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Abstract

This paper examines the experience and conditions for 'spend[ing] like there is no tomorrow' by a group of individual young adults who are of mixed gender, aged 25-35, in 2016, and living in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, which is a mainly poor, Black African residential area of Cape Town.

The paper points to historical continuity in youth cultures, of identity formation and social distinction, that go back to the 1950s and 1960s and are based on distinctive dress codes and lifestyle. However, there is also discontinuity with earlier historical situations in that the post-apartheid scene includes a massive expansion of consumer credit linked to the retail sector. The paper shows that the domestic moral economy of the young adults bridges and underpins these continuities and discontinuities. For the household, the 'objects of aspiration', such as furniture, suggest a future economic well-being and a confirmation of kinship mutuality. For the individual participants, positional consumption manifests a social deception in the face of private deprivation. The extent that young adults enact the consumption practices of those with money is symbolic of a capacity to aspire. The construct of 'capacity to aspire' links the external social and political economic context through both local role models and media-generated images of the 'good life', and is monetised as consumer debt taken from the familial workforce by the administrative technologies of the retail and finance sectors.

This paper contributes to scholarship a case of the making of youth (young adults) identity through dress, drink and revelry that is embedded in everyday life and normalised in a symbolic violence, in the normalisation of the material and emotional exhaustion of the capacity to aspire as an individual and collective resource, in the recognition of chronic depletion by the low and unreliable earnings spent on episodic extravagant displays of positional consumption.

1. Introduction

This paper is the third from a study that enquires into the experience and meaning of money in the lives of a group of individual young adults of mixed gender, aged 25-35, living in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, which is a mainly poor, Black African residential area of Cape Town. Their common situation presents three interwoven domains: low-waged and mostly intermittent employment, accommodation in a family household to which they contribute and on which they depend for support, and habits of consumer spending that go beyond their means. Having focused in previous papers on the individual experience of employment and its effect on the household, this paper examines the conditions for and experience of ‘spend[ing] like there is no tomorrow.’

The case study was based on ethnographic data from repeat interviews, observation, casual conversation and group work, of a small select group of young adults. The group was recruited by a local non-government community service organisation (CSO) for training as community development workers.

The research shows that, after making contributions to the household and spending on essentials for themselves — on transport expenses, data and airtime, burial insurance, clothes for children, personal items and urgent debts to *mashonisas* [local, informal moneylenders] — the study participants experience a tense material and moral encounter with consumption. They spend or tend to spend whatever they have left on ‘flash’ consumer items that define a social field of positional goods and recreational activities. Shoes, hairstyles and brand name clothing, treats of fast foods (burgers, chicken, etc.), alcohol, and parties and other gatherings of revelry lay out a continuum of bought experiences of pleasure, satisfaction, attention, judgement and valuation. As we will see, positional consumption along this continuum poses a conundrum around spending on one’s own pleasure and image, while living impoverishment at home. This is the issue. While such consumption is a norm and standard of modern life, what defines this as a moral encounter, and not simply as a social-psychological matter of consumer preferences, is the awareness of the habit of expenditure beyond one’s means, and the tensions this sets up.

The moral realm here concerns evaluations of the individual person as worthy or not and, by acts of comparison, embeds judgement of worthiness in a social field of interpersonal exchanges, encounters and meetings. In this study of the experience of money, the moral is a thread on which hang the self-evaluations the young adults make in relation to matters of their own success and failure. Positional consumption becomes a moral encounter because it is the setting, in the lives of these young adults, for acting as if one has more than one does, as if one is more successful than one feels. It is moral because on each occasion of flash consumption, the individual is confronted by a gap between their aspiration

to a ‘normal life’ and everyday realities, where income and expenditure never add up to a surplus, always only to a deficit.

Inside the complex of situations and routines that constitute the domains of experience referred to above lies the individual’s pursuit of ‘a life.’ Pressed to earn well and therefore ‘advance’ or ‘progress,’ these young adults pursuing ‘a normal life’ (Temba¹) confront a gap between aspiration and reality; there is never enough money to meet the everyday demands made on them. However, in a gesture both destructive and constructive, ‘not having enough’ will not rob the individual of the rewards of work and the momentary and intense pleasures of consumption. This near universal (globally familiar) gesture of flash expenditure in the face of debt or poverty shows itself in the local situation as a moral encounter marking the daily lives of the young adults. With the narrow margin of their earnings they hold for themselves, or with small amounts borrowed, they ‘spend like there is no tomorrow’ on designer brand clothes, on hairdos (both men and women), on treats — fast food and drink and revelry. Rather than saving, the individual enters into an excessive (relative to income) expenditure, which represents, by its chosen objects, an aspired-to lifestyle that signals the attainment of a ‘good life,’ such as depicted by media-propagated images (primarily through product advertising but also by popular TV series) that associate well-being with spending money and ‘dressing nice’ (Lulama).

This world of consumption envelopes them and their peers, as it does modern economic subjects everywhere. But the intermittently employed, low-income individual here also competes for attention with those who do have more regular money, whether earned legitimately or not – a point brought up by several participants. The young adults enter, in successive passing moments, into a field of symbolic substitutes for a lifestyle which in actuality is unattainable in their circumstances. By vicariously conforming to images of having and spending, through acts of flash consumption, the young adults signal to themselves and to their peers their participation in economic well-being and elevated social status. Very real aspirations to a good life, frustrated by never having the monetary means, are realised episodically in displays masking ‘not having money in the bank’ (Fezile) or ‘not [even] having a bed [to sleep on]’ (Funeka).

Viewed from the outside, the consumption habits the young adults speak of may surprise, given their personal financial vulnerability and that of the households they depend on and which depend on them. A purely economic rationality² must regard such spending as irrational, especially where it depends (as it often does) on borrowing: this flash (or compulsive) spending is evidently destructive of the individual project to save, invest and advance. In point of social fact, the

¹ Names of study participants have been changed for reasons of privacy.

² In terms of rational choice theory.

evidence here presents a situation that makes visible how social relations embed economic relations in a complex lifeworld, at the centre of which lies the individual as a being of wider experience than the purely economic. Indeed, it is difficult to know what purely economic relations could refer to, given that economic production and expansion is inherently driven by consumption, that is, by expenditure toward the making, buying and enjoying of things and services.

In terms of this study, what the young adults spend on dress, drink and revelry has two aspects relating to what we will call ‘existential satisfaction’: enjoyment of the personal psychological release that such actions bring (‘the reward at the end of the day’) and the social image this shapes in the eyes and regard of others. In everyday terms, their spending happens for the sake of immediate personal and bodily enjoyment, and for the admiration and social status it confers. This conforms with the mass of positive valuations in the world of images of advertising and television normativity. Because that which is termed economic cannot exist outside of social norms, values and biographical injunctions (the productive individual pursuing a life), this study confronts, in the life context and dispositions of the study participants, an encounter between employment income and biographical or subjective aspiration.

For the participants, the situation is far from ideal, with their income not being proportionate to their stated aspirations. Speaking of spending on things they want (i.e., personal goods), they speak of their positional consumption spending as disproportionate, even excessive, in relation to their means and living conditions. Consequently, while their consumption behaviours conform to the socially embedded rationality of the consumer marketplace, they acknowledge that this portion of their expenditure is laden with anxieties that carry a sense of acting contrary to their own aspirational interests and to their impoverished conditions at home. So why do they do it?

The theoretical case made here finds the core of an answer in a perceived gap between a life aspired to and a lived reality of unresolvable financial insecurity within a wider situation of lack, of never having enough to go around. Flash consumption jumps this gap to provide momentary satisfaction of that imagined lifestyle of ownership, style and social success. Sometimes the gap means not being able to make expected contributions to a dependent household. Or it means going out with friends on a Friday night and it is your turn to buy drinks, to show you are part of the scene, that you too will share. You borrow, knowing you may have a short employment next week or hoping something will come up in time. On a micro scale, each act of spending enters a continuum of demands and a renewed confrontation with the gap — that is, between what you have and what you need.

The macro scale, or lifeworld, upscales the situation to an aggregate of routine micro events of monetary calculation to show the individual financially

transacting against the potent gravity of finding and holding a job and debt and risk in the flow of daily existence and collective life. The lifeworld shows an individual young adult who says ‘the money is not enough’ or ‘work is sometimes not worth the money.’ Their evidence for these statements, which provide the terms of a case made repeatedly, are their experiences, habits and inclinations within the matrix of the labour market and low wage intermittent employment, the household and the realm of positional consumption. In the interview discussions, the individual participants speak from within their portion of daily existence which challenges their aspirations to a financially independent life and what that brings. The life aspired to is not readily or directly available through education and employment; much of the time they track informal work and short contracts through networks of friends and contacts. Consumption, I argue, provides a convenient and immediate substitute or replacement for the gratifications of that absent way of life, the ‘normal’ or ‘good life’ envisaged by Temba. At the same time, this positional consumption, when it depends on borrowing cash or on retail credit which cannot be repaid, is constantly shadowed by the figure of the debt collector, or of debt itself as an impersonal force constraining every aspirational move.

Aspiration shows material processes embedding personal life orientations with regard to desired and envisaged futures. Viewed as an extrinsic value orientation, it is consistent with the respondents’ mutualistic or collectivist culture and interdependent self-conception (Eaton & Louw, 2000; Kim, Kasser & Lee, 2003). Aspiration is usefully conceptualised by Ray in two dimensions: the aspirations window and the aspiration gap (Ray, 2003). According to him, aspirations are narrowed down by comparison and seek similarity to give them substance. The breadth of social comparison may be restricted by what is observed and communicated, and may be influenced by how much perceived social mobility exists in the particular world of the participant. According to Ray, ‘The greater the extent of (perceived) mobility, the broader the aspirations window’ (Ray, 2003:3). The young adults feel ‘held back’ or ‘left behind’ and as a consequence they ‘spend like there is no tomorrow,’ like ‘there is no future.’ These are the sentiments they voice. They feel a gap between what they earn and the wages they aspire to, and between the life aspired to and their lived reality, which is economically precarious and dependent on an economically vulnerable and emotionally stressed domestic moral economy³ (DME) (Gregory, 2012).

³ “DME is that domain where profit and loss and virtue and vice form an inseparable whole; or, to use Polanyi’s (1944: Chapter 4) famous formulation, where the economy is embedded in kinship and other social relations” (Gregory, 2012: 380).

The study concludes that the positional consumption the study participants speak of, and many of them live, manifests a social “deception” in the face of private deprivation. The study points to historical continuity in youth cultures, of strategies of identity formation and social distinction that go back to the 1950s and 1960s, cultures based in distinctive dress codes and lifestyle (Bank, 2002; Glaser, 2000). The situation under consideration is also in discontinuity with earlier historical situations in that the post-apartheid scene includes a massive expansion of consumer credit linked to the retail sector. Further, I argue that these patterns of consumption are linked to a tendency to quit employment without another job to go to, that can be traced back to the 1960s (Posel, 1991). And thus, I argue that the domestic moral economy of the young adults and others like them bridges and underpins these continuities and discontinuities. The rest of this paper describes and elaborates this argument in two parts.

First, an account is presented of spending patterns, followed by consideration of the subjects’ attitudes toward spending and consumption. Their consumption patterns are then elaborated in relation to their experience of buying on credit and borrowing to spend. The voices of the participants are the basic evidence, and ground the exposition which illustrates my findings and theorisations; these relate, with the nature of consumption and with aspiration, as an existential resource and a form of cultural capital. The findings examine historical scholarship on youth consumption and identity in South Africa in relation to the wider contemporary context, before concluding with a look at post-apartheid credit as ‘money from the future.’

2. Reading spending priorities — A story of weights and measures

The account of the spending priorities of individual subjects below identifies tendencies within the group, and aims, cautiously, to depict spending patterns within the wider social context of their lifeworld. The items they spend on may be grouped under two basic headings: regular and anticipated spending, and irregular and unanticipated spending. The latter includes responses to temporally uncertain, but generally anticipated, demands from household members, family and friends.

Food and electricity, or cash contributions toward household expenses, are anticipated regular expenses and are at or very near the top of the participants’ lists of priorities. These are followed by necessary personal expenses such as mobile phone data, transport to and from work, burial insurance premiums, and loan repayments to family or local moneylenders. These regular expenses run alongside calls by retail chain debt collectors and frequent demands from family members and friends for money for this or that. The study respondents also

experience irregular, unanticipated expenses for sudden social or traditional events, what Fezile refers to as “emergencies.” These events, such as funerals of family members or friends, weddings, *lobola* [bride price] and male initiation, often include travel expenses to the Eastern Cape. There are also socially ritualised, customary visits to the family homestead in the Eastern Cape during the December holidays, and similar, less routine, visits at Easter.

To reiterate, when earning, the respondents must either contribute to household expenses in cash or buy food and electricity for the household. This is expected by the head of the household and prioritised by all participants. Contributions approximately cover the cost of food and shelter for one person and are the price of social inclusion in the household, i.e., of remaining part of the life of the family household. Most feel responsible and obligated to make such contributions, but some, like Fezile, only contribute when they perceive a need to do so, and an alternative is less pressing. He explains:

Yes, if okay you give me R500 now I will look at it, okay, [do we have] enough groceries at home, are we having enough electricity. Okay, we are doing a floor at my [house] ... my stepfather paid something like R8,000 for it. So, I will think okay if you were drinking with this R500 they [his friends] are not laughing at my face. So, I must go spend it with my friends [and not contribute to household expenses].

Further along the list of priorities, those who have more regular employment buy insurance against the risk of an unanticipated family funeral expense. Such events would likely involve transport costs to the Eastern Cape and food and drink for the occasion. The insurance covers some or all of these costs. Travel expenses to the Eastern Cape are considerable and it is not only the death of kin that incurs costs, but also the death of a friend or the kin of important friends. Fezile attributes what he considers excessive expenditure on death to pride and competition for status, when compared to spending by Whites.

You see the thing is we Black people, we like the pride, you see. It's like if I've got a funeral, I want to handle my funeral more expensive than yours. It's the status: we slaughter a cow for my grandmother's funeral. A cow and two sheep — and people were, like wow, and if the other one slaughters three sheep, we'll look at it and [think], ooh that was a small funeral. So, it's kind of a competition. You see, when I'm watching the movies and you look at a white person's funeral, they are not spending a lot of money on the funeral. It will be sandwiches, snacks. We would slaughter cows and drinks and hire tents and everything, you see. Spend a lot of money.

Consequently, buying funeral insurance is a priority and the norm for most of the study participants. Some, like Nomlanga, Tembeka and Fezile cannot afford it.

What follows in the list of priorities is repayment of small interest-free loans from a parent or a friend. Such loans bridge the frequent shortfall of cash until payday, but the repayment may need to follow more urgent settlements of cash debt to a *mashonisa*, which incurs an astonishingly high interest rate of 50% per month. So, naturally, every effort is made to repay the loan within the month. Debt to formal sector retailers and, in some instances, debt to high street moneylenders or micro-lenders often finds its way to the bottom of these young adults' list. A common refrain regarding debt to retailers is 'I will pay it when I have money or when I have a proper job.' Other expenses take priority.

Regarding child maintenance, all five of the young men have children but only Dumisa and Nomlanga live with the mothers of their children. All but Siphosay they make maintenance payments. Temba's child maintenance payment is a regular budget item and Nomlanga allocates R1,000 to send to his partner's mother in the Eastern Cape, who takes care of their child. Fezile's mother insists that he contribute toward his children's expenses, but she often contributes in his stead. Dumisa shares the cost of his children's expenses with their mother, his partner. Siphosay has a child but was not clear about whether or not he pays maintenance, or how regularly. The women in the group all take responsibility for their children's food, clothes, school fees, books and transport, often with the help of their working or pensioner mothers. None report receiving regular contributions from the father of their children.

Further regular payments are to savings clubs, which are obligatory regular payments. These savings are usually for year-end December travel and feasting expenses. They constitute an enforced saving and cannot be postponed or disputed. They appear to protect cash from the subjects' own personal wants and from the demands of others.

Along with anticipated and unanticipated costs, the research participants face temporally irregular but generally anticipated claims on their earnings from family members and friends. Sometimes the respondents feel obligated to buy items of furniture or appliances, to fix the ceiling of the house in Khayelitsha or to pay for the repair of dwellings in the Eastern Cape, but sometimes they do so voluntarily. Some express resentment for these claims from family members and friends, for what they perceive to be a drag on their economic progress, while others attend to what is expected of them without complaint. Some lament their economic position and blame themselves for their bad luck, their circumstances or choices they have made in their lives. Some try to save but often withdraw their funds as soon as they need the money, to spend and to share or distribute as contributions, loans, gifts and reciprocations in-kind of drink and eating out.

This force of extraction (or sharing on demand) is relentless and ever-present. Many of the respondents claim that by the middle of the month “there is nothing,” meaning their income has been spent and they have no cash left for themselves.

With or without remaining disposable cash, the young adults now face the demands of positional consumption. It is time to party, to share, to have fun or to get those shoes or that hairdo. Up to this point, the use of their earnings has followed a rational calculus; the study participants think carefully about how to meet their various financial obligations. As shown above, a list of priorities determines the way they portion out every R10 spent or contributed. They evaluate and order their spending to make sure they meet their everyday expenses and their possible obligations and still have money to spend on themselves — if they do. If they do not, they borrow. Either way, they now spend “like there is no tomorrow” on positional goods. The participants recognise that this positional spending is not commensurate to their earnings and to their longer-term aspirations. Having carefully calculated the use of their income, they now spend beyond their means for the sake of pleasure and social standing. Rational choice theory, in framing the ideal behaviour of a modern economic subject, must call this behaviour irrational in that it contradicts a core injunction relating to economic advancement: accumulate through saving and investing. Such an interpretation of economic behaviour is subject to debate and criticism (Becker, 1962; Sen, 1977). Rather than pursuing this ‘rational’ economic path by sacrificing immediate pleasure and status, the young adult forgoes ‘normal life’ by acts of positional consumption haunted by debt and indebtedness.

In the section that follows, the words of the research participants suggest that their positional consumption produces feelings of subjective well-being and of just desert, and provides a momentary escape from the hardships of everyday life. It also provides an experience of pleasure.⁴ They indicate an ambivalence regarding the satisfaction derived from conforming to peers’ consumption behaviour and the status that conforming confers. They note that the satisfaction or pleasure has material consequences and results in anxiety, derived from what they perceive to be undue spending. Perhaps they feel this way because they carefully evaluate the proportion of their wages they withhold for themselves relative to the material circumstances and demands on their earnings at home. Anxiety may also arise because they fail to save for the times they are unemployed, or because of what they owe to retailers. As will be shown below, spending also has a moral aspect due to an underlying sense of a pretence, and through the illegitimacy of the role models that drive their aspirations. The

⁴ Contentment, satisfaction from sociability, conviviality and the making of the self socially. Belonging.

young adults exhibit and act out wealth in spending. The circumstances require them to wear a mask, to adopt a persona, to show and enact what everybody knows and lives but does not speak about, the social deception of public flash and private deprivation. The positional consumption enacted through public flash substitutes for economic progress; deprivation is its outcome.

3. Consuming status

For Tembeka, young people spending on themselves is a reward, a just desert for hard work. She says her peers spend:

... a lot of money on clothes, and dress and making up their hair; at the end of the day you are working hard and you see that nice dress, you know, and you feel like you deserve it ... you have to look good even if you haven't got any money.

'You have to look good' implies a necessity to conform to norms and standards. Lulama explains dressing up and spending at parties as a way 'to be free from stress at that moment, ja, to be on your own planet.' Buhle and Nomlanga similarly point to rewarding themselves for their efforts in earning an income. For Lulama, it is a moment's release from stress, entailing a freedom from the hardships of everyday life.

Tembeka explains that fitting in with friends is conditional on wearing brand labels despite the fact that this conditionality is not supportive of one's financial circumstances. Branded clothes are the norm and friends are indifferent to the financial circumstances of the individual. In her words:

They want to fit in to the society, [in] with their friends. They associate themselves with friends who've got conditions⁵ ... sometimes friends that we associate ourselves with, they don't support us. People I know. Maybe they see each other wearing labels, I mean ... label clothes, ja. So, the other one wants also to fit in there and [she will] go and buy Levi's and what-what — all those things. They see the other one changes her hairstyle, so I'd also want to change hairstyle. You know because my friends are doing so. Otherwise [they] wouldn't fit in to the group. Even if there's no ... if [they] don't have money.

⁵ The conditions referred to here are conditions relating to dress and behaviour regarded as conditional for belonging. Tembeka indicates that such friends may not be understanding of the financial difficulties associated with spending and are therefore not supportive.

Nearly all the research participants repeat this volition among their peers. Tembeka warns against borrowing to spend as irresponsible but also implies an inevitability to succumbing to the pressure to fit in.

Not even if you haven't got any money; that's being irresponsible, because other people get themselves into debt and others they go and seek money in irresponsible ways because they are feeling pressure — they want to fit in.

Speaking of youth, generally, and telling of the lengths to which some will go to have the things they want, Tembeka speaks of moral coercion in the household and questions the behaviour ethically as blackmail, especially considering the relatives' meagre monetary position.

Maybe I will pressurise my aunt to give me money amid the little that she has, or I'll pressurise my grandma. Others they even — what's this — you know, blackmail? Ja they even use that to get money from their parents or their family. Ja, just to be the same as the others.

Nobomi, referring to her own younger cohort, points to the moral and financial burden sometimes placed on parents by children who feel an anxiety to conform. In this way, anxiety to conform spills over into the DME (Gregory, 2012). Possessive individualism overwhelms and transgresses rules of mutuality based in kinship. Nobomi illustrates this by her comment:

When you see your friend that is having something like Carvela⁶ [shoes] you ... when [your friend has] Carvela shoes; that Carvela shoe is R 1,500, and then [you are] getting stressed that you don't have this Carvela, and then you go to stress your mother about Carvela. Why she doesn't afford to buy it when you want to be like your friend.

Fezile's words highlight the prevalence and symbolism of the brand name shoe in the production of status, indicating an investment in cultural capital. He may be exaggerating the money value but his attitude indicates the disproportionate expense of social inclusion, which is high for the material circumstances of those in Site B, one of the poorer areas of Khayelitsha:

You see, for example, most of us we like our Carvela. Remember I told you about that, yes and especially us Black people, if I must put it that way. If you can go to Site B you see me and other two

⁶ A commonly-worn Italian brand name shoe that costs between one third and two thirds of a monthly wage.

friends, we've got Carvela. At the shebeen most of the people are wearing Carvela and if you could count that money, it could be even fifty thousand or more, you see.

In one conversation, Funeka names as 'sacrifice' the cost of such status:

The main thing for them is getting a car, getting designer clothes and that's it. If they have a beautiful car you will find a person is sleeping on the floor instead of ... they don't even have a bed, but they can sacrifice.

Sacrifice implies giving up something now for something greater or more meaningful later on. In this instance, not having a bed to sleep on is the symbolic sacrifice for the visible consumption of "a car, getting designer clothes" as objects of aspirational and positional consumption. They are a means by which to conform and display the 'good life' as a form of distinction, to use Bourdieu's terminology (Bourdieu, 2013). In Fezile's words:

You have to fit in. Maybe I can afford [to] have a house, I have a car and I can buy, I [can] afford [things] and my neighbour doesn't have much but he wants to be at my level. So, I think that's what [fitting in] has to do with.

Drinking — they buy expensive alcohol, maybe Hennessy, or expensive whiskies, they don't drink cheap vodka or whatever. They have to be seen as people with status and power. It gives them power, I think. I don't know how to explain it, sir. If you could go some time on the weekend, go there by the pub you'll see what I am talking about. You'll see a lot of beautiful cars and people dressing expensive, drinking expensive alcohol, ja. [Their] priority is having good life. Partying, drinking and stuff, they call that good life. Yes, wearing expensive clothes, having a car and sir, surprisingly enough, education.⁷

But it comes at the cost of 'suffering inside,' having nothing to eat at home:

Yes, if I buy that bottle there and I go home they won't see [me]; they don't know what is going on in my house, but when I put that bottle where everybody sees, they will look at me differently. They will think I have money, just because of that bottle they will respect me. They will respect me, even though I suffer inside; they don't know my suffering inside, the inside is when I go home, and I get no

⁷ Education is recognised as a gateway to earning and economic progress (see Chapter 4).

food. So, just to look good I put that bottle there where everybody sees.

This kind of positional consumption is a performance of social comparison — a public display of status and power symbolised by the artefacts of the good life — but with a sacrifice of savings, of money in the bank:

It's all about the money. It's like I would like to be seen as that one [who] is quite good financially wise. Although when I go to sleep, I will eat like maybe pap, with nothing else, but when I go to ... you know, to Ace [a well-known drinking hole in Khayelitsha], the place next to the police station, where they usually drink and sell weed? When you go there you will dress nice, buy expensive stuff like a Hennessy, Biscuit and all those ... but if you can go look at my bank account, I've got nothing.

Funeka asks a rhetorical question about this positional expenditure. She speaks of theft. Money is taken if left unguarded:

Where do they get the money? They're not working, where do they get the type of money to spend on clothes and drink. They ask the parents, maybe lie or some steal. If they know where the monies [is] kept then they steal. They think the fact they see money laying around means there's money to be spent, there's a lot. So, they don't see it as a bad thing, no.

Fezile speaks of taking money without asking and the resulting disruptions and domestic conflict:

They go there a lot — they steal money. Five hundred from my mother. Yes. And that's it, ja, that's what's causing the problem! Those sisters of mine. They steal the money. The father is gonna think it's the mother who steals the money. So ja, that's why, sometimes, they had fights about money, you see.

In such instances, the pull to conform through positional consumption is premised in its extreme on intrahousehold domestic theft and deception.

Temba speaks of spending to be seen and says the ones that spend know they should not spend but do. Flash spenders, suggests Temba, hide from themselves a compulsive aspect of spending, for it is 'stupidity':

I will spend just for you to see me. If I go behind the wall into my mind I will think, oh, I shouldn't have spent that, but just to show you that I can spend it. That usually happens month end, that's when

the money comes, and we go [on] weekend, you know, buying the most expensive bottles, maybe a bottle that costs R500 or even a thousand, just to go ok, I bought this. I don't like spending, [it is] stupidity for me because myself I won't do that.

But, in his words, 'status is very important.' Drinking expensive alcohol publicly signifies having money and having money buys flash status and respect. There is, seemingly, profit in stupid spending. It buys position and cultural capital but the stupidity that Temba refers to is also a widely recognised and practiced "deception" of public flash and private deprivation for the sake of acquiring social status. It may thus be inferred that such acts of spending, in claims to status and respect, are commonly seen as performances.

Regarding historical forerunners, Aphiwe volunteered that her grandmother "was a party girl" who was reckless with her spending. Because my research did not enquire into the experiences of the older generation, I turn to the literature. Historical descriptions of dressing well, drink and revelry are given in accounts of 1950s and 1960s East Bank in East London (Bank, 2011) and in accounts of youth gangs in Soweto (Glaser, 2000). These accounts indicate that positional and aspirational consumption, performed through dress and drink, and revelry and rivalry, is related to social distinctions among and between members of youth groups. According to studies in various disciplines, these distinctions emerged in response to colonial and apartheid regulated modes of urbanisation and legal status in the city (Posel, 1991; Wilson & Mafeje, 1963). Legal status included: the right to work and reside in the city; distinctions between rural and urban, and between Christian and 'Pagan' (referred to as 'School' and 'Red'); education; and type of employment, and consequent dispositions toward employment (Wilson & Mafeje, 1963). These distinctions and their modes of enactment are discussed in more detail below in relation to categories of youth and identity referred to in Swartz's work in Langa (Swartz, 2009).

When asked to confirm that the respect of others is contingent on displays of spending in this fashion, Temba spoke of the effect these displays have on relations between men and women. He claims that intimate relationships are conditional on having money:

No, you won't get a girl if you don't have money. It's very hard to get a girl. Love is like forty [percent] and the other sixty [is to be provider]. You need to be able to support your girl. Most of the girls now they won't even love. They will be with you just because you've got that money and you can afford to take them out.

Sipho puts it this way:

Even if you are wrong, if you have money you are right. By virtue that you have money you are a winner. Your clothes, expensive clothes, crocodile shoes, your car you are driving, although you know that you wrong. People like me, and adults, will join them. You see, once you wear those clothes, those watches, chains, earrings, in our society you are very powerful. Even the ladies; you have 50 points [you are] at the top. Me, I must start from the scratch.

Drinking is a sign of success, i.e., of reciprocal masculine admiration and the power to attract women. Perceptions of having money to spend, wealth and power are contingent on displays of drinking: money buys masculine attention and female attraction. Siphon can 'call one girl, she will definitely come.' He attributes this situation to 'our culture' explaining 'the way it is:'

The guys will not respect you if you don't bring that bottle there. You know when you are standing there, you know with that cup and that bottle, standing there you know you're the man. People who walk past you they look at that bottle and they think, hey this guy ... [he has] money. Even yourself you feel like you [are better] than other people. So, if you're standing there with that glass and that bottle and the ladies walk past and if I call one girl, she will definitely come [laughter]. It is like that in our culture. It is mostly like that.

Buhle speaks of women's expectations of men. Love is not enough. Her man must be financially independent of her. He must be a provider with a job and must dress well. She would not want to be seen with him wearing 'flat clothes.' Yet, in contradiction, she also speaks against spending on expensive brand name shoes while not having a decent room to sleep in:

I think things have become expensive. People get to the relationship, okay fine for love and stuff but more it's reality, love alone cannot keep the relationship going, there are certain expectations, you know, from a partner. Especially from men, we have expectations from our men, they should provide. So, you won't really go for a man who is not working ... [especially] if I was working. I wouldn't go for a man who is not working because he will depend on me, in a way, I wouldn't want to be seen with him wearing like, you know, flat clothes.

You know he's still maybe staying at home, okay fine, maybe there's nothing wrong with staying at home because I am also staying at home, but you'll find that even the home that he is staying in is not like, you know, the essentials are still not there. You know,

the basics. [But] when you check his wardrobe, it will cost about R10,000. Some of the ladies they don't find that, I don't know, [attractive]. It's a turn off for me because I wouldn't trust a guy who owns expensive clothes but he doesn't even have a decent place to stay.

These comments exemplify the particular logics of the lifeworld of the study group which is rife with glimpses of the inescapable contradictions of their predicament. Buhle is 'turned off' by the acknowledged paradox of positional consumption, the deception of public flash in pretending to have wealth and well-being while living an experience of private deprivation, which is the sacrifice that Funeka refers to. Buhle expresses a moral rejection of the deception but, at the same time, does not want to be seen with a man who wears flat clothes; he must have a job to be trusted, yet she cannot secure employment herself. These are the contradictions of the predicament in which the young adults find themselves. The man must show the mark of a good provider by demonstrating that he has a job and is contributing to the essentials at home. Buhle cannot trust a man's full wardrobe and expensive clothes as a sign of being a good provider. It is not attractive for 'some of the ladies'. But sometimes money comes easy.

Temba is of the view that money obtained by illegal means — 'easy money' — is behind the phenomenon of carefree spending. In his words:

I am working hard for my money. Now the guys that are getting the money easy they can spend R1,000 on this girl on that girl and that girl because it's just too easy. It's easy to spend money that [you don't earn] so they don't care. The guys that do your illegal activities, and there's a lot of them, there's a lot of them.

He laments that hard work is not enough, that flash positional consumption is beyond the means of a normal working and earning adult. For Temba, only 'easy money' can be spent in such a carefree, generous fashion. Only theft, taking without asking, or other illegal activities can explain it. He implies that it is hard to keep up with the standards set. On a different day, Fezile confirms that it is indeed stolen money that is spent in the shebeens with such ease:

Just because most of the people that go there [to the shebeen], they are not working. Those guys are stealing some other people's bank cards and [they] are doing frauds and all that stuff. So, they don't care about spending money, you see. I know that I'm working and I'm getting this much from my work so I'm not the same [as those guys]. Those guys must make maybe about R10,000 in five minutes

you see. So, I can't compare myself with them. The problem with us we would like to get up to their standard you see.

The perception of 'easy money' as one driver of consumption, i.e., of spending power, implies an existential devaluation of money earned. Money earned is valuable at home and scarce, but is devalued by money stolen and spent with careless abandon in the sphere of public life, especially in the shebeen and on clothes and cars. The distance from the life aspired to is thus regularly measured against displays of conspicuous positional consumption in the field of the shebeen.

Fezile adds in his explanation that, in addition to the carefree spending of 'easy money,' it is status as social comparison, as an attitude or an evaluative judgement (Crano & Prislin, 2006) of the dress of peers, that produces the perceived distance from the life aspired to (Ray, 2003). It may then be suggested that the affect generated by the perception of a gap may indirectly drive moral compromise, for example, that of stealing from one's parents in order to dress in branded clothing and vicariously live the good life. According to Fezile:

It's like I compare myself with you. You've got a car — then I'm gonna start stealing from my parents and all that stuff, to put myself at the same standard as you, you see. So that's why [people] tend to steal the money. They don't want to be treated as inferiors you see. Yes, they want to have the same status as the other people. You will see they wear some expensive brands there, Lacoste, you name it. So, if you go there, you can't put on maybe some overalls and all that stuff. [They] must know that you've got these big brands you see.

Perhaps it is the feeling of denial of the status aspired to or its positive, the pressure to conform, that sets up easy money as an explanation for the moral compromise of stealing. My own observations since the period of the research show that, on a Friday afternoon and on Saturday, men with money, earned or stolen, travel around to show off their cars, go places to be seen, drink with friends, talk and laugh and make merry and flirt with women. Those with meagre and intermittent earnings meet these norms and standards when and if they can.

In Tembeka's opinion, the strong pressure on youth to conform comes from the hold that images of consumption produced in the media as advertising have on their sense of self: 'Maybe sometimes media does that. Because you see something on TV or in a magazine and you like it, then you want to have it.' Zintle has a more radical view. She blames 'the system'. She points to this hypothetical agency as a cause of self-interest, rather than providing support to others:

So, what I'm saying is what the system has done in terms of encouraging or ensuring that it gets the last money from the poor people ... [by] ensuring that there is consumption, [that] people consume, you know, those products that are being advertised, that you need this Samsung Galaxy and this and that and that and that. [It] has promoted the thinking that okay, I need to work for Zintle and Zintle alone, because if I'm busy supporting people around me, or, well I won't be able to get the things that I want.

Sipho understands it from a traditionalist's view by making a distinction between European and African values and ways of being that have been corrupted, with consequences:

You see, those guys ... the money, they confuse our society. They think that once you have money, you are rich. You know in Europe, they are still confused, [that is] White people in Europe. There are people in Africa who can live a lesser life, a peaceful life, [without] riches, without having a mansion, house and car, two cars. So now here in Africa, there are people who copy that kind of life. So, there are people who believe that [if] you have no money, some people even become depressed. They don't know why they become depressed and hang themselves. So, money has been corrupting people's minds; people have been corrupted to their soul for the sake of money. So, the money's good and it's bad. It depends on how you use it. For me example, I don't have the money, but I can manage without using money.

It is evident from the accounts above, and it will be shown below, that brand name dress and 'looking good' (Lulama, Buhle) signify status and power. The will to dress well and look good for the sake of status and power are not culturally external. That is to say, they are not determined exclusively by advertising or 'the system' or by a form of acculturation attributed by Sipho. Demonstrated positional consumption, set as extrinsic individual goals that involve 'enhancement of wealth, image, or popularity' is reported to be culturally consistent with mutualistic cultures and with an interdependent self-conception (Kim, Kasser & Lee, 2003: 278) which characterises this group. In this context, they enact their positional consumption as an exchange of signs and for social inclusion.

The study participants do not speak about the views of their parents or of other household members regarding this form of spending on attire and lifestyle, and brand identity is not observed as a code of status for the parents. For all generations, however, owning desired consumer appliances and dressing well mark distinction, as is evident, for example, in Aphiwe's reference to her

grandmother's reputation as a 'party girl'. It does seem to signify a code for economic well-being that is associated with the urban lifestyle among kin, when participants are 'back home' in the Eastern Cape during December festivities. To this extent, spending on fancy clothing and shoes confers a status that is felt to be obligatory to uphold. Lulama, tellingly, voices the dynamic and its distinctions:

December I'm going back home. So, I must look excellent. They mustn't be able to judge, [that] I'm living in Cape Town but I'm like this [not well dressed], why [they would ask]? No, you make sure if you go, you dress to impress every day. Our hair is up to date, everything, and our wallet is full of money or our bank account is full of money because we arrive there and people will say, no you come from Cape Town, buy me this. You can't say no, because you come from Cape Town. Cape Town is where the money is but they don't know Cape Town is a very hard place. You must struggle, you must [have a] job. I save for it [trip to Eastern Cape in December]. I tell them stories but they don't believe me because they see Cape Town as the place to be. They don't look at Cape Town with the inner eye, what is actually happening in Cape Town. I tell them. [They say] Ag man, you're talking, you just don't want to give us the money, just say so. Don't try lie to us, ja, like that. It is a lot of pressure and you must dress to impress. They must see what that person, Cape Town, the Cape Town life now.

Lulama's comments mark the distinctions at play between the glittering city expressed in her dress and 'full' wallet and the rural deprivation of kin and community who seek advancement and her support. Her status is established as provider. She is expected to dress well and to spend on others and to share, to give money. But she protests at being in this situation. She distinguishes herself and is made distinct by her relatives in the rural Eastern Cape. She pretends and enacts and feels obliged to exhibit a positional consumption that is expected of her urban status. It substitutes for well-being but she also denies well-being.

This situation depicted by Lulama tells of a moral economy of aspiration bound to family and kinship (Shryock, 2013) across the 1,000 kilometres between Cape Town and the Eastern Cape. It is a binding of many strands across four centuries. This is not an historical study and therefore the reader may not have in mind a deeper historical sequence which this paper cannot ignore.⁸ Along this

⁸ In sum, the geospatial history, both political and economic, of relations between Cape Town and the province's eastern frontier dates back more than three hundred years, and it makes Khayelitsha a typical modern day (mid-1980s) residential manifestation of a White colonial demand for low wage (Black and/or 'Coloured') labour. This began with the start of the Dutch East India Company settlement in Table Bay in 1652. Across three centuries,

historical trajectory, for generations under colonial and then White nationalist rule, money was never enough, work was short and opportunities would come and go.

The relationship between the Eastern Cape and Cape Town and the social machinery of high apartheid extends to the era described by Mafeje and Wilson in their study of social groups in Langa, in Cape Town in 1961 (Wilson & Mafeje, 1963). Wilson and Mafeje (1963) describe lifestyles demarcated by apartheid's time-related residential and employment urban status. In the contemporary present of my study, the evolution of the social machinery and the cultural reworkings within it manifest an exhibition of the image of well-being and status, and Lulama's Eastern Cape rural kin do not believe her claim that this image is false. It is the contention of this study that this dynamic between urban and rural, and the enactment of positional consumption and its simultaneous denial, represents another example of the aspiration gap that is common in the lifeworld of the young adults in this study.

The study shows that the family household DME also extends itself in December across geographic space from the urban to the rural. 'December', as the phenomenon is simply referred to, presents a time of festival, an event in the annual calendar of the research participants that involves travel from the city to the Eastern Cape to reconnect with family and the village community. December is the time to be reminded of traditional values and obligations, and to fulfil customary practices, such as male initiation and marriage negotiation. It is, above all, a time to party, to look good, and to eat and drink and make merry. It is a time to be rich, to renew social bonds, and to re-establish the social status of

independence and self-generated identity were wrenched by the colonists from the local inhabitants in a long sequence of wars and policies, legislations and policing. With this came the technical evolution of the socially engineered machinery of compounds and dormitories, and camps, townships, fencings, offices, officials, regulations and papers. In the lens of that sequence, Khayelitsha, theoretically and practically, was a 'labour reserve,' and now is a reserve of mostly 'surplus labour.' Its distant siting from the Cape Town city centre and its blocks of small houses are signal how independent 'indigenous' subsistence farmers became units of labour for a colonial, and later apartheid, system. Native labour became Bantu labour then Black labour. Historically, Cape Town's labour was done by African slaves brought by ship from west and east African ports, by Indonesians ('Malays'), and by dispossessed Khoi herders and their hunter-gatherer kin they called San. While 'Coloured' and 'Black' were both 'non-White' under apartheid legislation, and were removed from inner city precincts to colour-coded labour dormitories on the city's industrial edges, labour preference laws in the Western Cape kept Black labour to a minimum, in favour of Coloured labour. In the changing dynamics of apartheid's tottering demise, new townships were planned. Within a few years of building Khayelitsha's first houses in 1985, the ending of political apartheid ushered in a new era of promise. Travel and residential restrictions were lifted, opening Cape Town to a new migration of families from Transkei and Ciskei, now Eastern Cape, in search of work, education and the city life, or to escape poverty at home.

being urban. Temba describes the exuberance of spending with excitement and, like Lulama above, the financial implication of sharing:

December, we just go all out. We don't think of January. You get bonuses in December. You get everything in December you have a lot of money coming in — salaries, stokvel money, savings [you spend] like there is no tomorrow. You go to the Eastern Cape, you get a cow, slaughter a cow, you do it because you have got that power, you've got that money in the bank. You have so much money you have not got before. All that power. You change the way you walk in December because of that money. But if I go to the Eastern Cape, I can't just say I have got that R3,000; when I get there there are unexpected things — they expect me to chip in.

Temba expects to be asked to 'chip in'. This is a statement in a minor key relative to assembly, flow and spending of money in a South African version of a festival of giving, reminiscent of the *potlatch* in Mauss's classical text *The Gift* (Mauss, 2002). It is the contention of this study that the festival of December is instrumental in re-affirming kinship bonds. The responsibilities of provision are refreshed, recharged and reciprocated each year with a mutual regard for the provider status. The mutuality of kinship is thus brought back to the city annually, into the DME, and into everyday life in the household, as described in the previous [working paper](#).

Study participant positional consumption, beyond the cost of reproduction of everyday life at work and home, is spatially and temporally cyclical. It is abundant, momentary, and bound to the irregular cycles of intermittent employment and the demands of the household, and is almost invariably followed by scarcity. Positional consumption follows earning, and it follows saving for events of consumption and of not earning, of waiting and making do on shared household income or donations of others. Occasions for merriment and exhibition of consumption include frequent parties held privately at home or publicly at the shebeen, on weekends or at month-end. These are moments for demonstration of abundance and of conforming and belonging. Lulama gives her own perspective on the spatiality and experience of the weekend partying and the volition to drink and spend:

I also want to party — this weekend the people start there, in Stellenbosch, we were there Saturday, then we came back about 10 o' clock. Me and my friends. We went to my friend's house and had a party there. Then on Sunday we went to the beach. Then we came back and we partied. Whoa, drink, dance, smoke but I only smoke when I drink, smoke, drink, dance, just having fun. You feel good at that time but in the morning *babalas* [hangover].

Ja, I have at least R500 in my ... at home *ne*. [I take] R100, I go and drink, I will finish that R100, then I will go back and fetch another one and we will drink again. In the morning when I go to my wallet, no man where is that R500? I can't remember now, but I drink it. So that is the problem, alcohol. It tells you to do something, [you] don't want to do, overpowers you. Even if you hide it [the money], you're going to find it.

[The party is] in lots of taverns that we go to. On the weekend, every weekend there will be an event. Sometimes, you know, maybe in your neighbourhood someone would have a party. For instance, like now it's my birthday, so people are expecting me to do something about it, ja. Sometimes we sit in and then we buy a lot of food, but I told myself, it was a big thing for me, that I would never do it again. You've got a bucket full of ice, you buy meat for maybe R1,500 and buy drink for even R2,000, just to make people [happy]. So, one day I decided, you know what, not anymore, so the parties we go to now are at taverns each and every week.

You know okay maybe we are five dolls; we are five friends. Each and every one must have maybe R100. So, out of that R100 we buy booze and then when you go to that place you've got to pay R50 just for entrance, so you know that you must budget for at least a week; [in] a week you must have R150 put aside for you to have a nice time. So that was it. And then we know that when it comes, we must make a statement; so out of that R800 that I was getting [I spent it to buy something to look good].

Lulama estimates that she spends R2,000 to R2,500 per month on clothes, meaning clothing, shoes, cosmetics and so on. She also spends R200 a month on her hair and R100 or R150 on a weekend on partying. At the time of our discussion, she was earning R3,500 per month. She spent R650 per month on food and electricity at home. Her saving and spending strategies are managed such that she can accumulate the amounts of money needed to spend on herself.

I must dress well. I must have something new, so out of that R800 maybe. Even if it's a top then you can mix and match with other things, so out of that R800 I would know that maybe previously I had lay by-ed something, so now I must just pay it off and then get it, and then that R150 that is supposed to be there, it's like a month it must be there. I would do that, and I know that I don't have to buy food every week. Maybe one week I would sacrifice my whole R800 and buy food so that next week all my money's mine, and I've got a monthly ticket, so why not? So, ja, it was like that and then

remember it's only Saturday, you spend like R150 Saturday, it becomes Sunday. You want to blow.

The stories of the young adults repeat how they seek and feel compelled to compete and compare themselves with their peers, i.e., to belong and give meaning to who they are in the world. Upholding the social status involves socialising, and participating in social gatherings and parties with friends and peers on weekends, be it at shebeens or their homes. On these occasions, it means spending on food and drink in abundance. It involves dressing up in clothes and shoes that match the fashion set by those with money, who are above these research participants in financial rank and means. The phenomenon of spending, and the character of consumption voiced by the research participants, resembles a compulsion — an addictive habit — to enjoy the heady moments of revelry that combine drink, food, music and dance, driven by desire and aspiration. But it presents a predicament born of the pressure to conform and a will to belong socially.

Up to this point I have given an account of the study participants' spending patterns and their attitudes toward spending and consumption. In the words of the research informants, other than what is leftover earnings, it is consumer credit and borrowing from family, friends and local moneylenders that enables positional consumption. The account below tells of what is bought with money borrowed from family and friends or local moneylenders, or with credit from retailers and unsecured loans. It also tells of the study participants' attitudes toward credit and borrowing to spend for the sake of social status, i.e., practicing positional consumption.

4. Borrowing to spend — Survival and the display of status

The study finds that, during periods of employment of longer than 12 months, the research participants buy clothes on credit for themselves and for their children and, on occasion, items for the household, including appliances and furniture. In time, however, with the swing to periods of unemployment and during periods of short-term contract work of less than one year, buying on credit is put on hold and repayment of financial debt to retailers is suspended.⁹ In these times, debt repayment falls to the bottom of the list of priorities.

⁹ Credit from clothing retailers is, however, available. It seems that some gesture of repayment, even a modest demonstration of an ability to sustain repayment, will keep an account open.

The study finds that, despite flux and uncertainty in earning, the respondents' financial indebtedness is accentuated by their capacity to aspire, by the urge to satisfy their needs and wants before the contract ends and the money runs out. It is intensified by intermittency and uncertainty of earning and by their felt responsibility or obligation to the household. Equally, access to credit and its promotion by the retail sector in the context of intermittent employment gives life to the aspirational or positional consumption, leading to high levels of financial indebtedness and default. Borrowing from local neighbourhood moneylenders is for emergencies. Even though it is reviled for its high cost and the consequences of failing to meet payment deadlines, five of the 12 respondents reported using such borrowing for drink and revelry.

Money circulates and is distributed in small quantities in the household and in social networks of mutual support and reciprocity among those who do and those who do not have cash. When there is an unanticipated larger expense, or when the study participants fail to manage their money or relationships with supportive friends and neighbours, they face the hazard and having to pay the penalty of a debt to a moneylender. Dumisa despises informal moneylenders, as will be shown later, but has a sympathetic view of formal sector moneylenders. They are considered a last-resort source of money. He borrowed R1,000 from one while he was employed at Shoprite, and paid it back over five months.

My experience of them, ja, I think you see, they are presenting a good service because we have got a big problem here. We're poor, we're suffering, even though we are working, but the money that you need, the cost of living is too high. So sometimes you get into trouble and then you see that the only way, in this case, [out of] the trouble is for you to have money, and then you will go to somebody you know, for only this money — don't have it, you'll go to that one, don't have, family members, don't have, and then as a result, where are you going to go? You go to those people, to the lenders.

According to Dumisa, circumstances are such that sometimes poor people have no place to turn other than to moneylenders. On the other hand, Fezile admits that he borrows from informal moneylenders to drink and make merry, in spite of the interest that will accrue.

Yes, I do borrow sometimes from the people living here. There's this lady who's doing money laundering, you see. Yes, I do sometimes go to her and ask for maybe R100. Do you know what R100 is for? I go for drinking [laughter]. But I wouldn't go maybe over R500. Just because if I borrow R500 that will have an [a large] interest.

Dumisa places a limit on what he will borrow, and pay as interest, as the cost of sociability. Like Fezile, Nomlanga also borrows to drink and smoke, though he does not like to do so. He reports:

I don't do it anymore. I don't like just borrow cash, *ne*. If ever I want this thing, ja, me and my friend want to smoke or drink or do anything, I would go to those guys [*mashonisas*]. Now I don't do that anymore because ... you know it is wrong. You see, I go there, borrow the cash and we'll go smoke; maybe I borrow R30, maybe I borrow R50, maybe I borrow R100 and go and smoke or go drink, you see.

Lulama borrows regularly from a *mashonisa*. 'Even last month, I have to borrow R100. At the end of the month [I] must come back with R150'. Asked how many times a month she borrows, she answers, 'Ja, I would say one time, one. Not every month. John, I won't lie, if I borrow money from *mashonisa*, it's for me having fun on weekends'.

Aphiwe tells of her aspiration for 'these sorts of things' that young people need and want. She prioritises food and electricity and borrows for transport to get to work. She also borrows at a high cost to buy 'nice clothes' for partying. She alludes to youthful desires as the reason for borrowing at punitive interest rates.

I had to borrow. I had to borrow for my transport. I was a young person then and I wanted these sorts of things and I could not reach them [with earnings or credit from retailers] and [so] I had to make another plan, so I borrow from *mashonisa*. I borrow maybe starting from R500 to even R1,000. I would have to pay back R1,000, or R1,500, it's no longer R1,000. Yes, in one month. I was very young, I wanted to party, John. I wanted to wear nice clothes. I wanted to eat, [pay for] electricity. So that money was for all those things. I had a young child. My mother had spoiled me rotten so now these things are not here now.

She could not buy on credit from retailers as this requires regular employment or a contract longer than one year. Without the necessary job security, she borrowed from moneylenders instead. Perhaps she could have managed her debt by skipping payments, she thinks, but she chose to borrow from a local *mashonisa* instead.

No, I could not. I could not qualify. I need to open an account maybe in Ackermans¹⁰, for my child or maybe in Edgars, [but] if

¹⁰ Ackermans is a South African chain of clothing retail stores. Founded in 1916 in Wynberg, Cape Town, Ackermans has over 700 stores across Southern Africa, including in Namibia,

they would call work, they will know that I'm only there for a certain time, so you can't [open] an account if you are only working for six months. But if I get a card I can still [buy] as long as I have credit [but] the issue would [then] be how would I pay the monthly instalments? That's the issue. Sometimes you will skip months, you don't pay for that, but at that time I had not done that [bought on credit] so the only person that I owed was the *mashonisa*.

Nobomi turned to credit from a *mashonisa* with full knowledge of the consequences of delayed payment.

No, it's not those ones. I didn't go to those ones [*mashonisas*] that took an ID and all of your cards and what not. It's someone that I know. It's not a friend [but someone] that I have been living with in Makhaza. Ja, they are chasing me but we understood each other when I go there and talk to her. I don't like to do *mashonisa* but sometimes when you don't have money you do. Ja, I don't like it but I thought I'm going to *mashonisa* to buy my stock and then to sell it, and then I was going to pay it back ... [but] it didn't happen that way because the customers like to take things on credit and they don't pay, and then you get cross but ...

What interest did the *mashonisa* charge? I asked, as it appeared to be a special circumstance. 'Yoh! 50%', she replied. Borrowing from local moneylenders is not only very expensive but failure to repay could lead to embarrassment with neighbours as well as the loss of household items of value such as appliances, until repayment is made. Aphiwe volunteers that it is mostly women in the neighbourhood who lend money. In fact, three of the mothers of the 12 research participants lend money.

Mostly it's women that are doing those things, yes. They are from my neighbourhood. Everywhere there are *mashonisas* ready to give you money as long as you want to pay for them and even in my community you see things that are happening to people that are not even paying. Yes, most of the time they would have a business. Maybe they would sell chickens and then on the other side they are loan sharks. So, you know *mos*, everyone that has a business always have people that are surrounding her. So, if you try to do or try to be *skelm* [scoundrel], [to avoid repayment] they will have to deal with you. You'll be embarrassed, they will go to the house and they will shout 'give my money' and then you will be embarrassed in the

Botswana, Lesotho, eSwatini and Zambia, and is headquartered in Kuilsrivier near Cape Town. [Wikipedia](#)

whole community because the community now knows that oh, she borrows.

Sipho confirms: ‘Yoh, yoh, yoh, *mashonisa*, yoh, those [people] they want your money; they get loudspeaker. “Sipho where [is my money?]”. No, no, no, they are so rude. If they want your money, they will use a loudspeaker outside your house’. But, I comment, surely everybody in the community borrows.

Yes the thing is everybody borrows but not everybody tells that they borrow. If you are being embarrassed in front of other people, it’s like a huge thing. Ha, not her, she’s living in that nice house, she’s doing A and B but she can’t [be] borrow[ing], not her. So, you are being labelled in that sort of way.

It may be that borrowing to have the things needed carries a stigma or it may be the inability to repay the debt that causes the social embarrassment. It may be both, as both undermine the projected status of well-being, of having things of one’s own. Dumisa associates violence and the occult with debt to loan sharks:

Oh, you see, those people, I avoid them because they charge a lot. If it’s R100 then it’s R50 a week. If you take a R50, let’s say today, you bring it Friday with a R50 interest and if you do not do that, there’s lots of consequences; you’re going to pay because those people they don’t just borrow [lend] money you see. They have got something that they use to make sure people pay, and to keep people coming [back] they use physical force, battery. They are not, you see, good-hearted people. They are cruel people. If you don’t pay, they can come and take your possessions. Like if you have got a freezer, they can take your freezer out. If you have got a TV they take your TV set out, or else most of the times they use certain, you see, witchcraft, to ensure that if you did not comply with their payment whatever way then they will use their witchcraft to revenge act you, see to you. I know of many people who have experienced that. The informal loan shark, those people, they are really not good. Most of them, I know them, they’re definitely not good. They are using, you see, a variety of things to ensure that people come and pay, and then if they don’t come and pay there is going to be terrible consequences, you see. As a result, many people in our community they are mad and they are sick, and so on. It is not because those things happened natural, it’s because we’re going to that lending [informal moneylenders]; lots of witchcraft.

I have been affected by witchcraft and I’m still ignorant you see [of] those effects. I think it’s a common thing in terms of our tradition or

our culture. Everybody will tell you, as I tell you, that have been affected by witchcraft; nobody hasn't been affected. The way in which we have been affected by it, it's like bad dreams. Every night when you find it very difficult to sleep because of the forces that come in, you see, and destruct you.

Regular employment enables buying on credit from retailers but it also leads to a high level of financial indebtedness. Temba is of the view that as soon as his Black peers get a job, meaning when they have employment facilitating access to credit, they immediately go out to buy things they want.

I am talking about my Black peers, my Black community, once we work, one month goes then they open an account. Usually you have a clothing account, and then there's another furniture account. Maybe to buy the TV, music system, DVD players. That is [the] most common thing that they buy; when you start working you must have a TV, and like a DVD player, just a normal TV that you need in a house to start off.

His peers are also subject to the demands and expectations of family. Temba warns against buying on credit for family, but says it is difficult to avoid.

You know when you are working, [it is expected] at home you bring in something; whether you are bringing a table or wardrobe or something. They will ask 'Can you buy me something then I will pay you back' but you can't really trust someone [to pay you back] because once you take something from your account and give [to] that person you will need to control that money coming in and you paying that account.

One time I also had that account, and I was responsible, and my cousin ask me 'look I am not working full-time, so I cannot open an account, but I need shoes.' I had to buy because he didn't have shoes, but I knew that I probably would end up paying that account myself because at first, he came with half of the money. So I said okay fine at least I got half and then the rest I never got back.

Is this unusual? I ask.

It's common because usually if I am working and my sisters are not working, or my relatives are not working they will come and ask you something. They will come ask for a jacket. Ja, you might give them one of your old jackets.

Dumisa had two, two-year stints of full-time, regular employment. During this time he had a bank savings account and an account at a clothing retailer. He, too, bought on credit to support the family but when he lost his job he stopped doing so. He felt he had paid enough anyway.

I bought clothes for my sister and for myself and for my brother, on account at Edgars. I abandoned that account because I realised that I could not pay it any longer. I could not afford it because you see I lost job and then after losing my job for, I think for a year, I decided that no, I must not repeat it again.

I think I owed them some money. I was paying every month; my account limit was something like R2,000. I ran the account for a year and a half and I think the outstanding money, after I lost the job [was] something like R600 or R700, ja. I think that has just written off because I no longer received any communication from them.

Lulama managed to secure a retail credit facility when she was employed but she lost control of her spending, then lost her job, and eventually paid it off when she was earning again.

When I was working at the airport I applied for an account at Identity [a local clothing store]. They approved me. They gave me a voucher of R750. I took it, then I went to shop like it dropped and I shopped and I came back with a lot of bags from Identity. I did pay it [back] but I then a lot of stuff, a lot of things happened and I lost control of my account,¹¹ but I did finish it when I was at the learnership, at Stellenbosch. I paid my money. I said close it. I don't want it. I think, my arrears when I finished was R1,200. I spent it on clothing, and hair bows and stuff to put in the hair to make the hair pretty, stuff like that. Now I don't have any accounts. I only buy cash.

Nomlanga hates to borrow money. His attitude is aggressively antagonistic toward buying on credit and especially toward the interest rates charged. He would rather save and explains that he would do so if he had a proper job.

I hate to borrow money. I don't want to be in that borrowing thing. You going to borrow R8,500 and then you take five years to pay it back because every time [the wages are only] R3,500. Yoh, I am not into that kind of thing. No ways. Each and every time I am getting

¹¹ In a second interview, Lulama tells she owed R5,000 - R6,000 and that she was required to pay more than R1,000 per month. She made two smaller payments after which the creditor went quiet. She does not know, she says; maybe she is in the black book.

R6,000 [in wages], each and every time, if I borrow that cash man, they take half of your wages. I borrow R10,000 you check the total is going to be R22,000 when I give it back or more, I don't know. If you are buying a refrigerator there by the shop, the refrigerator is R10 and then after 24 months you pay R20. Why is that? Crap man, so I rather save for the refrigerator than buy it now, now, now.

I don't have a problem with saving. Do I? I don't think I have a problem with saving if ever I have a good job. Maybe save for years, I do not know, but I can say that I don't think I'll have a problem saving if ever I have good job. [Better to] work, work, save, save, work, save, work, save, work, save and then when you reach that, that amount maybe ... after [you have reached] that R22,000 you can just go buy that thing. I'd make lots of savings, when I know I got a permanent job, or a job that is going to last for four years or five years, when I know I have good job, not that shitty thing here [current part-time employment].

Nomlanga links his inability to save to his employment status. If he had 'a good job, a permanent job, or a job that is going to last for four years or five years' he would save but he is unsure. He admits his inability to control this compulsion to spend the money he has in hand.

Buhle also points to not having a 'nice job', one that pays more than what is necessary to feed and clothe her small family, as a reason for not clearing her debt. While she was earning well — R8,000¹² per month in 2009 — her excitement led to opening accounts at retail stores and spending, which she claimed she could manage. But when she lost her secure employment, she became financially indebted and was still in debt in 2015. In her words:

So, I haven't really had a nice job, you know, where I can take care of finances, like that [that is, to make payments for goods purchased on credit five to six years before]. The money that I'm earning is just for us to feed and clothe ourselves, nothing much. And also, while I was earning that R8,000 I think I got excited because that was like my first job when I felt like I was working. I started to open accounts, clothing accounts, of which I was paying then. I was managing them while I was working. And when I stopped working then I was in debt. I think I have three accounts that are [in] my name that I'm still struggling to pay. [Since] between 2009 and 2010, ja.

¹² Equivalent to nearly R11,500 per month in 2015.

One might attribute her indebtedness to negligence or, more sympathetically, to a lack of foresight of the consequences of buying on credit, especially since she should have known that her contract with a civils contractor would, by its nature, come to an end. Either she remained hopeful that it would somehow not come to an end or she chose to ignore the inevitability of contract completion. It signals a measure of recklessness, but it also sheds light on the excitement she refers to, that intensity of desire to immediately buy things she feels she needs and wants.

Temba comments on the predicament of financial indebtedness for young adults when unemployed, of ‘having a lot of things that you were paying for before’ when employed and facing losing it all — ‘your car, your house and all of that’. He implies that precariousness of employment and access to credit is the cause of indebtedness. Yet earlier he commented critically on the tendency of his ‘Black peers’ to go out and buy all the things they want as soon as they are regularly employed.

You get yourself in debt, not knowing if your contract will be renewed. So, some time you are working, and then suddenly you have no job, you have no income, you’ve got a whole lot of things that you were paying before. Maybe your car, your house and all of that. So now you think you’re under pressure because now you’re thinking about that car, you will lose that car, you will lose that house, you will lose everything that you must pay [but you know] that you can’t pay now. So that’s the problem [implying the uncertainty of a contract].

Obviously, if you weren’t working, you can’t get into debt, that’s the thing. Even if you want to you can’t [get into debt] unless you go to the *mashonisa* and then you just take your ID and if you can’t pay they keep your identity until you can pay, but now if you go to the formal *mashonisas* they need [you] to bring them your bank statement, you need to bring in a whole lot of papers just to show you have an income or you will be able to pay back. So, now if you don’t work, *haai*, there’s no pressure. You can stay at home and just wake up in the morning and watch TV the whole day.

The aspiration for upward mobility, represented in Temba’s words by the car and the house, is swiftly displayed. It is bought with credit that is premised on steady employment, contra the experience of the study participants, even in the case of Temba who has experienced more regular employment. The ability to repay debt is suspended once they are out of work or, as demonstrated in the case of Buhle, when wages are not enough. But the interest accumulates (the

interest on a retail account opened prior to 6 May 2016 was reported¹³ to be 21.48% per annum). Her condition for repaying her debt is a 'proper job' but the creditors persist in their efforts to recover the debt. Buhle lists her creditors and gives her response to what she considers coercive tactics.¹⁴

The one is Ackermans [a clothing retailer], for the child. And the other one is Homechoice, for the homeware stuff. And the other one is Miladys for the lady's ware, especially for me and my mum. Only those three, ja. So, when I have money, I pay them. When I see that I can't afford, I tell them I'm still struggling to take care of myself. So, the little I have I cannot [pay you], I will deal with you once I get a proper job. Because with the little that [I get] I can't even afford, you know, to do some of the other stuff, but they phone. They phone constantly. So, I said, if you want to put me through credit bureau it is fine. I'll deal with it. I don't want to worry myself about that. I'll deal with it. You can even check on [your] records, while I had a job, I didn't skip even a month. I always paid my account. But now I can't. I can't from the money I get from people [employment] to start to pay you. The little that I get. If someone gives me R200, I'm not working, I'm not gonna rush and pay you. So that's when they tell me, do you realise if we put your name on credit bureau then it will be difficult for you to find another job? And then I will ask them, don't you want your money from me? Because if you put [me on credit bureau], if you forward my name and you are aware that it will make things difficult for me, you know, in securing a job. How do you think that I will be able to repay you? If your intention is to block my name and make me unemployable.

As to why she allowed herself to get into such deep debt, she answers:

You know when you go there [to retailers to buy on credit] you don't go with the attitude that you won't pay. You think that you will be able to pay but you realise that you shouldn't have gone there in the first place, because if you can't afford to buy cash or lay-bye, then why do you go and borrow. Obviously it's going to be more interest, so it's the money that you don't have but once you go

¹³ Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyr. (2016, March 9). *New limits for consumer credit charges*. <https://www.cliffedekkerhofmeyr.com/en/news/publications/2016/finance/finance-and-banking-alert-9-march-new-limits-for-consumer-credit-charges-.html>

¹⁴ Interestingly, it was found that Buhle's financial indebtedness from 2008 and 2010 exceeded the period in which consumer debt is regarded as retrievable by the micro-credit industry.

and make credit you don't have that in mind, you know, of putting myself in more debt because I won't be able to pay back money.

Buhle is thus caught between the pressure of wanting the things she needs and wants and cannot wait for, and the ignored risk of a future inability to repay debt and mounting interest. And so the aspirational consumption gap is momentarily bridged. What she describes is reminiscent of an addiction, but it is also a genuine predicament borne of incommensurate pressures. She is hopeful and also in denial. She must have the things she needs and must 'look good' for the sake of dignity and to fit in with her peers, as indicated earlier. She explains what drives people like her into debt, and adopts a moral attitude toward the retailers, and dismisses the consequences.

It's more like looking [for] a way out of the situation at the present moment, you know. You don't have a bed to sleep on and you can't afford to buy it cash. You can't wait, no, you can't wait for 10 months. So, there's an easy way out. You can just go and, you know, borrow and have this thing. And you always tell yourself that, ag, they won't beat me.

Buhle understands credit as an 'easy way out of poverty'. She is hopeful she will escape or evade the demands of creditors. She cannot wait for the future to have a bed to sleep on. She speaks as a victim, of a need for the basics of a normal life. She seeks dignity connoted by the words 'a bed to sleep on'. Her words sketch the desire to spend, the resignation and resentment at her predicament. She shows her frustration with the creditors' persistence and the personal cost of repayment. But, by the words 'they won't beat me', she implies contest and avoidance.

Ja, they will have to wait, [but] now the interest is escalating until such time that you look and you say, ag, I might as well go to credit bureau. After some time, they will have to clear it, if they want to but I want these things. I must do things you know. Even myself it is not easy for me. I do get like jobs and stuff but with the money I have I feel like, no, (laughter) I can't go and pay R400 there and there. They want me to pay R400 and that other shop wants me to pay R400 then what am I going to left with? What am I going to take home and how long is this going to continue? I must pay these shops for six months and then now for six months I will be bringing home nothing.

There is, seemingly, a disjuncture between aspiration and the reliability and quantum of money earned, which is regarded to be too little and too uncertain. In Buhle's case, she adopts a moral attitude toward the owners of the retail store

who are rich and do not need her money. She will pay later when she gets a 'nice job'. Repayment is morally conditional on employment.

No, I'm saying I have nothing, you know. Those people, the owners of the Ackermans, that guy has a lot of money. Even if I don't pay him it doesn't mean that they will go hungry at home, you know, [that] his family will go hungry, but if I pay him and I pay Homechoice and I pay that one, I will go home hungry. So, I am like okay, he is losing a bit but others are paying, he is losing a bit and he has grown. You know he has other businesses. My R400 won't really make a difference because that guy is rich. He has got a lot of things you know but if I pay him, I am left with nothing. So, I'll pay later when I get a nice job when I can.

Buhle feels frustrated and angry, displaying a sense of injustice, of being 'cheated out of life', especially with the threat of the debt collectors on her prospects of employment.

It's like you don't care anymore of the situation because you are not working, it's not your choice, it's not by your choice. In a way you get angry, you feel like you're being cheated out of life. You know you try, you try, you try and then now the first thing they will do when they collect those monies they say ha, but your name, you know, you will be in this state, no company will employ you with such a state, and I say oh you're doing that so that I will be unemployed and if you do that so where you going to get the money because for you guys to get the money I must be employed. You know. So, it just becomes now a circle because they block you so that you won't be able. For them it's like they are punishing you, but at the end of the day they will also punishing themselves, you know.

Nobomi says something similar even though she was more regularly employed than Buhle and nearly all of the others. I asked her whether she had opened any accounts with retailers.

I had a savings account with Capitec [bank] and a Truworths [clothing retailer] account. Ja, the Truworths account, it was expensive; I didn't pay. I got another account of Foschini [clothing retailer] and an account of RCS.¹⁵ RCS is a credit account that increase if you are a good payer but it starts from R3,000; they will increase if you are a good payer — it will go to R4,000 or R5,000.

¹⁵ Consumer Finance Business. The RCS Group. (n.d.). *RCS Store Card: Features*. Retrieved from <https://rcs.co.za/cards>

You can buy [with] it from any shop, from Game, from Foschini, you can buy Pick and Pay or Shoprite.¹⁶

Nobomi still has the RCS card but does not use it because she was not making any repayments at the time of the interview. She still owed R3,000 to RCS but felt she could not afford to repay her debt even though she considers it to be small.

The Foschini account's still open but I don't have money to pay [laughter]. I don't afford to pay it. I have a lot of debt because when you've got the job [you open the account] and then you leave the job you become not able to do your thing. You plan but your plans [for the future] got disturbed. I must have ... to buy the phone; I must have a transport money; I must also have a money that's going to pay my account also. I'm in debt because I don't pay my account, Foschini, but it's not a big money but it just, I don't afford it for now. It was around R2,000 and it was paid in December and is left with R500 ... and the RCF account it is R3,000 and the Foschini account was R1,200. They always call me and then I don't pick up the phone.

Failure to pay the local moneylender is evidently humiliating and shameful. The costs are high and the relationship with the creditor in the community is close and personal. I asked Funeka which creditor, between the bank and the retailers, is paid first.

I would say the bank, the bank. People don't usually care — they take out those the clothing accounts and they don't pay. If they don't want to, they don't pay them. They don't care if they have been blacklisted or ... I have worked in a call centre. You would tell them this and this will happen, and they will say you pay it yourself I don't care. You see. So they don't usually pay the clothing stores. The bank would be more important to them because maybe they will want another loan, so they don't want a bad name with the bank. Or they don't pay [the retail creditors] clean as they would pay the bank. Maybe they have to pay R400 a month and they will go there and pay R100, ja.

I enquire with Temba from whom his peers borrow, and for what, and how they manage their financial indebtedness.

Yes, usually an account, maybe [at] Pep Stores, they are going to use that for clothing and at Capfin, maybe they have a problem.

¹⁶ These are clothing, food, furniture and appliance retailers.

Maybe they need to buy, maybe they are building a house and the material is short. I am just making an example, or they need something, maybe something important, I think. I think that's the difference. For Pep if they need clothing and for money, if they have a problem maybe they need to send someone to Eastern Cape or whatever [they go to Capfin].

I ask: 'So if people have accounts with the retailers, with the stores, and they have borrowed money from Capfin or Standard Bank or the *mashonisa*, which one would they pay first?' The answer: 'The *mashonisa*. Usually the interest is more. It is 50. So *mashonisa* they would be the first. And, the people can come collect. It's nearby, it's not far'.

To summarise, the study finds that participants borrow from consumer credit providers when their employment status permits or from local moneylenders usually, but not always, when their desire for drink and revelry overcomes them. They do not repay consumer credit when unemployed or when earnings are too low; that debt finds its way to the bottom of the priority list. Buhle is indignant when her future prospects of employment are threatened by creditors while she is not earning and cannot meet her debt obligations. Some, like Dumisa, stop paying when they feel they have paid enough. Borrowing from local moneylenders is a last resort when there is no one to turn to or when it is party time. Credit is punitive, and from local moneylenders it is doubly so and personal, but for Dumisa and Buhle, it is money that provides a way out of poverty. For others, it is a way to have the things they need and want now. Retail credit fuels consumption and charges the aspiration to consume.

In sum, the respondents' experience of positional consumption is depicted as varied, multivalent and generative of a complex of affect and ethical and economic reasoning that is often contradictory. This mode of consumption involves feelings of pleasure, of sociability and of just deserts for hard work done. It also involves feelings of anxiety that derive from uncertain employment and from spending itself, from debt and indebtedness, from interdependence in the household and from the pressure to conform to contemporary norms and standards of dress and lifestyle that are aspired to. In speaking of spending in this way, they speak of it as being disproportionate, even excessive, in relation to their means and living conditions. They speak of the pretence of having money that masks the reality of not having a bed to sleep on. And thus, with each moment of expenditure, of flash consumption, the young adult confronts an evaluation of their worth. It is a moral encounter suspended between their aspirations and their reality and there never being enough money to meet their needs and the demands on their wages. But, in that moment, 'not having enough' will not deny the individual the return of hard labour and of the momentary pleasure of consumption, not to speak of the value of being seen and

judged as one who has measured up to the signs of a ‘good life’ as depicted in the media and by peers, despite its consequences. The gap is thus filled in a moment’s lapse that bridges aspiration and reality; the expensive bottle of Hennessy placed on the table or the beautiful new top worn for the evening’s revelry are operations that cover the gap between aspiration and actuality.

5. Thinking about positional consumption

What are the drivers of positional consumption? Externally, Tembeka speaks of the force of advertising, Zintle speaks of the ‘system’ taking advantage of the gullibility of the poor, and Sipho speaks of the delusion among some of his people who have succumbed to the values of the European colonists. These are structural conditions that are as much historical as they are economic. They fuel desire for economic progress substituted by the demonstration of positional consumption. All along, this study argues that structural conditions (of subjugation and denial) have been internalised or embedded in social relations involving affect. This indicates a place where, conceptually, moral economy and political economy form, to borrow a phrase from Gregory, ‘an inseparable whole’ (Gregory, 2012: 380). The social relations are not culturally exterior or outside of the practices, values and norms of the lifeworld of the young adults, but are inscribed in historical antecedents of youth identity and consumption, and are fuelled by post-apartheid commodification of well-being through signs and images of well-being and mass access to consumer credit.

Regarding youth identity, Swartz (2009) provides a key ethnographic account of the ‘moral ecology’ of young people between the ages of 14 and 20 in Langa, Cape Town. She elaborates differentiated youth identities and lifestyle in a social and moral context with which to compare the findings of this study. In her *The Moral Ecology of South Africa’s Township Youth*, Swartz provides a description of the moral characteristics of four youth types in her study sample: ‘mommy’s babies’ at one end, with ‘right ones’ next to them, and ‘*ikasi* boys and girls’, who are a short step before ‘*skollies*’¹⁷ at the other end. While traces of the four types are discernible among all the study participants, they broadly fall into two groups, with some overlaps. Tembeka, Buhle and Zintle, all women, display characteristics of ‘mommy’s babies’ and ‘right ones’. Temba, Nobomi and Funeka demonstrate characteristics of ‘right ones’ and *ikasi* style. Aphiwe and Lulama are younger. They suggest, by what they say about their lifestyle and attitudes, to be closer to *ikasi* style. Nomlanga and Fezile (both male) also show characteristics of *ikasi* style. Sipho stands alone as traditionalist and a ‘right one’.

¹⁷ Township gangsters and thugs, also known as *tsotsis*.

Considering this placement, there is continuity and overlap between Swartz's findings and the characteristics and tendencies of this study's young adults. They are now 10 years older and have moved on in age and lifecycle stage. For the study participants, work and earning, expectations, household dynamics and obligations to children and family have elevated the stakes. There is an aspiration for upward economic mobility across the board, through steady employment and further education. There is still pressure to conform to norms and standards of consumption signalled by money spent for the sake of social status. All but three show a tendency toward drink and revelry, though not all take part in public flash at the theatre of exhibition, for example at Ace's, a popular weekend drinking hole.

Returning to the moral ecology of the study group's peers in Langa, in a joint paper Swartz, Harding and De Lannoy (2012) conclude from two case studies that youth seek an upward mobility that is anticipated by all 'free South Africans' (Swartz, Harding & De Lannoy, 2012: 28). They argue that youth seek social mobility through two alternative modes of social inclusion or belonging: through *ikasi* style and by means of dreaming.¹⁸ They argue that 'technologies and legacies of apartheid can be seen not only as social exclusion. They represent forms of so-called structural violence' (Farmer, 1996, as cited in Swartz, Harding & De Lannoy, 2012: 30) which manifests a 'symbolic violence', 'a process of internalisation of inequalities which still structure social behaviour' (Swartz, Harding & De Lannoy, 2012: 30). In both their study samples, youth refuse their oppressed background as a restraint on their opportunities, saying rather that their time will come. This refusal, the authors claim, 'was both the method and the result of their will to belong to the hope-filled future of the "New South Africa"' (Swartz, Harding & De Lannoy, 2012: 32) which they describe as a 'double-edged sword of high aspiration coupled with slim chances of success in [...] "the quiet violence of dreams"' (Swartz, Harding & De Lannoy, 2012: 32). They claim this dual and paradoxical way of being, the 'double edged sword' or the 'quiet violence of dreams', to be the foundation for contemporary township youth identities adapted to the realities of their impoverished circumstances. These modes of being run together in this study as the pursuit of social mobility and financial independence by means of education and regular employment while seeking distinction and symbolic capital in dress codes and aspirational lifestyle. My study shows that the capacity to aspire, as understood by Appadurai (2004), is a resource that is materially and emotionally exhausted by the low and intermittent earnings of the individual study participants and by the cost of the cultural capital of consumption. It is also my contention that the 'capacity to aspire' links the

¹⁸ *ikasi* style '... comprises violence, sex, alcohol and substance abuse as well as music, recreation, fashion and other diversions' serving to 'attain markers of belonging by alternative means' (Swartz, Harding & De Lannoy, 2012: 28).

external social and political economic contexts through both local role models and media-generated images of the good life. Furthermore, if the capacity to aspire is indeed a resource as Appadurai claims, it is also monetised as consumer debt by the administrative technologies of the retail and finance sectors. This, too, is a version of the ‘double-edge sword’ referred to by Swartz, Harding and De Lannoy (2012).

6. In conclusion

The young adults experience their ‘capacity to aspire’ in dressing well and taking part in the ritualised moments of positional consumption. To the extent that they enact the consumption practices of those with money, they are symbolic of a capacity to aspire. In contradistinction to Ray’s (2003) construct of a two-dimensional dynamic of aspiration — the aspirations window and gap — this study points to a subjective dimension experienced in events of ‘as if’ positional consumption, in displays of individual aspiration to wealth and well-being while conscious of impoverishment at home.

For the household, the ‘objects of aspiration’ (Appadurai, 2004: 68), such as furniture, appliances and home improvements, suggest a future economic well-being and a confirmation of kinship mutuality. That is, positional objects register a residual mutuality which belongs to both a common collective aspiration and to the obligations and reciprocity of traditional relations of kinship. This indexing is one explanation of why the young adults’ households accept their spending behaviour despite deprivation at home.

Another explanation is a long history of dissatisfaction with low wages and the making of youth identity through dress, drink and revelry that are embedded in everyday life and normalised in a symbolic violence, the ‘violence of dreams’ that Swartz, Harding and De Lannoy (2012) refer to. In this study the ‘violence of dreams’ is the normalisation of the material and emotional exhaustion of the capacity to aspire as an individual and collective resource (Appadurai, 2004). The violence is in the subjective experience, in the recognition of chronic depletion by the low and unreliable earnings spent on episodic extravagant displays of positional consumption. The construct of ‘capacity to aspire’ links the external social and political economic context through both local role models and media-generated images of the ‘good life’. Furthermore, the capacity to aspire is monetised as consumer debt taken from the familial workforce by the administrative technologies of the retail and finance sectors. This, too, is a version of Swartz, Harding and De Lannoy’s (2012) ‘double-edged sword’.

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The **Sustainable Societies Unit (SSU)** explores the social and institutional dimensions of economic development and the interaction between human society and the natural world. Its current foci include agricultural practices, human-wildlife conflict, winners and losers in South Africa's growth path, and the impact of the climate crisis. The SSU collaborates with the University of Cape Town's *Khusela Ikamva* Sustainable Campus Project, assisting with research on recycling and integrated pest management. The **Adolescent Accelerators Research Hub** generates evidence on which development accelerators – alone and in synergy with each other – can support adolescents in Africa to reach multiple Sustainable Development Goals. The Accelerate Hub is a partnership between governments, international agencies, NGOs, donors, adolescents and academics in Africa, Europe and North America. The **Safety and Violence Initiative (SaVI)** contributes to understanding and responding to violence and promoting safety. Its current focus is on the roles of parents in promoting the safety of children and adolescents.

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