1977) describes as items of ‘collective consumption’. In various healthcare and education contexts, for instance, we happily employ the vocabulary of consumer rights and satisfaction as opposed to the vocabulary of a patient or a student (Massey, 2013). This has profound implications for our sense of collectivity and interdependence in the world. Honig (2017), among others, argues that unlike private commodities, public
things such as education and healthcare (but also local libraries, parks and so on) have a deeply psychosocial effect in our sense of community and collectivity. Along with the marketisation of public things like schools, hospitals and playgrounds, we also lose our ability to connect with and care for others without expecting anything in return.

In sum, for those of us interested in human and nonhuman flourishing, the intersection of care with consumption poses a series of fundamental challenges – not least, the need to narrow that intersection! It also involves recognising that most everyday consumption is both caring and uncaring, depending on where and how we look at it. It is thus only through more expansive, elaborate and conjunctural understandings of care and consumption that we can begin to work towards a more caring world.

**Conflict of interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

**References**


