

**Champagne Taste, Beer Budget—The New Poor's Incongruent Capital and Consumption**

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## Introduction

*Norah: If somebody pointedly asked me according to my economic status and income...I'm a very educated poor person, yes. I'm in an extreme amount of debt from school, I have no income, I have no vehicle, I have no home, I have nothing. I would guess I'd just be poor. But as far as what I identify with, now that's different. I live in a nice neighborhood, in a nice home, with nice parents. I live an upper middle class lifestyle, but I, myself as a party of one, am poor. (Norah, F, 31, Atlanta)*

Norah is unsure about her current social class identity: She holds master's degrees from major universities, comes from a supportive family background, and subscribes to a middle-class lifestyle and values. However, she failed in finding a full-time, stable, and professional job in her field and eventually moved back to live with her mother due to long-term unemployment. Norah is not "Urban Uptown" or "Urban Core" in marketing segmentation, and she cannot even be categorized as Middle American or Lower American (Coleman, 1983) based on some common ways to segment markets by profession, income, purchase behavior, living area, or interests.

The emergence of "Norahs" is associated with the Great Recession in the first decade of the 21st century, when income inequality pushed people out of their previous economically secure positions (Goodman, 2010). People who used to be less associated with poverty problems, such as well-educated youngsters and white-collar workers, have become economically challenged and then "fall from grace" (Ehrenreich, 2005). Those slipping out of the middle class have been described as the ALICE class (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) whose household income is below \$51,017 but still above the poverty line (Cherny, 2013), or the "new poor," those former members of the middle class who are now becoming economically-challenged and underprivileged due to macro-societal transformations (Goodman, 2012). Having "more class than income," the new poor are those

accustomed to the comforts of a middle-class lifestyle but for the first time are associated with financial insecurity such as stagnant salaries, unemployment, and even poverty, due to political, economic, and structural changes in the society (Lu, 2007; Goodman, 2010). In addition to scholarly discussions, the new poor phenomenon is widely covered in popular media. For example, the new poor in Europe is dubbed the “lost generation,” which refers to qualified and aspirational youngsters who need to leave home to find employment overseas that does not correspond to their professional qualifications, such as working for a coffee shop while having a doctoral degree (Coldwell, 2013). The new poor phenomenon is often discussed along with regional contexts such as the high living costs in urban areas in Taiwan (Chang, 2014), and the Brexit of the U.K. (Haque, 2016).

While the new poor may not necessarily fall under a certain income level, the conceptualization of this term can be compared to some concepts of relative poverty. The new poor, in this study, do not include those “real poor” who suffer from absolute poverty and have no access to necessities such as education and healthcare (Hill and Martin, 2012). They are also distinct from those categorized as underclass due to certain social and cultural discourses that emerge rather late in the modern history (Bauman, 2005). Instead, the new poor can be viewed as a form of broadly defined “outcome poor” or “lifestyle poor” (Perry, 2002), as they are deprived from a reasonable hope of upward mobility, as well as a sustainable lifestyle in which individuals are economically, mentally, and socially healthy. They have few urgent, survival issues and are still able to at least partially participate in the consumerism society. Therefore, the new poor may not be motivated to resist the markets and inhibit consumption (Leipämaa-Leskinen et al., 2016), and they may not yet adjust their values for the new economic reality (Hamilton and Catterall, 2006). Thus, the focus of the present study is not about how the new poor retreat from the consumer society to cope with the income loss, but rather about the nature of their

participation in the consumer society where their remaining resources and identity dynamics are reproduced.

Studying the new poor consumers is a departure from dominant social class and consumption studies in which social class may be used to account for lifestyle variations or may be dismissed as an obsolete notion because of upward mobility and diluted social class differences in the contemporary society (Henry and Caldwell, 2008). In this study, the new poor hold an “in between” social position and fragmented social class consciousness. They may obtain an advanced degree from an elite university while engaging in low-pay, temporary jobs after graduation; they may acquire middle-class values and taste in their upbringing while struggling with low earnings in adulthood. The new poor problem is developed in the dwindling middle class discussions; thus, it serves as a pertinent context to examine consumers who experience identity strain in their life transitions and cannot be fully pictured through commonly used static categorizations of consumer segmentation (Hamilton and Catterall, 2006; Ulver and Ostberg, 2014). While income and social class are both common indicators of consumer behavior (Mihic and Čulina, 2006), this study explores how new poor consumers cope with the conflict between these two indicators (class, cash) and reproduce their self-identities in today’s marketplace.

This study echoes one of the four research programs in Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) to investigate consumers’ identity project, with a particular focus on how consumers in downward mobility reproduce their limited spending power and identity strain in the marketplace. Our research question is: how do new poor consumers wield their incongruent capital and reproduce their fragmented social class consciousness through consumption? To answer our research question, we first briefly review the literature on consumers’ identity change in social mobility, and draw on Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of various forms of capital to “operationalize” consumers’ potential identity strain. Subsequently, we discuss our method, findings, and potential contributions.

## **Consumers' Fluid Identity in Transitions**

Social mobility is a common theme in sociological scholarship (see Chan and Boliver, 2013), but previous studies usually tend to focus on macro-societal mobility rates, while individuals' experiences in the trend require more scholarly attention (Friedman, 2014). Given the drastic increase of wealth inequality and social class segregation in the past fifty years, a more dynamic view to investigate how social class is lived is necessary (Shavitt et al., 2016).

Addressing how individuals react to life transitions can add considerable complexity when discussing social class implications in our everyday shopping. In social mobility, some consumers experience fragmented identities because the ideology instilled in them in their upbringing contradicts the new societal context they face after growing up. Such identity strain makes them unfit within a particular consumer segmentation (Ulver and Ostberg, 2014). In addition, sometimes a demographic indicator (such as income) is not a condition, but a by-product of an individual's identity project. For example, some artists and graduate students strategically adopt a low-income lifestyle in order to support their prospective identity (Demetry et al., 2015). Zamwel et al. (2014) also pointed out that some consumers voluntarily reduce consumption as a political act. These discussions call for a more nuanced perspective to explore consumers' identity rather than focusing on external, demographic indicators. Hamilton and Catterall (2006) found that compared to those constantly living in poverty, families that have recently experienced transition into poverty may have a different reaction to the thrifty lifestyle since they are fully aware of what they are missing. In this sense, for marketers using traditional psychographic and demographic indicators to demarcate their target audience in social mobility, they may risk viewing these consumers in a way different from how the consumers view themselves.

The new poor's fragmented social class consciousness should be differentiated from the identity strain of those consumers who lost class-based advantages due to personal misfortune. Compared to individuals who developed a middle-class consciousness in a corresponding lifestyle but later needed to cope with identity threat in situations of income loss (Newman, 1988), the new poor usually did not realize their low earning issues until they entered the job market. Thus, the upper-class dimension of their identity was less cultivated through their own occupation and income level, but in their backgrounds such as educational attainment and upbringing. Due to structural changes from political, economic, or societal shifts (Lu, 2007), the new poor are caught in "double binds" that the capital into which they have grown does not fit the changing field so that their skills and knowledge have been devalued (Gross and Rosenberger, 2010).

To "operationalize" the incongruence of the new poor's social class consciousness, we draw on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital. Bourdieu (1986) submitted that people use three forms of capital to pursue distinction in social life: economic capital (financial resources), cultural capital (socially rare and distinctive tastes, skills, knowledge, and practices), and social capital (relationships, organizational affiliations, and networks) (Holt, 1998; Henry and Caldwell, 2008).

Social mobility in the fast-changing, modern society inevitably affects how various forms of capital operate in the field of consumption. For example, Owens (2015) indicates that in the housing crisis in the Great Recession, some advantageous characteristics of the middle class became disadvantages in the mortgage modification process if compared with their working class counterparts, who may have coworkers in the same situation and can learn more useful information and avoid scam. Bardhi et al. (2010) also pointed out that in an unfamiliar cultural context, travelers' cultural capital may "decrease" as their consumption of food abroad reveals a low cultural capital mode. For example,

travelers may choose global fast food restaurants to consume the symbolic meaning to “feel like home,” which does not reflect their high cultural capital status in the home country.

As the new poor’s privileges and qualifications no longer guarantee an advantageous position in the production system, their fragmented social class consciousness can be understood as having more non-economic capital than economic capital. In this study, we do not focus on discussing how the fluctuation of a certain capital would influence consumption. Instead, we aim to explore how participation in the consumer society is structured by not only the possession but also the dynamic negotiation among incongruent levels of capital.

## **Methodology**

Data were collected in 20 in-depth interviews with self-defined new poor informants in the U.S. and Taiwan over a two-year period (2014-2015). We first acquired access to potential interviewees through spreading recruiting messages in online forums (e.g., Craigslist) and researchers’ social media including Facebook and LinkedIn. In the recruiting message, we made it clear that we were looking for new poor informants and provided concise clarification. “The new poor generally refers to people whose income or employment do not live up to their identity/educational attainment/background/taste/expected lifestyle/working ability, etc. For example, we see news about how people with graduate degrees and white-collar working skills are still threatened by poverty, contingent employment, or stagnant salaries.” For this study, we selected informants who believe their advantages (such as educational attainment) have been “devalued” in the new socio-economic order so that they cannot expect a satisfying position in the production system, which results in personal financial disadvantage.

Our informants were selected through purposeful sampling, which is the most common sampling technique for qualitative studies by which the researcher actively selects the most productive samples to

answer the research questions (Marshall, 1996). The number of informants (N=20) was determined by two criteria proposed by Seidman (2006). The first is that we believe informants consist of multiple backgrounds to an extent that others outside the sample might have a chance to connect to the experience of those in it. The second is that the information we gain from data can be viewed as saturated as recurring themes can be identified.

As indicated in Table 1, self-defined new poor informants occupy diverse positions in the system of production. While it may be conceivable for those engaging in contingent employment to consider themselves new poor (e.g., Emily, Vivian, Tracy), those “having a real job” have a similar tendency for they suffer from stagnant salaries, rising living costs, and the lack of financial security and potential upward mobility (e.g., Amber, Danny, Mila.) Besides, we recruited informants between 25 to 35 years old. This age range is set because the cohort is affected by the rough job market in the Great Recession, as well as their psychological feature that they may have left adolescence and “emerging adulthood” to reach a level of maturity that should be associated with a settled self-identity and responsibility of their own financial decisions (Arnett, 2000). All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded for data analysis purpose (see Saldaña, 2013).

In the initial research design, we collected data in the U.S. and Taiwan in hopes of providing a richer interpretive framework with more “glocal” variations (Robertson, 1992, as cited in Ulver and Ostbert, 2014) of the new poor phenomenon. However, since the age cohort of our informants can be generally categorized as the millennial generation (Twenge, 2010), they may have a worldview that is more similar to each other than to older generations within their own culture because of the influence of globalization, social media, and the exporting of Western culture and the speed of change (Stein, 2013). In the data, some minor cross-cultural differences were revealed, but these differences do not



significantly affect the recurring themes that emerged from the data, which are based on the common features of informants.

## **Findings**

The data revealed that the new poor's shopping is patterned by their mobility experience and their incongruent capital. Through "compromised ideal consumption," a term we coined to describe the research findings, they trade up for an ideal lifestyle within a confined manner. Echoing Holt's (1998) argument, informants' consumption practices, rather than consumption objects, better reflect how social classes are structured in shopping. They did not spend mindlessly to reconstruct the lifestyle they believe they are entitled to, nor did they turn to a frugal lifestyle to save money. To cope with the identity strain and the challenging socioeconomic reality, new poor informants on the one hand strategically interpret and wield their non-economic capital through moderate consumption, while on the other hand "capitalize" their advantages to afford things that are out of their price range.

### ***A moderate trading-up***

Some may contend that shrinking income *per se* can be a powerful indicator to understand the consumers' economic behavior. The younger generation's aversion to home-buying, auto loans, and savings is conceivable if we take the falling wage into consideration (Thompson, 2014). Indeed, our informants are not able to afford durable assets, which is viewed as a middle-class privilege. They also have difficulty in making long-term investments or saving money.

That said, while the new poor's low earnings explain what they do *not* buy, it does not explain what they buy. Informants in our study do not opt for alternatives intended for economic-minded consumers. Distinct from others in a similar economic bracket, informants do not tend to engage in thrifty shopping such as looking for savers in street markets and mail order catalogues (Kempson et al.,

1994), searching for partially-consumed products (Hill and Stamey, 1990), or sharing resources with others in the community (Hill and Stamey, 1990). Our informants still care about an overall living quality so that they trade up for as many product types as they could. Rarely would they consider counter-attitudinal shopping, in which consumers knowingly shop for products they consider inferior to save money. Instead, they would only purchase products they adore albeit the desire would be confined by a price range.

For budgetary concerns, informants would compromise in quantity rather than in quality. In other words, even with shrinking budgets, informants do not acquire a taste of necessities, in which people favor the most filling and economical options. With the taste of luxury, informants are not socialized to appreciate commodities that they have the potential to purchase (Sutherland, 2013). For instance, Irene prioritizes quality in shopping and the trade-off is that her purchases are limited to few basic items. For her, each transaction can be viewed as a brick to build up her ideal lifestyle, so that she is reluctant to include anything unfit in the blueprint.

*Irene: I would say I don't spend money often, but if I find something I want, even if it is expensive, I would still buy it...I spend a lot on housing, the rent in that neighborhood is expensive. I don't usually buy clothes and shoes, but I am stubborn and I insist on wearing high-quality pieces. For example, I want my sweaters made of cashmere, and shoes should be made of genuine leather...I can only afford basic items such as clothes and shoes for now, but with \$5,000 (her ideal monthly salary) I would be able to buy a necklace. (Irene, F, 30, Taipei)*

The contrast between new poor informants like Irene and general consumers may be that the new poor's trading up acts are built upon the cost of "insufficient" consumption in the same or other product categories. Their emphasis on quality is compelling when they could not have "enough" in general. Mila

also echoed this point. She said that once she “sees the difference in having nicer clothing and how much nicer it fits, how much longer it could last, how much better it washed up,” she prefers having high-quality clothing even if she cannot afford enough pieces to cover a work week.

According to informants’ reflections, the high-quality items they pursue are a balance of aesthetic form and durable function. Rarely would they splurge on fine, elegant products that have no utilitarian but only decorative values. For Irene and Mila, the fine fabrics fulfill their needs of clothing in an aesthetic form, i.e., a decent look. In addition, high-quality products mean certainty in user experiences—they are reliable and would constantly bring benefits across the users’ long-term possession.

While trading up for high-quality goods, informants’ shopping is confined to those non-durable, light products. The product categories vary across physical goods (e.g., clothing), ephemeral experiences (e.g., travel), and lifestyle choices (e.g., healthy diet, neighborhood). Due to budget constraints, such trading up mostly means shopping for little luxuries, i.e., the entry-level options of luxurious brands (e.g., small accessories of designer fashion brand), services (e.g., a manicure), or activities (e.g., backpacker travel). Taking fashion accessories for example, informants may be able to afford a scarf on sale from Burberry but not an overcoat. Besides, for Taiwanese informants, a trip to Japan that costs \$1,000 would be a good alternative when they are unable to save up for a pricey airline ticket to Europe.

These acts of consumption are not for “real and traditional luxuries” such as buying sports cars, designer clothes, and caviar (Yeoman, 2011). These little luxuries are not always associated with conspicuous possessions or constructed symbolically, but can be essential and self-related to serve the purpose of supporting individuals’ identity projects in their everyday lives (Bauer et al., 2011). The new poor’s consumption of small luxuries may be less about projecting their fondest expectations or noblest

ideals in consumer goods through displaced-meaning strategy (McCracken, 1988), i.e., removing one's ideals from the "here and now" real life to another time or space that either existed in the past or will hopefully occur in the future, and relying on consumer goods to access them. Instead, the informants are trying to live a relatable lifestyle that they are accustomed to from their upbringing. These small luxuries in their lives are familiar experiences rather than a coveted symbol of hope.

### ***Cultural capital embodied in shopping literacy***

The new poor consumers do not simply dismiss the connection between social status and luxury consumption, they further stress the importance of "shopping literacy" in consumption. To accommodate the current consumerism society with limited economic capital and relatively high cultural capital, informants embrace the idea that those who are able to consume may not be those who know how to appreciate the luxuries, and the latter are not less deserving than the former to have access to material well-being. The legitimacy of their ideal lifestyle, ideal self, and trading-up consumption lies in their rich shopping literacy instead of spending power.

In this study, shopping literacy can be understood as a set of knowledge through which consumers are informed of how to appreciate the "real value" of products in the "correct way." Even without significant spending power, they emphasize the knowing attitude to show that they are more informed and capable consumers than those followers of consumerism. This allows the new poor consumers to show their taste through how they use their limited possessions, as well as how they do *not* shop. Different product types require different types of knowledge to appreciate. For example, in terms of travel, informants believe that the real value should be about the interaction with the local context instead of sightseeing. Calvin uses the example of a group tour versus backpacker travel to explain how

backpackers are more capable of consuming the multiple meanings of travel, while group tour participants are economically advantageous but “impotent.”

*Calvin: There is a huge gap between backpackers and group tour participants. We travel in a frugal way...others may even feel like why are you doing this to yourself? Why sleep in the airport or stations? But you feel good about yourself. Backpacker travel needs a lot of capitals, the first is language proficiency. You also need to have guts, which were accumulated in your experiences. Backpacker travel is good because you really stand on that land with your own feet, you explore into those alleys and see more and understand more. You stay as long as you want, you interact with local people who have different cultural and ethnical backgrounds...Those who always travel by joining group tour are impotent in travel...I sometimes look down upon them because they cannot do what we can do. (Calvin, M, 29, Taipei)*

The “correct way” to consume tourism echoes the exploration- and experience-oriented value held by middle class youngsters in their emerging adulthood (Weinberger et al., 2017), and evidences that the shopping literacy as a form of cultural capital can be a marker of different social classes. Compared to economically secure informants in the study of Weinberger et al. (2017), while they all stress the participatory experiences in common, new poor informants seem to be more eager to dissociate the performance of cultural capital from their financial standing. In other words, backpacker travel is favored not just because of its novelty, but also due to its affordability. The dual virtues of new poor’ shopping literacy are further evidenced in their consumption of fashion products.

In terms of fashion, we may assume that the new poor would live a frugal lifestyle to invest in conspicuous items to create a middle class façade, but informants judge those who overdress themselves with flashy and loud products because they do not want to “look wealthier than they really are.” For

example, Renee believes that the worship of brands may actually mean bad taste and lack of shopping literacy. People who only wear high fashion brands do not know the correct way to dress up as well as the rule of fashion.

*Renee: ...if you are somebody who truly understands fashion, you understand the mixing of high and low fashion...sometimes we laugh at those who don't because they think it's about having designer outfits on from head to toe, you know what I mean? A designer handbag, designer shoes. If you really understand fashion, you understand that you can mix a pair of blue jeans from Target with the Versace top. (Renee, F, 28, Dallas)*

In other words, the shopping literacy is not just about how to buy, but also how to buy less. Renee judged and distanced herself from those “\$30,000 millionaires,” who spend extravagantly to “keep up with the Joneses.”

*Renee: There is also an inside joke here in Dallas that the yuppies or the young professionals that live here, they are the \$30,000 millionaires...meaning that most people that are young professionals here really are only probably making somewhere in the \$30,000 but are living way outside of their means... I think there is a lot of people that are young professionals and trying to front or pretend that they are making a lot more money than what they are, and I am not really interested in that. My thing is that I don't try to, that old saying, keep up with the Joneses. I am not trying to keep up with the Joneses. (Renee, F, 28, Dallas)*

In this sense, shopping is an everyday activity that informants casually and moderately perform to suit their internalized value and taste. Their consumption is less about the pursuit of social prestige, but more related to reproducing their identities within class fractions through habitus, which is described as the “psychobodily mechanism that unconsciously mediates class socialization and expression of

status through consumption” (Üstüner and Holt, 2010: 52), or a “world view derived from similar life experience and common images of the way of life appropriate for people ‘like us’” (DiMaggio, 2001:542).

The stress of shopping literacy based on one’s habitus as a coping strategy provides a new perspective to explain consumer behavior in recession. When engaging in luxury consumption, informants did not “turn it up” to purchase loud, logo-laden products as Nunes et al. (2011) argued that consumers still demand conspicuously branded products in recession. Nor did informants prioritize non-positional goods (less visible essentials such as food at home, housing, and health insurance) during economic contractions (Kamakura and Du, 2012). Their shopping preferences are more consistent with Turner and Edmunds’ (2002) analysis of Australian high-status elites, who tend to display a range of cultural preferences instead of focusing on highbrow cultural consumption such as ballet and opera. What distinguished their status from other lower-class people is a comprehensive understanding of “a strategic knowledge of the most appropriate genre to use in a given social setting” (Turner and Edmunds, 2002:234).

### ***Capitalizing non-economic capital***

Similar to how individuals tend to associate good quality with higher price (Deval et al, 2013), our informants believe “you get what you paid for” and are prepared to pay more for high-quality goods. But instead of passively waiting for their desired products to be on deep discounts, informants try to subvert some conventions in the marketplace. They are not the “craft consumers” who further personalize the products after the purchase, but more like “crafty consumers” who use creativity in the pre-purchase stage to devote time, efforts, and intelligence to discover the “best buy” or to ensure making the most of their money (Campbell, 2005). As Norah said, “getting more than you paid for” is only possible when

you do not have things in the way they were sold to you. Consumers could spend time and energy to search for high-quality but outdated pieces in Nordstrom Rack, then they use their own creativity and taste to mix and match to “look like something” with low costs. Informants tailor the best deal through “capitalizing” acts in which they turn personal advantages into money-saving strategies. In other words, these advantages cannot be converted into economic capital in institutionalized ways, but they can be used to compensate for the weak spending power in the marketplace. For example, Helen’s second language proficiency does not turn into better salary in the job market, but this skill allows her to shop online from the country-of-origin to save money.

*Helen: Some brands do not have discounts in Taiwan, but they have discounts in the U.S. during the Thanksgiving sale, then I will buy it online, or search for discounts. For those website offers free international shipping, I will place an order as quickly as possible. (Helen, F, 25, Kaohsiung)*

Non-economic capital does not necessarily help informants earn money, but it helps them spend money. In the “saving through spending” practice, Helen’s second-language proficiency, cosmopolitan worldview, and resourcefulness allow her to “buy in” from anywhere in the world. Such an act supports the argument of Bauer et al. (2011) that luxuries should not be only defined in managerially constructed ways, as consumers may perceive luxuries as something “worth the money” in terms of a good price-performance ratio. For consumers, the real value of trading up for little luxuries is to support their identity projects and to create a relatable lifestyle; while in capitalizing acts, the real value is more calculative that consumers strategically make the most out of their money.

Another example is how Mila used her technology literacy to download smartphone applications to learn the discounts and free products in her neighborhood. As these free products seem to be available



for everyone, it actually requires some non-economic capital for consumers to constantly obtain these deals to save money.

*Mila: I like to go to Caribou Cafe sometimes...I don't like to go there all the time and I don't want to pay full price but if I look at my Hooked app and if they have half price lattes then I'll go. I feel like I'm getting more for my money just by doing that... I'm not buying coffee here because after I leave here I'll go get free coffee at Panera. It's just as a consumer what you're willing to do to get a good deal. (Mila, F, 33. Illinois)*

In Coskuner-Balli and Thompson's (2013) study, consumers would capitalize their consumption to enhance the conversion rates of their acquisition of subordinate cultural capital. For example, at-home fathers embrace the idea that they provide economic value to the household by being thrifty shoppers in lieu of a steady income stream. In the present study, informants employ a similar strategy to configure their resources and capabilities in innovative and creative ways to reinterpret and recalibrate prevailing and mainstream socioeconomic valuation. They are versatile, active, and resourceful shoppers who are able to and willing to pay more efforts than taking advantage of ready deals provided by manufacturers such as coupon-clipping. The way that the new poor are able to "enforce" the conversion between different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) embodies class-based privileges, as the lower class have little chance to do so to increase their overall capital volume and can only stick to their function-based tastes to "do the proper things and no more" (Blasius and Friedrichs, 2008). Through such capitalizing acts, along with their remaining capitals, the new poor do not resemble the poor at all even if they may appear to be equally incapable to marketers. According to Blocker et al. (2013), such strengthened access to products and capacity in the marketplace could empower consumers to alleviate felt deprivation.

## ***Discussion***

The data revealed that compared to the poor, the new poor have more intangible assets that can be used to fulfill their needs and wants, but compared to the middle class, their consumptions are doomed to be limited to small luxuries in the immediate context that cannot contribute to a permanent and sustainable lifestyle. As Gross and Rosenberger (2010:67) said, “The habits of their upbringing have ill-prepared them to strategize in the world they live in today as poor members of society.” Although consumers across different economic brackets are believed to exhibit weakness and biases in consumption, the new poor gradually lost the margin for error so that their shopping may result in a vicious cycle that pushes them into a more disadvantaged social position (Bertrand et al., 2006, as cited in Blocker et al., 2013).

Viewing informants’ consumption practices in the broader context, some may contend that the new poor’s consumption pattern is related to their traits of the millennial generation, a cohort born between the late 70s and the late 90s. Millennials are perceived to be more individualistic and narcissistic than the previous generation (Twenge, 2010) so that they have a strong sense of entitlement and blame others for failure. Indeed, the way informants splurge on hedonic consumptions under financial pressure seems unrealistic. The YOLO (you only live once) lifestyle to allocate resources to immediate enjoyment and not “save for rainy day” may further undermine their financial disadvantages. However, instead of viewing new poor consumers as lighthearted spenders who behave like a rich kid (Stein, 2013), we argue that their consumption is a balancing act after fully considering their advantages and disadvantages in pursuing material well-being. Expecting little chance for upward mobility in the near future, informants may lose incentives to regulate their behavior toward long-term financial success (Yoon and Kim, 2016). Unlike financially secure youngsters, the consumption of new poor informants reflects little consideration of an imagined future (Weinberger et al., 2017) as their lives have been left behind the planned trajectory. Therefore, informants choose to “seize the moment” to enjoy their lives as much as they can, while being careful to not accrue debt for an uncertain future. Their shopping,

although reflective of their internal values, is not a spontaneous and lighthearted decision. On the contrary, it is based on an eclectic strategy to “not put life on hold” in the unpleasant socioeconomic reality. The disposition can be observed in Paisley’s reflection.

*Paisley: I mean certainly when you are making \$1,600, it's really hard to save money. Even if you know you are going to be unemployed for the summer and you need more money, it's really hard to save that because you need pretty much everything you are making to pay your expenses...we sort of sign up for not making much money in exchange for the potential to make a lot more money later on, but it's also true that the longer my grad school career stretched, the more it became annoying to think about it as a time when your life is kind of on hold and you are just squeaking by. So I have tried to sort of not think of it that way and to recognize that for now, this is my life...That just means that this is where I am right now, and that I am trying really hard not to just put my life on hold to still do things that I want and to still pursue relationships and to still have fun for instance. (Paisley, F, 29, Wisconsin)*

Thus, informants’ seemingly hedonic consumption is actually a deliberate act to address their identity strain. For the new poor, it is exactly because of the understanding, instead of ignorance, regarding their marginalized economic position that informants choose to spend in a knowing, calculating, and purposeful way. This tendency also indirectly echoes a long-lasting debate regarding whether different lifestyles are the causes or the products of different social positions (Conley, 2016). If there is a “culture of poverty,” i.e., people’s disadvantaged social position resulted from their internalized, inherited values that prevent them from improving the conditions (Lewis, 1975), then one may ascribe the new poor’s struggle to their own hedonic consumption. According to the data, however, the new poor’s consumption decisions are affected by the awareness of the fact that their values and hard-working are not rewarded. For the new poor who subscribe to middle class values and lifestyle, consumption is more structured, rather than structuring, by their downward mobility.

## Conclusion

This study echoes one of the CCT research interests in consumer's identity projects in relation to the contemporary income inequality context (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), as well as the scholarship that attempts to offer "deeper scientific understanding of poverty that can be translated into practice that helps improve the material, social and cultural condition of the poor" (Blocker et al., 2013:1196). For example, for jobless informants, their shopping literacy about how the "marketplace rules" work is a key feature that differentiates them from the underclass and provides access to more resources. In other words, they are more empowered if compared to other low-income consumers.

Informants' eclectic consumption strategy and interpretation reflect their "in-between" status and fragmented social class consciousness. Compared to informants who deem consumption as a way to foster certain social identities (Demetry et al., 2015), project future identities (Demetry et al., 2015), convey political beliefs (Zamwel, 2014), or perform creativity and self-expression (Campbell, 2005), the new poor's consumption is less a voluntary or political expression of personal identity, but a reaction to internal identity strain, as well as to potential marginalization of their status as consumers. They employ an alternative framework to subvert some marketplace conventions, so as to disconnect the pursuit of status in the consumerism society from their own economic standing. In other words, through everyday shopping, new poor informants re-construct their dynamic identities to claim the position as "full" and capable consumers.

Specifically, Bourdieu's (1986) discussion of multiple forms of capital is employed as the analytical framework, through which the new poor's fragmented social class consciousness is understood as the incongruent levels of various capitals that do not yield a consistent social class implication. To address both the budgetary concern and their internalized taste and value, they perform

compromised ideal consumption in which they neither retreat from the luxury market nor insist on spending in the way they believe they deserve. In contrast, they carry out their ideal lifestyle in a moderate manner and spend in a calculating and resourceful way.

The theoretical contribution of the findings is threefold.

First, as the demarcation among different social classes in consumption may be considered blurred, we argue that even in the mass market and in the recession context, consumers' internalized values, interpretations, and everyday shopping decisions still signal social class differences. These differences may be diluted in the system of production (e.g., the sweeping low-earning problem), but remain salient in the consumption field. In this study, we explored the dynamics of incongruent capital to discuss social class reproduction in the social mobility context. In particular, we captured how cultural capital, which have been devalued in the labor market of the Great Recession, are endowed new meanings to back up consumers' shopping in economic contraction even without a corresponding economic capital.

Second, according to Holt (1998), consumption patterns still act to structure social classes nowadays if we focus on consumption practices instead of consumption objects. In Holt's (1998) study, high cultural capital holders and low cultural capital holders could afford the same possessions but would interpret them in different ways. In this study, we do not merely observe such social class differences when individuals engage in consumption, we further see social class differences when consumers are unable to fully participate in the consumerism society. That is to say, when consumers "trade down," developing money-saving strategies or engaging in moderate consumption in which most objects are relatively affordable and are from the mass market, their behaviors still reveal class-based privileges and cannot be easily imitated by other low-income consumers.

Third, Bourdieu's perspective has often been criticized for the lack of evidence in terms of the extent to which the lifestyle variations are meaningful and are reflective to the substantial differences across social groups (Longhurst and Savage, 1996). Some may argue that it is the commonality, instead of the difference, among different social groups that bears more implications that are of interest to researchers (Longhurst and Savage, 1996). While the relativity of consumption pattern may not imply as many social class implications as expected, studying consumer behavior in a transitional status addresses such concerns if the focus is put on how certain consumption practices are stressed by consumers to claim their belonging to or distance from certain social classes. In other words, even if some consumption patterns do not substantially vary across different social groups, they are perceived as such and can be used to either compete for social status or reassure a corresponding part in consumers' self-identity. For example, a way for the new poor to signal status is through sophisticated, responsible, and informed shopping, while staying away from mindless shopping for conspicuous symbols. Consumers in social mobility serve as a pertinent context to explore the ever-changing social class implications attached to certain commodities and practices because compared to others, these consumers' everyday lives involve more decisions to make to constantly reallocate available resources to reconstruct a relatable lifestyle. As such, even if some variations across different social classes are not significant, they stay central to the reproduction of social stratification in our society.

This study has several limitations that need to be addressed in future research. A major limitation is that as we take an inductive approach to learn the consumption behavior of those self-defined new poor, we do not consider the new poor phenomenon under the influence of other structural forces or individual differences. Other potential, macro-societal influences on the new poor's consumption need to be considered in future studies. Our inductive approach also leads to more questions. For example, would everyone affected by downward mobility identify themselves as new poor? If not, the

consumption of the new poor may be related to some mechanism beyond consumers' common social position. Future studies may focus on examining other aspects that contribute to the new poor identity, such as a stronger achievement motivation. Furthermore, the data did not reveal much in terms of how new poor use their social capital in the compromised ideal consumption. As an advantageous social network may also be the heritage from the once-privileged social position, we are curious about why the new poor in our study seem to rely less on social networks to reconstruct their ideal lifestyle. Studies taking another approach such as ethnographic method may help address this question. Finally, although gender difference is not considered salient in the new poor phenomenon, our data are overrepresented by female informants so that we may neglect some gender-specific strategies and acts. Future studies including more male participants would enrich such scholarship with gender-related insight.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our study adds value to the understanding of contemporary consumer culture with respect to how the downwardly mobile individuals react to their elusive social positions, identity strain, and weakened spending power in today's income inequality, so as to claim a deserving, full status as consumers. An examination of their practices sheds light on how social class differences are subjectively re-defined to address the socioeconomic shifts, and how the (dis)advantages of a mobile, transitional social position can be reproduced in everyday shopping.

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