**The Skins We Live In**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the skin-ego, a theory associated with Didier Anzieu, which holds that we experience life as encapsulated by an outer shell. This insight is used to push understandings within consumer research of how we might regard the body, not as a finite entity bound in absolute time and space or as a canvas to be decorated, but as a porous and sprawling entity that bears unconscious and historically formed relationalities open to transformation. This vein of insight allows us to consider anew how music and noise is consumed in terms of containment, holding and individuation.

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Pedro Almodovar’s the *Skin I Live In* tells the story of a plastic surgeon who imprisons a man, effects a non-consensual sex change and leaves the distressed person inside skin that is not his own. By depicting ‘Norma’ as experiencing skin as an external envelope that contains, bounds and re-identifies him, Almodovar leads us to consider the strange reality of living inside skin and the disorientating idea that we are both interior and on the surface. By contrast, we argue, marketing theory conventionally takes skin as an object to be managed and animated, as though a blank canvas. Distinct from such literal understandings and instead noting the possibility of a more relational and figurative understanding with implications that stretch well beyond skin itself, we note how Didier Anzieu theorised a skin-ego that informs experiences of containment, fragility, self-identification, sensuality as well as a porous sense of interiority that pushes our understandings away from the inscriptive and the representational. In this article, we attempt to think through some of the implications of such insights for the study of consumer culture and, in the spirit of maintaining a focus on a relational understanding of skin-ego, imagine how it may help us understand music consumption.

**Skin in Consumer Research**

Within consumer research, we discern two approaches to skin; biological skin as a material canvas and relational conceptions that consider skin as a boundary of the self. The first approach considers the organic materiality of skin and its semiotic significance. Examples include studies of tattooed women (Patterson & Schroeder, 2010), tattoos of brand images (Bjerrisgaard, Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2012), the use of skin whitening creams (Karan, 2008, Shevde, 2008), the imitation of skin in fetish culture (Schroeder & Borgerson, 2003) and the use of botox (Giesler, 2012). In each case, marginal practices relating to skin are explored and skin is framed as a canvas or, as Bjerrisgaard, Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson put it, as a “site for self-reflexive identity articulation, a malleable object which can and should be worked on” (2012, p.5). These authors point to a second approach, whereby animated skin not only acts as an object of identity expression, but also as a means for reconceptualising the subject-object dialectic. For instance, according to Patterson & Schroeder (2012), “tattoos do refigure the body, shifting identity into liminal zones between subject (of the tattoo, of identity) and objects (of the gaze, of social stigma)” (p.255).

This relationship between subject and object as complicated by skin already appears in the work of Dichter (1960) (this should hardly surprise us because, as Tadajewski argues, much interpretive consumer research have their roots in insights previously developed by motivational researchers; see also Schwartzkopf, 2015). As Dichter put it, consumers “cling to objects as tangible expressions of our anchorage” (p.89) and thus explores how textiles become interwoven, so to speak, with the subjectivity of their consumers and this supplements the person’s self-understanding. Moreover, Dichter considers the ultimate purpose of clothing to act as a *barrier to contamination*, providing an exterior layer that protects a vulnerable interior. At its most direct, this relates to wearing clothes but extends outwards to such examples as hanging white lace curtains over a window as a symbolic barrier that keeps the home atmosphere uncontaminated. Dichter’s examples reveal how the coordinates of our psychological sense of having an interiority shielded by an external layer (i.e. skin) is reproduced as we relate to other external objects. Accordingly, clothes, a room, a house may all be experienced as supplemental skins protecting a fragile interior.

In a similar vein of analysis, Belk (1988), in his seminal *Possessions and the Extended Self*, explores questions that relate interiority and exteriority. Belk addresses how externally existing possessions are experienced as part of the self, including both other people (i.e. ‘*my* father’) and objects within proximity. Belk provides empirical evidence that demonstrates the deep sense of interiority that people experience during disruptions – for example, the trauma of losing personal objects following a burglary or the sense of contamination when other people use our possessions a little *too* intimately. Belk observes how our possessions relate to human development as the infant distinguishes self from the environment, then from carers and latterly how possessions can allow for a formation of identity. Whilst Belk does not analyse skin, nonetheless a very porous boundary between subjects and objects is at stake and so we can conceive of subjectivity as something that exceeds bodily boundaries and incorporates a range of objects.

Interesting in this regard is the use of bleach for the purpose of becoming white*.* For example, Karan (2008) explores skin creams in India which promise to alter skin as a means of achieving marriage, empowerment, generating job opportunities, and boosting confidence. Indeed as Shevde (2008) further notes, Bollywood regularly depicts fair skinned characters as successful, which in turn reflects centuries of thinking about skin colour in terms of reputation, marriage, dowry, prestige, and oppression. Yet, changing skin colour is controversial because, as Karan (2008) notes, conventional Indian thought sees beauty as intensely personal and hence the idea of rendering skin is seen as a violation of the internal self.

Separate from practices of skin faring in India, Fanon’s (1967) theory of epidermalisation argues that bodies are meaningful inasmuch as they are encoded with qualities of “colour”. As Gilroy (2000:p46) purports, epidermalisation suggests a perceptual regime “in which the racialised body is bounded and protected by its enclosing skin. The observer’s gaze does not penetrate that membrane but rests upon it, and in doing so, receives the truths of racial difference from the other body”. Skin, therefore, acts as the master signifier of race and also, as Stephens (2014) argues, black skin carries the markings, the “scratchings of discourse” (p4) and the traces of violence of the symbolic order. In this sense, the cultural meaning of black skin infers a range of historic objects (the noose, the hood, the slave ship, etc.) and places (Africa, slave plantations, etc.). What such analysis emphasises is that skin must be understood, not just in terms of its absolute materiality nor in terms of how it allows a person to manage (or fail to manage) their identity, but also skin as the object of interpellating gazes that can be subjectifying, racialising and sexualising in ways that bear unconscious and historically formed relationalities.

All of these critical insights push us towards understanding skin as more than biological canvas to be decorated during consumer identity projects. We begin to see skin, to quote Stephens (2014), as a “boundary between self and world that serves as both an entryway to the outside world and an enclosure of interior space”... but also skin “reminds us of ourselves in a way that differs from how we think of ourselves in the abstract; the skin brings us back in touch with ourselves, literally as bodies” (p1). Therefore we might, again with reference to Stephens, regard skin as a heuristic that represents the intersectional meeting point of a semiotically encoded body that is subject to symbolic and imaginary capture in discourse and imagery, but also a bodily subject whose sensory and relational presentation of self occurs in material settings. In this regard, it is entirely appropriate to think of the relationality of skin. Harvey (2006) considers relationality as reflecting how there is no such thing as space or time outside of the processes that define them. Therefore we can speak of skin insofar as it contains and represents within itself relationships to other objects. Or put differently, we ought to speak of skin as a temporal site of congealed and disparate influences of the past, present and future. To speak otherwise of ‘black skin’, for instance, would tell us very little at all.

Arguably the site in which these various issues are best explored are to be found within modern figurative sculptures, to which attention is now turned. Potts (2000) advocates an idea of sculptures as objects not for a disembodied gaze but rather as objects that actively engage with vividly involved viewers in ways that are spatial, kinaesthetic, intellectual and temporal. Considering such pieces as Carl Andre’s *Magnesium Square*, Potts explores how sculptures can interact with, intrude onto our space, produce instability and radically reshape our sense of ambience. An Andre sculpture, Potts writes, implies no privileged viewpoint and is an object that can easily “slip from view as one comes close to it” (p314). Potts states, Andre’s sculptures “might be thought of as the empty bases of an absent sculpture that can only be fitted with the viewer’s own presence” such that “the presence of the work evokes the need to be partly internal, bound up with a sense of oneself being there as well as the sculpture” (p315). At stake, interestingly for consumer researchers (or at least we hope it will be) is a problematising of what Potts (2008) refers to as the “structuring imperative” of the word “object” (p8) because such sculptures psychically activate the viewer and make physical and spatial intrusions.

Inasmuch as the embodied experience of perception can be thought of as a physical activation caused by the object, the *otherness* is complex and paradoxical: the structure is static but experienced as dynamic. Yet, sculpture is not a subject and Potts welcomes Andre’s naming of his sculptures as *places*; a framework emerges in which sculptures exist as something we can inhabit and there have “vividly embodied physical and perceptual responses” (p5). In this regard we remain both inside and outside the object, which in turn is both active and static, as though both subject and object desire to reach out and touch, the body is…

… not an inert solid mass weighed down on the ground, but an arena of interiority extending outwards into its immediate surroundings while also being sharply delimited and clearly located in one place (Potts, 2000:p304).

This reading of Andre’s *Magnesium Square* in which there is a body that is sharply limited and absolutely located yet nonetheless also “extending outwards” captures the enigma of skin that we wish to explore; that is the experience of being contained by our skin, as though the skin is the object that contains the sprawling subject, yet also is part of this subjectivity. Further, even if the skin is not experienced as an external object, it is at least mostly stimulated and perceived through external interaction. As Segal (2008:p6) notes, with reference to Merleau-Ponty, “every touch is double: it involves both an active and a passive experience; I feel myself feeling and felt. Thus, when I touch a sculpture or a piano, I am also dwelling on the surface of the body of the other”. Segal continues; to speak of an experience of skin in a singular sense is misleading because skin is multi-sensorial or, as she puts it, is a matter of *consensuality* inasmuch as skin links various senses in facilitating how we learn about the world. In order to engage further with such heightened conceptualisation, attention is now directed towards the work of Didier Anzieu.

**Didier Anzieu**

Didier Anzieu (1989) is well known in psychoanalysis and contemporary cultural studies as the prominent “skin theorist” (e.g. Lafrance, 2009, Segal, 2009, North, 2013). His notion of the “skin-ego”, Anzieu’s most influential concept, builds upon Freudian theory but also breaks away to consider not only the psychical contents but also psychical containers because for Anzieu, skin cannot exist without a relation to the ego. By focusing on the body’s surface, Anzieu attempts an elaborate topographical model that addresses “both the spatial organisation of the bodily ego and the psychical ego” (Ibid, p.11). Skin emerges as the key analytical concept, not only because of its primacy as a body organ in the infant’s early developmental stages, but also due to skin’s metaphorical prominence in a variety of different scientific and everyday discourses. Anzieu’s theory redresses Freudian psychoanalysis’s emphasis on psychic interiority.

Anzieu’s concept of the skin-ego represents a move away from “disembodying” models of subjectivity that became prominent following poststructuralist psychoanalytical thinkers, most notably Jacques Lacan. In his article, “Against Lacan”, Anzieu (2000; cited in Lafrance, 2013) criticises Lacan for making philosophical rather than psychoanalytical postulates, characterised by “a triple deviation of thought, speech and practice” (p19). Anzieu confronts Lacan’s clinical and analytical techniques and Lacan’s conceptualisation of the unconscious as structured like language. For Anzieu, just as Freud’s era had previously repressed sex, Lacan’s disproportionate emphasis on language now repressed the body. Anzieu’s concept of skin-ego is therefore an attempt to escape what he regarded as the “linguistic determinism” of Lacan and the “biological determinism” of Freud (Houzel, 2000). For Houzel, Anzieu’s skin-ego paved the way for “…giving the psyche back its corporeal weight, which structuralism has denied it, without, at the same time reducing it to the laws of biology” (p21).

**Skin-Ego and Psychic Envelopes**

Anzieu (1973) defines the skin-ego as “a containing envelope, a protective barrier and a filter of exchanges, as a result of a proprioceptive and epidermal sensations and the internalisation of skin identifications” (p23). Accordingly, skin-ego can be a metaphorical conceptualisation of how psychic and physical space co-constitute each other and how we engage with the external world and have a sense of identity. The skin-ego develops through our initial experience of continuity with other bodies and the eventual realisation that the bodies are distinct. Therefore it is through our skin-ego that we develop selfhood and experience sensuality, protection and vulnerability. In developing a skin-ego, the child psychologically internalises physical encounters with others, as Anzieu puts it:

The Skin-Ego is part of the mother – particularly her hands – which has been interiorised and which maintains the psyche in a functional state, at least during waking life, just as the mother maintains the baby’s body in a state of unity and solidity. (Anzieu, 1989:p89)

Anzieu (1989) locates the development of the skin-ego in the infant’s early developmental stages (first six months), in what Freud calls the “primary processes”. During this period the infant is assumed to be in the most primitive stage, lacking entirely the ability to make sense of the world through mental functioning and relying solely on its body. Anzieu argues that most of the bodily functions are played out through the skin and so skin-ego emerges as a mental representation of the experience of the body’s surface that is progressively achieved as the baby starts to identify with his/her own body. Eventually, it assumes the baby’s realisation of the independence of its own skin from that of its caregiver and the ability to imagine himself/herself as a three-dimensional being with insides and outsides, bound and contained by the skin surface. In short, “the skin-ego is a phantasmic figuration which, given its primitive nature, can be seen as an inner pictogram of the body’s superficial sensations” (Lafrance, 2013:p25).

Anzieu locates the most formative developmental trauma in the moment where the baby leaves behind the illusion of a shared skin with his/her caregiver. In doing so Anzieu foregrounds the primitive experiences of the body already found in the work of Freud, Klein, Winnicott and others but displaces the centrality of the Oedipal configuration in Freudian, and by extension, Lacanian psychoanalysis (Lafrance, 2013). This allowed him to develop a psychogenetic account that not only avoids sexed and gendered essentialisms (Lafrance, 2013) but also, as noted above, affords a topographical model of the psyche that is neither biologically nor linguistically determinist. With reference to Lacan’s mirror stage, for instance, Anzieu (1989) argues that self-identification is more “bodily” and “intense” than characterised by Lacan. For Anzieu, Lacan’s account of ego development is not only largely disembodied but also reliant on accentuating visual signals at the expense of other senses and kinaesthetic awareness. In contrast, the establishment of a skin-ego relies on sensory reflexivities of many different kinds, which includes visual stimulation but also considers touching, being touched by one’s own hand, “hearing oneself make sounds”, “smelling one’s own odour” (p62) and it is skin as the site of the *consensuality* of these experiences that marks Anzieu’s conceptual distinction from Lacan.

For Anzieu (1989), the skin of the body and the psyche can be understood like the skin of an onion, “a structure of layers interlocking one within another” (p215). Thus, “what on one level is a container may become a content on another” (ibid), and the stripping away of one’s psyche may reveal further containers rather than contents, confronting the notion of a one-way flow from the inner to the outer self, In this regard, objects like clothes play a more ambiguous role in their relation to skin. North (2013) illustrates how Anzieu moves from listing clothing as a modification of skin – relating it to skin-ego’s inscription function alongside tattooing and scarification – to clothing as a “second skin” that compensates for a vulnerable skin-ego. Second skins, within Anzieu’s work, are generally sought whenever physical or mental boundaries require reinforcement.

Anzieu, therefore, regarded the skin-ego as eventually superseded by the thinking-ego, but with the caveat that the latter’s functions are still grounded in sensory qualities (Anzieu, 1989). As North (2013) explains, this grounding is not a one-way affair: “the sensory goes on being the ground of the psychical, which in turn grounds and shapes the experiences of the sense. The attempt to construct thinking as of a different order to corporeal experience is undermined by the concurrent claim that bodily experience constitutes psychical reality” (p. 80). This is also echoed in Anzieu’s “psychic envelopes”, a concept he uses to explain how sensory experiences are transposed from the somatic onto the psychic sphere. According to Lafrance (2013), the movement from “skins” to “envelopes” marks the psychic transition from literal skin to relational skin as well as thinking beyond the sense of touch, to consider envelopes of sound, warmth, odour, taste and their consensuality. Segal (2009) notes that this view is more in line with contemporary theories that emphasise the meeting of the senses and sensations, their “pluri-sensorial, combinatory, multidirectional” and “intersensorial” elements (p3). Concurrently the notion of psychic envelopes assumes that in some situations, sounds, smells and tastes serve as *better skins than skin itself* (Lafrance, 2013, p.32). Anzieu therefore presents us with both a literal and a relational understanding of skin; the latter becomes a “way of thinking about the experience of the senses – about how they feel – and how this feeling grows out of, or indeed, latches onto the sensations springing from the surfaces of the body” (Lafrance, 2013:p31). Altogether, through his metaphor of the skin-ego and psychic envelopes, Anzieu achieves a view of subjectivity that approaches an experience of interiority and its surrounding objects as utterly relational and mutually constitutive.

Examples of Anzieu’s theories in practice are to be found in his case studies which demonstrate how the formation of a weak skin-ego results in psychological disruption. Consider Anzieu’s work with “Jaunito”:

Juanito, who suffered from a congenital deformity, had had to undergo an operation in the USA shortly after his birth. His mother had interrupted her family and professional activities to accompany him, but for several weeks she was only able to see him through a glass panel, and could neither touch him nor speak to him. The operation was successful; his convalescence had gone well. After returning to his native country, the acquisition of speech had occurred normally, if not indeed somewhat precociously. But the little boy did, as one might expect, suffer some considerable psychical after-effects, which led to his being presented for pscyho-therapeutic treatment at the age of five or six. The decisive turning-point in the treatment is a session in which Juanito tears from the wall a huge, blank strip of the washable adhesive paper that has been put there expressly to allow children to paint freely on the walls. He cuts this strip into little pieces. He then undresses completely and asks his therapist to stick the pieces all over his body, except for his eyes, emphasising the necessity of both using all of the pieces and of covering the whole of the body without leaving any gaps – except to see through. During the following sessions, he repeats this game of having his therapist wrap up his entire body, then he performs the same operation on a celluloid doll of a swimmer. (Anzieu, 1989:65, see also Lafrance, 2009 for further analysis).

In this instance we can understand the practice of wrapping the body as responding to a need for containment and reinforcement that arises due to a weakened skin-ego. Note, also how the precociousness might be understood as addressing a heightened need for a noise bath of aural reinforcement. Anzieu’s practices are not limited to literal skin experiences. For example, in treating “Marsysas”, Anzieu became frustrated with his failure to make progress through conventional psychoanalytic means. Anzieu asked Marsysas about the “noise bath” that his mother had created for him. Anzieu learnt that Marysas’s mother spoke to him in ways that were dissonant to his needs, were abrupt and impersonal and hence Marsysas had developed a rough or discontinuous skin-self with pathogenic defects that continued to plague him through life. Anzieu speculated:

Perhaps the reason Marsyas comes to these sessions is not so much to be fed by me, which is something I had felt I was doing ever since we made our new arrangement, but rather to be carried and warmed by me; to be manipulated and, through the exercise, to regain the potential offered by his body and mind. (p. 24)

In this example, we see how layers of ‘skin’ need not be limited to the material, but also includes noise. Such expanded analysis is also to be found in Anzieu’s treatment of “Armand”, who, in a state of agony requested painkillers. As Armand waited, he conversed with Anzieu’s assistant. When the nurse finally arrived, Armand refused the medication claiming to no longer be in pain. Anzieu believed that Armand’s anaclitic support was provided by the enveloping function of conversation. “As Anzieu shows throughout his work”, Lafrance reports, “words… can often have a containing effect on those in distress… As Anzieu’s work with a number of patients makes clear, the skin sound… can function as a substitute psychic envelope when a strong and more supportive one is, for whatever reason, unavailable” (Lafrance, 2013:p.34) (similarly recall Juanito’s precociousness for speech).

Attention is now turned towards applications of Anzieu’s theory of skin-ego but, by way of commitment to thinking of skin-ego in the more relational sense, and against the biological consideration which hitherto defines consumer research of skin, we focus on aural experiences of the skin-ego and do so with reference to three instantiations: individuation, holding and containment.

**Theoretical Applications**

**Individuation**

Music can be understood as an attempt to organise and determine subjective experiences and as such, Attali (1985) claims that it is significant that capitalism endlessly envelopes us, or as he puts it “hems us” (p8) with background music. A similar argument holds for Adorno (2002a) who understood music as a means of transforming consciousness. Under conditions of culture industry, in which music’s social purpose is objectified by capitalist reproduction, music is ubiquitous and helps facilitate an ideology in which people render themselves compliant with the dominant social order. In this mould, the social purpose of ubiquitous ambient music that we encounter in commercial spaces, like Muzak in a shopping centre, does not exist to facilitate group cohesion, sharing and intersubjectivity, as per, for example, Feld’s (1991) famous account of Kaluli drumming, but rather to reinforce *individuation*, “a sense of distinctive selfhood that marks us off from others” (Segal, 2009, p. 48). As Adorno describes, the experience of background music is one that encloses people into atomised consumerist skin, in which they are separated from not just the experience of, but also the desire for, the social:

In forte passages, the music climbs likes a rocket. Its arcs glisten over the listeners until they sit there, abandoned once more, in the grey of their cigarette puffs. They are not an audience. Scarcely will one of them comment on the quality of the music that is offered. Nor are they in a musical mood. The music scarcely touches their inner stirrings. Rather it is an objective event among them, above them. The coldness from table to table; the strangeness between the young gentleman and the unknown girl across from him, who waits for the looks that will give her permission to be offended. All of this is not, for the life of you, eliminated by the music, but instead caught up and bound together. (Adorno 2002b, p. 507)

From this perspective the culture industry use of music acts as a barrier that prevents the social and encapsulates people into anaesthetised individuation. Notably Cronin (2002) detected how, as Irish life became increasingly defined by economic prosperity and consumerism during the Celtic Tiger era, the more frequent and louder the presence of music. Notably Cronin uses the analogy of an aural *flood*, as though our individuation is accounted for by being surrounded by an object:

Music is more and more a way of confining humans to individual, monadic worlds where communication runs the risk of being as worthless as it is wordless. It is almost as if automation empties the everyday life-world of human contact and thus generates more solitude, our public spaces are flooded with music to deal with the anxiety and fretfulness of the solitary consumer. (Cronin, 2002, p. 6)

Such use of music that silences crowds and forecloses communal experience recalls Debord’s (1967) theorising of capitalism as a circular production of isolation with various media serving as “weapons for a constant reinforcement of the condition of isolation of ‘lonely crowds’”. In each of these quotations we see music enveloping people into a bubble-like containment which disengages them– for example, the language of people being confined to “individual, monadic worlds” calls to mind a cellular existence as does Adorno’s analogy of the consumers surrounded by cigarette smoke and music that *glistens* over them. The reading that emerges from such use of music is one in which people, as consumers, are entrapped by ideology’s alienating figurative containers and we argue that music, in conditions of culture industry, acts as a means of envelopment and disconnection from the social.

**Holding & Containment**

As distinct from instances of imposed sound baths, there are other cases of consumers actively and voluntarily managing their own holding. For example, Bull (2007) considers personal sound technologies, like iPods, and their consumption in urban spaces. The experience of iPods, Bull argues, takes the form of active subtraction from the social and an enclosure into a highly privatised space. As Bull puts it:

With its *enveloping acoustics* iPod users move through space in their *auditory bubble*, on the street, in their automobiles, on public transport. In tune with their body, their world becomes one with their ‘soundtracked’ movements; moving to the rhythm of their music rather than to the rhythm of the street. In tune with their thoughts – their chosen music enables them to focus on their feelings, desires and auditory memories. The iPod puts them in tune with their desire to *eke out* some aesthetic, cognitive and social control as they weave through the day. *Enclosed within a zone of immunity* and security, *enveloped in what they imagine to be their own realit*y as they move through the city… (p. 3, italics added)

Central to the rise of the iPod is, according to Bull (2002), a desire for urban solitariness–just as solitariness is increasingly the preferred mode of travel in many cities, we see pedestrians and public transport commuters disappear into privatised sound bubbles of “technologically mediated solitude” (p. 5). In their controlled bubble, the city becomes experientially individualised. As Bull puts it, “iPod culture is best understood as a mono-rhythmic approach to urban experience, as against the traditional understanding of urban life as polyrhythmic – a world of certainty as against a world of contingency. iPod use makes the city what it is for users – rather than the city as inhabited by embodied ‘others’”. Kerrigan et al (2014), in their piece entitled ‘Gimme Shelter’ (a clear expression of desire for containment) explore how joggers use music in order to facilitate what they call ‘pleasurable escape’ in which joggers ‘anchor themselves further into their inner world’. As one of their respondents described the practice: “I’m *in my own zone*, listening to the music. Quite literally it’s like you go on a journey by yourself which is why I like to listen to music while I do it because you can run around beautiful scenery and *you’re in a world*, you forget everything” (p155, italics added).

It is tempting to conclude from such practices that it is once again *individuation* that marks a departure from inter-subjectivity and a desire for total enclosure, recalling a Zizek-esque landscape in which selfish consumers disappear into post-political gated communities, mass-masturabathons and other forms of ‘stupid’ narcissist self-pleasure in contexts where the only good neighbour is a dead one (see Zizek, 2009). However an interesting form of *symbolic encounter* with the other, what Bull terms ‘mediated company’ and ‘accompanied solitude,’ emerges from iPod culture. Bull considers the ubiquity of media noise – from iPods to constantly left-on televisions in homes – as addressing a desire for proximity and warmth. Such use of sound envelopment recalls Anzieu’s idea of skin-ego as *holding*. In other words, the accompanied solitude of contemporary capitalism may reveal a desire for being held and thus the iPod serves as an object that helps people negotiate a paradoxical desire to be both solitary and embraced.

In this regard, DeNora (2003) analyses intimate encounters that reach across time and allow subjects to relive past relationships. In this case music is a medium, or a string that connects people to the embodied experience of happier times, reminding people of loved ones and drawing consciousness into closer association with the desired other. DeNora writes of how the:

… pairing of music and people, music and memory, is about something greater than that music ‘accompanied’ previous times shared with the remembered other(s). Music does more than this: it penetrates experience: it is part of the material from which initial experience is formed such that, to quote the title of a popular song, ‘the song is you’. By this I mean that one’s very perception and experience of other(s) takes shape through and with reference to music…. that music, can so powerfully ‘bring it all back’. (p. 61)

Examples of such emotionally charged listening include a respondent who listened to music as a medium for remembering particular people at particular times – for example, after being informed that her father had had a heart attack she stated:

I was afraid he was going to die and I put on Brahms and I… played it very loud and just let it *sweep around me* and just prayed for my father. So whenever I hear that I am always taken back to that day, that time, when I feared for him. (in DeNora, 2003, p. 62)

She selected Brahms because this was the music that she and her father listened to during her formative years. DeNora (2003) analyses the account as demonstrating music’s role as a medium of consciousness that reorients awareness and directs consciousness to past times. In this sense music, DeNora writes, ‘has the power to shift her awareness from the flux of present-centred activity to a more emotionally charged mode of consciousness, namely, the remembering of an important time in her past, a time that remains significant to her present relationship with her father’ (p. 62). Turning to Anzieu, we could additionally say that the respondent is creating a sound envelope in which her father becomes musically objectified and that the experience of listening is akin to being *contained* by the father; as she said the music “sweeps around” her to provide a sense of surrounding continuity and a sense of care, without which she may feel “like a kernel without a shell” (Segal, 2009, p. 47). In other words, the interiority of the skin-ego is one that reaches out to re-experience the noise bath provided by her father and constitutes a vivid experience of the desired other. In tandem, another of DeNora’s respondents speaks of being in a car and experiencing a *flood* of overwhelming grief when she unexpectedly heard music that her late father had listened to during her parents’ separation. Again we could say that the vivid experience is an intimate return to a sense of sound envelopment that re-enacts the presence of the other. Given the emotional intensity of these experiences and the specificity of the sensation of the music *sweeping around* the body like an envelope or a flood, there is justification, it seems, to consider a far more embodied experience in which the audio-phonic skin gives a profoundly moving sense of the presence of, and being contained by, the desired but sadly absent other.

Karpf (2013), in her piece entitled the *Sound of Home* explores how radio voices can contain and anchor listeners at a level which is both visceral and unconscious. Noting how, for example when Nick Clarke, presenter of BBC Radio 4’s *The World at One* daily news died in 2006, BBC’s message board was overwhelmed by distraught listeners: one described Clarke’s voice as ‘the voice of home’ (p60). Indeed homeliness recurs within the experience of radio listening – shipping forecasts, for instance, (to quote Seamus Heaney come “conjured by that strong gale-warning voice collapse into a sibilant penumbra”) present an extra-verbal quality located at the juncture between the voice and the listener. Similarly in BBC 4’s *Today Programme,* Karpf notes that there is almost a “tea-ness” embedded in the presenter’s voice whilst the reassuring voices of beloved broadcasters reconstitute appalling news so that they lose their ability to overwhelm listeners. Karpf notes how the calm reassuring broadcasts of Winston Churchill and Theodor Roosevelt’s “fireside chats” managed to not just bring a semblance of calm during wartime but also to absorb anxiety, transform it and then bind listeners to themselves and to each other. In other cases, the voices of elderly and vintage broadcasters like Frank Keating or Terry Wogan help transplant listeners back to the embodied experience of an earlier age. All of these examples, Karpf notes, are instances of relational containment in which the radio presents a transitional space and psycho-spatial position in which well-known broadcasters can soothe, comfort, and unite subjective and collective experiences. A further example is provided in Belk & Watson’s (1998) studies of how university faculty decorate their offices. In one case, “Corrina” listened to music as a means of reconnecting her to her previous life in New York – again absorbing herself into a specific sound bath to psychically transplant herself across space and time.

**Discussion**

The mode of analysis conducted in this paper demonstrates a potential relevancy across various strands of consumer research. As a direct contribution to consumer research skin studies and music consumption, it offers a very distinct interpretive lens possible of generating fresh insight. Moreover, spread across different consumer research areas like embodiment and experientialism, the implications are arguably more exciting. Indeed the article directly returns to the experientialist and hedonist literature that emerged from consumer research in the 1980s and arguably constituted the subject’s most exciting period in terms of novel contributions and intervention (for example see Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). This research not just returns to such analysis but invigorates it by emphasising the role of the body in consumption, noting new interpretive lens for the purpose of studying consumer behaviour.

The article also contributes to ongoing studies of psychoanalysis within consumer research and marketing and therefore might be regarded as timely (for example, see the content of the recent Psychoanalysis & Marketing special issue of *Marketing Theory* and John Desmond’s excellent book *Pyschoanalytic Accounts of Consuming Desire,* 2012). It offers a distinctive approach to analysing subject-object relations and the psychodynamics of objectification and commodification, beyond Lacanian (Reyes, Dholakia and Bonoff, 2015), Freudian (Cluley and Dunne, 2012) and Kleinian (Chatzidakis, 2015) perspectives. Yet although directly inspired by Anzieu’s theories, it can be problematic to refer to this work as psychoanalytic. For example, by focussing on the recurrence of words such as “flood”, “contained” and so on, a very literal and face-value interpretation is asserted that does not engage with questions concerning the unconscious or ego formation, as might befit psychoanalytic methodology. However, our argument is that we prefer a demarcation between psychoanalysis and consumer research. As Frosh (2010) argues, psychoanalysis is a practice rooted in *the clinic*, it has conventionally taken a form of *treatment* for a patient, who would typically arrive with *psychological stress* and encounter an analyst who, using specific methods, would seek to *alleviate* that distress. Without wishing to be dogmatic fundamentalist party poopers, such psychoanalysis is clearly beyond our purview as marketing academics. But as Frosh also states, psychoanalysis has already migrated beyond the clinic and has become a significant tool for understanding the social world. It is here that we call for temperance. Anzieu’s case studies, as evidenced above, clearly relate to people in severe distress and the psychoanalytic interpretation presented followed extensive and highly intense meetings between analyst and analysand. We, by contrast, are doing no such thing. Nor do we wish to because, between the stated aim of the psychoanalyst of understanding the unconscious for the purpose of alleviating personal distress, and the aim of marketing scholar who seeks to advance our understanding of consumer behaviour in a context of the business school, lies a massive ethical and political gap. A fine line should exist, we submit, between psychoanalysis as a distinct set of clinical practices, and marketing scholarship. For this reason we would rather see this work described as *inspired by psychoanalysis*, rather than as psychoanalytic in content. If it is the case that we are amidst an enthusiastic embrace of psychoanalysis by marketing scholars, we encourage further consideration of what questions are raised in terms of psychiatric ethics, creativity of interpretation, researcher integrity and the old problem of ‘armchair analysis’.

**Conclusion**

Anzieu presents us with both a literal and a relational understanding of a skin-ego as a ‘way of thinking about the experience of the senses – about how they feel – and how this feeling grows out of, or indeed, latches onto the sensations springing from the surfaces of the body’ (Lafrance, 2013, p. 31). Drawing on this work, we have attempted to illustrate how material and immaterial objects surrounding the body, in this case noise, may approach relatable ontological status with biological skin borders as they become internalised into the ego experience.

Moving beyond skin’s typical framing as biological canvas for signification – a framing that we would argue parallels a broader preoccupation in consumer research with mechanisms of signification and symbolic communication – we engage with a range of consumer skins and envelopes that serve alternative functions. We turn to aural envelopes and some of the ways in which they reinforce the individuation of the skin-ego, compensate for vulnerability through holding and provide containment. Altogether, we hope the examples provide theoretical tools and metaphors that pave the way towards a view of the embodied self and its inanimate surroundings as relational and mutually constitutive.

Beyond allowing for additional insight, we suggest that skin-ego might also provide us with a deeper sense of critical awareness of how consumer behaviour can be understood as relating to a desire for reinforcement. For example, recall the previously mentioned case study of Anzieu’s treatment of ‘Marsysas’ in which the analysand was interpreted to be in need of being carried and warmed by another. Accordingly, we submit that Bull’s iPod users and DeNora’s respondents’ experience of music can be understood as stemming from a desire to be held and warmed by another. It stands to reason that the more capitalism and consumer culture isolate people into individuated living and “bowling alone” (Putnam, 2000) and “inoperative communities” (Nancy, 1991) the more people turn to noise baths to create sensations of intimate engagement. More generally, we see how everyday consumption may address experiences of sensuality, protection and vulnerability. Whilst much consumer research demonstrates the conviviality to be enjoyed via shared experiences in tribes and other forms of community (Cova, Kozinets & Shankar, 2007), the soundscape reveals a tendency towards people disappearing into antisocial melancholic bubbles.

With such thoughts in mind, it is interesting to recall another of Anzieu’s patients, ‘Armand’, for whom conversation provided anaclitic support during a period of intense pain. Might ubiquitous retail background music provide a similar function in easing a sense of loneliness in a crowd? Indeed, more generally, to what extent do consumer objects fulfil needs in a society that functions in anaesthetised, atomised conditions? Such questions provide a sobering counter-point to the strident, hyper-agentic “cosmopolitan burning mountain man of action hero” subject who re-appears across studies of consumer culture theory. Instead Anzieu’s treatment of his patients reminds us that underneath everyday consumption can often be a fundamental need for reinforcement. Accordingly, a poignancy and melancholia can be read into Potts’ analysis of Carl Andre’s sculptures of art audiences whose bodies extends outwards yet only encounters sculptures which, despite their perceived dynamism and ability to generate vivid experiences, remain just objects. Therefore the objects that come to constitute our extended self or skin-ego can betray, at a psychoanalytic level, deep levels of forlorn desire and melancholic yearning that run through our consumer culture.

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