Exploring hedonistic consumption from an identity perspective: an interpretative study

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Table of contents

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A study of consumer behaviour towards the consumption of luxuries

Document 1
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Table of contents – Document 1

Introduction

The western economy and society has experienced drastic changes since the 1950s: higher levels of education, greater awareness of other cultures and most importantly higher incomes have allowed a wider audience to enjoy luxuries. (Silverstein et al., 2003).

Along with upper classes that constitute the traditional clientele of luxury, middle-classes now focus on what money can buy, while money itself is becoming less important (Irons, 1997). These people are willing to pay a premium for luxury products of superior craftsmanship and more importantly for the emotional benefit that the experience procures. A significant research stream, that points out the increasing interest consumers are devoting to the experiences they live rather than the goods they own, supports this trend (Irons, 1997;Allsopp, 2005;Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982).

The author has already completed a dissertation on the ways of targeting the niche market of high spending customers, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration. That research pointed out the need for gaining an understanding of consumer behaviours towards luxury services, which this study proposes to fulfil. The findings of this study will benefit to the academic community by contributing to research in consumer behaviours, as well as providing recommendations to professionals marketing services to the target audience.

This document outlines how the research project is going to be approached. The first part will briefly define the concept of luxury services, establish the interest in studying this subject, raise key research questions and define the scope of research. The second part consists of a preliminary literature review. The third part will review different research methodologies and decide on the most appropriate one for the purpose of this study. In the fourth part, an outline of the document three, four and five will be given. Finally, political and ethical issues as well as learning outcomes will be stated.

2. SUBJECT AND OBJECTIVES

A brief definition of the concept of luxury services

Because this study is being conducted from a consumer's point of view, secondary research taking place among these consumers will enable the elaboration of their definition of luxuries. At the present stage, the research draws upon definitions given in academic literature in order to establish the key parameters of the study.

As a general rule, luxury is considered as being something out of the ordinary (Vickers and Renand, 2003), and refers to self-indulgence, refinement, aesthetics and sumptuous lifestyle (Dubois et al., 2001). Luxury must be considered within one's socio-economic context: while owning a Ferrari might be luxurious in western European standards, in China, the simple fact of owning a car is perceived as a luxury (Vickers and Renand, 2003).

The reasons for studying consumer behaviours towards luxuries

While consumer behaviours towards necessities have been studied extensively, particularly through research conducted on social and cultural influences (Belk, 1988), reference groups (Bearden and Etzel, 1982; Childers and Rao, 1992) and individual behavior (Siew Meng, 1993), luxuries seem to be an under researched area. Papers devoted to the subject point out many shortcomings: the concept of luxury lacks a clear definition (Vickers and Renand, 2003), knowledge (Dubois et al., 2001) and data (Dubois and Duquesne, 1993) about the behaviours of non-affluent consumers is insufficient.

Most of the literature covering the subject matter of luxury looks at products (Dubois et al., 2001;Piron, 2000;Allsopp, 2005) and brands (Dubois and Czellar, 2002;Dubois and Paternault, 1995;Shu-pei, 2005), leaving a gap in knowledge in relation to consumer behaviours towards luxury services.

Although similarities between products and services can certainly be identified, this research should bring to light the major differences between one and the other. Some of these differences, leading to very different consumer behaviours have already been underscored. For example, services cannot be tried before being purchased and thus require consumption in full in order to be evaluated (Lovelock, 2001). Also, the experiential nature of services implies that consumers seek information to demonstrate quality rather than simply responding to an emotional hit, such as to an advertisement (Albers-Miller, 1999). This research project will look in depth at the many different dimensions pertaining to luxuries.

Objective

The study aims to gain an understanding of the behaviours of non-affluent consumers (this target group will be precisely defined later in this paper) towards the consumption of luxuries. It will establish what these consumers understand by luxuries, and analyse the process they go through before, during and after the consumption of a luxurious product or experience.

Research questions

Dunleavy (2003:24) insists on the necessity of framing the research questions and the need to exclude concerns that the research will not be able to answer. He recommends looking at the ‘practicalities of research’ and the capabilities and resources available (Dunleavy, 2003:24). The following questions have been designed following Dunleavy’s recommendations.

How does the target audience define the concept of luxury?

In their qualitative research on consumers’ rapport to luxury Dubois et al. (2001) attempted to define luxury from a consumer’s standpoint. This study proposes to complement Dubois’ work.

What motivates the target audience to purchase luxuries?

Evidence that has been produced highlights that income is not the only component of the decision making process towards the purchase of luxuries (Dubois and Duquesne, 1993). The study will map and examine the vast range of elements that influence a luxury purchase.

What makes this purchasing experience satisfying?

This question draws upon Carbone's work, which emphasises the importance of both tangible and intangible elements in consumption experiences (Carbone, 2004). Other studies (Dubois et al., 2001;Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982) point out the need for further research in this area, usually neglected in consumer research.

Scope of research

Chisnall (1992) advocates the importance of feasibility in any given market research project. The following paragraph enumerates the parameters established by the author in order for the study to be realistically achievable.

The study will focus on individuals aged from 25 to 45, earning between £30,000 and £50,000 (approximately $55,000 and $95,000) per year either from their work or from their assets. While individuals falling in the considered income bracket can afford to live a comfortable lifestyle, they are deemed as non-affluent for the purpose of the research project (previous research conducted by the author on affluent consumers defined that group as individuals earning at least £100,000 per year).

As the author will be living in the United States when primary research will take place, the study will be conducted among the people living in the Chicago area. Respondents who will take part in qualitative research will be recruited on the street, within reach of premium retail outlets. Quantitative research will be conducted using online panels of respondents.

The research will be limited to products and services proposed by business to consumers (excluding business to business services). Also, the research will exclude the study of financial services, due to the potential difficulty of collecting data. Products and services that appear to be too difficult to access, such as private air travel will also be excluded.

Although the research might look at examples of the use of the internet in the context of luxuries, it will not concentrate on the study of online purchases. The rapid rate at which the internet evolves is such that many findings could become irrelevant even before the end of the study.

3. PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW

Chris Hart (2005) emphasises that a literature review is necessary to gain an understanding of the topic, what research has already been done, how that research was done and to identify the key issues. The following paragraphs will outline the key issues that will be developed as part of the main literature review in document 2.

The different factors affecting one's perception of luxury, leading to the segmentation of the audience of luxury consumers

Dubois clearly establishes that culture is as important as income in one's behaviour towards the consumption of luxury (Dubois and Duquesne, 1993). This section starts with a brief review of some relevant theories on social and cultural influences on consumption, and later looks at different attempts at segmenting the audience of luxury consumers.

There is an agreement in the literature that one's social and cultural background greatly influences the way he will perceive and consume luxury (Dubois and Czellar, 2002; Dubois and Duquesne, 1993; Piron, 2000) or, in other words, what kind of luxury consumer he will be.

For example, Rindfleish and Burroughs (1999) illustrate the importance of family structure in one's opinion on materialism. In disrupted families, fathers often compensate for the guilt of the divorce by buying gifts or giving money to their child. Consequently, the child is likely to associate positively materialism and father satisfaction, and perceive materialism later in life as being synonymous with well-being.

The family is only one of several reference groups that might influence an individual's behaviour. Childers and Rao (1992) distinguish familial and peer-based reference groups, and establish that these groups influence one's purchasing decisions to different extents. Based on the existing literature, they consider two types of reference groups. Firstly, parents, teachers and peers are described as normative referents, providing norms and values. Secondly, sport heroes and entertainment figures are comparative referents to which the individual aspire. In the context of luxury consumption, the later group contributes to setting the standards of luxury by endorsing certain brands and consuming certain products and services.

Alleres (1990) argues that the scope of what can be considered as luxury is too vast. She addresses this matter by proposing a hierarchy that distinguishes ‘accessible luxury’, ‘intermediate luxury’ and ‘inaccessible luxury’. ‘Middle class’, ‘social-class professionals’ and ‘social-class elite’ respectively consume these products or services. LaBarbera (1988) advocates that the ‘Nouveaux riches’ are those who aim to base their lifestyle on luxury. Stanley wrote extensively (Stanley, 1988, 1991, 1993; Stanley and Danko, 1996) on what he calls the ‘affluent’: In *the millionaire next door* (1996), Stanley and Danko give details on the demographics of this population and their consumption habits. They identify different profiles of wealthy individuals characterised not only by the size of their assets, but also by the ways in which they manage their wealth. One limitation of Stanley’s work is that his research concentrates only on the United States.

Individuals who access luxury only on certain occasions are distinctly defined as ‘excursionists’ (Dubois and Laurent, 1996). These consumers purchase luxury goods irregularly, in order to live an exceptional experience contrasting with their daily life style (Dubois and Laurent, 1996). They are certainly the most fascinating and the most important group to put under study in the context of this research project. While not using the term of ‘excursionists’, Allsopp (2005) advocates that consumers, regardless of their social class (apart from the very lowest), are now willing to engage in premium market/purchases from time to time. They trade up and down by spending $200 on a meal on one hand, and $12 on a pair of jeans on the other. Empirical research brings to light that these individuals are more likely to pay a premium for a product or service that includes an experience.

Towards a definition of the concept of luxury

While agreeing on the interest of studying the topic, authors often underline a lack of research in the subject matter of consumer behaviour towards luxuries (Dubois and Paternault, 1995; Vickers and Renand, 2003; Dubois and Duquesne, 1993). A significant share of the literature review will contribute to the elaboration of a clear definition of this concept, following the observation of Vickers and Renand (2003). Their paper indicates the general confusion about the subject matter of luxury in academic literature. For the time being, this section proposes to identify the key components that shape the concept under research.

The concept of luxury can first be defined by academics, by comparing the need for consuming luxury to other needs. An influencial theory is the one of Maslow (1970), who proposes a hierarchy of needs ranging from basic physiological needs to self-actualisation. His model starts from the premise that one must satisfy the lower level needs before considering any upper level one.

This links in with the widely accepted definition of luxuries as opposed to necessities. Indeed, Bourne (1957) states that a luxury is a not commonly owned or used, while a necessity is owned and used by virtually everyone. A sailboat, for example, can be identified as a luxury while a mattress is widely considered as a necessity.
Kemp (1998) investigates further the consumer's perception of necessities and luxuries by carrying out empirical research using a necessity-luxury scale. While most consumers agree on what should be considered as a luxury, the study points to several findings that will be investigated in this study. First, significant differences in individuals' perceptions of luxury have been identified. Also, perception of what is luxury tends to change overtime: petrol would have been considered as a luxury 100 years ago; today, it is widely accepted as a necessity. Finally, the same individual can regard the same good or service as either a luxury or a necessity, depending on the consumption situation.

In his celebrated treatise on conspicuous consumption, Veblen (1899) identified that conspicuous goods are often consumed to advertise one's wealth. The so-called 'Veblen's effect' is defined by one's willingness to pay a higher price for a functionally equivalent good in order for one to signal wealth. This theory points out the importance of group influence in consumption, later investigated by Bearden and Etzel (1982). Based on the framework developed by Bourne (1957) that contrasts luxuries and necessities as well as publicly and privately consumed goods, Bearden and Etzel (1982) emphasize the importance of the group influence in decisions other the purchase of publicly consumed luxuries.

It is suggested that luxury is made of key components. The evidence produced so far clearly emphasizes the importance of emotional appeal in luxury goods and services. Unlike the rational appeal, where the consumer makes logical decisions, emotional appeal takes its roots in the experiential and emotional aspect of consumption (Albers-Miller, 1999). Emotional appeals 'seek to make the consumer feel good about the product, by creating a likeable or friendly brand' (Albers-Miller, 1999:3).

In the context of luxury, emotional appeals are described through the use of a specific vocabulary in the literature. Seringhaus (2002) insists that luxury must be synonymous with 'extraordinary' and 'dream'. Vigneron and Johnson (1999) underline the attributes of 'glamorous' and 'stunning', Kapferer (1998) describes luxuries through 'sensuality' and 'magic'. This emotional appeal is augmented by the exclusive aspect of luxury. It must remain elitist, rare and unique in order to exist (Seringhaus, 2002; Kapferer, 1998; Dubois et al., 2001).

For Vickers and Renand (2003), the key components of luxury are functionalism, experientialism and symbolic interactionism. Functionalism refers to the ability of the product to satisfy the consumer's utilitarian need. Experientialism, which is mainly materialised by sensory pleasure, will be investigated further in the following section. Symbolic interactionism mainly refers to the satisfaction of self-enhancement and the access to group membership. Vickers and Renand argue that symbolic interactionism is the most important dimension, as the primary value of a luxury good is psychological. The least important component is functionalism, the consumer being aware that a basic version of the product could perfectly fulfil the same function. A Swatch watch that is worth a few dozen pounds indicates time just as well as a Patek Philippe sold for several thousands pounds. The later, however, is distinguished by exceptional craftsmanship.

The price is indeed a major characteristic of luxury. A luxury product or service is by definition more expensive than a functionally equivalent, non-luxury good. The traditional consumer's view is that a higher price signals higher quality, and being able to spend more indicates success and self worth (Allsopp, 2005). This can be linked with Veblen's seminal work on conspicuous consumption (1899) and brings to light the fact that individuals from higher classes purchase costly goods to distinguish themselves from the lower classes. These individuals ensure that these costs are high enough to discourage imitation.

The experiential dimension of luxuries

Pullman and Gross define experience design as 'an approach to create emotional connection with guests or customers through careful management of tangible and intangible service elements' (2004:551). As mentioned earlier, there is an agreement in the literature (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Arnould and Price, 1993; Vickers and Renand, 2003) over the importance of the experiential aspect of consumption. This is especially important to address in relation to services, as they are mostly intangible by nature. This perception is greatly affected by the knowledge the consumer held prior to the experience. When enjoying a meal in a restaurant for example, a novice might describe the food summarily, using words such as 'delicious'. On the other hand, connoisseurs would be able to detail the ingredients contained in the dishes and describe the whole experience using a technical, elaborated vocabulary (Lageat et al., 2003). Because consumers are becoming more knowledgeable and aware of the wide range of luxury products and services on offer, they are increasingly discerning and raise their expectations towards luxury experiences (Presbury et al., 2005).

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) contrast the information processing perspective and the experiential view on consumer behaviour research. While not rejecting the traditional information processing view, their paper advocates that the experiential perspective can broaden the horizons of researchers. This approach is particularly relevant to the study of services: the traditional view tends to focus on the tangible aspect of products, such as their useful functions, while the experiential perspective considers the components of the experience associated with fantasy and dream.

Research in the area of the experiential aspect of consumption allowed the identification of different types of experiences. ‘Optimal experiences’ are certainly the most interesting type to look at in the context of consumer behaviour towards luxury consumption. ‘Optimal experiences’ embrace the constructs of peak, flow and absorption. The term ‘peak experience’ is used when a high level of effort is required (Celsi and Rose, 1993). The flow experience constitutes the highest possible degree of involvement, in which the consumer is absorbed by the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998). Smith (Smith, 1995: p.110) clearly distinguishes Peak and flow experiences by stating that ‘a consumption peak may be attained during one’s first experience with a particular consumption episode but flow appears to be achieved through the repetition and recreation of the episode, either through individual performance or group interactions’. Quarrick (1989:18) defines absorption as a ‘particular kind of attention that is qualitatively different from the orientation maintained in everyday life’. Unlike flow, absorption does not occur only when under certain conditions but at any time. Books or movies are examples of fascinating stimuli that can result in absorption. Similarities have been identified between these three constructs: all are fundamentally different from everyday life and involve the total focus of the participant on a specific stimulus. Also, these experiences result in altered sense of time and loss on consciousness of the self (Walker et al., 1998).

Another interesting approach is the discipline of Customer Experience Management (CEM) was initiated by L. Carbone and S. Haekel in 1994 when publishing their article ‘Engineering customer experience’ (1994). Carbone (2004) argues that whilst going through a purchasing experience, consumers collect all sorts of ‘clues’ about the product or service and the organisation. Those clues can be defined either as ‘humanic’ (clues produced by people) or ‘mechanic’ (physical aspects of the experience) (Carbone, 2004:8-19). Customer Experience Management consists of identifying and classifying those clues, before developing some new ones and orchestrating them so as to optimise the customer experience (Carbone, 2004). In his book ‘clued in’, Carbone (2004) proposes a wide range of conceptual frameworks to help enable professionals to engineer customer experiences, along with examples of companies using CEM.

Madeleine Pullman and Michael Gross (2003) explored how different service elements could increase customer satisfaction and loyalty, in the context of the VIP area of a well-known circus. She asked respondents to evaluate 30 different context items using a 5 point scale. The research differentiates 'basic' context items such as food and seating from 'VIP' ones, characterised by 'behind the scene effects' for example. These design elements lead either to basic or VIP emotions and ultimately to consumer's loyalty. Surprisingly, VIP service elements played an insignificant role in developing loyalty, as individuals surveyed devoted more attention to basic service elements such as interaction with performers. In line with these findings, Presbury et al. (2005) emphasize the importance of the interaction between guests and staffs of luxury hotels, who tend to have longer and more frequent conversations than in a non luxurious environment. This highlight the misconceptions one might have about individuals' perceptions and behaviours towards luxuries. Pullman and Gross (2004) suggest conducting further research in different VIP settings such as luxurious hotels, in order to verify their findings.

Pullman and Gross study can be linked to Arnould and Price (1993) that explores the provision of hedonic, extraordinary experience through qualitative research conducted on river rafting trips. Their research brings to light the fact that people might often not be able to articulate what they seek from extraordinary services encounter. As discussed earlier in this paper, cultural scripts brought in by each participants influence their expectation towards the experience: in the United States for example, extraordinary experiences are expected to be affectively charged and open relationship boundaries. The main outcome of these experiences is the production of a multitude of feelings and emotions. Different individuals, depending on such their likes and dislikes, joys and fears, could rate this emotional outcome in different ways. In the case of river rafting trips, the emotional outcome was strong enough to allow participants to recall vividly the experience several months later. Arnould and Price (1993) call for further research in other consumption experience contexts, which this study proposes to address.

Emotions in consumption have later been the object of further research by O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2003). They contend that understanding the role of emotions in the buying process is critical for the marketing manager, as 'emotions are tied to a negative or positive appraisal of the firm's offering' (2003:31). These emotions ‘bubble up and down’ within the consumer’s mood, which is defined as a ‘qualitative character of a conscious mental state’ (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy, 2003:24). Overall, O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy (2003) look at the process by which emotions are generated, how they can be predicted, and try to appreciate the extent to which they can be influenced. However, they do not explain how their experiments were conducted nor suggest techniques to measure emotions.

Finally, the time factor is probably one of the most important aspects of the consumption experience. Gabbot and Hogg (1998) mention that most research on timing looks at short and discrete rather than long and repetitive service encounters. This is due to the fact that the former offer less methodological and conceptual challenges. They suggest three levels of time analysis: generic, specific and atomistic (Gabbott and Hoog, 1998:65-66). The generic level consists of travelling from point A to point B with a specific airline. The specific level is the time the consumer spends finding out about flight times, cost and bookings. The atomistic level covers every step the consumer goes through from thinking about flying to arriving at the destination (Gabbott and Hoog, 1998:67).

4. METHODOLOGY

Theory is a crucial component of the research project, as it allows for the understanding of the subject matter and is directly related to practice. Indeed, Gill and Johnson emphasize the link between theory and practice by arguing that ‘many practical activities…might be seen as involving regular attempts to create, apply and evaluate theory’ (1997:23). Fisher (2004) insists on the importance of the theoretical approach of the research, which affects every step of the research project. Choosing between positivist and phenomenological approaches is an important matter. Cooper and Schindler (2001) contend that a positivist approach is to be adopted when the research question has been clearly defined and hypotheses can be formulated. At the opposite end, a phenomenological approach is more appropriate when too little is known about the subject, often because it has not been researched thoroughly yet (Cooper and Schinlder, 2001). Remenyi et al (1998) strongly recommend using a phenomenological approach for business and management research.

Positivist approach

Positivism consists of the application of the methods of natural science to the realm of social sciences (Bryman and Bell, 2003). The theory focuses on the tangible aspect of things by testing and comparing variables (Cooper and Schinlder, 2001) in order to produce general laws that can predict behaviours (Fisher, 2004). This theory enables the researcher to produce valid and replicable answers to the research questions (Gill and Johnson, 1997).In the matter of researching luxuries, this approach could be useful to look at the tangible components of luxurious experiences. Also, the research could benefit from the analysis of numerical data such as consumer behaviour towards a price variation. Pullman and Gross (2003) have demonstrated how to use the positivist approach to rate the importance of different elements in a luxurious experience.

Criticisms

Many writers (Preece, 1994; Gill and Johnson, 1997) believe the positivist approach is simplistic and not adapted to the study of social causes. Remenyi argues positivism only asks the questions ‘how much?’ and ‘how many?’ while interpretivism looks at things more broadly through the questions ‘what’ ‘why’ and ‘how’? (1998). Laing (1967:53) contends that ‘persons are distinguished from things in that persons experience the world, whereas things behave in the world’. Fisher (2004) argues positivism allows for the understanding only of averages and not the behaviours of individuals.

Phenomenological approach or interpretivism

Phenomenologists consider that the study of people and institutions differs fundamentally from that of natural sciences (Bryman and Bell, 2003). Bogdan and Taylor (in Bryman and Bell, 2003) argue people interpret the world surrounding them and phenomenology is an attempt to see the world from a people point of view. This approach claims to focus on understanding human behaviour rather than simply explaining the behaviours, as with the positivist theory (Bryman and Bell, 2003). Using a phenomenological approach would benefit the study by helping to clarify consumer behaviour towards upscale services. It would also allow the author to identify consumer expectations, emotions and to characterise the frustration of individuals who have already experienced the most extravagant services.

Those in favour of methodological pluralism

Rather than making a definite choice between one of the approaches, research can be conducted using the most appropriate theory for each stage of the study. Trow (1957) and Smith (1975) are among the authors in favour of methodological pluralism. Trow contend that it is the problem itself that determines the methods of investigation (1957). Also, using different theories emphasizes different aspects of the problem (Smith, 1975). Gill and Johnson suggest that a researcher must compromise between different theories by using several of them in a same study (Gill and Johnson, 1997).

The choice of an approach for the study of luxuries

As suggested by Trow (1957) and Smith (1975), both phenomenological and positivist approaches will be used for to investigate the subject-matter of marketing upscale services, through qualitative and quantitative studies. Also, methodological pluralism fulfils the requirements of the DBA program.

5. OUTLINE FOR DOCUMENTS 2,3,4,5

Design of the project

A clear plan is necessary to achieve the objectives of the research, as writing a dissertation is a fastidious task that takes place over several years. In his book 'Researching and writing a dissertation', Fisher (2004) details a process to help the reader with organising his research project. After choosing a precise topic, the researcher must write a literature review, develop a conceptual framework, conduct research, interpret the research, write up the findings, and draw conclusions.

Document 2: Literature review

The literature review 'removes the need to discover knowledge that has already been reported and allows the researcher to build upon the work that has already been done in the relevant field' (Fisher, 2004:62-63). The subjects discovered in the preliminary literature review will be developed thoroughly through the review of a wide range of articles from academic and professional publications, abstracts, books, conference proceedings, video documentaries and online content. The literature review will include four parts. The first will focus on reading materials pertaining to the definition of the concept of luxury. It will then look at consumer behaviour towards luxuries and the importance of the experiential aspect of luxury consumption. This will allow the author to identify specific gaps in knowledge that will later be filled through the qualitative and quantitative research. It will also result in the elaboration of a conceptual framework for the study.

Document 3

Document 3 and 4 will consist of secondary research, aimed at verifying some of the theories reviewed in document 2, and address the shortcomings identified. Working within the market research industry, the author will benefit from the assistance of colleagues and peers, as well as being able to access some viewing facilities and technologies specific to the industry.

The third document will focus on qualitative research among the consumer segment defined in the scope of research. In depth interviews will be conducted based on an unstructured questionnaire, allowing respondents to evoke luxury in their own words. Respondents taking part in depth interviews will be invited to bring a friend along in order to undermine any potential feeling of shyness.

Focus groups consisting of 6 to 8 panellists will be conducted. In order to identify the characteristics of a product or service that might appeal them, participants will be asked to evaluate advertisements, brochures, pictures and video of venues and mock-ups of luxuries. As recommended by Morgan (2005), four focus groups will be conducted to ensure that the study is representative.

A qualitative tracking study will be set up to evaluate how consumer opinions evolve when experiencing high-end products and services repeatedly. Panellists will be asked to record their impressions in a diary before, during, and after consuming luxuries. Finally, the author will also carry out mystery-shopping visits to identify and evaluate key components of a range of luxury retail outlets and luxury services. Photograph will be taken to support the study.

Document 4

The fourth document will focus on quantitative research in order to build upon the issues identified through the qualitative research. It will aim at testing among a larger audience the consumption behaviours and expectations identified through the in depth interviews and focus groups.

The author will draft a questionnaire, and later consult with professional researchers in order to optimise its design and ensure the pertinence of the questions. The questionnaire will mostly be administered online. This will facilitate and accelerate the collection of data. Respondents will be invited by email to take part in the survey, which will be hosted on a dedicated website. They will be rewarded for filling out the survey. Results will be presented in cross tabulations, sorted according to criteria such as age, gender and income. Similar verbatim from open-ended questions will be grouped in categories, suggesting trends that will be later analysed.

Document 5

Document 5 will gather the results obtained in document three and document four, allowing analysis to be conducted. The first analysis will focus on the data collected through qualitative research. A second set of analysis will look at the answers given in the questionnaire. The third set will concentrate on the importance of the design elements of the environment. Cultural specificities and differences will be examined in a fourth set. In the meantime, the research tools will be refined and a second set of qualitative and quantitative research will be conducted to address the outstanding issues identified in the analysis.

6. ISSUES ARISING

Political and ethical issues

Working for a market research agency specialised in online fieldwork, the author will be able to meet with industry experts in both qualitative and quantitative research. The organisation will, to some extent, contribute to the study by facilitating the collection of quantitative data. However, the author will not at anytime use client data as a matter of business ethics. In depth interviews, as well as focus groups, will be video taped to facilitate analysis. Participants will always be informed of the recordings and will be given an opportunity to decline being filmed. Although it would have been interesting to look at the cultural influences from regions such as the Middle East or Eastern Europe, the time constraints will not allow for the conduct of primary research in such a wide variety of countries. Also, although the study will focus on the ways consumers spent their money, it will not make any thorough research about or judgement on the way this money is earned. For example, the ethicality of investing in tax shelters will not be questioned in the research. Finally, consumers as well as suppliers of luxuries might be reluctant to communicate some data, such as the exact amount spent in a particular experience.

Outcomes

This research will mainly benefit the author, the academic community and professionals marketing luxury products and services to the target audience.

The author will benefit by gaining a better understanding of what consumers define as luxuries and what they expect from these experiences. Also, the study will enable the author to acquire new research skills in both secondary and primary research, as well as accessing some new career opportunities.

Professionals marketing luxuries will benefit from the key behaviours identified and from the guidelines the author will develop. These recommendations should contribute to the development of their business and provide them with valuable information about their market and target audience.

The study will benefit to the academic community by filling in the gap in knowledge identified in the literature review. Most existing research focuses necessities, thus this project should make a significant contribution to academic knowledge by investigating luxuries. The author plans to publish articles related to the study in professional publications and on websites.

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Doctor of Business Administration

A study of consumer behaviour towards the consumption of luxuries

Document 2
Critical literature review and initial conceptual framework

Submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements of The Nottingham Trent University for the degree of Doctorate of Business Administration

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Table of contents – Document 2

Introduction

It is argued that 'Luxury, as a concept and a material good, is an obsession of today's consumer society' (Vickers and Renand, 2003:459). This obsession for luxury has been accelerated mainly by the rise in standard of living (Bialabos, 1991; Irons, 1997). Aware of this phenomenon, a growing body of scholars now devote attention to consumer behaviour towards luxuries, in contrast with the traditional debates that usually looked at consumption of utilitarian goods. This body of scholars dwell on a wide range of approaches, which include comparing luxuries to necessities, conspicuous consumption and the experiential aspect of consumption. Indeed, understanding consumer behaviour towards luxury is complex as motivations are diverse and attitude components are numerous (Dubois et al., 2001). This literature review proposes to fulfil the need of giving a critical account of publications that relate to the subject matter under study.

The author has been reading extensively on the topic for the last three years. First, to satisfy a personal interest and later for the purpose of an MBA dissertation dealing with the way of targeting the niche market of high spending consumers. This initial research allowed the author to gain knowledge from a practitioner's standpoint. The present review will enable a better understanding of the luxury consumption from a consumer standpoint.

The conceptual framework (see appendix 1) of this research starts from the premise that consumption of luxuries and necessities are distinct. The desire for one to consume luxuries has different origins and different effects. Despite the origin of the desire, all lead to the search for hedonism, best enjoyed through extraordinary consumption experiences. On the other hand, the consumption of necessities leads to functionalism and ordinary experiences.

This paper will review and criticise the literature pertaining to the key concept of the conceptual framework. First, this paper will give a historical account of the concept of luxury and its definition from an academic standpoint. Then, the paper will focus on the reasons that motivate one to consume luxuries, taking into account his social-cultural and economic background. Interpersonal and situational effects of luxury consumption will be reviewed, and drawbacks to luxury consumption will be identified. The last part will concentrate on the experiential aspect of consumption and particularly on extraordinary experiences, relevant to luxury consumption.

The choice of the areas of literature reviewed

'… All research originates from some view of reality, which means that there are different ways of gaining an understanding of some aspect of the world and different ways of confirming our understanding' (Hart, 2005:51). Clearly, it would not be possible to explore all the ways and all the aspects of consumer behaviour towards luxuries. For this reason, a small number of concepts and approaches have been selected and linked logically in the conceptual framework.

A 'preliminary review' looked at the widest possible range of reading materials, which include academic journals, books, consumer magazines and newspapers, online content, white papers, trade press as well as thesis and dissertations. The author then decided to focus mainly on academic publications, as practitioners and consumers literature is often vague. Also, these authors tend to make an unnecessary, exaggerated use of ill-defined words such as 'ultraluxury' (Gunter, 2005), 'masstige' (Britt, 2006) and 'big-ticket shoppers' (2004a). This 'preliminary review' brought to light the lack of a clear definition of the concept of luxury, the predominance of theories on conspicuous consumption in consumption behaviour towards luxuries and the importance of the experiential view. The author consequently decided to further review thoroughly these three areas.

2. Definition of the concept of luxury

The use of clear definitions of terms and concepts in a research project is fundamental to the development of its conceptual framework (Fisher, 2004). The word and the concept of luxury lacks a clear definition, as different scholars tend to give it a different meanings leading to a general confusion in the academic literature (Vickers and Renand, 2003). Perhaps because of the fantasy and the dream appeal inherent to luxuries, the vocabulary used in the context of luxury consumption is often vague and superficial, and the concepts surrounding the topic unclear.

Another reason why the term luxury might be so ill-defined, is because its definition depends on one's socio-economic context and its consumption depends upon personal, social and individual cues (Vickers and Renand, 2003). This part aims to elaborate a definition of luxury that will be used through the entire research project, by exploring the origins of the concept and its characteristics.

Origin of luxury – historical perspective

The word luxury is derived from luxus, meaning sensuality, splendour, pomp and its derivative luxuria, meaning extravagance and riot (Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie, 2006). Luxury might have existed even before the Hebrews (Sekora, 1977). It is worthwhile differentiating classical and modern conceptions of luxury. For Christian writers the definition of luxury lies in the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2-3, and corresponds to anything unneeded. Hebrew writers go further by considering the books of Samuels and Kings in the old testament, and retaining as a definition 'anything to which one has no right or title' (Sekora, 1977:25). Religious writings on luxury take a fairly negative standpoint by referring to luxury consumption as a sin. Later the Greek view on luxury complemented that of the Hebrews by blaming luxury for initiating chaos in the cosmos, violating harmony and preventing both individuals and communities from realising their natural ends. Plato and Aristotle consider luxury as a violation of nature and reason (Sekora, 1977).

Christian writers have also historically criticised luxury and this continues today. Most Protestant sects have an established ethical obligation to spend money on necessities rather than engaging in hedonic purchases (Weber, 1998). Up until about 1600, various pieces of legislation prohibited the consumption of goods that were at the time considered as luxurious. At that time, luxury was considered as a disease, which weakening home markets and obliged countries to increase their imports (Mason, 1981). Later, around 1750, British periodicals such as *the Gentleman's magazine* and *The London magazine* advocated that luxury was a threat to the state and its constitution. More broadly, luxury was widely attacked by intellectuals and politicians in the 17th Century. Benefits of the consumption of luxuries only started to be identified at the end of the 17th Century and in the 18th Century. Luxury, which was formerly synonymous of sin and depravity, became acceptable and even a positive good (Sekora, 1977). The classical view initiated by Christian writers, progressively made room to a more modern conception led by intellectuals and economists. The expansion of capitalism and the increased interest of people in consumption in general certainly encouraged this view. A small stream of writers that included Hume and Mandeville, were in favour of luxury, which they saw as way to increase labour by motivating labourers, leading to harder and more efficient work (Sekora, 1977). Defoe and Adam Smith also supported luxury consumption as it was contributing to the prosperity of the nation and it was a way of redistributing wealth (Mason, 1981; Sekora, 1977).

The concept was further developed at the beginning of the 19th Century with Veblen's theory on conspicuous consumption, which will be thoroughly reviewed later in this paper. In the mid-nineteenth century, Rae put vanity at the centre of the concept and defined luxury as 'the expenditure occasioned by the passion of vanity […] the mere desire of superiority others, without reference to the merit of that superiority' (Rae, 1834).

Luxury defined by contrast to necessity

The literature often opposes hedonic products (also sometimes referred to as luxuries) to utilitarian products (also referred to as functional products and necessities). This facilitates research on consumer behaviour, as there is a substantial consensus among individuals as to whether a good should be considered as a luxury or a necessity (Kemp and Kemp, 1998). While the third part of this paper will investigate the consumption experiences originated by one or the other, the following paragraphs summarise the differences between these two concepts and will help shape the definition of luxury.

Webster's third new international dictionary (1986) defines necessities as 'items that cannot be done without; things that must be had for the preservation and reasonable enjoyment of life; essentials'. They are functional objects that relieve a state of discomfort (Berry, 1994). Luxuries are 'non-essential items or service that contribute to luxurious living, an indulgence or convenience beyond the indispensable minimum' (1986). They are objects of desire that provide pleasure (Berry, 1994).

When choosing between utilitarian and hedonic items, the later are always disadvantaged when the choice is based on reason. Necessities are always de facto justified (Shaffir et al., 1993). In a similar vein, the 'principle of precedence' states that 'when Alan needs something that Brenda wants but does not need, then meeting Alan's need is prima facie morally preferable to satisfying Brenda's desire' (Berry, 1994:199). However, while both psychological and functional needs can be satisfied by a luxury product, it is the psychological benefit that distinguish luxuries from counterfeit and non-luxuries (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004).

For those authors who worked on the position of luxuries in the hierarchy of human needs (Maslow, 1970; Berry, 1994; Weber, 1998), it is widely accepted that luxuries hold the lowest status, after physiological, safety and social needs. In line with this reasoning, Vickers and Renand (2003) define luxury good in relation to its socio-economic context as something out of the ordinary in terms of daily living needs.

Characteristics of luxury

Some authors are more concerned by defining luxury in relation to its fantasy and dream appeal. For Kapferer (1998:253), 'Luxury defines beauty; it is art applied to functional items. Like light, luxury is enlightening […] Luxury items provide extra pleasure and flatter all senses at once […] Luxury is the appendage of the ruling classes'. For Nueno and Quelch (1998), 'Luxury product means indulgence of the senses, regardless of costs'.

Others adopt a more pragmatic approach by defining luxury in terms of its key components. For Vickers and Renand (2003) luxury goods are made of a mix of functionalism, experientialism and symbolic interactionism. Functionalism refers to the utilitarian aspect of the product. Experientialism refers to the experiential aspect of consumption and will be studied thoroughly in the third part of this paper. Interactionism refers to the interpersonal effects of luxury consumption and will be dealt with in the second part of the review.

More recent research has focused on the individual's rapport to luxury and are aimed at elaborating a definition of luxury from a consumer's standpoint (Dubois et al., 2001). Six key characteristics emerged from the qualitative interviews conducted: First, luxury is synonymous with excellent quality: the components are of an exceptional nature (i.e: a diamond) and manufacturing the product involves high level of expertise.

Secondly, the price of a luxurious product is assumed to be very high, in comparison to its utilitarian counterpart (Dubois et al., 2001). Indeed, empirical research identifies a positive relation between the perception of quality and the price of the product or service. Consumers often judge the quality of a product according to its price, which allows them to choose between different brands (Lichtenstein et al., 1988; Erickson et al., 1985). Consumers who believe the price is an indicator of quality also consider high prices as an indicator of prestige (Lichtenstein et al., 1993).

In depth interviews conducted by Dubois et al. (2001) indicate that consumers expect luxury products to be distributed with restriction. This constitutes the characteristics of scarcity and uniqueness, which can be summarised as something difficult to obtain. These findings are in line with Solomon's work (1994:570) who establishes that 'Items that are in limited supply have high value, while those readily available are less desirable. Rare items command respect and prestige'. The ancestral heritage and history associated with the product and/or the brand also play an important role in the perception of luxury (Dubois et al., 2001). Finally, it is implied that luxury should be superfluous and useless. For consumers, the fact of being able to consume in abundant quantity leads to the feeling of freedom, allowing them to experiment with products and services without fearing the consequences (Dubois et al., 2001). Research conducted by Dubois et al. is limited. First, it ignores luxury services. Secondly, it lacks consideration of a broad enough range of luxury goods. Most importantly, its findings would have to be verified among a wider sample of respondents. The research project proposes to address these limitations by conducting further research in line with Dubois et al.'s findings.

Characteristics of luxury brands and the paradoxical relationship between exclusiveness and high level of diffusion

Luxury brands are characterised by a low functionality to price ratio and intangible and situational utility to price ratio (Nueno and Quelch, 1998). They should not be defined only in terms of higher prices (Prendergast and Wong, 2003), but must also 'evoque exclusivity, have a well known brand identity, enjoy high brand awareness and perceived quality, and retain sales levels and customer loyalty' (Phau and Prendergast, 2001). These brands are maintained over time using a mix of culture, marketing, endorsements, product integrity, history and value driven emergence (which is the consumption of a specific product by celebrities; the product, initially marketed as non-luxurious, in this way becomes a luxury) (Beverland, 2004). The paradoxical nature of marketing luxury goods lies in the fact that that brand awareness is a prerequisite to dreaming and ultimately purchasing, while on the other hand, the act of purchasing the good or service takes away some of its inaccessible dimension (Dubois and Paternault, 1995). The more the product is diffused, the more its prestigious and luxurious character fades (Dubois and Paternault, 1995; Britt, 2006).

3. Origins and effects of luxury consumption

The previous part clarified the origins of the concept of luxury and its definitions in academic literature. This part will first look at why one engages in luxury consumption, taking into account his self, reference groups and social, cultural and economic background. Secondly, the paper will explore the different effects of luxury consumption and drawbacks to consuming luxuries.

The role played by the man's self and extended self

Scholars who work on consumer behaviour towards luxuries often refer to psychologists to seek explanations in why one is appealed by luxury consumption. The following paragraph dwells on the psychological literature to define and establish the key motivations for consuming luxuries.

A man's self has been defined as: 'the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands, and yacht and bank account' (James, 1890-292).

Belk (1988) argued later the one's self was 'extended' by his possessions. The extended self is categorised as body, internal processes, ideas, and experience; yet it also includes the persons, places, and things to which the individual is attached. The notion of extended self is 'a superficially masculine and Western metaphor comprising not only that which is seen as me (the "self"), but also what is seen as "mine … The more we believe we possess or are possessed by an object, the more a part of self it becomes' (Belk, 1988:140-141). What we do and what we have plays a crucial role in shaping our identity. Sometimes, doing something imposes a need to have: for example, one could only enjoy sailing if he has a boat. Losing a possession unintentionally should be considered as a lessening or loss of self (Belk, 1988).

Furthermore, Belk (1988) relates closely ‘having’, ‘doing’ and ‘being’, and suggests that possessions can be visualised as multiple concentric layers surrounding the core self. Possessions incorporated in extended self provide valuable functions to healthy personalities. They give one the possibility of holding personal archives or a museum allowing one to later reflect on his history and how he has changed. Additionally, possessions give a tangible aspect to an intangible memory, such as a souvenir from a particular travel experience (Belk, 1988).

Relating to the subject matter under study, possessing goods allow one to enhance his self-concept by satisfying his need for uniqueness. This need is the pursuit by the individual of difference and the enhancement of personal and social identity through the acquisition and utilisation of consumer goods (Tian et al., 2001). In other words, the need for uniqueness is a motivation for differentiating the self by using consumer goods that differentiate the individual: the self-image is enhanced through the transfer of a product’s symbolic meaning to the self (Tian et al., 2001).

In line with this reasoning, Nail (1986) qualifies a consumer’s need to buy differentiating goods as ‘counterconformity motivation’. Individuals driven by counterconformity motivation are influenced by the norm behaviour dictated by others but differentiate themselves through their possessions to obtain satisfaction. These consumers are likely to engage in a wide range of uniqueness-seeking behaviour; purchasing unique hand crafted items and novelty goods for example might enable them to resist conformity (Tian et al., 2001). Counterconformity is believed to be driven by three dimensions that are creative choice counterconformity, unpopular choice counterconformity and avoidance of similarity. It is an ongoing drive for consumers driven by counterconformity to maintain the difference, as products initially marketed for their uniqueness tend to gain popularity overtime (Tian et al., 2001).

Influence of the group

‘The extended self operates not only on an individual level, but also on a collective level involving family, group, subcultural, and national identities’ (Belk, 1988:160). In the consumer behaviour literature, it is a well underlined belief that one develops his perception of luxury based upon its interaction with people whom he or she aspires to and their peer reference group (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). The reference group becomes particularly influent in the case of conspicuous consumption (O'Cass and McEwen, 2004). Aubert-Gamet (1997) distinguishes the psychological from the physical dimension of the consumer’s environment. The former is made of a micro group, referring to small groups of people, such as groups of friends, and a macro group that refers to culture or class.

Two types of group influence have been identified, respectively called informational and normative influence (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955) . The normative influence occurs when the individual conforms to group influence or expectations. The evaluation of products through verbal communication and the basic observation of other group members, for example, is identified as informational influence (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955). Later, a third dimension was identified, named the value-expressive influence (Park et al., 1977). This dimension implies that one can be greatly influenced by the group because of his desire to enhance his self-concept and his liking for this group (Park et al., 1977). More recently, research on the relationship between product conspicuousness and reference group influence highlighted that purchases of products perceived as conspicuous are more likely to be influenced by the group (Brinberg and Plimpton, 1986). Having multiple reference groups can add pressure on the individual to match the requirements of a group whist also being attracted by another group commanding other standards (Hyman, 1942).

The importance of the consumer’s social, cultural and economic background

A consumer’s own definition of luxury and behaviour towards luxury consumption cannot be standardised in only one model. ‘The possessions central to self … will differ from other individuals, overtime, and over cultures that create shared symbolic meanings for different goods’ (Belk, 1988:152). What is synonymous with luxury for some is not for others. Although owning a sports car or a swimming pool is commonly accepted as being a luxury in European standards, the simple fact of owning a car or having access to potable water can be considered as luxurious in other parts of the world. An individual is basically exposed to general culture and sub-cultures through the groups and institutions he belongs to (Mason, 1981). Culture is defined by Dubois and Duquesne as ‘a common set of values shared by its members which determine what is considered socially acceptable behaviour. In other words, to belong to a culture is to behave in a similar manner, accepting the same norms and respecting or rejecting the same values’ (Dubois and Duquesne, 1993:39). Culture is likely to have a significant influence on his lifestyle, beliefs and his propensity to consume conspicuously (Mason, 1981). Individual differences based on ethnic and cultural background, social class and gender also greatly affect the emotion the consumer may feel for a product (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982b), and the meaning of the goods themselves might evolve overtime according to popular perception and culture (Richins, 1994).

Based on previous research on the S shaped curve of the population growth, Mason suggests differetiating the traditional, achieving and affluent societies (Mason, 1981). Traditional societies, associated with the early stage of the curve, are characterised by their high growth potential. Traditional communities tend to be more oriented towards their past. The new generation still refers to the father, seen as an example. These societies are intellectually self-sufficient and condemn or reject any new behaviour challenging the traditional ones. Life goals of the members are set by the group to which they belong (Mason, 1981). Achieving societies are in the middle of the population growth curve, where income and wealth is more equally distributed. These societies tolerate values being translated into money and individuals enjoy social mobility and independence of thought and action (Mason, 1981).

Affluent societies are characterised by declining birth and death rates, and are highly developed and industrialised. Individuals living in these societies are likely to enjoy material abundance. The individual's character is said to be 'other-directed', rather than 'inner-directed', and shaped by other people's opinion. Members of the individual's 'macro group' (Aubert-Gamet, 1997) such as 'Media personalities' and opinion leaders are more likely to influence one rather than the members of his 'micro group' (Aubert-Gamet, 1997) of friends (Mason, 1981). The market for luxury goods in different affluent societies seems to stand at different maturity levels (Dubois and Laurent, 1993). Empirical research on luxury goods and brands conducted across the five biggest European countries reveals that France and the UK are mature luxury markets. Italians would be ready to consume more luxuries but lack the money, while Germans could afford to but lack the motivation. The Spanish appear to be less sensitive to luxuries (Dubois and Laurent, 1993). However, luxury consumption in Europe seems to be influenced mainly by income, occupation and education rather than country affiliation (Dubois and Laurent, 1993).

Further research advocates that services, unlike products, are directly influenced by local issues and linked to the local service provider. For example, while emotional loyalty easily works for a soft drink, it certainly would not for a dry cleaning business (Albers-Miller, 1999). Local culture is even more important in the context of prestigious and luxurious products and services. Research conducted on the dynamic of prestige across cultures concluded that success lies in the firm's ability to communicate and embody prestige in a culturally appropriate manner (Garfein, 1989).

Finally, the origin and the importance of one's wealth considerably affects his rapport to luxury consumption. The 'affluent' (Stanley, 1988) are characterised by their financial ability to indulge in luxury consumption often enough that is part of their everyday lifestyle. Practitioners might segment the audience of luxury consumers according to which 'cycle of wealth' they fall in: the 'newly rich', who have just made their first million can be differentiated from the 'elder statesmen' who are usually wealthy retirees (Duckworth, 2004). Scholars distinguish the 'old money' (Aldrich, 1988) from the 'nouveaux riches' (LaBarbera, 1988), who are defined as individuals with a strong need to validate their new status in order to become socially accepted by the traditional upper classes (Laumann and House, 1970). These typologies appear to be limited in many ways. Stanley's research concentrates only on the USA and typologies suggested by other practitioners lack a clear definition and the scholars involved considered only a small number of categories.

Other complicating factors

Other complicating factors include the gender of the individual. Males tend to be more materialistic and have stronger orientation towards external validation, while females often reject messages to be noticed (O'Cass and McEwen, 2004). Furthermore, one's orientation towards materialism could greatly affect the extent to which consuming luxuries satisfies him. While some materialistic people might be disappointed by the fact that materialism does not necessarily bring happiness, others might feel happier pursuing materialism, following various other disappointments in life. In other words, materialism could affect happiness either negatively or positively (Belk, 1985). Finally, the importance of possessing versus doing changes over the life span of the individual and between life stages (Belk, 1985).

Interpersonal and situational effects of luxury consumption

In their conceptual framework of prestige-seeking consumer behaviour, Vigneron and Johnson (1999) argue that prestige consumption might have interpersonal and personal effects. The former refers to ostentatious consumption and conformity or non-conformity to the group. The later refers to the hedonistic and perfectionist effect that one can enjoy from prestige consumption (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). This paper proposes to challenge Vigneron and Johnson's framework, by suggesting that luxury consumption is mostly motivated by interpersonal effects, along with situational effects. These effects lead to a hedonistic consumption experience, which will be further developed in part three.

The interpersonal effects of luxury consumption: conspicuous consumption and snob and bandwagon effects

Veblen's theory of the leisure class

The most influential theory in the area of consumer behaviour towards luxuries is certainly Veblen's *theory of the leisure class* (Veblen, 1899). It is an attempt to understand conspicuous consumption through social and anthropological lenses in the US at the end of the 19th century. Wealthy individuals often consume conspicuous goods in order to advertise their wealth, allowing them to achieve a greater social status. These individuals, at a higher point in the hierarchy, inspire consumers who stand at a lower point and try to emulate their consumption patterns. As the economy changes, these social norms change accordingly (Veblen, 1899). Veblen advocates that the trend towards conspicuous consumption is shocking and unacceptable. In referring to the primitive societies, Veblen states the competition takes place between groups and not between individuals. He sees the competitive possession of goods dictated by the modern society as an aggression between groups: one must possess goods to 'exist' in the community (Veblen, 1899). 'When accumulated goods have in this way become the accepted badge of efficiency, the possession of wealth presently assumes the character of an independent and definitive basis for esteem' (Veblen, 1899:29).

There are two ways for one to transmit his superiority to others. First, the wealthier one becomes, the more he can afford to engage in 'conspicuous leisure'. The less one needs to work (which can be seen as an inferior economic status) the more leisure time he consumes and the more he demonstrates his prestige and social status (Veblen, 1899). Conspicuous consumption is the second way one can demonstrate his superiority. Consuming ostentatiously expensive, unneeded goods allows one to gain social recognition. Conspicuous consumption must include a component called 'conspicuous waste'. This is called as such because, 'waste because this expenditure does not serve human life or human well-being on the whole and not because it is waste or misdirection of effort or expenditure as viewed from the standpoint of the individual consumer who chooses it' (Veblen, 1899:97-98).

Veblen (1899) distinguishes the phenomenon of individuous comparison and pecuniary emulation. The former occurs when a member from a higher class consumes in a conspicuous manner, in order to distinguish himself from the lower classes. Pecuniary emulation occurs when members of the lower classes conspicuously consume to be perceived as members of the upper classes. It is the motivation behind the process of achieving financial success; success being only rated through pecuniary comparison (Veblen, 1899). This treatise has been so influential that it led scholars to create the term 'Veblen effect'. Widely employed in academic literature, the 'Veblen effect' can be defined as the consumer's willingness to pay a higher price for a functionally equivalent good (Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996).

Several limitations should be applied to Veblen's theory. First, his standpoint is limited to his view on American society at the end of the 19th century. Also, because the theory remained unchallenged for such a long time, it has been too easily accepted as typical of all conspicuous economic behaviour. For Mason (1981), the expression 'Veblen's effect' reveals the narrow definition given by researchers to the subject matter. He suggests considering Veblen's observation only as part of a wider analysis.

Other influential theories on conspicuous consumption

Later Veblen's theory was challenged and developed further by numerous authors, as conspicuous consumption became a growing phenomenon. It is probably in late 1960's that scholars regained interest in the topic. It is argued that certain acts of purchasing are motivated by status seeking, rather than focusing only on the utility of the product (Nicosia, 1966). Conspicuous consumption is further considered as phenomenon based only on differences among social classes (Engel et al., 1968).

It is at the beginning of the eighties that Mason started publishing major advancements in research on conspicuous consumption (Mason, 1981, , 1984, , 1985).His conceptual framework both integrates existing knowledge and broadens the scope of research:

'Conspicuous consumption is intended for the most part either to consolidate and secure existing community or group status or to make new 'vertical' status gain in the community. It can be seen as a response to particular cultural and social conditions, which, together or separately, encourage (or at least do not overtly condemn) the ostentatious display of wealth as a legitimate form of status seeking. This social motivation to conspicuously consume may then be reinforced or diminished by individual personality characteristics, which could be strong enough to dominate conspicuous decisions. Finally, individual opportunity to display will be decided by personal income and wealth measured in both absolute a relative terms' (Mason, 1981:35).

Mason (1981) starts from the premise that conspicuous consumption is largely influenced by the social, cultural and economic background of the individual and its society. While some societies might condemn conspicuous consumption, some might encourage competition between individuals and ostentatious display of wealth (Mason, 1981). In traditional societies, 'status is ascribed rather than achieved' (Mason, 1981:38). In other words, status is obtained by family connection but not through achievement. Distribution of wealth is unequal and conspicuous consumption is tolerated only for an elite minority (Mason, 1981). While Mason emphasises that traditional societies are most likely to condemn conspicuous consumption, Belk suggests that 'Even third world consumers are often attracted to and indulge in aspects of conspicuous consumption before they have secured adequate food, clothing and shelter' (1988:104-105).

Achieving societies tolerate values being translated into money and individuals enjoy social mobility and independence of thought and action. Their orientation towards consuming conspicuously is twofold: on the one hand, these individuals might rather look for 'self approval' instead of looking for 'public approval'. On the other hand, the importance of money and wealth in these societies might lead to conspicuous consumption, in order for one to convert his intangible self-approval into a tangible form (Mason, 1981). For example, Chinese consumers are now an important group of status-conscious individuals, who are eager to engage in conspicuous consumption. Recent studies report a potential 10 to 13 million mainland China customers for luxury goods (Economist, 2004b).

This paper earlier stated that individuals living in affluent societies enjoy material abundance and tend to be 'other-directed' rather than 'inner-directed'. In theory, other-directed societies might find conspicuous consumption unattractive as various factors make economic displays ineffective. Practically, consumers living in affluent societies might retain an inner-directed orientation and engage increasingly in conspicuous consumption (Mason, 1981). Mason (1981) observes that conspicuous consumption did certainly not disappeared in affluent societies, although it has been 'modified'. The political and diplomatic elite now engages in conspicuous consumption in order to reinforce their status. Furthermore, producers and their advertising agencies try to encourage non-elitist segment to conspicuously consume what they market as status goods. All social levels can now consume conspicuously (Mason, 1981). In line with this reasoning, other research brings to light that most consumers, regardless of their social class, are now willing to engage in a premium purchase from time to time (Allsopp, 2005; Economist, 2005).

Although the concepts of status consumption and conspicuous consumption are rarely distinguished in the literature, it is worthwhile defining the former to better understand its influence on the later. On the one hand, conspicuous consumption implies public demonstration, in order to signal wealth to others. On the other hand, status consumption lies in the acquisition of status-laden products and brands that may or may not be demonstrated publicly (O'Cass and McEwen, 2004). Three types of status have been identified. Status can either come from definition or assignment; an example is the case of Royalty. It could also be obtained by achievement or consumption (Hayakawa, 1963; Brown, 1991). For some scholars (Bierstedt, 1970; Dawson and Cavell, 1986), status is a position or rank awarded to an individual in a group or society. In contrast with this view, Donnenwerth and Foal (1974:786) consider status as 'an expression of evaluative judgment that conveys high or low prestige, regard or esteem'. Status consumption is 'The motivational process by which individuals strive to improve their social standing through the conspicuous consumption of consumer products that confer or symbolise status both to the individual and to surrounding significant others' (Eastman and Goldsmith, 1999:p. 42). For Packard (1959:5), status seekers are 'people who are continually straining to surround themselves with visible evidence of the superior rank they are claiming'.

Views challenging theories of conspicuous consumption

Research points out the growing importance of taste in conspicuous consumption (Laumann and House, 1970). Nowadays, the need for taste is easy to satisfy with the assistance of 'professional tastemakers' such as architects and fashion designers (Laumann and House, 1970). In line with this reasoning, Shipman (2004) identifies a shift in conspicuous consumption going from 'waste' to 'taste'. His paper advocates that consumers now move from appropriating themselves materially valued products, towards appreciating culturally valued products.

Veblen's theory, which considers conspicuous consumption only through symbolic goods purchased for display might be becoming irrelevant: consumption is moving towards a more symbolic realm, where conspicuous taste is characterised by less material displays that provide the consumer with equal distinction (Shipman, 2004). This shift is justified by the declining legitimacy of material excess and the takeover by governments of many objects of individual indulgence such as art and scientific research. Shipman also observes that conspicuous consumption is vulnerable to financial attacks (2004). Today, consumption of symbolic goods consists in focusing on other people’s knowledge and talent, rather than on the physical inputs. The elite are distinguished by their willingness to understand and access the top of cultural capital: only people educated to the higher standards can grasp the philosophy behind a particular song, even if millions know the lyrics (Shipman, 2004).

Other interpersonal reasons: Snob and bandwagon effects

Taking place in affluent societies, the bandwagon effect, also referred to as the demonstration effect, is derived indirectly from theories on group attitude formation and opinion leadership (Mason, 1981). It starts from the producer’s standpoint that ‘products can be established as socially desirable with one group or class in the expectation that its subsequent high ranking within that group will be made known to other (lower) socio-economic groups who are highly motivated to make status gain’ (Mason, 1981:124). Then the producer is allowed to sell to at least to socio-economic segments. From a consumer standpoint, copying the elite allows one to feel affiliated to their group (Mason, 1981). One might consume conspicuously in order to access specific groups and communities and benefit from social interactions (Jaramillo and Moizeau, 2003). For example, parents would spend significant amount of money on certain social events, in order to ensure their children would eventually meet someone from that same social class (Jaramillo and Moizeau, 2003).

In contrast, the ‘snob’ effect is a consumer driven phenomenon that works against the producer. It occurs when consumers reject a particular product that became to widely consumed resulting in the loss of exclusivity (Mason, 1981). ‘Snob’ consumers are likely to purchase products for which availability is limited and stand away from mass-produced goods. Upper classes use symbols such as expensive automobiles and yachts, to indicate to lower classes the extent of their wealth. It is further theorised that they use these costly signals to prevent members of lower classes from accessing their network (Jaramillo and Moizeau, 2003). They might also adopt a new prestige product immediately after its launch, taking advantage of the small number of consumers who are able to differentiate themselves to feel affiliated to their group (Mason, 1981).

The situational reasons for consuming luxuries: the Excursionists

Beside the traditional groups of 'old money' and 'nouveaux riches', who live a luxury lifestyle, the 'excursionists' consume luxury under certain circumstances only (Dubois and Laurent, 1996). These individuals engage in luxury consumption to experience something out of the ordinary that contrast sharply with their daily lifestyle. Giving priority to necessities, they are aware of an imbalance in their life and suffer from not spending enough money towards pleasurable activities (Thaler, 1985). They consequently look for opportunities to indulge in hedonic and luxurious purchases (Kivetz and Simonson, 2001).

Dubois and Laurent (Dubois and Laurent, 1996) contend that a given product fulfils a set function. On the other hand, a particular situation generates the need for certain functions to be fulfilled: consequently, purchasing certain luxury products is more appropriate in certain situations than in others. For example, purchasing a diamond ring is negatively associated with impulsive buying or self-gift, but positively associated with the notion of 'social gift', in the context of an engagement (Dubois and Laurent, 1996). In line with this reasoning, Allsopp (2005) contends that most consumers are now willing to engage in premium market/purchases from time to time, regardless of their social class (apart from the very lowest). People trade up and down by spending less on many items to be able to spend more on exceptional products or experiences. These consumers use self-control to avoid spending on necessities, allowing them to afford hedonic, luxury purchases (Allsopp, 2005).

While most research on luxuries deals with the attitudes of affluent consumers, there is a lack of knowledge about the occasional consumers of luxury. This exists despite the fact they represent a major part of the market (Dubois et al., 2001). The 'excursionists' constitute a fascinating type of consumer that will be investigated further in this research project. As suggested by Dubois and Laurent (1996), experiments might involve a larger number of consumers confronted with a wider range of situations leading to the purchase of services as well as products.

Alternatively, consumers might pre commit to consuming luxuries. One might more easily choose to receive a luxury when the likeliness of the event is low (in the case of a lottery for example), or when the psychological cost is less obvious. Consumers might also choose luxuries over necessities when the act of consumption is planed in a distant future (Kivetz and Simonson, 2001).

A key drawback to consuming luxuries: The feeling of guilt

As discussed at the beginning of this paper, luxury consumption has always been controversial and widely criticised. This certainly results in an ambivalence of consumer attitudes towards luxury, because people are torn apart between the pleasure resulting from consumption and the moral drawbacks (Dubois et al., 2001). Some might perceive luxury as 'another world', considered inaccessible: consumers might believe they would not know how to use luxury products and services, and how to behave in luxurious venues and environments (Dubois et al., 2001). Others refrain from consumption because of their ethnical background: some ethnic groups share norms that may restrict certain kind of hedonic consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982b). However, the main drawback to luxury consumption is certainly the feeling of guilt.

Numerous studies point out that one is likely to experience a feeling of guilt when choosing an hedonic, luxurious item over a necessity (Lascu, 1991; Prelec and Hernstein, 1991; Thaler, 1980). Guilt is defined as a violation of one's internal standard. It is 'a negative emotion which results from a consumer decision that violates one's values or norms. Consequently, the consumer will experience a lowering self esteem on his decision' (Burnett and Lunsford, 1994:33). It is an unlearned, negative emotion that refers to regret, remorse, self-blame and self-punishment that occurs when committing a transgression (Izard, 1977).

Burnett and Lunsford (1994) advocate that guilt could be a new construct in the field of marketing that will help with the understanding of consumer purchase behaviours. Qualitative research they conducted suggests four dimensions of consumer guilt, which are financial, moral, social responsibility and health guilt (Burnett and Lunsford, 1994). Financial guilt occurs when one makes purchases that cannot be easily justified. Impulse shopping or extravagant purchases are examples of situations that lead to the feeling of financial guilt. Moral guilt occurs when a purchase decision violates the consumer's moral values. Among other examples, gambling is likely to generate a feeling of guilt for many consumers because of their religious and personal values. Social responsibility guilt can be experienced when one does not fulfil what one perceives as social obligation associated to a particular purchase decision. Charity contributions and environmental issues are examples of situations that can lead to social responsibility guilt. The last dimension, less relevant to the subject matter under study, is characterised by one's feeling of not properly taking care of his welfare (Burnett and Lunsford, 1994).

Burnett and Lunsford (1994) further suggest considering the time period in which the feeling is experienced. Guilt might occur either after the violation of the norm or prior to it (called anticipatory guilt). One can also feel guilty for purchasing as well as for not purchasing a product (Lascu, 1991): while the purchase of a diamond by someone on a tight budget might lead to the feeling of financial guilt, the non-purchase of this diamond as an engagement present can also lead to guilt. Finally, the authors underline the importance of the focus of guilt, characterised by who is affected by the action of the decision maker (Burnett and Lunsford, 1994). This can be illustrated by the question of spending money towards a new CD player or towards a child's education.

Different individuals react to the feeling of guilt differently. Giges (1987) identified that high self-esteem individuals are not responsive to guilt appeals often used by advertising. They use avoidance defence mechanisms that allow them to reject messages based on guilt appeal and are more responsive to optimistic messages instead (Ghingold, 1981). Ghingold (1981) also distinguishes individuals with an internal locus of control from those with an external locus of control. The former tend to believe they are in control of their destiny, hence are better protected against guilt appeal. The later consider that external forces control their destiny, making them more vulnerable to advertisements that suggest ways to reduce guilt by purchasing a particular product.

Another way of rating individuals' reaction to the feeling of guilt is to differentiate copers and avoiders. Copers are responsive to stimuli that are significant to them, while avoiders simply avoid responding (Ghingold, 1981). Copers respond better to high guilt persuasive messages because they are more susceptible to persuasion that generates tension. Avoiders appear to be more responsive to lower guilt appeals (Ghingold, 1981). In any cases, once the individual feels guilty, he feels he must make some reparation rapidly (Hoffman, 1982).

4. The hedonistic aspect of the consumption experience

Since Veblen's theory on the leisure class (Veblen, 1899), theoretical orientations have evolved a great deal and are increasingly pointing to the consumer's hedonist benefit. More recent theories advocate that people might consumes luxuries for their own benefit (hedonists) as well as their superior qualities (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). This part will first define experiential consumption and distinguish traditional and experiential approaches, which are respectively suited for the study of utilitarian and hedonic consumption. It will then focus on the experience itself and look specifically at optimal experiences.

Defining the concept of experiential consumption

Originally found in the social sciences and philosophy, 'Experience is defined as a subjective episode in the construction/transformation of the individual, with, however, an emphasis on emotions and sense lived during the immersion at the expense of the cognitive dimension' (Caru and Cova, 2003:273). Marketing science adopted later a more objective meaning, emphasising the result obtained by the individual immersed in the experience. This result is expected to be very significant and ideally unforgettable. Consumption experience must be distinguished from consumer experience: relations with others within a community result in friendship experiences, relations with the state result in citizenship experiences and relation with family and relatives result in family experiences. Consumer experiences are defined by exchanges between the individual and the market (Edgell et al., 1997).

The concept of experiential consumption itself is inspired from the 18th Century European Romanticsism movement (Caru and Cova, 2003). Today, the experiential aspect of consumption is believed to be at the centre of the post-modern consumer's life: 'For the post modern consumer, consumption is not a mere act of devouring, destroying or using things […] but an act of production of experiences […] The way to enhance and enchant life is to allow multiple experiences […] Life is to be produced and created, in effect, constructed through the multiple experiences in which the consumer immerses'

(Firat and Dholakia, 1998:96) It is further argued that an object's value pertains to the consumption experience associated with that object (Holbrook, 1994).

Every consumption experiences involve a subject and an object, both interacting and contributing to a different extent to the experience (Holbrook, 1999). The result of this interaction is the value that the consumer gains from the consumption experience. When the objective feature of the product outweighs the consumer's subjective responses, the consumer's value (and the product category associated with it) can be described as utilitarian. A can opener, for example, might elicit very little of a consumer's subjective responses, being outweighed by the product's objective features (Addis et al., 2001). Individual subjectivity is becoming more and more important in consumption experiences, which materialised in part by consumers' values, increasing interactivity and consumers' orientation towards the buyer seller relationship. They describe this phenomenon as an 'explosion of subjectivity'. Economies are increasingly becoming focused on the consumer's personal and subjective needs, which are satisfied through the customisation of products and services (Addis et al., 2001).

Consumption experience is not limited to the act of the purchase, but instead is spread over a period of time divided into four stages (Arnould et al., 2002). The pre-consumption experience includes planning and daydreaming about the experience. The purchasing decision is referred to as 'choosing' in Holbrook et al. (1986). The purchase experience refers to the choice, and payment of the product or service and more broadly the encounter with the environment (outlet, staff …). In the case of the hedonic purchase, decisions are made madly on the symbolic elements, as opposed to the technical features that they are made on when buying an utilitarian product. The core consumption experience refers to the sensation towards the product or service and the satisfaction to different degrees. This stage is referred to as 'using' (Holbrook et al., 1986). Finally, the remembered consumption experience, as well as, the nostalgia is the recall of past experience (Arnould et al., 2002).

The practitioner must devote his attention to experience design, which is 'an approach to create emotional connection with guests or customers through careful use of tangible and intangible service elements' (Pullman and Gross, 2004). In the context of hedonic experiences, it is crucial to understand a consumers' subjective responses to the symbolic and intangible aspects of the experience (Addis et al., 2001). However, these subjective responses are difficult to analyse and control. On one hand, hedonic experiences are mainly made of intangible and symbolic aspects. On the other hand, consumers change constantly and are influenced by the different sociological and economic variables described earlier.

The discipline of Customer Experience Management (CEM) was initiated by L. Carbone and S. Haekel in 1994 when publishing their article 'Engineering customer experience' (1994). Carbone (2004) argues that whilst going through a purchasing experience, consumers collect all sorts of 'clues' about the product or service and the organisation. Those clues can be defined either as 'humanic' (clues produced by people) or 'mechanic' (physical aspects of the experience) (Carbone, 2004:8-19). Customer Experience Management consists of identifying and classifying those clues, before developing some new ones and orchestrating them so as to optimise the customer experience (Carbone, 2004). In his book 'clued in', Carbone (2004) proposes a wide range of conceptual frameworks to help enable professionals to be able to engineer customer experiences, along with examples of companies using CEM.

Contrast between utilitarian and hedonic consumption

The academic view

Traditionally, research in consumer behaviour assume the consumer made logical purchasing decisions, based on the processing of information, with the aim of solving a problem (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982a). More recently, Hirschman and Holbrook (1982b) challenged the 'information prospective perspective' on the basis that this traditional approach might neglect some important aspects of the consumption phenomena, such as sensory pleasures and a product's esthetic. Their paper develops the idea that Holbrook and Hirschman (1982a) advocate that the experiential view on consumer behaviour research is as important as the more common information processing perspective . While not rejecting the traditional information processing view, they argue that the experiential perspective can broaden the horizons of researchers. This approach is also relevant to the study of services: in the context of environmental input, the traditional view tends to concentrate on the tangible aspects of the product while the experiential approach looks at the meaning of subjective elements such as sociability or elegance.

In the context of consumer input, the traditional processing view considers the consumer as a problem solver. When looked at through the lens of the experiential view, this same consumer is believed to be making decisions based on the principle of pleasure (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982a). When analysing the output consequences of consumption, the information processing perspective considers mainly the output in terms of product's usefulness. On the other hand, the experiential view takes into account the fun that the consumer derives from using the product (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982b). Finally, consumer's satisfaction leads to repurchase in the traditional approach, while the experiential perspective leads to feelings and fun associated with fantasy and dreams (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982a). In this later approach, sensations largely prevail over a consumer's rational thought (Holbrook, 1997).

Definition of hedonism and hedonist consumption

The concept of hedonism takes its origins in different behavioural sciences that include different areas of research within sociology, philosophy psychology (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982b). Marketers started devoting more attention to hedonism in the 1950's, through a research stream focusing on motivation (Dichter, 1960).

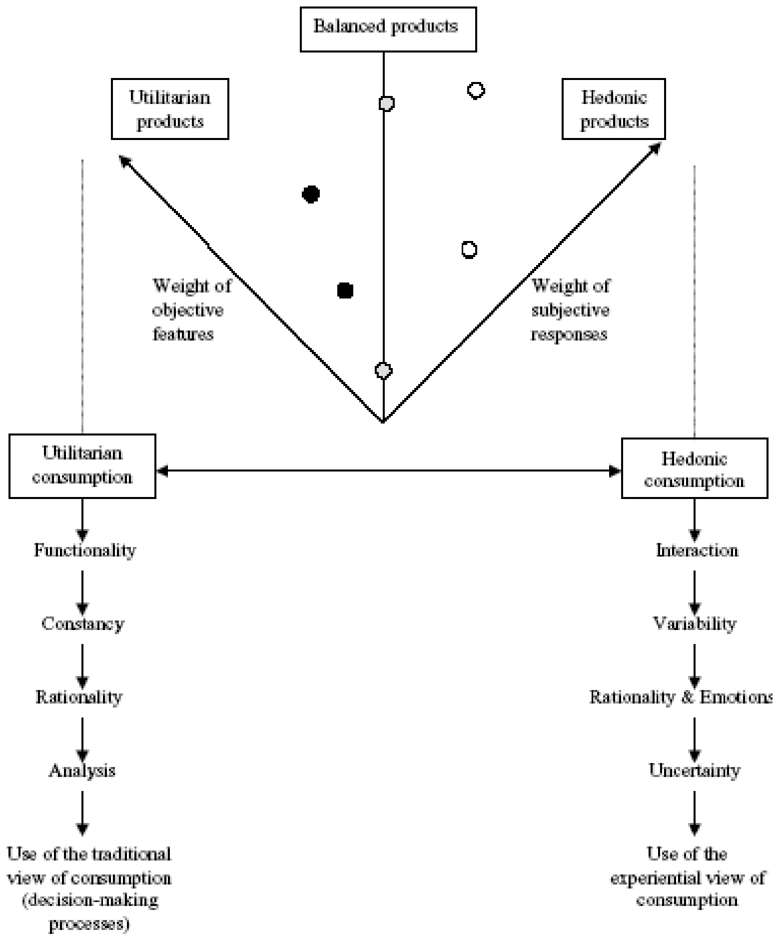
The research will retain the definition given by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982b:92): 'Hedonic consumption designates those facets of consumer behaviour that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one's experience with products […] By multisensory we mean the receipt of experience in multiple sensory modalities including tastes, sounds, scents, tactile impressions and visual images'. When engaging in hedonic consumption acts, one might ignore the reality and instead consider what he desires the reality to be (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982b).

Multisensory images might be classified either as historic imagery or fantasy imagery. The former implies the recollection of an event that occurred, such as the scent of a perfume. The later refers to an experience that never occurred in the past, only occurring as a mental phenomena (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982b). Emotional arousal is made of neurophysiological, expressive and experiential components (Izard and Buechler, 1980).

In seeking to expand an understanding of hedonism, Hirschman and Holbook's (1982b) propose a conceptual framework based on four dimensions. Hedonism can be best compared and distinguished from functionalism, by looking at the way scholars approach the dimensions of mental construct, product classes, product usage and individual differences.

	Traditional view	Hedonic view
Mental construct	Ignores multisensory responses. Focuses only on semantic analysis	Hedonic consumer research does not deny benefits of the traditional view but acknowledges the importance of the sensory stimulation in the consumption experience.
Product classes	Looks mostly at packaged goods such as toothpaste, beer and appliances Maslow (1968) establishes that these products require low involvement Decision based on tangible features	Performing arts and plastic arts (painting, sculpture) Maslow (1968) establishes that these products require high involvement Decision based on symbolic elements
Product usage	Most studied activity: decision making process	Variability of decision making pattern
Individual differences	Consumers profiled according to their discriminating characteristics	Individual differences based on ethnic and cultural background, social class and gender greatly affects the emotion the consumer may feel for a product

Distinguishing the utilitarian from the hedonic consumption experience



Addis and Holbrook's conceptual framework (2001) leading to the traditional and experiential view of consumption

The consumption of hedonic goods is often led by the aesthetic value of the product and personal pleasure and fantasy (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982a). Customer value (and the sort of product corresponding to these values) is called hedonic when the customer's subjective response weight is greater than the objective responses (Addis et al., 2001). Hedonic consumption involves more activity, evaluation and emotional processing than instrumental consumption and less sensory stimulation and cognitive processing (Lofman, 1991).

For example, work of arts are likely to elicit a great deal of a consumer's subjective responses, which weigh more than the actual products' objective features and lead to hedonic value (Addis et al., 2001). Hedonist consumers are more likely to react emotionally to what the artwork symbolises and make an impulsive, rather irrational buying decision (Woods, 1960). 'Hedonist consumers are more interested in their own thoughts and feelings, thus they will place less emphasis on price as an indicator of prestige' Vigneron and Johnson,(1999:9). This particular behaviour is said to be 'congenial' as it is 'pursued for its own sake' and focus on the subjective and emotional benefits of consumption (Havlena and Holbrook, 1986).

Dubois and Duquesne (1993) define these consumers as being 'On trend', they are risk takers who make the most of their affective potential. These consumers want to take control of their destiny as they believe that the future holds a wealth of opportunities for self-development (Dubois and Duquesne, 1993). They are in 'a state of receptivity or openness […] to undergo whatever experiential events, sensory or imaginal, that may occur, with a tendency to dwell on, rather than go beyond, the experiences themselves and the objects they represent' (Tellegen, 1981:222). Hedonic consumption, where consumption is an end to itself is led by intrinsic motivation (Koch, 1956).

On the other hand, the consumption of utilitarian goods is goal oriented and cognitively driven. It is aimed at accomplishing a functional, practical task (Strahilevitz et al., 1998). Consumers engaging in utilitarian consumption acts are more likely to make decisions on the basis of price and are more sensitive to rational claims (Woods, 1960). For Dubois and Duquesne (1993), these 'off trend' consumers are more likely to focus on their roots and security. They maintain 'a state of readiness to engage in active, realistic, voluntary and relatively effortful planning decision making and goal directed behaviour' (Tellegen, 1981:222). The consumption behaviour of these individuals is extrinsically motivated. Such extrinsic motivation implies that consumption is a mean towards an end, (which corresponds to the utilitarian consumption) (Koch, 1956).

Recently, studies have focused on how the choice the consumer makes between hedonic and utilitarian goods might be influenced by the nature of the task (Dhar et al., 2000). Empirical research conducted by Dhar et al. (2000) compare consumer preferences for both hedonic and utilitarian goods either in acquisition or in forfeiture conditions. Results show that to a certain extent, one's preference for hedonic good is stronger in forfeiture conditions. For example, when moving to a new flat, the individual's choice might be led by a nice view (hedonic feature), even if this implies a longer commute to the tube (an utilitarian feature) (Dhar et al., 2000). A third possibility, whereby objective features weight as much as subjective responses defines balanced products. These are products that have a perfectly balanced mix of hedonic and utilitarian elements (Addis et al., 2001).

The following table contrasts the differences between utilitarian and hedonistic aspects of consumption and the methodological orientation of the paper reviewed.

	Utilitarian	Hedonistic
Also referred to as/ embraces the concepts of	Functional, instrumental	Experiential consumption Luxury consumption
Academic views (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982a)	Traditional view Focus on tangible aspects of the products	Hedonic view Subjective elements such as sociability or elegance
Methodology most frequently adopted	The rational of the product enables analysis: the approach tends to be positivist	Hedonic products are variable and uncertain: the approach chosen is more likely to be constructivist
Orientation of research		Exploratory research
Research often looks at (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982a)	Commodities	Luxuries
Consumer Behaviour		
Consumer behaviour qualified as (Havlena and Holbrook, 1986)	Instrumental	Congenial
Key components (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982a)	Task driven	Emotional response Multisensory dimension

Brain (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982a)	Responds in an analytical fashion	Responds in an holistic fashion
Shopping experience (Babin et al., 1994)	Intellectual	Emotional
Decision (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982a)	Based on technical features	Based on symbolic elements
(Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982b:94)	What consumers know to be real	What they desire reality to be
(Koch, 1956)	Extrinsic motivation: consumption is be a mean towards an end, as in utilitarian consumption	Intrinsic motivation: the consumption is an end to itself
Research in the specific context of luxury consumption		
Consumer choice (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999)	Based of functions	Based on emotions
Involvement required	Low involvement	High involvement Prestige products are the perfect example of ‘extreme-end high-involvement decision making’ (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999:2).
(Berry, 1994)	necessities are functional objects that relieve a state of discomfort	Luxuries are objects of desire that provide pleasure
(Dubois and Duquesne, 1993)	‘off trend’ consumers focus on their roots and security	‘on trend’ individuals: endeavour to take control of their destiny
Consumption experience (Abrahams, 1986) (Anthropological approach)	Ordinary Everyday life, routine	Extraordinary Intense experience

Psychological approaches		
(Tellegen, 1981)	Engage in realistic, relatively effortful, goal directed experiences	State of receptivity or openness, ready to undergo sensory or imaginal experiential events
(Woods, 1960)	Rational buyers	Irrational buyers

Drawbacks specific to hedonic consumption

There is an emerging amount of literature that suggests drawbacks specific to hedonic consumption. Drawbacks in hedonic consumption might occur even if one can indulge in a luxury experience at no cost: being invited to a restaurant might generate guilt if one thinks the activity is taking him away from his work or contradicts his diet (Kivetz and Simonson, 2001). Hedonic purchases are often motivated by an impulsive, short-sighted decision, while their consequences can often only be appreciated in the long run. An individual might choose to indulge himself with a chocolate bar for example, which will be a pleasurable experience on a short-term basis but could have long-term consequences on his health (Wertenbroch, 2001)

In seeking to expand an understanding of ambivalence towards hedonic purchases, Dubois et al. (2006) advocate consumers might be attracted by the sensory benefit of hedonic products and services on one hand, and feel guilty about purchasing these products on the other. In the particular context of luxuries, products and services can sometimes be perceived as morally wrong. Consumer interest in luxury can easily conflict with the moral drawback. An explanation is that luxury comprises both positively and negatively loaded components: the quality value is a positive component while excessive conspicuousness is a negative one (Dubois et al., 2001).

Dubois et al.'s conceptual framework (Dubois et al., 2006) suggests that moral drawbacks originate either from an external constraint, such as economic or health concern, or internal barriers through ethical barriers. Consumers tend to manipulate these constraints in order to reduce their responsibility in hedonic purchases. The consumption situation illustrated in the upper-left cell below represents a complete acceptance of the hedonic choices, as neither internal nor external barriers lead to any ambivalence. Consumers from the upper-right cell are constrained by health-related and/or financial barriers, but do not hold any ethical beliefs preventing them from engaging in hedonic experiences. An occasional cigar smoker, for example, would fall into this category. These consumers elaborate strategies that allow them to enjoy hedonic purchases at an acceptable level. At the opposite, the lower-left cell suggests the existence of ethical barriers but the absence of health-related or financial issues preventing the consumer to indulge. In the lower- right cell internal and external barriers are combined, which is likely to lead one towards completely avoiding hedonic purchases (Dubois et al., 2006).

ANTECEDENTS OF AMBIVALENCE TOWARD HEDONIC PURCHASES AND CORRESPONDING CONSUMER STRATEGIES

	External Constraints (economic or health-related restrictions)	
Internal Barriers (ethical principles)	No	Yes
No	Epicurean enjoyment	*Objective* strategies: actual containment of hedonic consumption
Yes	*Subjective* strategies: finding justifications for hedonic consumption	Ascetic abstention

From Dubois et Al. (2006)

It is argued the benefit of hedonic consumption can be obtained without actually purchasing any goods or services, eliminating internal and external drawbacks.
Consumers might develop strategies to overcome the ambivalence between self-indulgence and guilt. Receiving gifts, daydreaming and inheritance are examples of strategies that allow the consumer to obtain the hedonic benefit without purchasing.
Consumers can also contain their hedonic purchases at a level they judge acceptable in order to overcome the ambivalence. Avoiding any replacement costs and using

shortcuts to reduce costs are example of strategies employed. Manipulating the mental accounting of costs and relinquishing the responsibility of the purchase by attributing this responsibility to someone else are the two subjective families of strategies suggested by Dubois et Al (2006).

Limitations of this classification and approach

From the standpoint of a researcher, it is widely accepted that researchers lack the necessary research techniques to evaluate and monitor the individual's processing of multisensory imagery and emotions. Much needed is a means to measure the emotional arousal at the selection stage and during the act of consumption. This would allow a better understanding of the linkage between hedonistic response and consumer satisfaction/product enjoyment. Another limitation of defining a product as hedonic or utilitarian is that conceptually, necessities are not systematically utilitarian, and luxuries are not always hedonic (Kivetz and Simonson, 2002).

From a consumer standpoint, it is crucial to realise that products cannot always be categorised as strictly utilitarian or hedonist. It is well known that many product-usage situation have very few tangible benefits but produce a great deal of subjective and emotional reaction in the consumer's mind (Havlena and Holbrook, 1986). On the other hand, hedonistic products might include a great deal of utilitarian components. In sum, products might be mostly hedonic or mostly utilitarian, but hardly one or the other (Addis et al., 2001). Furthermore, this paper emphasised in part two the importance of one's social, economic and cultural background in his perception of luxury consumption. Research conducted so far in hedonic consumption neglected this aspect (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982b).

Finally, the same good or service might be considered as hedonic, utilitarian or irrelevant by different individuals, depending on a wide range of psychological and physical factors. The consumer's mood, for example, is said to greatly affect his perception of a given consumption experience (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2003). Even more subtle, the same good might be considered by a same individual either as a necessity (utilitarian good) or as a luxury (hedonic good), depending on the purpose of usage and the situation (Kemp and Kemp, 1998). Goods might sometimes be considered as neither a luxury nor a necessity for one who simply does not consume them. An example is cigarettes, which are irrelevant to non smokers (Kemp and Kemp, 1998). In a wider debate, it is argued that today's society is too focused on hedonism. Consumer marketing claims that 'the meaning of life is discovered through acquisition, that the hedonistic experience of material accumulation is the core object of existence on earth (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2002).

The hedonistic experience must be optimal

The previous paragraphs establish that the experiential aspect of consumption is particularly important in the context of hedonic consumption. Since the mid-sixties, the concept of experience has received increased attention from scholars, sometimes leading to confusion. The term experience has been progressively replaced by ‘extraordinary’ or ‘flow’ experience in academic publications, assuming that every experience has to be extraordinary in order to avoid the ‘commodity trap’ and to engage the consumer physically and emotionally (LaSalle and Britton, 2003). This paragraph proposes to clarify these issues and gain further understanding of the experience constructs that pertain the most to hedonic consumption.

The consumption experience is defined according to the four realms of entertainment, educational, escapism and aestethics. The model considers two dimensions that allow for the rating of the intensity of the experience ranging from weak to strong: (1) the consumer’s involvement in the experience and (2) his connection with the environment of his experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

‘Ordinary experiences’ refer to the routine of everyday life and the passive acceptance of events (Abrahams, 1986). Unordinary experiences embrace constructs that include peak, flow, absorption, epiphanic and extraordinary experiences to name but a few. These constructs are similar in many ways. They assume the experience is fundamentally different from one’s everyday life. Secondly total attention has to be devoted on a specific stimulus. Finally, the overall experience results in an altered sense of time and loss of consciousness of the self (Walker et al., 1998).

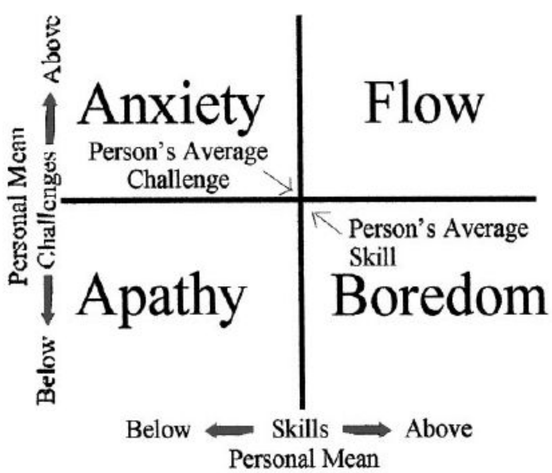
Origin of the concepts of peak and flows

Maslow (1968) pioneered research on optimal experiences by distinguishing the process and the product of the experience. He identified the concept of peak experience, whereby participants were motivated by ‘self-actualisation’ through intense experience and activity. The individuals described in his study are intrinsically motivated by the work itself, rather than an external goal such as financial reward (Maslow, 1968). Maslow describes peak experience as a ‘temporary turning away from the real world’ (1968:96), which results in ‘moments of highest happiness and fulfilment’ (1968:73). Peak experience is a self-actualisation process involving intense activities that lead to unconventional rewards. Peak experience involves acquiring new knowledge and is constantly intense (Mannell, 1996). The term of ‘peak experience’ is used when a high level of effort is required (Celsi and Rose, 1993).

Csikszentmihalyi ‘s work (1990; , 1998) seeks to expand an understanding of experiences led by intrinsic motivations. He first did this through doctoral research conducted among male artists before 1975. The flow experience constitutes the highest possible degree of involvement, in which the consumer is absorbed by the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998). It is a ‘state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. The experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990:4). Although the intensity of the flow experience is variable (Mannell, 1996), it is refered to as ecsastic, meaning separated from the routine of everyday life (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Further, Csikszentmihalyi (1999) theorised that flow is the alternative to happiness through money. Empirical research shows that people earning \$30, 000 believe they would need to earn \$50, 000 to be happy, while people earning \$100, 000 would need \$250, 000. Flow brings satisfaction to the person who takes part in the experience, regardless the financial aspects. One’s happiness depends on his ability to derive flow from an experience he is involved in (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

It is argued that flow experiences often contain elements of adventure, which are themselves rewarding and do not need to rely on physical incentives. For Csikszentmilhali (1990), flow is a balance of skills and and challenges that exclude the feelings boredom and anxiety. In his celebrated treatise on flow, Csikszentmilhali identify key components of the concept. These components include the complete absorption of the individual in the activity, who tends to lose his self-consciousness as his worry about losing or lacking control over the situation. Individuals engaged in flow experience understand clearly the goals of the activity. This allows them to assess their performance accurately; as they concentrate intensely on achieving these goals (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Csikszentmilhali (1992) later argues on the difficulty for researchers to measure optimal experiences as flow is an elusive concept. Thus, researchers tend to reduce this elusiveness rather than measuring the flow precisely.

Massimini and Carli's (1986) conceptual framework identifies four different channels in the flow that are determined by one's personal mean of skills and challenges. One's ability to match the level of experience required is a condition for the flow to happen as flow cannot take place if the challenge is too great (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Anxiety occurs when skill is below personal mean and challenge is above. At the opposite, boredom occurs when skill is above and challenge below the personal mean. Apathy occurs when both skill and challenge are below the personal mean. It is when both skill and challenge are above the personal mean that flow occurs.



From Massimini and Carli's (1986)

Smith (1995:109) distinguishes peak and flow experiences by stating that 'a consumption peak may be attained during one's first experience with a particular consumption episode but flow appears to be achieved through the repetition and recreation of the episode, either through individual performance or group interactions'.

Differences between ordinary and extraordinary (or optimal) experiences

Ordinary experiences involve a fairly low level of emotional intensity (Privette, 1983). Extraordinary experiences, which takes their root in North American thinking (Caru and Cova, 2003), refer to 'more intense, framed and stylised practices' (Abrahams, 1986:50). Using other terminologies, the difference between ordinary and extraordinary experience has been described by Turner (1986) and Schmitt (1999). Turner (1986:35), differentiated the 'mere experience' as synonymous with 'passive endurance and acceptance of events' from 'an experience' that 'stands out from the eveness of passing hours'. Schmitt (Schmitt, 1999) distinguishes 'mundane' from extraordinary or memorable experiences.

In contrast, the concept of extraordinary experience is characterised by the sense of newness of perception and process (Privette, 1983:1366). These experiences are mainly spontaneous and unrehearsed (Abrahams, 1986) and go further by engaging the customer in a personal way (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Extraordinary experiences are difficult to describe in terms of expectations before being consumed (Arnould and Price, 1993). Consumers are mainly motivated by the desire to escape from their ordinary routine are not guided by any script, but only by curiosity (Hanefors and Mossberg, 2003). The considerable emotional content conveyed by extraordinary experiences makes them easy for consumers to recall (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), even after several years. The satisfaction coming from the pleasure, enjoyment and surprise, makes the experience memorable (Hanefors and Mossberg, 2003).

Extraordinary experiences are synonymous with high involvement and a high degree of challenge, leading to high emotional intensity (Hanefors and Mossberg, 2003). Involvement, which can be defined as pleasure and interest within a particular situation (Gabbott and Hoog, 1998), 'reflects the inherent need fulfilment, value expression, or interest the consumer has in the product' (Mano and Oliver, 1993:452). In the specific context of luxury consumption, prestige products are referred to as the perfect example of 'extreme-end high-involvement decision making' (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999:2). In line with this findings, Dubois et al. (2001) established that the high involvement of luxury consumers leads to pleasure and deep interest.

It is argued that both affective involvement, that is the 'heightened feelings and emotional energy', and the cognitive involvement, that is the 'heightened thinking and processing information about the goal object' (Arnould et al., 2002:400) occur in order for one to reach an extraordinary experience (Hanefors and Mossberg, 2003). Involvement affects arousal, positivity, negativity, and hedonic experience perception (Mano and Oliver, 1993).

Research focusing specifically on peak experiences

Research conducted over a river rafting trip on the Colorado river (Arnould and Price, 1993) brought to light a wealth of key characteristics of extraordinary experiences. River rafting provided the participants with a feeling of personal control, personal growth and renewal. Spontaneous letting-be of the process and a feeling of newness of perceptions and processes have also been highlighted by the experiment (Arnould and Price, 1993).

Other research has been conducted with the aim of understanding what constitutes an extraordinary meal experience (Hanefors and Mossberg, 2003). The consumer distinguishes expedient and extraordinary meal experiences through five inter-related dimensions: motivation, expectation, interaction, involvement and satisfaction. The study also establishes that an experience, to be extraordinary, must be infrequent or unusual. Furthermore, the consumer is not led by any clear expectations or any distinctive script that could guide the action (Hanefors and Mossberg, 2003). While it has been established that extraordinary experiences were memorable (Hanefors and Mossberg, 2003), consumers are most often unable to assess precisely the physical components of their initial sensation (details of what they hear, touch …). When they can do so, they often lack the words to describe what compose the stimuli (Lageat et al., 2003). The extraordinary experience might be physically challenging for the individual who does not necessarily hold prior specific knowledge. For these reasons, peak experiences involve taking risks that could enhance the excitement but also put one's life at risk.

Le Breton (2002) provides a thorough analysis of the reasons why people engage in increasingly dangerous experiences. His analysis finds that because our contemporary society, and particularly our leisure activities, are peaceful and protected from risk, the fear of boredom increases accordingly and sensations are more solicited. 'The risk-free long-term projection, with the assurance that nothing will ever change and that all surprises are excluded, generates boredom and indifference, in the absence of hurdles which give individuals the chance to measure themselves against their existence' (LeBreton, 2002:130). High-risk experiences are distinguished by three key characteristics, which are the individual's heightened experience, the notion of transcendent group camaraderie and communitas (previously highlighted in the example of river rafting trips in Colorado) and special communication (Celsi and Rose, 1993).

It is argued that weighting the degrees of competence and risk can allow one to assess the state of peak experience (Martin and Priest, 1986). Martin and Priest's Adventure Experience Paradigm model (1986) balances competence and risk suggesting five conditions ranging from devastation and disaster to exploration and experimentation. Priest and Baillie (1987) describe devastation and disaster as where the risk is overwhelming for the individual in relation to his level of knowledge. This imbalance forces the individual to consider the likelihood of injury or death. Misadventure occurs when competence does not match the risk, which could have the consequence of minor injuries. Peak experience is described as the 'razor's edge', where one experiences euphoria. For Priest and Baille (1987), adventurists reach the state of peak adventure when competence and risk are (almost) perfectly balanced. For example, experienced skydivers are freed from constant self-awareness which allows them to experience transcendent flow state (Celsi and Rose, 1993). Adventure occurs when risk is lower and competence is slightly higher. The state of exploration and experimentation is characterised by an high level of competence outweighing a low level of risk, allowing the individual to practice his skills without having to worry about the risk.

Celsi and Rose (1993) look at the example of skydiving in order to expand on an understanding of risk in leisure consumption. Their analysis underlines similarities between Greek theatre and high-risk experience, describing the later as dramatic in form and structured with a distinct beginning, middle an end. The beginning is a period of growing tension for the individual taking part in the experience. This tension is progressively internalised by both the actor (the adventurist) and the public. Finally, the period of denouement allows both actor and public to 'cleanse' their emotions (Celsi and Rose, 1993). Celsi and Rose's framework (1993) also integrates the macroenvironmental influence and inter- and intrapersonal motives as elements influencing high risk leisure consumption. The former influence the context in which behaviour occurs and the later embraces some normative and hedonic motives. Key findings on high-risk experience consumers have identified the phenomenon of risk acculturation. That is when the normalisation of risk leads to an escalating motivation towards high-risks behaviours (Celsi and Rose, 1993).

Limitations of experiential approach

Despite the interest of a growing body of researchers interested in the experiential aspect of consumption, limitations to the approaches reviewed must be addressed. First different individuals would have different expectations towards the different kinds of experiences defined above. A consumer's innovativeness, which is 'the degree to which an individual makes innovation decisions independently of the communicated experience of others' (Midgley and Dowling, 1978:235) greatly influence his perception of experiences. Knowledge held by the consumer also affects greatly his perception of the experience. When enjoying a meal in a restaurant, for example, a novice might describe the food summarily, using words such as 'delicious'. On the other hand, connoisseurs would be able to detail the ingredients contained in the dishes and describe the whole experience using a technical, elaborate vocabulary (Lageat et al., 2003).

Social and cultural differences are also likely to influence one's perceptions and expectations towards experiences. For example, Americans would expect extraordinary experience to be affectively heavily charged and boundary open, where the demarcation between the service provider and its client is blurred (Arnould and Price, 1993). In fact, Americans attach more importance to consumption experiences in general, as it relates to the notion of constant development of the individual. Described as individualists, Americans seek experiences in line with their obsession for novelty and fear of boredom (Abrahams, 1986). Finally, Hull Iv et al (1992) underlines the fact that the experience is dynamic, in that sense that it fluctuates over the course of the engagement. One's satisfaction might change according to elements as varied as landscape and scenic beauty (Hull Iv et al., 1992).

From a practitioner's point of view, market players can only plan 'consumer experiences' and have little influence on family, friendship and citizenship experiences (Caru and Cova, 2003). Marketers often fail to design 'good' and memorable experiences. Schmitt (1999:251) underlines that 'most brands and marketing campaigns, most of the time, are unable to provide these types of experiences – even temporarily'. Schmitt admits that not all experiences can be extraordinary as 'our organisms have not been built to undergo intense, personality-shaking experience all the time' (1999:251). Mundane, or ordinary experiences appear to play a significant role in enriching our daily lives (Schmitt, 1999).

From an academic standpoint, the notion of extraordinary experiences is criticised by scholars such as Bruckner (2000) who reject the 'search for perpetual euphoria' and 'the mysticism of peak points'. He vividly attacks the ideology of assessing everything according to the pleasure or displeasure it generates and criticises 'the society of continual entertainment' and 'the enemies of boredom' and defends that 'different intensity of existence must be preserved' (Bruckner, 2000:141). Le Breton insists on the benefit generated by basic experiences such as walking, which he describes as 'an introduction to the sensations of the world' (2000:18). Walking enables the individual to meditate and is described as 'a quiet way to give back appeal to time and space' (2000:19). Agamben (1989) reminds the reader that it is elements of everyday life, and not the extraordinary, which initially were the raw material of experience.

Conclusion

This paper allowed the identification and the description of the key areas of literature that pertain to the subject matter of consumer behaviour towards the consumption of luxuries. First, it looked at definitions given to luxury and prestige by scholars. It then focused on the motivations that lay behind luxury consumption, and looked particularly at conspicuous consumption. Finally, the hedonic aspect of luxury consumption enjoyed through extraordinary consumption experiences has been approached. The literature reviewed clearly points to gaps in knowledge that this research project proposes to address: the term ‘Luxury’ lacks a consumer inspired and a more contemporary definition. Furthermore, if scholars wrote at length on ‘traditional’ motivations for consuming luxuries, little is known about ‘new’ behaviours such as excursionism. At last, the literature insists on the growing importance of the experiential aspect of consumption and its hedonist components. This aspect is largely under researched in the context of luxury consumption, despite its obvious, fundamental importance.

Conceptual framework (see appendix 1)

The conceptual framework eases the research task by describing the relationships between the concepts that have been defined and described (Fisher, 2004). These concepts are the blocks that enable the building of a theory (Bryman and Bell, 2003). It is critical for the researcher to choose when to draft the critical framework; this can be done either at an early stage in the research project (what Fisher calls the ‘structured approach’) or towards the end of the project (scholars call it the ‘grounded approach’) (Fisher, 2004). In researching the subject matter of consumer behaviour towards the consumption of luxuries, the author decided to adopt a structured approach, as this will help with structuring and focusing the research project.

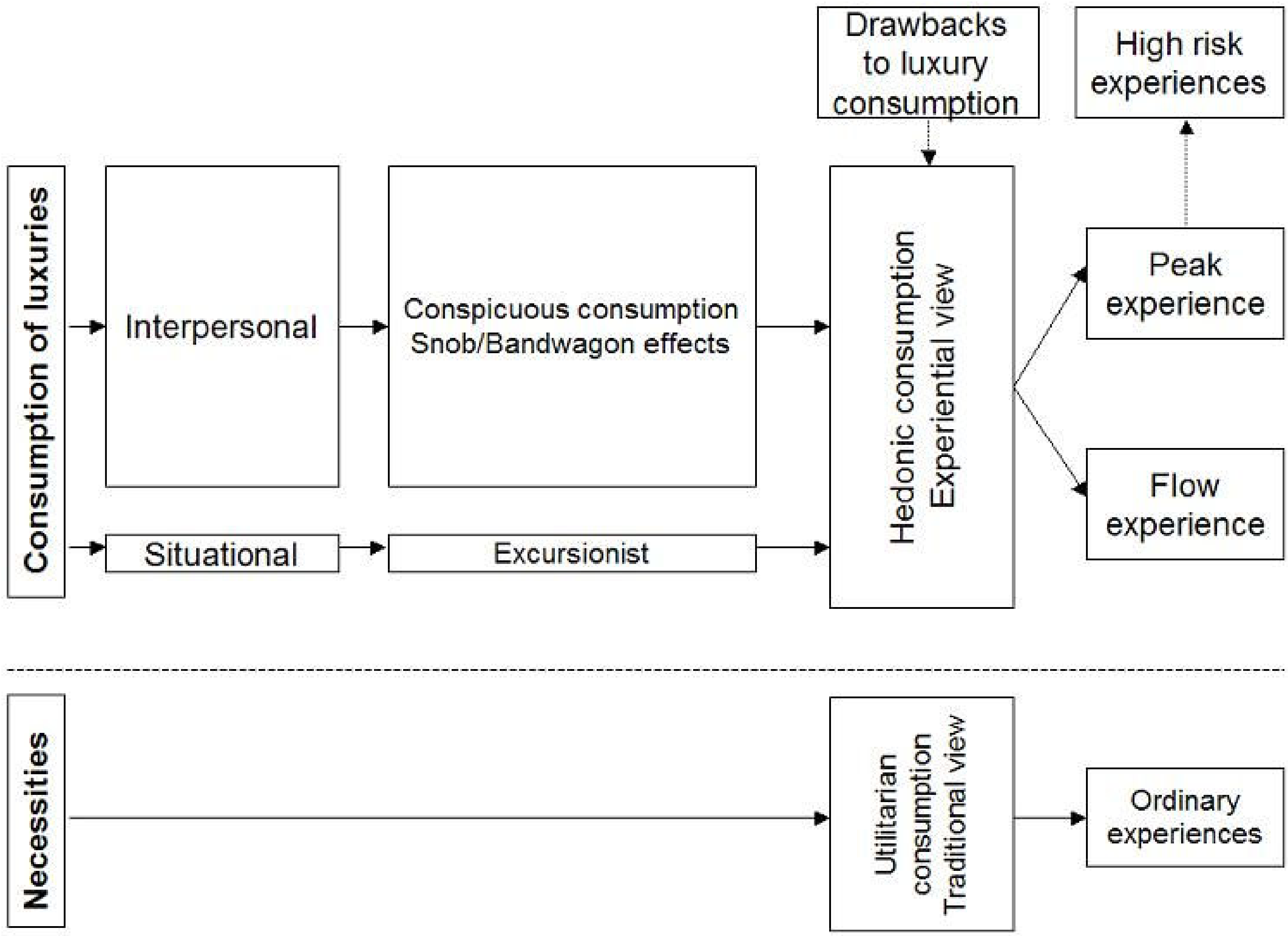
The conceptual framework elaborated for the purpose of this research can be found in Appendix 1 of this document. It distinguishes the consumption of luxuries (on which the research project focuses) as opposed to the consumption of necessities. Reasons for consuming luxuries are mostly interpersonal, but can also be personal and situational. In any case, the consumption of luxuries, sometimes withheld by its drawbacks, is of a hedonic nature and can be best analysed through the lens of the experiential view. Luxuries are enjoyed through extraordinary consumption experience that could sometimes be risky for the individual involved. The consumption of necessities is utilitarian in nature and is usually studied using the traditional view. This type of consumption leads only to ordinary experiences for the consumer.

Qualitative research is going to be conducted as a way forward to the identification of key issues. This research will aim to elaborate a definition of luxury and extraordinary experience from a consumer standpoint. Sample panels of consumers will be invited to attend focus groups and in depth interviews. These results will be gathered in Document 3 and contribute to the design of a questionnaire that will allow the collection of quantitative data at a later stage.

Appendix 1

Conceptual framework:

Origins and effects of luxury consumption


Consumption of luxuries
Interpersonal
Conspicuous consumption
Snob/Bandwagon effects
Situational
Excursionist
Drawbacks to luxury consumption
Hedonic consumption
Experiential view
High risk experiences
Peak experience
Flow experience
Necessities
Utilitarian consumption
Traditional view
Ordinary experiences

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Doctor of Business Administration

Defining the concept of hedonic, extraordinary experience through qualitative consumer research

Document 3
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of The Nottingham Trent University for the degree of Doctorate of Business Administration

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Table of contents - Document 3

Introduction

The traditional information processing view considers the consumer as a problem solver. In contrast with this approach, a growing body of research is now bringing attention to the experiential view. This view argues that consumers base their decisions on pleasure (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982a). The concept of experiential consumption, which takes its roots in the 18th Century European Romanticism movement (Caru and Cova, 2003), is believed to be at the centre of the post-modern consumer's life (Firat and Dholakia, 1998). Previous research on experiential consumption distinguished ordinary experience, as of utilitarian nature, from extraordinary experience, as of hedonic nature. This document will address a gap in knowledge identified through the literature review previously conducted. That is, defining the hedonic, extraordinary experience from a consumer's standpoint.

It is worthwhile reminding the reader of the way this research project has been conducted so far, in order for the reader to better understand how it has evolved. Document one established how the research project was going to be approached. This initial outline of the study to be undertaken was specifically focused on the researching consumer behaviour towards luxury services. It mainly consisted of an elaboration of the key research questions and the definition of the scope of this research. A thorough review of the literature surrounding the subject matter under study was then conducted and reported in document two. It looked at defining the concept of luxury, identifying the origins of luxury consumption and characterising the hedonistic aspect of luxury consumption. The review of the literature enabled the elaboration of a conceptual framework for the research project. This framework distinguishes the consumption of luxuries, of a hedonic nature as opposed to the consumption of necessities, of a utilitarian nature. The experiential view is best suited to explore the consumption of luxuries, enjoyed through extraordinary experiences. Document two brought to light the necessity of conducting secondary research as a way forward to the identification of key issues. The present paper (document three) will consist of qualitative research that will allow for the elaboration of a definition of extraordinary experience from a consumer standpoint.

A major evolution in the research project since its beginning has been to progressively move away from the concept of luxury and instead devote more attention to the concept of hedonic, extraordinary experience. This shift has been mainly motivated by the confusion surrounding the term 'luxury'. Previous research conducted as part of an MBA dissertation and through document 2 (the literature review) progressively brought to light the difficulty of defining the concept. Indeed, what is synonymous with luxury for some consumers might not be for others.

One might consider that eating in a given restaurant is luxurious, while another dinner in the exact same restaurant might simply seek to fulfill the physiological need of eating. Furthermore, practitioners add to the confusion by using the language of luxury for all sorts of products and services, luxurious or not. Tenser (2004) underlines the fact that credit cards aimed at the most affluent individuals are now branded with names such as 'Centurion' or 'Signature', since the mass-market segment has copied the words 'Platinum' or 'Gold' traditionally synonymous of luxury (Tenser, 2004).

Early research conducted for the purpose of this document highlighted the different meanings of the word luxury. In a first recruitment effort, the author sought volunteers to take part in face to face interviews about luxury consumption. A screening stage consisted of asking potential participants about their views on luxuries. As expressed below, there was very little common ground in the replies received.

'I …have a watch from the Museum of Modern Art that cost more than $250' (Crouch, 2006)

'I just recently ordered a Mac notebook for my fiancé for Christmas which is one of the best notebooks out right now. It is definitely worth the money that I paid for it...got it on sale luckily for $1,195' (Anderson, 2006).

'I recently purchased a Louis Vuitton handbag ($1,300)' (Wiggins, 2006)

'I frequent the mall 2-3 times per week' (Thomas, 2006)

A total of 11 replies were received, giving as many definitions of the concept of luxury.

It is by dwelling on this previous research that the author decided to refocus the research project towards the understanding of hedonic, extraordinary experiences. This refocus is likely to impact the conceptual framework elaborated through document two, which will be reformulated at the end of this paper. The research question that is going to be addressed in this paper looks at how the target audience defines the concept of extraordinary, hedonic experiences. Rather than trying to analyse the different stages of the experience (before, during and after), this research will concentrate on the subjective meaning of these experiences.

A brief outline of the relevant literature reviewed

The literature review allowed the researcher to identify a number of key concepts, which one is reminded of here as they pertain directly to this paper. In a seminal article on researching consumer behaviour, Hirschman and Holbrook (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982a) compare the traditional and the experiential view and challenge the 'information prospective perspective'. The traditional view considers the consumer as a problem solver who processes information in order to make decisions towards utilitarian purchases. The experiential view takes into account a wider range of characteristics, which includes sensory pleasures and a product's aesthetic. It also looks at the meaning of subjective elements such as sociability or elegance. The importance of considering the experiential view is well illustrated by Firat and Dholakia (1998:96) who state that 'For the post modern consumer, consumption is not a mere act of devouring, destroying or using things … but an act of production of experiences … The way to enhance and enchant life is to allow multiple experiences … Life is to be produced and created, in effect, constructed through the multiple experiences in which the consumer immerses'.

The concept of hedonism takes its origins in different behavioural sciences that include different areas of research within sociology, philosophy and psychology (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982b). Marketers started devoting more attention to hedonism in the 1950s, through a research stream focusing on motivation (Dichter, 1960). Hedonic consumption is characterised by the fantasy, emotive and multisensory aspect of the consumption experience. This includes sounds, tastes, scents, visual images and tactile impressions (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982b).

This paper will provide an understanding of the meaning of extraordinary experience from a consumer's standpoint. First, the document will map the context of the study, giving an account of participants' socio-cultural environment. Then, the paper will review different methodologies and determine the theoretical framework of the research project. The third part will concentrate on the method that will be used to gather data. The data collected will then be analysed through the most appropriate approach. Finally, conclusions will be drawn and new and useful knowledge will be stated.

2. Context of the study

While the degree of Doctor of Business Administration is being completed in the United Kingdom, the author recently relocated to the United States, both for professional and personal reasons. Conventional wisdom suggests that people with different backgrounds consume differently. In the particular setting of this project, the cultural heritage of the United States is likely to greatly influence the definition respondents will give to the term extraordinary experiences. The following paragraph will review some key cultural, demographic and geographical characteristics of American society today.

The abundance of marketing messages and choice

Americans in general are overwhelmed by marketing and the idea of consuming. Some argue that too much choice is available (Howe et al., 2004). Recent sociological studies bring to light that a small supermarket offers a choice of 275 varieties of cereals, 230 soup offerings and 285 varieties of cookies. Most supermarkets carry 30,000 items nowadays and 20,000 new products are introduced every year. Most of the new products will become failures (Schwartz, 2004). Different factors broaden the range of options available to consumers and accelerate the process of needing to choose. The most recent ones have been the democratisation of the internet and some changes in government measures. The former allows the consumer to choose and compare faster a much wider range of options. An example of the later is the overwhelming number of retirement investment funds that people are now forced to choose between as employers no longer run pension plans. This overwhelming choice is also true for healthcare, where consumers must choose between 36 different prescription discount cards (Howe et al., 2004). In this highly competitive environment, practitioners have to be more and more aggressive in order for their brand to succeed. In America, marketing is omnipresent through the internet, the 500 TV channels available and all sorts of communication channels ranging from word of mouth marketing to road shows. It is difficult to evaluate how many times a consumer is exposed to marketing in a given day and studies conducted report different figures, but most practitioners estimate the number of messages at over 100 (Iaa, 2007).

The American dream

The term American dream was initiated by the historian Adams (1931). It is associated with American capitalism, the freedoms guaranteed by the U.S Bill of Rights and meritocracy. This ideology contends that America offers limitless opportunities and an individual's success is driven by their merit. Merit is a combination of factors that includes hard work, high morals, having the right attitude, integrity and innate abilities (McNamee and Miller, 2004). Luntz (1995:83) emphasizes that opportunity 'is not just the chance for rapid social mobility, but has also to do with our entrenched belief in the concept of meritocracy. Americans are more likely than any other democracy to believe that people succeed because of actual individual talents, efforts, and accomplishments rather than the social class into which they are born'. Immigration is a key component of the concept, as hundreds of thousands of impoverished Western Europeans escaped the 'Old world' and settled in America to live a successful life

Although the concept has been fading in recent years, many Americans still associate a strong meaning to the American dream. It is widely accepted that the American economy allows for the enjoyment of a better life through hard work. The late nineteenth century American success model, where the ultimate goal is to translate money into status and fame still underlies American society today (DeVitis and Rich, 1996). American personalities such as the entrepreneurs Donald Trump and Martha Stewart can be considered as role models who achieved the American dream. The success of immigrants is represented by the likes of Arnold Schwarzenegger (the Austrian born actor and Governor of California). Further, Oprah Winfrey (the African-American entrepreneur and TV presenter) is highly regarded because she has both 'pulled herself up by her bootstraps' and given back to society.

More recently, meritocracy has been depicted as a myth and the ideology of the American dream as overestimated, because resources are not distributed according to merit (McNamee and Miller, 2004). McNamee and Miller (2004) identify two sources of income, one coming from wages and salaries and the other one coming from capital gains. Looking at statistics, they bring to light the fact that the top 5% percent of American households receive more than 20% of all available income.

Generation X

Generation X is a term often used in market research, social science and demography to define the generation of North Americans born after the baby boom, which followed the Second World War. Generation X includes anyone born between 1961 and 1981 (Howe and Strauss, 1991); it is made of 48 million of Americans who tend to reject the values and habits of the previous generation of baby boomers. This generation appears to be mainly influenced by the readily-accessible birth control, the legalization of abortion on demand, the increase in divorce and the increase of mothers in the workplace (Howe and Strauss, 1991). On the political side, Generation X witnessed the end of the cold war, the fall of the Berlin wall and the first Gulf war.

The work environment of this generation is characterized by the disappearance of traditional permanent job contracts, which progressively have become unsecured, short term employment situations. From a social standpoint, members of this generation are deeply concerned by problems such as homelessness, fractured families and AIDS.
Generation Xers, also called 'baby busters' by some scholars, respond to marketing and advertising in their own way. For Damon (1988), three aspects of the socio-cultural environment have impacted baby busters' attitudes towards advertising, marketing and consumerism. First, the breakdown of the traditional family structure previously described. Another aspect is the ubiquitous nature of advertising and marketing messages. Finally, the fact that spending is considered as a form of worship in American society (Damon, 1988). These factors have helped create an environment where compulsive buying and overspending is considered as an acceptable social behaviour (Roberts, 1998). Generation X is preoccupied with shopping and material possessions. These individuals are accustomed to spending time in shopping malls since their earliest years (Roberts and Manolis, 2000) and their goal in life being to buy products and make money (Dunn, 1993). While having money was cited as important for only 18% of high school seniors who were baby boomers, it was cited as crucial for 37% of high school seniors who are in Generation X (Mitchell, 1995). For Barlett (1997), members of this generation have been influenced by their exposure to 20,000 TV commercials per year while growing up. Generation X is consequently more consumer-savvy and media-savvy than any previous generation.

Research conducted on attitudes toward marketing, advertising and consumerism brings to light a contrast between the previous generation of baby boomers and Generation X. Unlike baby boomers, these people tend to be favourably predisposed toward advertising and marketing despite being constantly exposed since early childhood. Members of Generation X are likely to value marketing efforts, which they don't consider as offensive and useless. They tend to consider marketing as beneficial and marketers as socially responsible (Roberts and Manolis, 2000).

Members of Generation X are also more likely to engage in compulsive buying. Credit cards have been identified as a contributing factor to this phenomenon, while having debts and using credit is morally acceptable (Ritzer, 1995). Finally, factors such as international travel, multinational marketing campaigns and communication technology contribute to a worldwide consumer culture (Roberts and Manolis, 2000).

Members of Generation X are impatient

Members of Generation X are further characterised by their impatience. These individuals expect to be gratified instantly in every aspect of their personal and professional life (Herbig et al., 1993). Herbig et Al (1993) argue that members of this generation have low self-esteem, which they compensate by frenzied spending. Compulsive buying can be analysed as a therapy and a way to reinforce self-worth. Herbig et Al (1993) further contend that 'baby busters' might often have high, unrealistic self-expectations. For example, they expect salary increases to be high and to occur rapidly after leaving college. The 'dot.com era' illustrates the impatience of this generation. In the 1990s, the democratisation of the internet gave birth to a new breed of entrepreneurs. Many members of Generation X got involved in 'dot.coms', some high technology companies relying on the internet to generate profit. These new companies rapidly raised large amounts of money from venture capitalists and stock markets upon the promise of rapidly delivering a high return on investment. While most of these firms failed due to their lack of clear business models, a small minority of them greatly succeeded. This allowed a few young individuals issued from Generation X to become wealthy. A recent example is the acquisition of the 13 month old online community You Tube by the search engine Google for $1.65 billion (Henninger, 2006).

Work/life balance in the USA

Balancing work and personal life is more challenging in the United States than in any other society. Firms often require from people to work long hours and might expect employees to be available 24/7. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, workers employed full-time in the US get an average of 3.9 weeks of holiday a year, while UK employees enjoy 6.6 weeks and employees in France enjoy seven weeks (Glanz, 2006). Furthermore, the Families and Work Institute (FWI) brought to light that more than a third of US workers will not take all their holiday leave (Glanz, 2006). According to recent surveys, a vast majority of employees admits that the balance between their personal and professional life is unhealthy (Glanz, 2006). American workers suffer from working overtime and heavy workloads that make their lives more stressful. In the long run, this is likely to lead to decreasing job satisfaction, low employee morale and poor productivity. An increasing number of employers provide workers with Employee Assistance Programs, which provide services such as alcohol and drug counseling as well assistance with family and marriage problems (Lockwood, 2003). Work seems to be so overwhelming that employees admit to being preoccupied with work when not working; they tend to find difficult to engage meaningfully in activities with family and loved ones (Lockwood, 2003). US workers need to access services early in the morning or late at night as a typical day at work might sometimes exceed 12 hours. Most outlets operate extended business hours and many health clubs, pharmacy and supermarkets are open 24/7. Indeed, taking an aerobic class at six in the morning and ordering a pizza after midnight is common for many Americans. This trend of demanding services 24/7 is strengthening and has encouraged the fast food chain Mc Donalds to open more of its stores round the clock (Jargon, 2007).

Today’s increasingly competitive environment and Americans’ hectic lifestyles dictate high expectations towards services. The expectation is that services should be available constantly and delivered rapidly and professionally. As they are used to being able to access anything at anytime, American consumers are likely to be harder to impress, raising the standard of what they would deem as an extraordinary experience.

The City of Chicago and the Midwest

The author precisely relocated to Chicago, in the State of Illinois. Both qualitative and quantitative fieldwork will take place in the city. Chicago is the largest city in the Midwest with nearly three million inhabitants (Blackwell, 2003). The Chicago metropolitan area, also called Chicagoland, hass over 9.4 million inhabitants (Blackwell, 2003). Founded in 1833, Chicago initially linked the Great Lakes with the Mississippi River System. The city was an important transportation hub, with major connections for railroads, canals and steamboats (Blackwell, 2003). Today, Chicago is the capital of the Midwest and recognised as an important business, financial and cultural centre. Chicago's population is diverse as the city was originally a prime destination for Swedish, German and Polish immigrants. Vietnamese and East Asian populations as well as Irish, Italian, Lithuanian, Porto Ricans, Mexican-Americans and African-Americans are all significant communities (Blackwell, 2003). Chicago also hosts a large gay and lesbian population. To summarise, Chicago can be considered as a major city of the United States because of its diverse cultures, its dynamic economy and its important transportation hub. This would influence the profile of respondents that will take part in this research project and their view of the world. By contrast, a southern city such as Dallas hosts a less diverse population and carries more traditional values. Respondents would be expected to have a more conservative view of the world.

3. Methodology- phenomenological approach

The previous part looked at social and demographic data pertaining to American society and the City of Chicago, where the fieldwork is going to be conducted. After looking at the question of 'where', this paper is now going to focus on 'how' the research is going to be conducted. The following part will review different methodologies in order to elaborate a theoretical framework that best suits the study of extraordinary experiences.

Why is qualitative research suited to answer the research question?

It is argued that social contexts are changing rapidly and one's world is more and more diversified. Beck (1992) brings to light the 'individualisation of ways of living and biographical patterns' and Hradil (1992) argues that 'old' social inequalities have now been dissolved into today's diversity of ways of living, subcultures and milieus. These changes are happening so fast that traditional deductive methodologies do not allow the differentiation of objects (Flick, 2002). Rather than testing theories against empirical evidence, using inductive methodologies leads to a better understanding of these diverse ways of living (Flick, 2002). Qualitative research is considered as a more subtle approach for measuring consumer behaviours and attitudes towards goods and services than direct questioning (Chisnall, 1992). While quantitative research is based on formal methods of interviewing and statistical theory, techniques of interviewing used in qualitative research take their roots in psychology and sociology. These techniques allow one to identify and analyse a wider variety of consumer behaviours and attitudes as opposed to the rigid questions asked in quantitative research (Chisnall, 1992). In the specific context of this study, too little is known at present about the way people define extraordinary experiences. One must first gain an in-depth understanding of the many causes that make the experience extraordinary before testing these variables among a wider population.

Epistemological and ontological considerations

As opposed to positivism (that advocates the application of natural sciences to social studies), interpretivism contends there is a difference between the objects of natural sciences and people. The contrast between positivism and interpretivism is best illustrated by Schutz (1962:59), who posits that ‘The world of nature as explored by the natural scientist does not mean anything to molecules, atoms and electrons. But the observational field of the social scientist-Social reality-has a specific meaning and relevance structure for the beings, living, acting, and thinking within it’ (Schutz, 1962:59). Social scientists must focus on the subjective meaning of social actions and adopt a different research procedure (Bryman, 2004). The intellectual heritage of interpretivism lies in Weber’s notion of Verstehen; he describes sociology as ‘science which attemps the interpretive understanding of social action in order to arrive at its causal explanation of its course and effect’ (Weber, 1947:88).

Objectivism and constructionism are the main ontological orientations relevant to social studies. Objectivism contends that social actors should be considered independently of social phenomena; these phenomena must be considered as objective entities that beings cannot reach or influence. On the other hand, constructionism argues that social actors produce and constantly revise social phenomena through social interactions. Becker (1982) takes the example of culture, which is constantly constructed and reconstructed by people. When confronted with new situations, people must create new solutions in order to solve problems; the culture they hold could not provide a perfect solution to every situation (Becker, 1982). A more recent debate suggests that the view presented by the researcher is one (his own) account of social reality and should not be considered as definitive (Bryman, 2004).

The different methodological approaches

This paragraph will specifically focus on gaining a better understanding of different methodologies. It will also reflect on the methodological frameworks adopted by other researchers in the field of consumer behaviour and determine the methodology of choice for this study.

The phenomenological approach

Phenomenology is one of the main intellectual traditions that can be associated with interpretivism. Lester (2002:1) summarizes the purpose of phenomenological research as 'to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation'. Phenomenological research takes its origins in the work of Husserl and Schutz. Husserl (1970) starts from the premise that phenomenological research aims at describing rather than explaining. The observer must conduct his research without any preconceptions or hypotheses. For Schutz (1962,1964) who has been influenced by Weber and Husserl, the reality is socially constructed by members of the society in the course of their everyday life. Schutz contends that social science should focus on the way members of the society produce and experience the world. Indeed, Schutz (1962) notes that individuals approach these experiences with values, ideas, theories and common sense constructs that are socially constructed. These common sense constructs allow beings to interpret the world they experience as in their daily lives (Schutz, 1962). 'It is these thought objects of theirs which determine their behaviour by motivating it' (Schutz, 1962:59). To grasp social reality, the social scientist must concentrate on these thought objects, constructed by an individual's commonsense (Schutz, 1962).

One of the key methods used by phenomenologists is known as 'bracketing'. It consists of placing in 'brackets' assumptions and the normality of the social world. It allows people to reveal the underlying thinking that impacts their understanding of the world and engagement in social action. Because individuals go through many experiences in their everyday life, they use loosely defined categories and common sense constructs to understand and interpret similar experiences. The main medium that allows the transmission of these typifications is the language. It is used to describe reality and words are defined by what they stand for or correspond with in the real world. Schutz

(1962) also posits that individuals share the same subjective reality. One assumes he experiences the world the same way that the others do, enabling individuals to understand each other (Schutz, 1962).

Husserl (1970) starts from the premise that the observer does not hold any preconceptions. In contrast with this reasoning, other researchers (influenced mainly by humanism and feminism) believe that the observer is not impartial. The way the observer biases the results must be underlined when interpreting the findings (Plummer, 1983, Stanley and Wise, 1993). More recently, Thompson et al. (1990) looked at the ways of applying phenomenology in the research process and identified three key concepts.

Intentionality: The researcher must look at respondent's experiences in the context of the life world from which they emerge. The researcher must appreciate that experiences related by respondents might not exactly fit the research's conceptual framework.

Emergent dialogue: It is the respondent that sets the dialogue rather than being guided by specific questions.

Hermeneutic endeavour: As it is the respondent's descriptions that provide the basis of the interpretation, descriptions that support this interpretation must be clearly underlined. This should allow other readers to understand and evaluate the interpretation (Thompson et al., 1990).

Those in favour of symbolic interactionism and grounded theory

Symbolic interactionism was pioneered by Cooley and Mead from the Chicago School and is inspired from the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism (Flick, 2002). Symbolic interactionsim is concerned with the symbolic meaning of clothing, artefacts, words, gestures and objects of consumption for individuals and groups while they interact with each other (Baker et al., 1992). For Symbolic interactionists, beings are constantly interpreting the meaning of their environment and the actions of others. They act on the basis of this symbolic meaning (Bryman, 2004). Symbolic interactionsim is concerned with reconstructing the subject's view point. It looks at subjective theories used by people to explain the world and autobiographical narratives, reconstructed from a subject's perspective (Flick, 2002).

Those in favour of ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology was founded by Garfinkel. It addresses the limits of symbolic interactionism through the study of methods used by individuals to produce reality in everyday life (Flick, 2002). Research is usually executed through conversation analysis and empirical research (Flick, 2002). Ethnomethodologists believe that interactions are produced in a well-ordered way. The research must focus on the analysis of the content of the interaction and how the interaction is organised. This contrasts with symbolic interactionism by undermining the subjective meaning the interaction has for its participants (Flick, 2002).

Interpretivism in the field of consumer research

Consumer research was mainly conducted via positivist approaches until the 1980s. Between the 1980s and the 1990s, a significant research stream (Otnes, 1988; Saunders, 1988; Belk, 1988, 1995; Hirschman, 1990; Thompson et al., 1990) challenged traditional positivists theories by arguing that social science should rely on a wide range of analytical perspective, rather than a single approach to justify knowledge. Researchers progressively started to innovate and advocated the use hermeneutics and semiotics (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1993), discourse analysis (Elliott, 1996) and postmodern approaches (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995).

In the context of the subject matter under study, Hirshman and Holbrook (1982a) provide an interesting view on researching the experiential aspect of consumption. They suggest 'departing from the traditional positivist focus … and devotes increased attention to the mental events surrounding the act of consumption' (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982a:137). Indeed, Hirshman and Holbrook (1982a) contend that 'all aspects' of the consumption experience must be investigated. MacLeod (1964) further argues that the phenomenologist must look at the widest possible range of data, such as sounds and colours, but also feelings of attraction, fears, ecstasies, disillusionment as well as impressions of distance and duration. 'These are data, given in experience, to be accepted as such and wondered about' (MacLeod, 1964:51). For Levy (1980:50), the analysis of personal narratives is essential as it is 'a protocol in which the consumer tells the story of how the product is consumed and can be examined for how the consumer interprets the consumption experience'. Phenomenology has also been the methodology of choice for authors looking at the specific topic of hedonic experiences (Belk et al.,1989; Arnould and Price, 1993).

The choice of an approach for the purpose of this research

Morse (1998) insists on the importance for the researcher to select one specific strategy to approach his research question. The choice of this strategy is guided by the research question itself (Field and Morse, 1991). As an example, questions describing the nature of a phenomenon can be dealt with using ethnography. Questions that may have stages or phases can be best addressed using the grounded theory (Morse, 1998).

The research question that this document will address looks at 'eliciting the essence of experience' (Morse, 1998:64); it is concerned with the meaning of the phenomenon. Consequently, the methodology of choice appears to be phenomenology (Morse, 1998).

The ontological position of the project is also guided by the research question. Some research problems might suggest that social entities act on individuals, leading to objectivism. Alternatively, the research question might emphasise the involvement of people in constructing reality, naturally leading to constructionism (Bryman, 2004). The context of this document, elaborating a definition of hedonic, extraordinary experiences from the standpoint of social actors, clearly suggests adopting a constructivist standpoint.

4. Collecting data

So far, this paper has depicted the setting in which the research will be conducted. It also has defined the theoretical framework that will be used. The following part will justify the choice of a specific method for collecting data and provide details on the technical and material aspects of the data collection. After detailing the planning phase, a last paragraph will reflect on the way data has actually been collected.

The choice of a method for collecting data

Qualitative data can be collected in many ways, such as focus groups, ethnographic studies and documentaries. It seems to be both appropriate and feasible to fulfil the objective of this research through open-ended interviews. The open-ended interview allows the researcher 'to enter in an empathic way, the lived experience of the person or group being studied' (McLeod, 1994:89). Le Bel and Dube (1998) also chose in-depth interviews as a method to investigate consumers' expressions and recollections of daily hedonic experiences, which is a topic closely related to this research. These authors reflect on the diversified and rich first-hand accounts that were identified using this research method.

Answers given by respondents in open-ended interviews are often analysed as describing either external reality (such as events) or internal experience (such as meanings and feelings) (Silverman, 2005). The interview appears to be the most widely employed method in qualitative research mainly because of its flexibility. Unlike ethnographies, where the researcher has to be immersed in the respondent's life for several days, interviews can be conducted in short sessions. This method is less disruptive for the researcher as it does not require extended absences from work and family life (Bryman, 2004). It is particularly appropriate for the author who conducts this research project on a part time basis, along with a full-time job and raising a 5 month old child.

In the setting of this research project, interviewing will be semi-structured; the researcher (who is the author) will establish a list of topics to be covered as well as loose questions, providing minimal guidance on how the respondent is expected to reply. The researcher will seek to understand how the respondent frames and understands events and issues (Bryman, 2004).

To make the most of the interview, Bryman (2004) recommends putting together a list of areas to be covered prior to conducting the research (this document is referred to as an interview guide). Lofland and Lofland (1995:78) suggest that the researcher think about ‘just what about this thing is puzzling me?’, in order to facilitate the generation of questions. The process can also be stimulated by the review of existing literature, discussions with colleagues and relatives and by writing of random thoughts as fast as possible (Lofland and Lofland, 1995).

Furthermore, it is recommended to record the interview in order to facilitate the transcription and the analysis (Bryman, 2004). For the purpose of this project, interviews will be videotaped, using a video camera that will be directly plugged onto a laptop computer. This will facilitate the storage of the footage and most importantly their transcription, as both the footage and the word processor can be displayed simultaneously on the same screen. Bryman (2004) also suggests conducting interviews in a quiet setting in order to ensure the quality of the recording. The office area located in the author’s residential building will be used as an interviewing facility.

Different types of questions can be used in in-depth interviews. It is suggested to use a mix of up to nine types (Kvale, 1996). Bryman (2004) notes that most interviews will include all of them. The nine types are:

Introducing questions: Tell me about your interest…?

Follow-up questions: give the respondent an opportunity to elaborate his answer (‘What do you mean by…?’).

Probing questions: follow an answer to a direct question and allow the subject to develop his thought.

Specifying questions: what did you mean?

Direct questions: Are you happy with the way…?. These questions might rather be asked towards the end of the interview to prevent influencing the respondent excessively.
Indirect questions: allowing one to grasp the individual's own view.
Structuring questions: in order to move on from one topic to another.
Silence: gives an opportunity for the respondent to develop and reflect on his answer.
Interpreting questions: 'Do you mean…?'

The key to conducting a satisfactory in-depth interview is by listening and paying attention to what the subject is both saying and not saying (Bryman, 2004). Following Bryman's recommendation (2004), the author will make notes after the interview to evaluate the interview and draft some general thoughts about the new avenues of interest (if any) the interview opened. The final step before starting the data analysis is known as transcription. Transcribing interviews is a time consuming task that can take between 5 and 6 hours per hour of speech (Bryman, 2004). Transcription also yields a large amount of paper that would need to be read carefully to be analysed. In the context of this research project, the author will not have the time to transcribe every interview nor the resources to hire a professional to do so. Only the most significant parts of the interviews will be transcribed and analysed thoroughly.

Access to and choosing respondents

After choosing a method for collecting data, the following paragraphs will look at how participants will be recruited. Any ethical issues involved in conducting the research will then be stated.

The approach of purposive sampling suggests one consider carefully the parameters that define the population under study and recruit respondents in light of these parameters (Silverman, 2001). In line with this reasoning, Denzin and Lincoln contend that qualitative researchers 'seek out groups, settings and individuals ... where the processes being studied are most likely to occur' (1998:202). Most importantly, sampling in qualitative research should be grounded in the theoretical framework that is going to be used (Silverman, 2001). Indeed, 'theoretical sampling' allows building in some characteristics that will help in developing the theory and the analysis (Mason, 1996).

In the setting of this project, respondents will be recruited upon their interest for hedonic, extraordinary experiences. However, the invitation will not dictate the parameters of what is deemed as a hedonic experience, allowing participants to elaborate their own definition. Indeed, a main concern of the researcher will be to elicit what people mean by a hedonic, extraordinary experience, and not to expose his own definition.

Recruitment will take place only within the 20 to 30 years old age bracket, as covering a wider bracket would require interviewing too many people. The researcher will not specifically seek to obtain a representative sample of the American population; no quotas will be applied on gender, social grade and ethnic origin.

The researcher hopes to be able to recruit 12 participants through the online community 'Craigslist.org'. The choice of this channel of recruitment is motivated by three factors. First, the website gathers people living in the same geographical area, materialised by Chicago and its suburbs (also called 'Chicagoland'). Furthermore, Craigslist.org appeals to a diversified audience, as it allows people to search for flats, jobs, voluntary work and dating, to name but a few. Finally, posting a classified on the website generates quasi-instantaneous feedback, enabling the researcher to recruit enough participants in a minimum of time.

These respondents will have to be compensated for their time. As discussed previously, Americans are overwhelmed by marketing messages and market research. Over recent years, market researchers have been forced to progressively compensate respondents for participating in research projects. Today, the US market research industry is made of 800 market research agencies and more than 700 focus group facilities that conduct thousands of research projects every week. Prior to even starting writing this paper, the author took the initiative to contact a company that specialises in recruiting participants for qualitative market research projects. This company reported that it offered respondents up to $200 for taking part in an in depth interview of one hour and an half. The researcher will clearly mention in the advert that interviews will be conducted as part of his doctoral research, in an effort to limit the amount of incentives paid. The incentive paid to respondent will not exceed $60 for an hour.

Ethical issues

Different ethical issues surround the conduct of qualitative research in general and in-depth interviews in particular. A first ethical rule that the researcher should comply with is called informed consent. On one hand, Silverman (2001) underlines the difficulty for the researcher to inform the participants without the risk of biasing the research. On the other, the researcher must behave in an ethical manner and make the purpose of the research clear, without being too specific about the research question (Silverman, 2001). Mason (1996) indicates that qualitative research can require an engagement in the intimate life of the individual. Informed consent dictates giving information about the research, allowing the respondent to decide whether he will participate or not (Silverman, 2001). Furthermore, participants must be able to understand the information and participation must be voluntary. In the context of this research, recommendations have been made that further consent should be obtained regarding the way the data could be used (Silverman, 2001).

Another ethical issue identified is the potential invasion of the respondent's privacy. 'Qualitative researchers are guests in the private space of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998:103). The respondent's right of privacy is linked to the informed consent. The participant acknowledges that his right of privacy has been surrendered in the setting of the research project on the basis of the informed consent given. Subjects might sometimes refuse to answer certain questions pertaining to private realms, despite the fact that the interview remains private and confidential (Bryman, 2004).

A further ethical concern pertaining to social research is that it could potentially harm participants (Diener and Crandall, 1978). Harm can entail the loss of self-esteem, harm to respondents' development, stress or even inducing people to perform acts that are reprehensible. Different ethical codes enjoin researchers and help prevent any harmful or disturbing aspect of the research experience (Bryman, 2004). A way to address the issue of harm is by maintaining the confidentiality of the records (Bryman, 2004).

Finally, deception could occur if the research project was presented as something other than what it really is. It is observed that deception is fairly widespread in qualitative research as researchers intend to obtain more natural results by limiting the subjects' understanding of what the research project is about (Bryman, 2004). It is obviously very difficult for the researcher to draw the line between deceiving respondents and giving too much information, which would bias the data.

The data collection

The actual data collection phase took place in February and March 2007. Eight participants in total have finally been recruited. The following table summarizes the environment and context in which these interviews have been conducted.

Interviewing facility	Office environment. No decoration whatsoever. Quiet setting. One to one with interviewer; no one else in the office.						
Weather	Outdoor temperatures between 0º and 20º Fahrenheit						
	Experience	**Video taped?**	**Where did the interview take place**	**When did the interview take place**	**Incentive paid**	**Participant's context/opening statement**	**Additional remarks**
Respondent 1 Female, 25, student, living with parents	Went on a cruise	Yes	Interviewing facility	Saturday morning	Yes, $55	Just came back from an intense work out at the gym	
Male, 30, engineer, single	Eats out at various restaurant and bars	Declined	Interviewing facility	Tuesday at 5pm	Yes, $60	Was travelling from the suburbs to visit his girlfriend	Participant mentioned 'I wish I could this everyday, that was easy' when receiving the incentive
Female, 28, Medical Doctor, living with partner	Went on a trip to the Dominican Republic	No. Set-up inappropriate	Starbucks	Thursday at 6.30pm	Yes, $60	Just finished work	Wanted to meet in a public place as she was concerned with her security.
Female, 32, social services, single	Went to a day spa with her mother and sister.	Yes	Starbucks	Monday at 4pm	Yes, $60	Had a day off	
Female, 34, project manager, single	Went skiing to Vale, CO	No – informal context	Researcher's flat	Friday at 8.30pm	No	Getting ready for a party on the Saturday	Provided very rich insights (possibly the richest) despite not receiving any incentive
Male, 35, IT Technician,	Travelled around	Yes	Interviewing facility	Saturday morning	Yes, $60	Working shifts	

single.	Europe for 2 months						
Female, 28, customer service, single	Went to a spa	Declined	Interviewing facility	Saturday morning	Yes, $60		
Male, 25, student, single	Went to Europe. Goes out with friends	Yes	Interviewing facility	Wednesday at 6pm	Yes, $60	Just finished lectures	

5. Findings and analysis

The previous part justified the choice of a method for collecting data and established how participants were going to be recruited. The data obtained through in-depth interviews now has to be analysed in order to bring to light new and useful knowledge. This part will first look at the way constructionism suggests interpreting information. It will then focus on two widely used approaches for analysing qualitative data that are Conversation Analysis and Discourse Analysis. Finally, it will then proceed with the analysis itself.

Interpreting the information

Constructivism and interpretivism are methodological and philosophical persuasions that suggest a way to interpreting information and designing concepts (Schwant, 1998).
Unlike quantitative researchers, qualitative researchers do not focus on developing measures of concepts. Concepts in qualitative research are not considered *definitive* but *sensitising* (Blumer, 1954). For Blumer (1954), definitive concepts (which become fixed once developed) ignore variety and excessively focus on what is common to the phenomena that the concept subsume. Concepts should instead give a general sense of what to look for; they are a means of uncovering the various forms that the phenomena can assume. To be useful, the concept should not be too general or it would fail to provide a useful starting point as its guidelines would be too broad. At the opposite, a concept too narrowly defined would repeat the difficulties related to definitive concepts (Bryman, 2004).

Rather than applying a rigid method to analyse information, interpretivism refers to the use of ethical principles that guide the making of a decision (that is, the interpretation) in a concrete situation (Jonsen and Toulmin, 1988). The researcher seeks to give good reasons for his actions and make responsible decisions. The making of an interpretation requires the exercise of a judgement rather than following strict procedures or rules dictated by scientific methods (Schwant, 1998). The decision cannot be considered as testable or verifiable (Schwant, 1998). Findings must not be presented as ‘true’ but as ‘credible’, ‘intellegible’ or ‘warranted’ (Miller and Fredericks, 1994).

Conversation Analysis and Discourse Analysis

Conversation Analysis is concerned with the methods people use to produce social interaction. It is oriented towards the analysis of naturally occurring talk (Silverman,2001) and takes its roots in the work of Garfinkel (1967) on ethnomethodology and the analysis of 'folk' methods. Conversation Analysis is first characterised by the structural organisation of talk. This refers to the organised and stable pattern given to the talk by the participants. Furthermore, the sequential organisation suggests that the speaker's action is shaped by a context. The researcher must grasp this context in order to understand the sequences of actions that play a roll in this context. Finally, the researcher must concentrate on specific analysis and transcripts to construct theories rather than using non-detailed, general research material (Heritage, 1984).

Features of Conversation Analysis will be used for analysing the different accounts of extraordinary hedonic experiences given by the participants. The turns at talk (turn-talking) is characterised by a turn in relation with a previous turn (i.e. 'but', 'huh'), a turn stemming from an interaction (i.e. a question or an answer) or a turn that relates to another succeeding turn (i.e a summons or a request) (Sacks et al., 1974). An effective way of analysing turn-taking is the examination of agency pairs (Bryman, 2004).

Agency pairs involve two linked phases, such as question-answer or greetings and summons-answer (a summon being an 'attention seeking device'). They force speakers to talk again to complete the sequence and interact with the other speaker(s) (Silverman, 2001). The second phase of the sequence (the response) is of particular interest to the researcher as it enables one to appreciate the answer to the initial phase (Bryman, 2004).

Repair mechanisms are used when things go wrong in conversations. For example, when a participant does not follow the turn-taking convention and causes an overlap of people talking. The first speaker can repair the interaction by stopping his talk before completing his turn. Furthermore, when a turn transfer dos not occur when expected (for example, when a participant does not respond to a question), the speaker might speak again in order to reinforce the need for the other person to reply (Bryman, 2004).

Particular attention must be devoted to the roles or identities speakers might take through the conversation, as well as specific outcomes in the conversation (such as laughter or a request for clarification). The researcher must be concerned with how the specific outcome was produced (Silverman, 2001).

Discourse Analysis looks at the study of discourse as texts and talks in social practices. It is concerned with the organisation of rhetoric and arguments (Silverman, 2001). People perform actions that constitute discourse; Discourse analysis focuses on identifying the nature of these actions (Potter, 1996).

Potter (1997) summarizes three key assumptions to doing Discourse Analysis. Discourse Analysis brings to light the way events, society and inner psychological worlds are produced in discourse. It does not classify reality as true or false. This assumption is referred to as anti-realism. Furthermore, Discourse Analysis is assumed to be reflective. It takes into account 'the way a text such as this is a version, selectively working up coherence and incoherence, telling historical stories, presenting and, indeed, constituting an objective, "out there" reality' (Potter, 1997:146). Finally, the approach is inherently constructionist. The emphasis is on the subject's constructions and how these constructions are accomplished (Potter, 1997; Wetherell and Potter, 1992).

While Discourse Analysis benefited from an important research stream (Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Billig, 1992, 1995), the present study will rely on three key concepts to analyse the data.

Paragraphs and episodes

Dijk (1981) argues that discourses are organised in paragraphs and episodes, which can be identified in both text and conversations. These are sequences of sentences of a discourse organised in a coherent manner. These sequences have a 'thematic unity' that can be events, time or location, for example (Dijk, 1981). An episode is well defined in the time with a beginning and an end. Furthermore, episodes are unified and independent; they can be distinguished from each other. Different grammatical units (such as hesitations, pauses, tense change and place change) mark the beginning of a new episode and consequently the end of the previous one (Dijk, 1981).

Interpretive repertoires

These are coherent sets of terms, likely to be organised around one or more metaphors (Potter, 1996). The subject is likely to use several repertoires at a time, which could sometimes seem contradictory (Silverman, 2001). Potter (1996) argues that interpretive repertoires are flexible, allowing the researcher to draw upon them and modify them depending in the setting of the research. One limitation of this approach is the difficulty of drawing the clear boundaries of a given repertoire (Silverman, 2001).

Scripts

In Discourse Analysis, a script is a way in which the subject constructs events. Participants use scripts to invoke events as anomalies and exceptions or features of general patterns (Sylverman, 2001).

In sum, Silverman (2001) recommends using a combination of both Conversation and Discourse Analysis. Techniques from both approaches will be applied to the analysis of the data collected for the purpose of this research project.

The Analysis

So far, this part has looked at different techniques for analysing data, which are rooted in Conversation Analysis and Discourse Analysis. The following paragraphs will make the most of these techniques in order to elicit the meaning of the participants' input. While each participant was recruited after taking part in one main extraordinary experience (see Apendix 2, Profiles of Respondents), they were also asked their opinion on other experiences. The analysis will first allow for the participants to define different kinds of experiences. It will then look more specifically at the concept of communitas in the extraordinary experience and the importance of what will characterise the next extraordinary experience.

Defining experiences

In line with the initial conceptual framework, the researcher took the initiative to ask participants how they define experiences in general, without strictly focusing on extraordinary ones. Contrasting these definitions will allow the researcher to gain a better understanding of what extraordinary experiences are.

Ordinary experiences

The interviews conducted suggesed that an ordinary experience consists of a utilitarian purchase made routinely. It may not involve any particular emotion or excitement. For example, nail polishing can be done at a nail bar if the only purpose of the experience is to look after one's nails. The same service can be obtained at a spa, but other components would enhance the experience. Other examples include grocery shopping and 'buying staples' (2). The participants surveyed tended to go through ordinary experiences on their own.

Some participants compared the same item across different experiences as a means to rate these experiences. For one respondent, the quality of a steak was a means to rate whether she qualifies the restaurant as 'ok', 'good' or 'extraordinary' (1). Another female (7) participant rated the experience of going to a lyric opera depending on the location of her seats in the theatre. For this person, who is used to going out to plays and concerts, sitting in the back row was a fairly ordinary experience. In contrast, sitting in the front row at the exact same event made the experience extraordinary. Another example is a travel ticket. Taking the train may qualify as an ordinary experience ('I don't even look at the landscape'). Yet, taking a plane was described by this same participant as 'sort of exciting, because you think about the destination' and flying business class 'would be an extraordinary experience' (6).

Between an ordinary and an extraordinary experience

In depth interviews allowed for the identification of some experiences that were not considered exceptional enough by participants to be classified as extraordinary; yet these experiences differed sharply from the respondent's daily routine. Respondents were relating to a third kind of experience, which seemed to be a compromise between ordinary and extraordinary. While the researcher imposed the words 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary', participants were asked to qualify this type of experiences themselves through an open-ended question ('what would you call an experience that you consider as neither ordinary nor extraordinary?').

For one, these experiences are 'A treat, like a special treat every once in a while' (5). Others called these experiences 'fun' and 'relaxation' (2 and 6). A female respondent defines these experiences as 'things that I wouldn't consider extraordinary but kind of things that I make a point to do' (4).

Participants may repeat these experiences on a regular basis, more often than an extraordinary experience but not as frequently as an ordinary experience. For one participant, money determines the frequency of the experience. That is, 'not too often, because I couldn't afford it'(5). Another respondent uses a turn in talk to justify how the experience differs from the ordinary: 'It is the same thing every time <u>but</u> you always have fun' (6). One participant gave as an example of a treat going out for a meal in a restaurant where only one dish will be consumed (a 'medium meal' as opposed to 'a meal with multiple courses' that could potentially qualify as an extraordinary experience) (3).

These 'in-between' experiences are described by participants as more intense emotionally than an ordinary experience. Respondents connect with the environment that feels more personal and less anonymous than 'going to the grocery store'. In the following example, the reader will note the contrast between these in-between experiences, described through the interpretive repertoire of family, and the ordinary experience associated with mass consumption.

‘Little Italian places … there are a lot of nice little Italian places that have some character, not like TGI Fridays [a chain of restaurants] anything like that … but like a neighbourhood place type of place’ [compared to TGI Friday’s] ‘It’s a very different experience’. When you go to a little mom and pop place you feel like you’re supporting a little family business. Somebody who worked their whole life…they own it puts a lot of pride into it…when you go to TGI Friday’s it’s like you go to McDonalds you know people there are just going in there to get their Big Mac and…’ (7).

This participant described these in-between experiences as less intense emotionally than extraordinary experiences. On the other hand, he stresses the uniqueness and the novelty of these in-between experiences, which the researcher interprets as possibly a common point between in-between and extraordinary experiences. This script used by this participant clearly differentiates both types of experiences using the interpretive repertoires of ‘little’ and ‘big’.

‘It’s more, it’s more interesting, you get, you get different food. You go in there at TGI Friday’s it’s just a burger you get at any other place. When you go to little places you get much different stuff on the menu … stuff you never tried before … prepared in … you know more interesting ways. I definitely wouldn’t call it extraordinary, but it’s nice checking out new places. It’s pleasurable but I wouldn’t qualify it as extraordinary. It’s not big’ (7).

A male participant described this type of experience as ‘Fun’, For him, ‘Fun’ experiences mean ‘going out to a couple of different bars with my friends on Friday or Saturday evening … have a few beers, play darts, do shots … goofing around with each other’. Interestingly, his description included some interaction with the personnel. ‘We go to places where we get along well with the bartenders, where staffs are cool’). The sentimental/sexual repertoire is also present in his description (‘We go to places where girls are’), although no or only superficial interactions are expected (‘places where we can see girls’) (8).

The extraordinary experience

Reflecting on the interviews conducted, the researcher suggests that most extraordinary experiences described by participants are built around an ordinary, utilitarian purpose or fulfil basic needs such as a physiological need. Going to a spa for example fulfils the purpose of having ones nails trimmed. Flying business class would enable one to go from a point A to a point B and going to a restaurant fulfils the physiological need of eating. What might make the experience extraordinary above and beyond its utilitarian purpose is likely to be a combination of tangible features and intangible, subjective characteristics.

What first arose from the analysis of definitions given by respondents are the themes of novelty and surprise. ‘An extraordinary experience is new, fresh and exciting’ (4). Expectations towards these experiences tend to be vague and the agenda loose. However, experiences described by most respondents are clearly defined episodes, with a beginning and an end (these are usually dates of vacation planned or evenings and week-ends). The lack of clear expectations and clear agendas seem to greatly contribute making the experience extraordinary.

‘I like not having any expectations and just going in there and just being surprised … you know’. ‘I’ve never done anything like that … with that cruise I did over the summer I had no idea what it was gonna be like. I’ve never been on a cruise before, and so I went’ (1).

‘So basically, I didn’t know where I was gonna go. I had a rough idea I wanted to hit the Northern countries first. Easier if I have a nice set schedule then if something else comes up I wanna do … I deviate from my schedule. It’s easier to do whatever you feel like doing. You can stay somewhere and if you like it you can stay for a couple of more days (2).

Words used in this episode might be grouped in the repertoire of approximation (rough idea, deviate, whatever, somewhere).

All the senses seem to be solicited in an extraordinary experience. For one respondent, the scenery provided by a beach for example seems to turn an ordinary experience (running, usually practiced at the gym on a treadmill) into an extraordinary one (3). For others, visual, tangible components are uncommon and described using the repertoires of extravaganza (‘The height of the ceiling is like … ridiculous’; ‘the Queen Mary II is the biggest cruise ship in the world, currently’ (1); ‘Vale is the biggest ski resort in the United states and it has the best night life’ (5)).

As for the sense of touch, the superior quality of the materials might be translated through the thickness of the towels and the weight of the curtains, for example. Products used on the skin also differ from the ordinary. ‘They don’t use massage oil because massage oil makes you feel really greasy … they use better lotion’(1). Another participants describes the ‘Nice scents’ diffused and delicate teas served when visiting a spa (‘The temperature is not too hot, not too cold … perfect’. ‘The sheets of the massage table feel warm’ (7)).

A female participant appeared to be particularly sensitive about noises. ‘Cell phones don’t work in a spa, period … which I like’. In the waiting room you weren’t even really allowed to talk to people, you had to sort of whisper (1). The reader will note the use of an agency pair, where the participant ends the sentence in order to emphasize what she describes (period). She then repairs the sentence to bring to light her point of view (which I like).

Food and drinks might contribute to make the experience exceptional. ‘You can have any juices and any food you like at the bar’. ‘We had premium liquors instead of regular liquors’ (1).

All the respondents interviewed described the superior quality of service delivered as being a key component of the extraordinary experience. Indeed, participants reported enjoying increased attention from members of staff at the venues visited. Interestingly, the personnel contribute a great deal to make the experience extraordinary by exceeding the expectation of the participant. In this paragraph, the participant insists on using statistical data as a way to quantify the quality of the service, which is inherently intangible.

‘The thing that impressed me the most is the amount of attention I got … like from the staff. They have a staff ratio of something like 3 passengers 1 staff member something ridiculous … waiter, everyone was you know if you wanted anything, they'd get it in a second, you wanted room service at like 1 in the morning I ordered a hot fudge Sunday they brought me two in like two minutes with extra hot fudge. They would always go the extra … stuff I mean they are sooo attentive and that's what really it and I kind of realise ok, this is what you're paying for when you go to a fancy hotel' (1).

This respondent uses the repertoire of quantity/abundance (amount of attention, extra hot fudge, sooo attentive) to insist on her opinion about the service.

Another respondent insisted on the ability for the staff to demonstrate expertise in a field, through appropriate qualifications and experience. In the following example, the depth of the masseur's knowledge is clearly emphasised.

'The staff has to know anatomy, they have to know what muscles they're working with. I like it when they have been clearly studying whatever they're doing. You know the shiatsu masseur I had from Tokyo he has been doing it for 16 years. He knew every single muscle when he did techniques huh like his fingers where moving according to the muscle. It wasn't just this general ok I'm pressing your back … you know. You can tell when somebody knows … the anatomy that's really really important' (7).

Several respondents suggested that employees were connecting better with their clients, sometimes establishing a unique interaction. 'They establish contact … they made an effort' (1). 'The technician was very personable, she talked with us she shared kind of about herself than asked us questions, it was a conversation, it was nice, it was relaxing' (4). For a female respondent, her interaction with a barman was one of the best parts of the experience 'He made cocktails using cherries from Rioja in Spain' (5).

All the questions asked to participants focused on their own definition of the concept of extraordinary experience and its meaning to them. After spending a while discussing their personal experience, most respondents interviewed took the initiative to relate their definition to the one given by 'other people'. By 'other people', they mean strangers, members of the society they don't know, unlike their peer group that will be further analysed later in this paper.

Some respondents differentiate themselves from ‘people’ and acknowledge that something might be extraordinary for them and not for others. In this example, ‘ambiance’ is contrasted with ‘service’.

‘It’s extraordinary for me. For people in Chicago … Chicago is more image conscious … so I think it will be more about the ambience … paying more for the ambiance than for the service. The clientele would be different in Chicago. In Chicago it’s about image a reflection of your wealth or your identity’ (4).

Another participant first defined the concept before adjusting her definition to what she assumed ‘other people’ think. The importance of how others define the concept might sometimes be strong enough to counter-balance one’s personal appreciation. For example, ‘running a marathon is extraordinary for me because it’s not something I’m used to do. I just took on running, I train for this marathon in July but that’s not extraordinary’ (6). Alerted by this obvious paradox, the researcher probed further which led the respondents to explain that ‘preparing for a marathon is different for me but it is not extraordinary for other people so it is not an extraordinary experience, a lot of people are doing this’ (6).

One of the conditions imposed by the researcher for a respondent to qualify for the study was that the experience they went through had to be paid for, either by themselves or by someone else. This allowed the researcher to unveil the role played by money in the extraordinary experience. While no specific questions were aimed at determining ‘how much’ an extraordinary experience costs (results would have been too diverse across participants and experiences), several respondents brought up the financial aspect of the experience in their definitions.

Reflecting on a dinner at a restaurant, a female respondent emphasized that ‘one of the girls chose the cheapest bottle on the list, which is … ok, because you know … the cheapest bottle there is ok but it wasn’t a nice wine’ (7). In other words, trying to save money on the wine impacted the experience negatively.

For another respondent, paying for the experience is not particularly painful as ‘everything is included’ (2) or everything is budgeted or paid for beforehand. However, extraordinary experiences might be perceived as expensive. For one respondent, ‘extraordinary is in a lot of cases associated with luxury’ (2).

In line with primary research conducted for the purpose of this paper on the American dream (see part 2), two respondents reports that spending ‘a lot of money’ is ‘ok’ since ‘you work hard’ (1,3). Furthermore, an extraordinary experience seems to be systematically associated with the idea of an exceptional cost regardless of the nature of the experience. ‘I think for most people it’s not something they would … it’s something that they would plan for to do in terms of the cost of the services compare to … other things’ (4). Another person reflecting on an extraordinary travel admits ‘we indulge more, we wouldn’t spend like that when we’re here’ (3). For another participant, spending was the most enjoyable part of the experience) ‘Vale has the best shopping, it was the best part of the trip’) (5).

The importance of communitas

The previous paragraph looked at defining the concept under study by mapping a range of tangible and intangible characteristics. Above these characteristics seems to be the overwhelming concept of communitas. Every participant in the present study insisted on the importance of sharing the experience with a group, through paragraphs that contrast sharply with the ones used to describe other characteristics. The importance of the concept of communitas in extraordinary experiences was first brought to light by Arnould and Price (1993) through their study of river rafting in Colorado. This paragraph explores the concept further and completes the findings of Arnould and Price.

From the point of view of a female respondent who visited a spa with her mother and her sister, the experience felt more enjoyable and more extraordinary if shared with a larger group of people rather than 'on my own' (4). Having a pedicure done is something that one could do on her own, especially since it is not a service that can be technically shared with others. However, sharing this service clearly enhanced the experience of this participant.

'They only had hum one person who could do it at a time, so we had to take turns so … and we could have decided not to be in the room at the same time but hum … well each appointment lasted an hour so three hours in total'. 'We did it together just because … huh, I think it's a bonding thing, for women and then women in the family'. 'At the end you can get your toenails painted [embarrassment], so you're like what colour you gonna pick, what colour you gonna pick, that kind of thing' (4).

One will note that this respondent used many turns in talk. It might reflect the difficulty the respondent has to justify sharing such experience. This is also likely to reflect the embarrassment of the female participant relating her pedicure experience to a male researcher.

For another participant who went through the experience with her partner, the experience can feel 'much more fun' when shared with a group. 'A week end away with my significant other' is considered as a 'treat' and going on vacation with 'my best friends' was an extraordinary experience (3). An even more extraordinary experience would be 'going on vacation with a larger group of friends' (3).

Furthermore, the way in which members of the group are initially linked to each other (or not) might affect to some extent the perception of the experience. It is 'different' to share the experience with either with family, friends or strangers. In a group of friends, all the members seem to share a very similar socio-cultural background as well as having some past experiences in common. The older the group is, the more members have in common and the stronger the group appears to be, hence the more extraordinary the experience feels. 'Me and my friends who went to the trip we all grew up together so we're all the same' (3). Another respondent reports: 'I got a really close group of friends that I've been with since like high school … so we've been really really close for like … 15 years' 'The most part, there is a few people that have joined in over the years but the core group of guys I met at high school and we hang out all the time' (6).

Sub-groups might sometimes be formed within a given group when different participants have slightly different backgrounds and/or only some experiences in common. 'I went with one girl I knew for a long time … we're both marathon runners with Louise, one guy and three high maintenance women' (5). The 'BP' girls [the high maintenance women] were partying at night and spending time getting dressed up. 'The Geeks were all concerned about playing cards and getting up early'. 'We were not doing the same things at the same time but we all had fun' (5). Another participant reflects on an experience shared with a smaller group of people coming from different background. In this case, members did go through the whole experience together but did perceive it differently. 'My mum emigrated from another country and she's from a kind of agricultural background … so … we've never been exposed to that sort of things growing up'. 'But me I lived in New York and in Toronto so … we all liked it but for me it's different' (4).

Another respondent chose to enjoy an extraordinary experience with a group of complete strangers. In this type of experience, it seems that participants connect with each others through their shared desire to engage in a given activity. When asked why did you go to a dude ranch, the participant explained:

‘I want a warm feeling … com’mon stand next to me, tell me about yourself, have another spoonful of this’.
‘I wanted to feel taken care of but I also wanted to feel very welcomed so I want a sort of a family atmosphere kind of’.
‘We all eat at the same big table BUT they have really good food ... They have a chef. It is not 5 stars but … it is up there.’
‘By the end of the trip you’ve been riding together you’ve been going on trail rides … you’re friends for life and so I like that I thought that would be neat’.
I’m hoping to make a friend … when I go’ (1).

Interestingly, the repertoires used focus predominantly on proximity and family. The experience is clearly scripted, starting with sitting next to a stranger, then sharing things and finally being friends for life.

The metaphor of sharing a family meal has been used by another respondent in her description of a evening at a restaurant (‘eating at these big tables, you always end up talking to people next to you’). People who take part in the experience might bring tangible items to share with others, which seems to strengthen the intensity of the relationships. ‘Bringing a bottle of wine [in the setting of a restaurant where patrons must provide drinks themselves] is much more convivial than ordering’ (2).

Reflecting on past extraordinary experiences to define the next one

So far, this analysis has dealt with data participants provided mostly by reflecting on past experiences. For most of the participants to this study, these experiences were extraordinary but don’t seem as extraordinary now and would certainly not be extraordinary anymore if lived again. In order to give a full picture of how the sample defines the concept under study, one must not only look at past experiences, but also at what future extraordinary experiences could be. This paragraph will expand the understanding of the concept by looking at how respondents imagine these future experiences.

Different participants reflect on past experiences differently. For some the last experience would be ‘less extraordinary’ (1,8); for others it would lose its extraordinary status and become ‘a treat’ (3,4). For all the participants, the past experience is now frustrating to some extent in comparison with what an enhanced version of this same experience would be: ‘It was only a day spa not one of these spas where you go away kind of’ (4).

Three participants insisting on using the word ‘more’ to describe their next experience (3, 4, 5). ‘More’ would make the experience extraordinary again or even ‘more extraordinary’ (4): ‘next time, we would need more spa things, more massage’ (3,4) ‘more girls’ (2). Unanimously, the last experience went too fast so ‘next time, it will need to last longer’.

Finally, a ‘different’ experience seems to be a possible alternative to an experience that involves ‘more’: ‘I would probably go for another … kind of thing’ ‘Something different maybe something that’s less … common’ (4). The extraordinary experience being ‘new’ by nature, some new components might have to be introduced to replace the ones participants are now familiar with.
‘I guess that spa does massages where they use like glasses, so I don’t think that’s something you find everywhere … that might be a neat experience to have … I think it’s more uncommon’ (4). While some respondents have already researched their next experience, none of them want to know what is precisely going to happen as ‘part of the thrill for me is not knowing who is going to be there’ (1)

Conclusion

Summary

This document focused on gaining a better understanding of the concept of extraordinary, hedonic experiences by conducting qualitative research. The research project has been slightly refocused from looking at luxuries, towards experiential consumption, as the former concept was too ill-defined. This paper allowed for the elaboration of a definition of the concept of an extraordinary experience from the standpoint of a respondent.

It first looked at the context of the study by reviewing some important socio-cultural, demographical and geographical information, which were likely to influence the research. The second part focused on the choice of a theoretical framework best adapted to addressing the research question. In the third part, a method for collecting data has been chosen and details of how the research will be technically conducted have been given. Finally, the information has been analysed using techniques inspired by Conversation Analysis and Discourse Analysis.

Several findings from this research are consistent with other research conducted on extraordinary experiences and the hedonistic aspects of consumption. In line with the reasoning of Arnould and Price (1993), hedonic experiences are characterized by the newness of perception and process. Furthermore, the theme of communitas is a dimension that contributes greatly to making the experience extraordinary. This research also corroborates the conclusions of Hirschman an Holbrook's influential paper (1982a) on the experiential view of consumption. Participants to this study recalled these experiences through multiple sensory modalities that include sound, taste, visual images, tactile impressions and scents. Rather than being driven by tasks, the extraordinary experience seems to be driven by emotions and decisions are made based on symbolic elements instead of technical features.

Results of this study also confirm the findings of previous research conducted on consumer behaviors towards luxury consumption (Dubois et al., 2001). For example, the staff are expected to demonstrate superior knowledge and devote particular attention to patrons. Furthermore, participants believe that hedonic experiences are expensive and associate them with the idea of an exceptional cost.

This piece of the study also brought to light new and useful knowledge. First, experiences may not be strictly classified as either ordinary or extraordinary. Some experiences differ from a participant's daily routine while being repeated on a regular basis. These experiences might be emotionally driven but are not as intense as extraordinary experiences. Some participants to this study qualified these experiences as 'treats' (5) or 'in-between' (4). Furthermore, extraordinary experiences seem to be defined by reflecting on past experiences as well as projecting the next one. This definition is never settled; it is re-elaborated following each extraordinary experience. Finally, participants to this study did not recall experiences involving increased physical activity. This sharply contrasts with findings from previous research conducted on the topic. In fact, respondents believe that extraordinary is rather synonymous with decreased physical activity (massage, slow movements).

Reformulation of the new, modified conceptual framework

The new knowledge gained through this paper has impacted the conceptual framework elaborated in document two. Thus, this framework has been revised to include these findings.

Experiences must be considered by reflecting on the past as well as forecasting the future. The framework distinguishes extraordinary experiences from 'in-between' and ordinary experiences. Ordinary experiences are of a utilitarian nature and are repeated routinely. 'In-between', which are repeated on a regular basis, elicit more emotions than an ordinary experience, but are less intense than an extraordinary experience. Extraordinary experiences are mostly hedonic in nature and mostly characterised by their newness. To be deemed as such, future extraordinary experiences might involve more components that generate emotions. Alternatively, such experience could also be completely different from the previous one.

Limitations of qualitative research

Qualitative research is essentially intrinsically subjective. While it provides unique insights into the consumer's mind that survey research is not able to provide (Chisnall, 1992), one must point out the limitations of the approach.

One limitation of qualitative research is the issue of consistency of the findings. While qualitative research provides in depth analysis of narratives, the categorization of activities and events described might be unreliable. The interpretation of findings is based on brief data extracts. Although interviews are video taped, the researcher might fail to analyse crucial pauses and body movements (Sliverman, 2001). This limitation will be addressed in document five by conducting another set of in depth interviews with at least one more researcher. The research team will then discuss what has been heard and seen and agree on a way to analyse the information (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982). Furthermore, quantitative research will enable to verify the findings among a larger sample of population. This will be the focus of the following stage as a way forward to fulfilling the objective of the study.

Furthermore, field studies are anecdotal (Mehan, 1979). This problem is often called anecdotalism. Snippets from unstructured interviews and conversations are used to bring to light apparent phenomenons. The researcher focuses on these phenomenons without making any attempt to deal with contrary cases, which can affect the validity of the research project (Sliverman, 2001). Conducting ethnographic research might help to overcome this limitation. Ethnographic studies allow the researcher to be involved in the social life of participant(s) for an extended period of time. This enables a higher level of congruence between concepts and observations (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982).

Another limitation of qualitative research resides in the fact that the original material is lost as the researcher summarizes the findings from the raw data. Once the summarizing occurs, Mehan (1979) contends it is therefore not possible to allow alternative interpretations of the research material. However, in the specific context of this study, most interviews have been video taped, which will enable other researchers to validate and challenge the interpretation suggested in this document.

While Schutz (1964) identified that language was the main medium used to describe reality, one can argue that language might bias the description of the situation under study (Goulding, 1998). Goulding (1998) questions the ability of people to describe reality in their own words, which can potentially manipulate or distort the analysis. Finally, one can argue that individuals might experience multiple selves and multiple realities, complicating the interpretation and affecting the validity of the data (Goulding, 1998).

The next research task will be based on a questionnaire survey that will consist of collecting quantitative data. This survey will verify if a larger population agree on the definition of extraordinary experiences elaborated here. Furthermore, it will establish what motivates the target audience in engaging in hedonic, extraordinary experiences. Results will be analysed in document four. Document five will gather all the knowledge gained since the beginning of the research project.

Reflective critique

While conducting qualitative research has been one of the most enjoyable parts of this research project so far, some improvements would ease the experience if the process had to be repeated.

Financial constraints have certainly been the main issue in conducting this study. It affected the scope of research, the choice of a method for collecting data and the recruitment of participants. When starting to recruite participants for this project, the author offered $30 dollars in compensation for taking part in a one-hour session. Despite reaching hundreds of potential respondents through 'Craigslist.org', no one ever replied to the advert. Worried about the need to conduct the fieldwork rapidly, the author decided to increase this incentive to $60 for a 60 minute interview. One single advert rapidly generated about twenty replies. Thus, financial constraints imposed great restrictions on the research project. For example, a bigger budget would have allowed the author to conduct more interviews. Reflecting on the experience, the author could possibly have sought a sponsor that would have covered the cost of the fieldwork in exchange for access to the results. Another solution could have been to interview friends and family of the author. One key concern with that approcach would have been the potential bias of the results caused by the personal relationship between researcher and participants.

The choice of the methodological framework and the research approach has been made after several weeks of reflection. Another possibility was to address a 'stages' question (before, during, after). The grounded theory, which is rooted in symbolic interactionism, would have provided an appropriate theoretical framework; data would have probably been collected through ethnographies. The author finally decided against this option for three reasons. First, the literature review did not cover in detail the tangible elements of the experience (scenery, physical surroundings, light, scents …). Furthermore, conducting ethnographies would have forced the author to define for himself what an extraordinary experience was and to assume that participants shared this definition. For example, conducting ethnographies among a group of private pilots starts from the premise that flying a private plane is extraordinary.

While this might be the author's point of view, some participants could consider their plane simply as a means of transportation. Finally, conducting ethnographies would have been expensive, time consuming and challenging in the area of recruiting participants.

Reflecting on the whole research project, data could have been collected in a slightly different way. A small number of interviews conducted beforehand would have helped surround the topic better and define the research questions more precisely.
Furthermore, talking to participants brings to light what is feasible in the environment where the fieldwork is to be conducted. The literature review did not contribute to assessing feasibility, as different scholars have different access to data and conduct research in different settings. For example, the pieces of research reviewed in document two are based on ethnographies, large samples, or fieldwork conducted in high-risk conditions. When starting to plan the fieldwork, the author realised that none of these types of research could realistically be conducted in the particular setting of this project.

Another limitation of this research is that participants have been recruited from one single source (the online community Craigslist.org). Recruiting respondents from a wider range of sources would have allowed the author to obtain a more diverse or homogeneous sample. Ideally, on-line recruitment would have been combined with off-line recruitment. The choice of recruiting through Craigslist was mainly made for financial reasons as posting an advert on the website was free. Using the services of a recruitment agency would have guaranteed a representative sample of the different social grades and ethnic backgrounds among the 25-35 age bracket. The downside is that the author would have had to support a total cost of $280 per respondent.

Finally, many discussions with supervisors brought to light the tendency of the author to conduct the research project with a preconceived agenda. In the early days, the author had been very concerned by what the results would be or should be, sometimes ignoring that the theory was to be built upon research. Furthermore, the author first tended to bias the study by taking his definition of extraordinary experiences and luxuries for granted. It took a long time for the author to realise that the study was about asking people to define the concept by themselves, rather than asking them if they agreed with the author's definition.

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Appendix 1 - Respondent profiles

(1) Female, 25, student, living with parents. Went on a cruise.
(2) Male, 30, engineer, single. Eats out at various restaurant and bars
(3) Female, 28, Medical Doctor, living with partner. Went on a trip to the Dominican Republic
(4) Female, 32, social services, single. Went to a day spa with her mother and sister.
(5) Female, 34, project manager, single. Went skiing to Vale, CO.
(6) Male, 35, IT Technician, single. Travelled around Europe for 2 months
(7) Female, 28, customer service, single. Went to a spa.
(8) Male, 25, student, single. Went to Europe. Goes out with friends.

Appendix 2 – Consent form

RESEARCH PROJECT: CONSUMER EXPERIENCES

SUMMARY

- You are being asked to be in a research study.
- Your decision to be in this study is voluntary.
- If you decide to be in this study and then change your mind, you can leave the study at any time.
- The study will be video taped. The footage will be used for research purposes only and remain confidential.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:
The purpose of this research study is to investigate consumer experiences as part of a doctoral research project

This interview will last for a maximum of an hour.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION
You will be paid $45 for your participation.

I have read the information in this consent form. All my questions about the study and my participation in it have been answered. I freely consent to be in this research study.

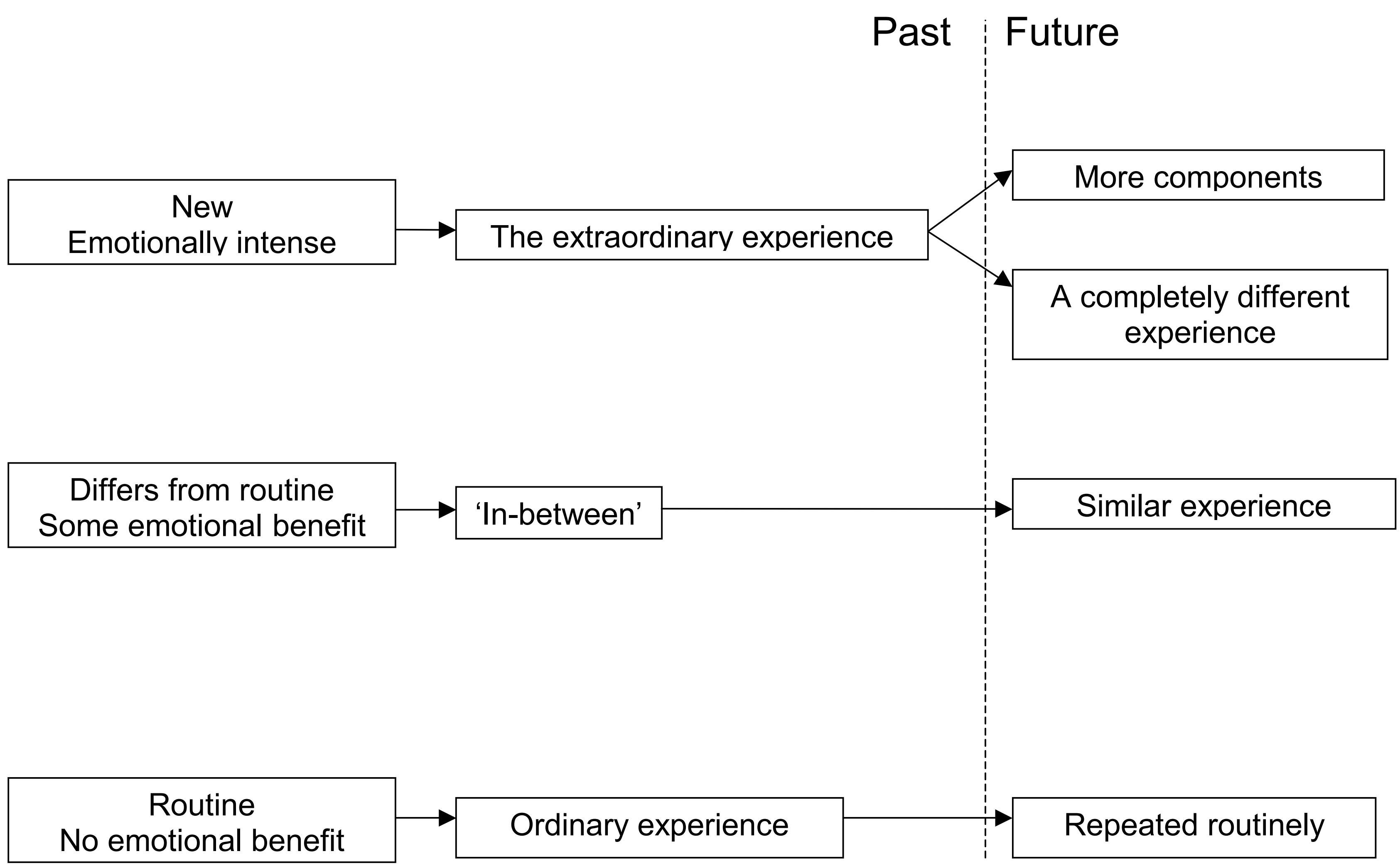
By signing this consent form, I have not given up any of my legal rights.

____
Subject Name

<u>CONSENT SIGNATURE:</u>

____	____________________
Signature of Subject	Date
____	____________________
Signature of Person Conducting Informed Consent Discussion	Date

Appendix 3 – Conceptual framework



Doctor of Business Administration

Identifying patterns of beliefs and attitudes towards luxurious experiences through quantitative consumer research

Document 4
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of The Nottingham Trent University for the degree of Doctorate of Business Administration

Emmanuel Probst
April 2008

Table of content – Document 4

Introduction

It has been argued that consumers are increasingly concerned with the experiential aspect of consumption rather than the functional features of the products or services they purchase (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). Purchases of luxury services are mainly driven by emotion. Thus, it is particularly important to understand the meaning of these experiences to the people who engage in luxury consumption (Woods, 1960). Qualitative research conducted through document three allowed the researcher to grasp how individuals rate the intensity of different luxurious experiences. This piece of research will identify patterns in participants' beliefs and attitudes towards the consumption of luxury services.

It is worthwhile reminding the reader of the way this research project has been conducted so far, in order to better understand how it has evolved. The literature review allowed the author to map the key concepts of the study of consumer behaviour towards luxury. The project then focused on classifying luxurious events according to the intensity of emotions generated. The conceptual framework classifies consumption experiences as either ordinary, 'treats' or extraordinary. Activities repeated routinely qualify as ordinary. 'Treats' are activities repeated on a regular basis that provide some emotional benefit. Extraordinary experiences are hedonic in nature and emotionally intense. The present paper will be based on a quantitative piece of research conducted through a survey administered to a diverse audience.

Conclusions from this piece of research will benefit both academics and practitioners.
Most research conducted on the topic of experiential consumption and luxury consumption is based on qualitative enquiries, which raises the question of the ecological validity of the findings. Furthermore, participants might be deemed to be self-selected groups because of their willingness to travel to remote places and take part in uncommon experiences (Arnould and Price, 1993; Farber and Hall, 2007; MacCarthy et al., 2006). Indeed, the academics who conducted these research studies admit that their conclusions can hardly be generalised to the overall population (Arnould and Price, 1993; Farber and Hall, 2007). This project will address these shortcomings by adopting an original design, one based on quantitative evaluations of a range of experiences.

Findings from this paper will also benefit practitioners involved in the design of luxurious services. Empirical research which has been conducted shows that 75% of American consumers find advertising culturally and personally irrelevant to them (Census Bureau, 2007). Furthermore, consumers have become immune to the messages broadcasted at them in light of the abundance of information available. Rather than approaching their overall audience with the same message, firms must become aware of these different patterns of behaviour in order to reach their customers at a deeper level.

Defining the concept of luxury

One of the main challenges encountered in this research project so far has been to define the concept of luxury. The following paragraphs will review a range of reading materials and should help one gain a better understanding of the construct. The concept of luxury is difficult to grasp, as its definition seems to constantly evolve in line with the fast-changing society in which we live. Furthermore, every individual is likely to hold his or her own definition of luxury. Consumers recognize that what feels special for someone else does not necessarily feel special for them (Graham and Matthews, 2004). Indeed, academic research conducted on the perception of luxury goods and services unveiled significant differences in the ways different cohort groups perceive luxury (William and Nancy, 2007). Factors likely to influence this definition include age (William and Nancy, 2007), cultural background (Weinstein, 2005) and education (Mandel et al., 2006).

The traditional view of the concept can be distinguished from the 'new' luxury. The traditional perception of luxury is that it is about material possessions. Luxury products are synonymous of excellent quality, expensiveness, scarcity and being superfluous (Dubois et al., 2001). These product are often consumed conspicuously as a way for one to advertise his wealth and achieve greater social status (Veblen, 1899). On the other hand, the 'new' concept of luxury is that luxury is about going through an experience (Morrison, 2005). Possessing 'things' is becoming less important because consumers are more concerned with expressing their individuality through unique and highly personal experiences (Graham and Matthews, 2004).

Indeed, consuming luxuries enables one to achieve self-realization and self-fulfilment. It is the type of consumption that is not necessarily apparent and might not be easy for others to feel or see (Weinstein, 2005). Luxury is now associated with comfort and hedonism rather than conspicuous consumption (Morrison, 2005).

Although articles recently published tend to allow more room for research on luxury services, most articles from both academics and practitioners mainly refer to material possessions. By focusing only on luxury services, findings from this paper will contribute to expanding Morisson's definition of 'new' luxury. Despite being ill-defined from an academic standpoint, the word luxury will be used throughout the questionnaire as it should be more meaningful to participants than the terms hedonism or extraordinary experience. Indeed, the participants will come from many different educational backgrounds and should not be expected to hold specific academic knowledge of the later concepts.

The diversity of the American population and its impact on the project

As mentioned previously, the audience that will be surveyed is particularly diverse. The following paragraphs will highlight the different specificities pertaining to the environment in which the fieldwork will be conducted.

A particularity of the United States of America is the diversity of its population. The term 'melting pot' is often employed to refer to the fusion of different ethnicities, nationalities and cultures. Sociologists also use the terms cultural pluralism and multiculturalism to describe the way in which ethnicities and cultures mix. That is, immigrants tend to retain their native cultures and heritage while blending into the majority European/Anglo-Saxon/American society (Gordon, 1964).

Today, there are 100 million people living in the US who are minorities; of these 21% live in California and 12% live in Texas. Hispanics are the largest minority group with more than 44 million in the group; African-Americans account for more than 40 million people, followed by Asians (almost 15 million), American Indian and Alaska Natives (4.5 million), and finally Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders (1 million) (Census Bureau, 2007). The Hispanic group is the fastest growing group, and accounted for half of the national population growth (2.9 million on total) between July 2005 and July 2006 (Census Bureau, 2007).

The American population is also very diverse in terms of educational attainment and income. While the vast majority of the population has completed secondary education, roughly 10% of the population did not study beyond high school. At the other end of the spectrum, 12% of people who are aged 25 and above are educated at the master and/or doctorate level (Census Bureau, 2004). While the median household income in 2006 was around $48.000, the aggregate income distribution was highly concentrated towards the top. One third of all income was earned by 6.37% of the population (Census Bureau, 2004). Educational attainment and income are correlated. Adults with advanced degrees earn up to four times more than adults educated at high school level and below (Census Bureau March 2007). Overall, the wealthiest households are the ones which feature the highest educational attainment (Census Bureau, 2004). Common wisdom suggests that people with different socio-cultural backgrounds are likely to perceive luxury in very different ways. Indeed, the diversity of the American population is expected to appear in the results of this project. When running the analysis, the researcher will look for patterns of beliefs and behaviour amongst people with similar socio-demographic characterisitcs.

This paper will first look at two approaches that pertain to the research project, social constructionism and social psychology. The second part will review different methodologies and determine the theoretical framework of the research project. It will then concentrate on the method of choice to gather data. Once collected, this data will be analysed using appropriate approaches. The findings will be discussed and contrasted with the literature reviewed earlier. Finally, conclusions will be drawn and limitations of the study will be stated.

Social constructionism and social psychology

The literature review conducted in document two and the additional reading materials reviewed for the purpose of this paper have brought to light the fact that the concept of luxury is socially constructed. Social constructionism and social psychology are two approaches that will help the researcher gain a better understanding people's beliefs and attitudes towards luxuries.

Social constructionism stems from the work of different scholars. Constructionism embraces the idea of a shared system of meaning proposed by Mead and other authors through their work on Symbolic interactionism. It is also keen on the idea of performative quality of human life developed by Goffman (1959). For Goffman (1959), life is like theatre and the self-construct enacts many roles through dramatic realization. Another approach that contributed to social constructionism is Saussure's structuralism. Saussure contend that '…we cannot know the world on its own terms, but only through the conceptual and linguistic structures of our own culture . . . Structuralism's enterprise is to discover how people make sense of the world, not what the world is' (Fisk, 1990:115). Structuralists and constructionists share a same rejection of the concepts of reality, objectivity and truth.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) also contributed to shaping the social constructionism approach in their book, the *social construction of reality*. For constructionists, all knowledge is derived from and maintained by social interactions. People's perceptions of reality are related and contribute to reinforce their common knowledge of reality. Indeed, reality is defined by complex patterns of ongoing actions rather than by individual acts (Burr, 1995). The social constructionist enquiry focuses on explaining the processes people go through to describe and explain the world in which they live (Gergen, 1985). It aims at articulating common forms of understanding as they existed in the past, exist today and might exist in the future (Gergen, 1985).

Categories used to classify things emerge from social interactions between people at a specific time and place (Burr, 1995). For example, one's definition of morality in respect to relationships is based on social interchanges; the researcher might suggest, contend or abandon interpretations as the individual's social relationships unfold over time (Sabini and Silver, 1982). Romantic love (Averill, 1985) and self-concept (Verhave and Van Hoorne, 1984) are other examples of concepts that vary over time.

The constructionist standpoint rejects the positivist-empiricist conception of knowledge that makes sense of the world through the building and testing of hypotheses (Gergen, 1985). It takes a critical stance towards knowledge taken for granted, both in sciences and daily life, by arguing that the world is known through human experience rather than presented objectively to the observer (Burr, 1995). An example of this reasoning can be found in the work of Sarbin (1984) on emotions. Emotions are not objects to be studied but rather acquire their meaning from their context of usage. Finally, the social constructivist position contends that knowledge is sustained by social process. Communication conventions in force at one point in time determine how reality is understood (Burr, 1995).

Social psychology

Social psychology emerged at the beginning of the 20th Century with contributions from Cooley (1902), Ross (1908) and McDougall (1908), among other scholars. Social psychology is an interdisciplinary area that stems from a collaboration between sociologists and psychologists, and was particularly fruitful during the years following World War II (Sewell, 1989). According to Allport (1954), social psychology seeks to understand and explain how the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of individuals are influenced by the imagined, implied or actual presence of others. Indeed, Allport (1954) contends that effects of social influences can be felt even when the individual is on his own. The term 'implied presence' refers to activities people carry out because of their membership in specific cultural groups and their role in a social structure.

Social psychology is concerned with the influence that individuals have on the attitudes and behaviour of others. It also looks at the influence of the group on individuals and the influence of individuals upon the group (Neill, 2005). Finally, social psychology looks at groups themselves and tries to understand the influences and relationships that a group might have upon another group (Neill, 2005). A core topic of social psychology is the study of attitudes. Attitudes can be defined as beliefs or feelings towards an object, place, person or issue that influences thought and action (Perloff, 2003). These attitudes can change through the process of persuasion, which relies on rational or emotive means (Perloff, 2003).

Cognitive dissonance is another topic of interest that pertains to this research project. For Festinger (1957), cognitive dissonance is defined as a an inconsistency in one's cognition that triggers a feeling of unpleasant arousal. As one deals with the threat, he is likely to seek self-justification and change his attitude or rationalise his behaviour (Festinger, 1957). A typical example of cognitive dissonance is smoking. Most smokers are aware of the risks of cancer associated with smoking but make an excuse (such as: 'I will die anyway') to reduce this tension.
In the context of this research, Dubois et Al. (2001) brought to light the ambivalence of people's attitudes towards luxury consumption. Indeed, one might purchase a luxurious item for its prestigious attributes while at the same time feeling guilty about its high price as being indecent and morally wrong.

A third area of social psychology is social influence. Social influence seeks to understand how people affect the thoughts, feelings and behaviour of others. The most common form of social influence is conformity, whereby one tends to think and act as other members of a group. Failure to adapt to the group's standard could yield imagined or real social pressure (Neill, 2005). An experiment from Asch (1955) conducted in the fifties illustrates the principle of conformity.

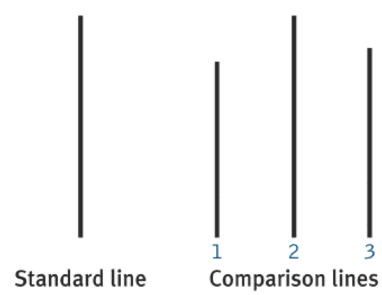


Figure 1: The Asch conformity experiment

When asked which line matches the first line participants frequently followed the judgment of the majority, despite the fact that the majority was wrong (Asch, 1955). This reasoning can be linked with the personal effect of prestige consumption that was described by Vigneron and Johnson (1999). Their framework refers to ostentatious consumption and conformity or non-conformity to the group.

2. Methodology

The following part will briefly review the different methodologies that pertain to quantitative research. It will elaborate a theoretical framework that best suits the purpose of this document.

Why is quantitative research suited to answer the research question?

While qualitative research greatly contributed to defining the concept under study one must be aware of its limitations, which will be addressed through this paper. First, conclusions had to be drawn by relying on a fairly small number of observations (only 12 in-depth interviews). Furthermore, all these interviews had to be conducted in the same location, among a population of Chicago residents. Quantitative research is the only method that allows a researcher to verify findings within a larger group of the population (Muijs, 2004). Participants will be recruited all over the United States so that conclusions can be generalised to the entire target group (as defined in the scope of research).

While many phenomena don’t seem to produce any quantitative data, data can be collected in a quantitative fashion. The research instrument will be designed in a way that converts phenomena that don’t exist in quantitative form into quantitative data (Muijs, 2004). For example, one’s involvement in an experience can be seen as fairly subjective, qualitative information. Using a scale from one to ten, where one means ‘I did not pay much attention’ and ten means ‘I was completely absorbed’ will allow the author to quantify the variables involved. Additionally, creating a multitude of variables will allow the researcher to measure relations between these variables and to analyse relationships using statistics. Studying links and interactions between the dimensions of the hedonic experience requires using mathematical methods. In contrast, qualitative research could only reveal *what* these dimensions are but not *the extent to which* they are related.

Another limitation of the qualitative research conducted is the involvement of the author, which might have influenced the account given by participants. At this stage of the research project, the researcher needs to be detached from the research so that findings can be more objective. Thus, the method that will be used will maximize objectivity and minimize the involvement of the author (Muijs, 2004). Finally, mathematical methods will allow the researcher to test the reliability of the findings. This means, it will enable the researcher to ensure the phenomena observed are beyond simple chance occurrences (Williams and Monge, 2001).

Inductive and deductive approaches

DeVaus (1995) brings to light the interaction between theory and research by underlining the fact that observations require explanation. By the same token, explanations need to be tested against the facts. There are two processes that can enable the development of good explanations, theory construction and theory testing. The theory construction approach, or inductive approach, develops a theory out of the data collected. It starts with a set of observations and moves on to a conceptual/abstract level to develop a theory (Bryman, 2004). In the context of this study, the theory has been constructed through a set of in-depth qualitative interviews in document three.

The deductive approach, or theory testing, starts with a theory that predicts how things will be in the real world. Empirical research is then conducted to assess if this predictions are correct or not (DeVaus, 1995). The analysis of the findings allows the theory that is being tested to be confirmed or rejected. The last step of the process actually involves induction, as the researcher uses the findings to revise the theory. This document will take a deductive approach by testing the conceptual framework elaborated in document 2 and amongst the targeted audience. It is the theory itself that will be tested rather than a set of explicit hypotheses derived from it.

Positivism as an epistemological position

Positivism is an epistemological position that applies methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality (Bryman and Bell, 2003). Positivism entails the principle of phenomenalism. That means only phenomena and knowledge confirmed by the senses can be deemed as knowledge. Positivism also involves the principle of deductivism. Deductivism suggests that theories generate hypotheses that can be tested in order to assess the explanation of laws (Bryman and Bell, 2003). These laws have been elaborated in the fact gathering, which refers to the principle of inductivism that was applied in document 3.

Realism

Realism shares two beliefs with positivism. First, natural and social sciences should collect data and explain phenomenon in the same fashion. Secondly, reality is separated from our description of it (Bryman and Bell, 2003). However, realism recognizes that research is subjective by nature and values play a role in research. Researchers adopting this viewpoint recognize that variables such as a 'feeling of novelty of the experience' or 'emotions' cannot be studied and measured the same way as can physical and chemical processes (Fisher, 2004). Realists try to quantify and measure the things they are studying but their theories come with a warning as realists recognize the role of subjectivity. Realists admit that competing or complimentary explanations to these theories can exist. Realist researchers often offer explanations that can be generalised but are less likely than positivists to offer predictions (Fisher, 2004).

There are two major forms of realism. First, empirical realism contends that reality can be understood through the use of appropriate methods. Sometimes referred to as naïve realism, this approach assumes that there is a perfect correspondence between reality and the terms employed to describe it (Bryman, 2004). It is argued that this approach 'fails to recognize that there are enduring structures and generative mechanisms underlying and producing observable phenomena and events' (Bhaskar, 1989:2).

Another major form of realism is critical realism. Researchers adopting this viewpoint believe that our understanding of knowledge is stratified in different levels. One level of reality (Mechanisms) is not easily accessible as it is hidden from common view. Indeed, these mechanisms cannot be directly experienced so have to be logically interfered from events (events are things that happen in the world, which we perceive through experiences) (Fisher, 2004). For Bhaskar, who pioneered critical realism, the social world can only be understood if one identify these mechanisms '… these structures are not spontaneously apparent in the observable pattern of events; they can only be identified through the practical and theoretical work of social sciences' (1975:2).

Objectivism as an ontological position

Objectivism implies that social actors cannot reach or influence social phenomena. These phenomena are independent of social actors and are considered as objective entities (Bryman, 2004). Phenomena have the characteristics of tangible objects; they have an objective reality. In the context of this study, extraordinary experiences will have an objective reality, as they will be given the characteristics of an object. Despite the subjective nature of the topic that could lead to adopting a realist standpoint, the project will be conducted through the lens of positivism. Even subjective dimensions such as emotions will have to be analysed through processes used in natural sciences so that possible correlations and interactions between variables can be measured.

3. Method for collecting data

The previous part enabled the researcher to define a theoretical framework for the research project. The following part will justify the choice of a specific method for collecting data and provide details on the technical aspects of the data collection.

Research design

There are many different ways of designing a quantitative research project. This paragraph will give a brief account of the three main approaches. It will then focus on the approach of choice for this study.

The classic experimental design establishes two different groups of respondents. The experimental group receives a treatment and is compared against the control group. These groups form the basis for the experimental manipulation of an independent variable. Analysis can be conducted before and after the experiment, allowing the researcher to establish if manipulating the variable made any difference (Bryman, 2004). The longitudinal design method allows mapping change over time as the sample is surveyed on several occasions. This approach tends to be costly and difficult to implement, as it requires the commitment of participants over time (Bryman, 2004). Finally, the case study design method concentrates on the analysis of a single case. Stake (1995) highlights that this research design enables a researcher to focus on the complexity and the particular nature of the case under study. The case study design method would not suit the purpose of this document, as the researcher is concerned with studying a group of individuals.

The cross sectional design method, also called social survey design allows the collection of data related to several cases so that the researcher can concentrate on variations between these cases. The examination of the data brings to light different patterns of associations (Bryman, 2004). The cross sectional design provides a picture of participants at one point in time, by contrast with the experimental designs that take place over an extended period of time (Fink,2003).

Data collected through cross sectional studies should be quantitative or quantifiable so that it can be connected with two or more variables. The main advantage of quantification is to provide the researcher with a consistent benchmark that enables him or her to gauge variation by using standardized methods. A cross-sectional research design implies that information is collected through a survey in which data is predominantly collected by a structured interview or a questionnaire on a multitude of cases (Bryman, 2004). The cross-sectional design research is structured so that data for each case (Case1, Case2…) is available for each of the variables (Var1, Var2…). The data can be easily visualised in a chart, referred to as 'a rectangle of data' (Marsh, 1982). The cross-sectional design is best suited to address the research question of this paper. The multitude of cases that will be collected will allow the analysis of correlations between variables and variations between cases. Since the author will have to complete this project within only a few months, collecting the data at one point in time will be more practical than tracking behaviour over a long period of time.

The design of the survey

It has been argued that leisure experiences are emergent stories, stories which start on-site but continue to develop off site (Stewart, 1998). Participants continue to create meaning for their experience after taking part and embed their stories in the context of their daily life (Borrie and Roggenbuck, 2001). This study will be based on a retrospective recall of a past experience. That means, participants will not complete the survey before or during the event but will reflect on a past experience. This design should allow the researcher to grasp the emergent stories described by Stewart.

The first question of the questionnaire will enable the researcher to screen panellists (see Appendix 1). A panellist will qualify by listing different examples of activities that this research project deems extraordinary. Anyone who did not take part in any of the five types of activities listed will terminate the survey. Everyone else will be qualified for all of the five parts of the questionnaire. The survey will then measure the contribution made by different dimensions of the experience. The importance of the newness of perception and process initially identified by Arnould and Price (1993), has been confirmed through in-depth qualitative interviews conducted by the author for the purpose of document three. This aspect will be further investigated by asking participants to rate and describe their experience if it was repeated.

Another aspect of this research project that is not understood by the academic and practitioner community, is the complexity of the different senses stimulated during the activity (also referred to as polysensuality) (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). Furthermore, Farber and Hall (2007) emphasise the need for research in the specific nature and causes of emotions in the recreation experience. This paper will measure to what extent each sense is associated with the perception of luxury.

Finally, the literature review dwelled on the psychological literature in order to bring to light the importance of the extended self and conspicuous consumption. For Belk (1988), consumption allows one to enhance his self-concept by satisfying his need for uniqueness. Mason contends that 'conspicuous consumption is intended for the most part either to consolidate and secure existing community or group status or to make new "vertical" status gain in the community' (1981:35). Although the theories of Belk and Mason are seminal, they are based on research that took place more than 20 years ago. The population that this document targets will be very different in terms of its social and cultural background. It will be worthwhile testing these theories amongst the target group and bringing to light any possible evolutions of consumer behaviour.

Collecting data online

There is a wide range of methods that enable the collection of quantitative data, which include computer assisted telephone interviews, mail surveys, mall intercept and in-person interviews. In the recent years, the internet radically transformed data collection by allowing researchers to access large audiences at significantly reduced costs. While traditional call centres employed hundreds of interviewers and required as many phone lines, the internet now allows for the collection of the same amount of data and can rely on only on a few pieces of hardware and a small team of programmers. This has been made possible by the democratization of internet usage. According to recent statistics, 69.7% of the American population has access to the world wide web; that is, more than 210 million internet users (Nielsen, 2007).

A key characteristic of online data collection is the absence of interaction with an interviewer. This could suggest that the researcher will lack control over the interview process. On the other hand, one could argue that participants are more likely to answer questions thoroughly and honestly because they would not feel embarrassed or intimidated by the interviewer. The second suggestion applies to this survey, as some participants might hesitate to describe their luxurious experience to an interviewer who could not necessarily afford it. The researcher will use the ‘Valued Opinions’ panel of consumers provided by Research Now to collect the data. Besides studying for a Doctor of Business Administration, the researcher works full-time for Research Now as a Client Development Manager. This will allow him to collaborate closely with the programmer and the project manager in charge of the study.

Definition of a panel

ESOMAR defines a panel as ‘A group of selected research participants who have agreed to provide pre-designated information at regular specified intervals over an extended period of time. The information may be on purchasing, media consumption or life-style activities’ (ESOMAR, 2007). Panels are usually recruited through different online marketing activities. While placing advertising banners on websites is the most common way to recruit, Research Now also contracts with Internet Service Providers and brokers who specialise in providing lists of email addresses. Channels of recruitment have to be as diverse as possible in order to constitute the most diverse sample. Research Now’s US panel has been recruited using more than 100 different online sources. These internet users are then invited to take an initial profiling survey of about 30 questions. This allows for the collection of the most basic social and economical information. Once profiled, these new panellists are invited to complete the surveys for which they qualify.

Running the data collection

Panellists will be invited to take part through an invitation that will be sent to them via email. This invitation will only indicate that the survey will be about luxurious activities, without detailing the exact purpose of the study. The email will be worded in this general manor in order to discourage ‘professional respondents’ while gathering the opinion of participants genuinely interested in luxuries. Panellists who received the invitation will then have to click on a link to access the survey. The author, who runs several online research projects a week, knows from experience that no more than ten percent of recipients are likely to actually enter the study. Furthermore, not all recipients will qualify to complete the survey and almost 20 percent of them are likely to abandon the questionnaire before the end. Considering these factors, an invitation will be sent to about 3,000 panellists meeting the demographic criteria of the study, which should allow for the collection of around 250 completed interviews.

A first introductory page will thank the panellists for taking the time to participate and inform him or her of the purpose of the survey (Different screenshots of the online version of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix 2), that is, contributing to a doctoral research project about luxuries. Through this introduction, the researcher will comply with the ethical rule of informed consent. This rule requires researchers to behave in an ethical manner and make the purpose of the research clear, without being too specific about the research question (Silverman, 2001).

In terms of graphic design, the questionnaire will remain very simple and will not feature any animated icons, advertising banners or any other components that could distract the respondent or bias his answers. Before starting the questionnaire, a short paragraph will detail the use of the navigation buttons in order to clear any potential technical difficulties the panellist may have. Each page of the survey will feature buttons pointing to Valued Opinion's privacy policy and panel support. Furthermore, a progress bar scaled in percentages will allow the participant to monitor his progress. Finally, navigation buttons will only allow a panellist to move forward in the questionnaire. It will not be possible for panellists to modify previous answers and each question will have to be answered in order before it is possible to move on to the next one.

After answering the final question, the participant will be redirected to the home page of his personal Valued Opinions account where his incentive will be credited. In total, this questionnaire will be less than 25 questions long. As a rule of thumb, market research professionals familiar with online data collection assume that a respondent can answer between 2 and 3 questions per minute. This suggests that the survey should be about 10 minutes long. The short length of the survey is likely to affect positively the quality of the data collected. Indeed, panellists are more likely to stay alert and involved when taking part in a short survey.

Limitations associated with the collection of data online

Although online panels transformed the market research industry by enabling faster and cheaper data collection, one should point out several limitations to this method. A major shortcoming of online data collection lies in the fact that panels are not representative of the population. 69.7% of the American population use the internet, which suggests that the remaining 30.3% do not (Internetworldstats.com, 2007).

Furthermore, more and more people are attracted by the incentives offered by the panels to take part in studies. Since most panels only award a few dollars for completing a survey, one could be tempted to join several panels in order to take as many surveys as possible and generate a more substantial income. Some dedicated websites called ‘Open surveys areas’ even allow one to register simultaneously in dozens of panels. Another issue lies in the way invitations are worded. Some unscrupulous panel suppliers send ‘leading’ invitations to their panellists. That is, invitations that reveal the precise subject of the study and suggest how to qualify. For example, an invitation that mention: ‘would you consider buying a brand new car within the next 12 months’ suggest a positive answer (a more ethical way to invite panellists would be to say: ‘would you like to take part in a study about cars?’). Finally, some panellists are motivated only by the incentive and try to save time by giving random answers (i.e: answering ‘five’ everywhere to the 25 scaled questions). In the context of this study, the researcher will take into account the average length of the survey and reject any suspicious interviews.

Sampling

Sampling consists of selecting a segment of population for investigation. It is concerned with the external validity of the study, or the ability for the researcher to generalise findings from this subset of population (Bryman and Bell, 2003). In the context of this study, participants will be selected randomly among the target audience (defined in the introduction). This means that each unit of the population will be given an equal opportunity of being included in the sample. One of the main advantages of this technique is that it leaves almost no room for human bias. Participants cannot be selected upon subjective criteria such as their appearance or personality. This mechanical selection of participants is aimed at keeping sampling error (that is, the difference between the sample and the population) to a minimum (Bryman and Bell, 2003).

Sample size

While cross-sectional research design is defined by the examination of more than one case, selecting a large number of cases allows the researcher to bring to light a wider range of variation. Furthermore, the precision of a sample increases, as the size of this sample gets larger. On the other hand, time and costs usually limit the amount of data that can be collected. In the context of this study, collecting data online almost eliminates the time constraint. Indeed, this method allows the collection of a vast amount of data in a minimum of time. The researcher plans on allocating about 48 hours to collect these 250 interviews, although it would be technically possible to collect several thousands of interviews within the same time frame. The sample supplier would only have to invite a larger number of panellists in order to do so. This sample is small compared to the size of the United States, but is not meant to be representative of the American Population.

Programming and hosting the questionnaire

Once designed, the questionnaire will have to be programmed so that it can be accessed and completed online. The researcher is not knowledgeable in programming so will delegate this task to Research Now's project management team.

The researcher will be given the opportunity to test the questionnaire to ensure that it has been scripted properly before inviting any participants. The project manager will then invite a small batch of panellists and collect a dozen responses (completes). Data will be looked at and the researcher will proceed with a final quality check before fully launching the study. Once the targeted number of completes is achieved, the data file will be cleaned of any interviews that don't meet the researcher's quality criteria (See part on quality). The project manager will finally provide the researcher with two files, one containing the answer to open-ended questions and the other one containing all the other answers.

Reliability, replication and validity

Reliability, replication and validity are three of the most important criteria for evaluating business and management research. The results of a study are deemed reliable when they are repeatable (Bryman and Bell, 2003). Furthermore, a study must be capable of replication. A key concern of natural sciences is to reduce to a minimum the contaminating influence of the researcher's biases and values. If a study can be replicated then confidence in the theory and its findings are enhanced (Bryman and Bell, 2003). Procedures followed must be spelled out in great details so that another researcher would be able to replicate the study (Bryman and Bell, 2003). The study of the perception of extraordinary experiences by the target audience would be easily replicable as details on selecting participants, designing the measures, administrating the survey and analysing the data are given in this document.

Finally, validity refers to the integrity of the conclusions generated from a piece of research. One must distinguish measurement validity from internal validity and external validity. Measurement validity refers to whether the measure really reflects the concept it is supposed to be tapping or not (Bryman and Bell, 2003). In the context of this study, which is based on a cross-sectional design, reliability and measurement validity are matters that relate to the quality of the measures employed rather than the design of the research.

Internal validity refers to conclusions drawn from a causal relationship between two variables. In other words, if the conclusion suggests the x causes y, can one be sure that it is the case and not something else that could cause an apparent relationship between the two variables? Internal validity is generally much weaker in cross-sectional research designs compared to experimental designs. This is because cross-sectional research tends to highlight associations of variables rather than causal inferences (Bryman and Bell, 2003). The question of whether the results of a study can be generalised beyond the research context is referred to as external validity. External validity is concerned with the way participants are selected to participate in the research project (Bryman and Bell, 2003). The external validity of this research project is expected to be strong, as the sample will be randomly selected.

Ecological validity is concerned with establishing if findings of a social scientific study can be applied to people's everyday life (Bryman and Bell, 2003). Data collected in unnatural settings, such as laboratories or focus group facilities are more likely to be ecologically invalid, as these settings are too different from participants' natural habitat. For Cicourel (1982), the ecological validity of cross-sectional research is often jeopardized by the research instruments (such as structured observation schedules), which disrupt the respondent's natural habitat. In the context of this project, the author believes that administering the survey online minimises the risk of the data being ecologically invalid. Indeed, taking part in a study online allows one to choose when to complete the survey rather than having to schedule a specific meeting with an interviewer. Also, the respondent would generally complete the survey in a familiar environment (either his home or office for example).

The actual data collection

The first data collection phase took place in June 2007. A total of 253 participants completed the whole questionnaire. Collecting the data required sending invitations to almost 3,500 pieces of sample and took only four days. The fieldwork started on a Friday morning and ended on a Monday evening, so that participants could complete the questionnaire either during weekdays or during the weekend (when planning a fieldwork, practitioners often like including a weekend as consumers are likely to have more time and complete the questionnaire in a more comfortable setting). Research Now's project management team delivered an SPSS file containing 248 valid interviews (5 interviews were deleted as their quality was questionable).

Analysis of the 248 valid interviews was conducted and a first version of this paper was submitted to the University. Academics who reviewed the document brought to light several gaps in knowledge that the first data collection phase failed to address. In January and February 2008, the author submitted a new questionnaire to the same participants. This new survey, containing 12 questions, allowed the author to collect more socio-demographic data about the audience (see Appendix 2). A total of 93 participants accepted the invitation to complete this second version of the survey. Participants to the first wave who did not complete the second one most likely had left the panel or simply lost interest in the research project. The fact that about 60% of participants did not complete the second wave is not particularly surprising, given the fact that the two waves were conducted more than 7 months apart.

4. Analysing the data

The previous part justified the choice of the method for collecting data and detailed the practical aspects of the actual data collection. The questionnaires completed online now have to be analysed in order to bring to light new and useful knowledge. This part will first focus on the approaches to be used to analyse the data and test its reliability. It will then proceed with the analysis itself.

A first set of analysis based on 248 questionnaires was conducted between July and October 2007. While this phase brought to light a handful of phenomena, the findings lacked credibility in two ways. First, some phenomena observed were easily predictable. Consequently, the analysis lacked depth and did not make any significant contribution to the overall research project and its conceptual framework. Furthermore, findings could not easily be generalised, as key demographic information had not been collected through the first questionnaire. A second set of analysis was the conducted in February and March 2008, based on the data collected through both of the questionnaires. This second phase allowed the author to identify some new significant phenomena as well as filling in gaps left in the first version of the paper. The results presented below combine the results from both phases of the analysis.

Choosing an approach for analysing data

Now that the data has been collected, the researcher must decide on a strategy to analyse this data. Running some basic frequency analysis enabled the author to detect which variables should be investigated further. The author identified two possible strategies for analysing the data. One approach would consist of selecting groups of people according to specific demographics such as their ethnic origin or income. The theory elaborated through this approach would apply to a limited audience only and the reason for choosing this particular group would have to be justified. Another approach would be to investigate participants' attitudes and beliefs towards luxury through certain variables. For example, the researcher could look at a possible correlation between the time spent using the internet and perception of luxury.

When running counts and frequency tests, the researcher rapidly realised that drawing conclusions on specific groups of people (i.e: people of Hispanic decent) would not be credible. Indeed, the phenomena observed would not be significant and the groups under study would be too small (sometimes less that a dozen participants) to allow generalising findings. Therefore, the author chose the second strategy described above; that is investigating possible correlations and tensions between certain variables and people's attitudes and beliefs towards luxury.

Using SPSS

While the calculations described below could be made by hand, researchers often use software in order to save time and concentrate on the analysis. In the context of this research project, the University provided the author with SPSS, a software widely used by both academics and market researchers. Some of the ouputs provided by SPSS are included in this document to illustrate the analysis. All the other charts and diagrams can be found in Appendixes 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Coding of the open-ended questions

The data collected through the seven open-ended questions and gathered in an Excel file has been coded. That means, words entered by participants have been coded as numbers (for example, enjoyment: 1, elegance: 2, and so forth). This follows the classical method suggested by Churchill (1979), which is to relate a corpus of items into a small number of underlying dimensions. Words of similar meanings have been coded under a similar code (for example: excitement and exciting are both coded as '5') in order to make the data easier to analyse. A list of 32 items has been created by gathering the answers to the six open-ended questions. Sometimes respondents did not provide an answer or the answer provided was out of the context of the study. These verbatim answers have not been coded. The codes were then imported in SPSS, where they appear as numeric variables (i.e: 'Wordlux1').

Testing the reliability of the data

Statisticians verify the validity of phenomena observed using different mathematical tools. This paragraph briefly characterizes the approaches that will be used in this study.

Cronbach's alpha

Cronbach's alpha is a test of internal reliability commonly used by statisticians. It calculates the average of all-possible split-half coefficients. This coefficient varies between 0 (that denotes no internal reliability) and 1 (that denotes perfect internal reliability) (Bryman, 2004). While 0.80 is usually considered as an acceptable level of internal reliability (Bryman, 2004), many researchers work with a slightly lower figure and deem 0.70 as a satisfactory level (Westergaard et al., 1989).

Chi-square test

The chi-square test allows a researcher to establish how confident he can be that a relationship exists between the two variables presented in a given contingency table. The test consists of calculating an expected frequency for each cell in the table, one that would occur on the basis of chance alone. To calculate the chi-square value, one calculates the difference between the actual and expected values for each cell in the table, and then sums these differences (Bryman, 2004).

A brief outline of the approaches that will be used to analyse data

Standard deviation

The standard deviation is a measure of dispersion. It is the average amount of variation around the mean. To calculate the mean, one takes the difference between each value in a distribution and then divides the total of the differences by the number of values (Bryman, 2004).

Mean

The arithmetic mean is what one describes as the average in the everyday use. All the values in the distribution are summed and are then divided by the number of values (Bryman, 2004).

Univariate and bivariate analysis

Univariate analysis is concerned with the analysis of only one variable at a time. Common approaches include frequency tables, diagrams and measures of central tendency (Bryman and Bell, 2003). Bivariate analysis refers to the analysis of two variables at a time so that relationships between these variables can be identified (Bryman and Bell, 2003). Part of the data collected will be analysed using these approaches.

Correlation coefficient

The correlation coefficient, also called Pearson product-moment coefficient brings to light a relationship between two variables expressed numerically (Fink, 1995). The correlation coefficient ranges between +1 and –1. A correlation of +1 indicates a perfect correlation between the variables. A correlation of –1 indicates a perfect inverse relationship. This means that the value of the independent variable increases by the same amount for each unit in which the value of the dependent variable decreases. A correlation coefficient of zero means that there is no relationship between the dependent and the independent variables (Fink, 1995). Correlations are usually described graphically as a scatterplot in which points represents the numerical values of the two variables.

Statisticians use a rule of thumb to rate the degree of relationship between variables. Should the correlation coefficient be lower that .25, one considers that there is no or little relationship between variables. A coefficient between .26 and .50 indicates a fair degree of relationship. A coefficient between .51 to .74 suggests a moderate to good relationship. According to Fink (1995) the relationship can be deemed as very good to excellent if it is above .75.

Cluster analysis

Cluster analysis allows a researcher to divide the observations into distinct and homogeneous groups (Tryfos, 1997). In other words, the objects placed in the same cluster resemble each other while objects in different clusters are dissimilar. Clustering is concerned with grouping cases according to the distance between cases (Tryfos, 1997).

While there are many methods for clustering (K-means and Hierarchical, for example), the author will use the SPSS two-step cluster analysis. Unlike hierarchical or K-Means clustering, the two step cluster analysis clusters to be formed on the basis of categorical (a variable based on non-metric data) and continuous (a variable with an infinite number of attributes) variables (Norušis, 2007). Furthermore, the method automatically determines the optimal number of clusters to be formed (Norušis, 2007). SPSS generates bar charts and cross tabulations showing the distribution of each categorical variable within the cluster (Norušis, 2007). For continuous variables, the software shows plots of *t* statistics that compare the mean of the variable in the cluster to the overall mean (Norušis, 2007).

Creating new variables

The variables totalux, totalemo and totalmemo

The author took the initiative to aggregate the data collected from the questions focusing on senses and emotions in order to facilitate its analysis. Respondents have been asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 10 the extent to which taste, touch and scent contributed to make the overall experience, luxurious, emotionally intense and memorable. Ratings have been added and recoded into three new variables called ‘Totalux’, ‘Totalemo’ and ‘Totalmemo’. Creating these coefficients was made possible by the fact all the questions had been designed in the same fashion, one which included a measurement scale from one to ten.

Ctouch, Csmell and Ctaste

The coefficients 'Ctouch', 'Csmell' and 'Ctaste' have been created by adding the answers to the three scales included in each question focusing on senses. Each scale respectively measured the extent to which the sense under study contributed to make the experience luxurious, emotionally intense and memorable (which were used to create 'Totalux', 'Totalemo' and 'Totalmemo').

'Extselfindividual' and 'Extselfgroup'

In relation to the questions related to senses and emotions, the data from questions on the interpersonal effect of luxury consumption was recoded to facilitate its analysis. Two new variables were created, which are 'Extselfindividual' and 'Extselfgroup'. The first variable is an aggregate of the data collected through the questions focusing on the self-concept. The second variable gathered data from questions dealing with the interpersonal aspect of luxury consumption. Scores from 'Extselfindividual' are considerably lower than scores from 'Extselfgroup', as the former is made of answers to three questions and the later five questions.

For each question, participants rated their agreement on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Consequently, the lower the overall 'Extselfindividual' score is, the more the participant is concerned with his extended self. The lower the overall 'Extselfgroup' score is, the more the participant is concerned with the interpersonal aspect of experiential consumption. Values obtained for the two variables range from 3 to 25.

Table 1- Different variables created to facilitate the analysis

Variable	Made from the answers to questions
Ctaste	10b / 10c / 10d
Ctouch	11b / 11c / 11d
Csmell	12b / 12c / 12d
Totalux	10b /11b / 12b
Totalemo	10c /11c / 12c
Totalmemo	10d / 11d / 12d
Extselfindividual	17a / 17b / 17c
Extselfgroup	17d / 17e /17f /17g /17h

Statistical analysis

Thus far, this part has looked at how the data will be to be analysed. The following paragraphs will proceed with the statistical analysis itself. Findings pertaining to the newness of process as well as correlations between luxury, emotions, sensory outputs and memories stem from the analysis of the first set of data. Analysis of the second set of data collected will look at how consuming a luxury impacts a participants' self-concept.

Newness of perception and process

			The fact that I experienced new things... The new experience...			Total
			Made the activity exceptional; I will remember it forever	Contributed to making the activity more enjoyable	Did not influence whatsoever how much I enjoyed the activity	
This activity... Activity: f('hC1St')f('hsq1bPipe').valueLabel()f('hC1En')	Was something I had never done before	Count	41	19	1	61
		% within This activity... Activity: f('hC1St')f('hsq1bPipe').valueLabel()f('hC1En')	67.2%	31.1%	1.6%	100.0%
		% within The fact that I experienced new things... The new experience...	43.2%	17.3%	100.0%	29.6%
	I have done something similar before, but most of the things	Count	27	19	0	46

		% within This activity... Activity: f('hC1St')f('hsq1bPipe').valueLabel()f('hC1En')	58.7%	41.3%	.0%	100.0%
		% within The fact that I experienced new things... The new experience...	28.4%	17.3%	.0%	22.3%
	I have done something similar before, and some of the things	Count	27	72	0	99
		% within This activity... Activity: f('hC1St')f('hsq1bPipe').valueLabel()f('hC1En')	27.3%	72.7%	.0%	100.0%
		% within The fact that I experienced new things... The new experience...	28.4%	65.5%	.0%	48.1%
Total		Count	95	110	1	206
		% within This activity... Activity: f('hC1St')f('hsq1bPipe').valueLabel()f('hC1En')	46.1%	53.4%	.5%	100.0%
		% within The fact that I experienced new things... The new experience...	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 2. Cross tabulation – Newness of perception of process

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	31.308[a]	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	32.228	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	23.226	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	206		

a. 3 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .22.

Table 3 – Chi-square tests relevant to table 2

This table presents the frequencies that pertain to the newness of the experience. The rows show the extent to which participants were new to the experience. The columns show how the newness of the experience contributed to the participants' enjoyment. Table 2 indicates that frequencies presented on Table 1 are reliable (Asymp. Sig..000); that is, the phenomena observed are based on statistical evidence and not simply on chance.

Overall, almost all the participants (99.5%) believe that experiencing something new contributed to make the activity more enjoyable or even exceptional. Furthermore, a majority of participants who rated the experience as completely new (67.2%) or mostly new (58.7%) agreed to say that the newness made the experience exceptional and unforgettable. 72.7% of participants for whom the experience included only *some* new components, declared that this components contributed to make the experience more enjoyable, but not exceptional. This could suggest that one's excitement towards the experience tends to decrease when repeating something mostly similar.

The researcher ran a cluster analysis in order to investigate further if any relationship existed between a participant's perception of newness of the experience and other variables measuring the results from this experience. The categorical variable considered was the first question of the survey. This question established the extent to which the activity is new for the participants (ranging from 'Was something I had never done before' to 'This activity is something I do on a regular basis'). Continuous variables are data collected through the questions that focused on the polysensual aspect of the experience.

The continuous variables first considered in the analysis were all the variables created by aggregating data from different questions ('Totalux', 'Totalemo' and so forth). Patterns observed using these variables were similar to the ones described below but the overall analysis lacked statistical significance (Asymp. Sig. was .113). Only 'Extselfindividual' and 'Extselfgroup' will finally be used to illustrate phenomena pertaining to the enhancement of one's self-concept.

SPSS created the three clusters summarized below.

Cluster	Mostly composed of participants who answered
1	I have done something similar before, and most/some of the things I experienced were new to me
2	Was something I had never done before
3	I have done something similar before, but some of the things I experienced were new to me/ This activity is something I do on a regular basis

Table 4 – Composition of the three clusters created by SPSS

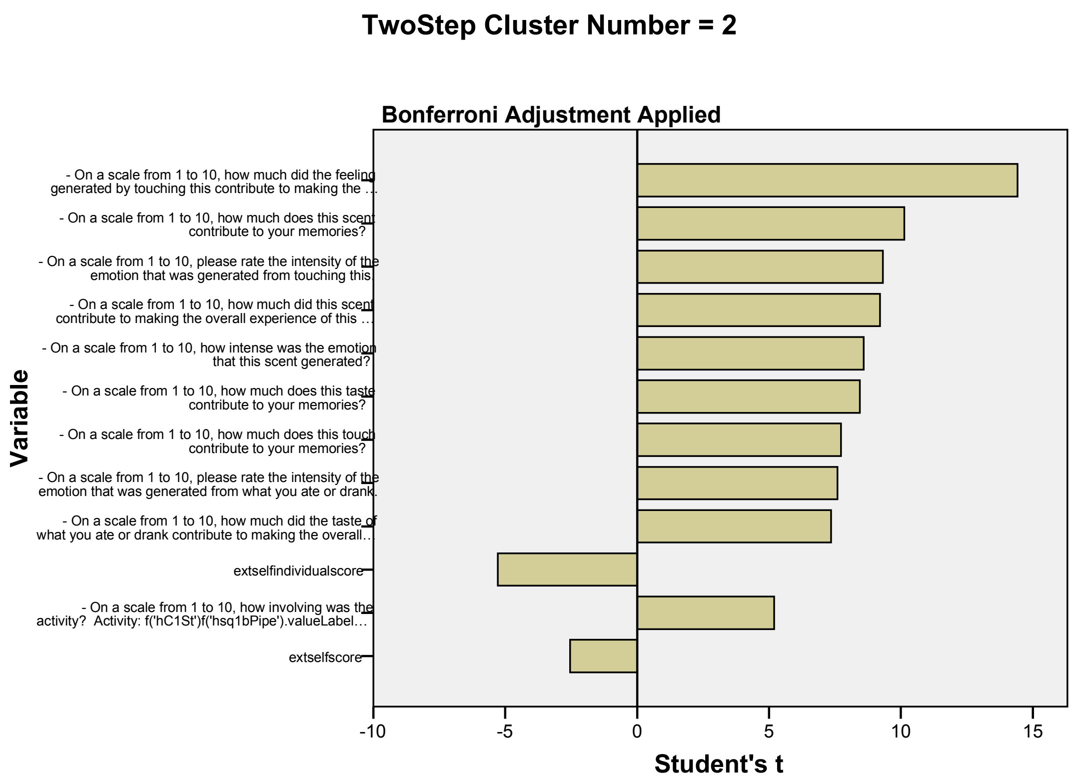


Diagram 1 - Graphic representation of the experiential outputs Reported by the members of cluster 2

Members of cluster two, for whom the experience was completely new, seem to have been much more impressed than the average participant (the ‘0’ line) with the senses derived from the experience and their contribution to the resulting perception of luxury, emotions and memories. On the other hand, these individuals appear to be less concerned with enhancing their self-concept on both individual and collective levels.

Members of cluster one, for whom the experience was mostly but not completely new, rated the different outputs from the experience as below average (between –2 and –2.5). Furthermore, they appear to have been overall less involved in the activity (-2). However, these individuals were more concerned than average with enhancing their self-concept on both an individual and collective level.

Members of cluster three, who were already familiar with the type of experience in which they partook, rated the different outputs tested as well below average (between –3 and –15). Furthermore, they were even less involved in the activity than the members of the first two clusters (-5). On the other hand, these individuals appeared to be more concerned than the others with the contribution the activity made to enhancing their individual and collective self. Another type of graphic that should be looked at is the variation within clusters.

Simultaneous 95% Confidence Intervals for Means

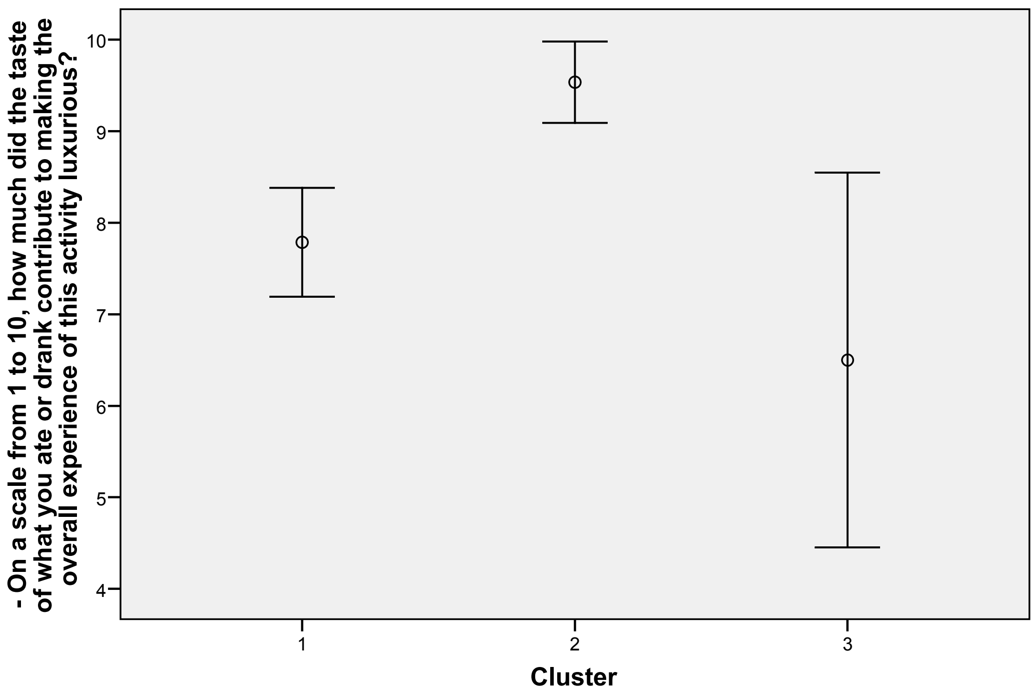


Diagram 2 – Variation within clusters for question 10b

This shows the highest, the lowest and the average numeric value of a given variables within each cluster. While the diagram above is just an example (all the diagrams featured in Appendix 1 show similar patterns), it clearly highlights that members of cluster two (for whom the experience was new) agreed overall on the extent to which taste contributed to making the experience feel luxurious. Indeed, the lowest rating they reported was 9 and the highest was 10. Variations are almost as low within cluster two, where the difference between the lowest and the highest rating is 1.25. In contrast, the highest variations for all the variables under study can be found in cluster three. While some members of this cluster still feel very content with the luxurious feeling derived from the experience (8.5), others rated this output fairly low (-4).

A final phenomenon that pertains to the newness of the experience was brought to light by the analysis of the answers given to an open-ended question. This question gathered verbatim what participants would have to change to make the next experience more enjoyable or as enjoyable as the first time (question 6). Almost a third of respondents (29%) used words that described a similar experience. 12.1% of participants suggested that 'more' (things or people') could be added (see Appendix 4).

Correlation between luxury, emotions, memories and sensory output

Another part of the analysis conducted looked at the possible correlation between the variables 'Totalux', 'Totalemo' and 'Totalemo'. Any possible correlation between the variables has been tested using the Pearson correlation's coefficient.

Correlations

		Totalux	Totalemo
Totalux	Pearson Correlation	1	.921(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	83	83
Totalemo	Pearson Correlation	.921(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	83	83

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5 – Pearson's correlation coefficient betweenthe variables 'Totalux' and 'Totalemo'

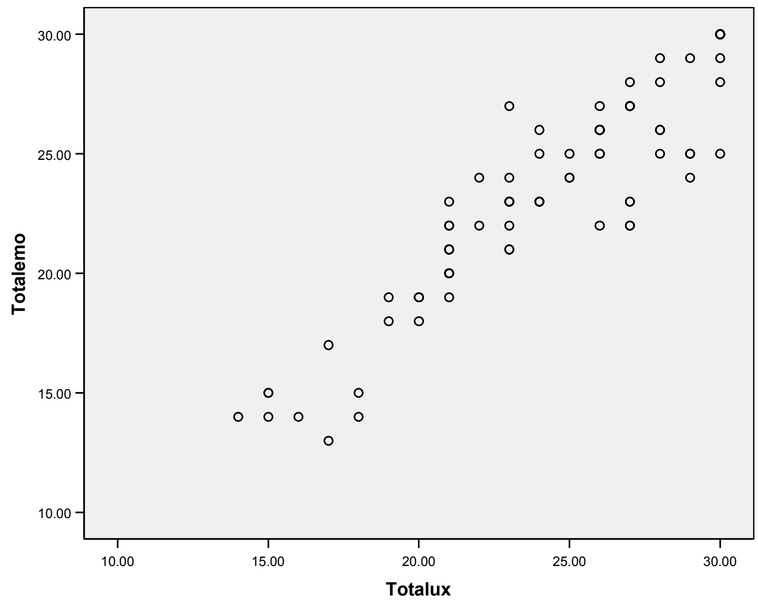


Diagram 3 – Scatterdots diagram illustrating this correlation

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.959	2

Table 6 – Crombach's Alpha calculated for this correlation

An inference from this analysis is the high correlation between the perception of luxury and emotions (.921). Indeed, the scatter dots diagram illustrates that the more the experience is emotionally intense, the more luxurious it feels. Calculation of the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient emphasized the reliability of this correlation (.959). The same high correlation has been identified between the recollection of emotions and memories recalled (see Appendix 5); the Pearson's coefficient of 'Totalux' and 'Totalmemo' is .876. Finally, the analysis brings to light a slightly lower yet significant relationship between the perception of luxury and memories recalled (Pearson's coefficient is .867). The Cronbach's Alpha calculated for these two correlations denotes a high reliability in both cases (respectively .927 and .933).

Correlation between sensory outputs, emotions, memories and luxury

The relevant outputs from SPSS for this paragraph can be found in Appendix 6.

The author next investigated possible correlations between different senses and the notion of luxury, emotions and memories. The Pearson correlation's coefficient was also the approach of choice for testing these correlations. The first observation is that correlations between the variables tested were significantly high overall. Indeed, even the lowest correlation observed, which was between 'Totalmemo' and 'Ctaste' (.791) is clearly higher than guidelines used by researchers to deem a correlation significant. Furthermore, the population surveyed seems to associate the notion of luxury predominantly to the sense of smell (.870), even if taste and touch also play an important role (respectively .835 and .854). In contrast, intense emotions seem to be mostly associated with the sense of touch (.908). The correlation between emotions and smell and taste appears to be much weaker (respectively .853 and .800), although significant. Finally, memories seem primarily associated with touch (.885), along with smell and taste (.845 and .791). All thee variables were also tested in comparison to the involvement in the experience ('On a scale from 1 to 10, how involving was the activity?'). This calculation failed bringing to light any significant correlation between any of the variables (the highest Pearson's coefficient being .604).

Self-concept

The following set of analysis concentrates on the extent to which the activity contributed to enhancing one's individual and collective self. This data was collected through the second questionnaire, which was fielded in February 2008. The relevant outputs from SPSS for this paragraph can be found in Appendix 7.

The cluster analysis below reveals a link between participants' internet usage and the extent to which going through a luxurious event contributes to enhancing their self-concept (see Appendix 7.1).

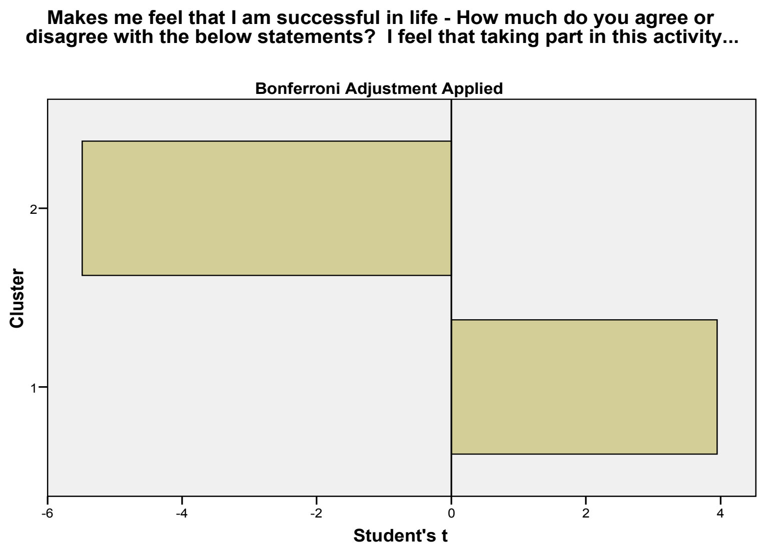


Diagram 3 – Cluster analysis – Internet usage and self-concept

Members of cluster two, made up of only frequent users (people using internet several times a day), are less concerned with impressing others and feeling unique and successful. Conversely, members of cluster one (that includes some frequent users but also all the participants who access internet less than one time a day), are more concerned with consuming conspicuously and enhancing their self-concept through a luxury experience.

A similar correlation can be seen between the time one spends watching TV and the contribution that luxury makes to his self-concept (see Appendix 7.2). A second cluster analysis distinguished three groups of participants. Members of cluster two typically spent less than ten hours a week watching TV. Most members of cluster one spend ten to 19 hours a week in front of their TV set. The heaviest users who watch TV between 20 and 39 hours a week are regrouped in cluster three. In line with findings linked to internet usage, the more one watches TV, the less he is concerned with the contribution luxury events make to his self-concept. On the other hand, participants who spend less time watching TV seem to enjoy the contribution luxury makes to helping them feel successful and unique.

A participant's desire to enhance of his self-concept can be linked to the environment in which he lives (see Appendix 7.3). A last cluster analysis differentiated people living in a major city (cluster two), from individuals living in a smaller city (cluster one) or a rural area (cluster three). The bigger the city is, the less people seem impressed with the contribution that luxurious events make to their self-concept. Conversely, participants living in the most remote areas are more concerned with the feelings of success and uniqueness.

Other significant findings

Finally, potential drawbacks to consuming luxuries can be linked to the frequency with which one goes through luxury experiences (see Appendix 7.4). SPSS created three clusters according to how many times participants took part in a luxurious activity over the last 12 months. The less often people take part in luxurious experiences, the more they felt guilty about spending money on luxuries and believed that doing so is morally wrong. These individuals also feel more intimidated by luxurious places and believe that consuming luxuries requires training and holding specific knowledge. At the other hand of the spectrum, members of cluster 2, who went through luxury events four times or more over the last 12 months, fell less guilty and do not seem to recognize the importance holding any specific knowledge to enjoy luxury.

Discussion

To sum up, the first set of analysis conducted verified findings from previous research. A link has been highlighted between the newness of the experience and the intensity of the resulting emotions, memories and senses. Indeed, this link has already been suggested in many papers concerned with the experiential aspect of consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982b; Mano and Oliver, 1993; Schmitt, 1999; Caru and Cova, 2003).

A second questionnaire administered to the same participants allowed the author to uncover new and useful knowledge. A link has been identified between the extent to which one is exposed to media (specifically the internet and TV) and the contribution luxury makes to his self-concept. A correlation also exists between this impact of luxury consumption on one's self-concept and the environment in which he lives. Finally, the feelings of guilt and shyness seem to fade when luxury is consumed more often.

The most influential papers looking at the enhancement of one's self-concept (Nail, 1986; Belk 1988) and conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899; Nicosia 1966; Mason 1981, 1984, 1985) were all published more than 25 years ago. At the time, people were mostly concerned with acquiring luxury goods that would contribute to 'extending' their self-concept and consuming these products conspicuously in order to differentiate themselves from others. Participants to this research project are different in many ways from individuals surveyed by Belk and other scholars. Americans are now overwhelmed with information delivered through the internet, the 500 TV channels available and all sorts of other communication channels ranging from word of mouth marketing to road shows. The findings of this paper corroborates Morisson's argument and contrast with the traditional theories described above; that is, these consumers are more concerned by the experiential aspect of luxury consumption than the product itself.

The correlation between living environment and the impact of luxury on one's self-concept can be looked at through the lens of social constructionism and social psychology. Indeed, the participants involved in this research project most likely built their relationship to luxury through interactions with other individuals and groups in the community they live in. Besides interacting in person, these internet users (all the participants) might also be members of online communities or social networking websites (such as ‘Linkedin’ or ‘Facebook’). Perhaps membership in these virtual communities also contributes to shape participants’ self-concept. Further research should be conducted in this direction, as the present questionnaire did not investigate these online communities. With the exception of the key findings described above, the analysis of the data did not identify any other strong patterns of beliefs and behaviour towards luxury. Indeed, different participants seem to hold individual definitions of what a luxurious event is.

These findings must now be reflected in the concept framework of the research project (see Appendix 8). An important dimension of the first two versions of this conceptual framework was the ordinary, utilitarian experience. Although the consumption of utilities has never been the focus of the research project, it helped to define and to differentiate luxury consumption. At this stage of the research project, mentioning utilitarian consumption is no longer necessary. The revised framework should only concentrate on the subject matter under study.

The new revised conceptual framework acknowledges that every individual holds his own definition of what luxury is and enables. Socio-demographic background, social interactions and media exposure greatly contribute to shaping this definition and determining some of one’s motivations for engaging in luxury consumption. Going through a luxurious event generates emotions, memories and sensory outputs of various intensities. In certain cases, consuming luxuries might also cause someone to have feelings of guilt and of intimidation.

Concluding remarks and limitations

This document focused on identifying patterns in participants' beliefs and behaviour towards luxury experiences. It also allows the author to verify the findings from previous research.

The paper first looked at two dimensions that strongly pertain to the project, social contstructionism and social psychology. The document then determined the theoretical framework best adapted to addressing the research question. The third part justified the choice of the method adopted to collect data and detailed how the research would be conducted from a technical standpoint. After being collected, this data has been analysed using the appropriate statistical tools. Finally, a discussion looked at how findings from this piece of research relate to the literature relevant to the project. The conceptual framework has now been revised to reflect the new and useful knowledge uncovered.

In conclusion, investigating people's beliefs and attitudes towards luxury quantitatively has been very challenging because every one of us can hold our own definition of the construct. Academics involved in studying consumer behaviour towards luxury must take into account the multitude of factors that contribute to shaping one's definition of the concept. From a methodological standpoint, constructionists theories and qualitative methods seem best suited to investigate this topic. Practitioners who market luxury products or services must acknowledge that their audience holds numerous definitions of luxury. Their message and offering must be personalised in order to be relevant to consumers.

Limitation of quantitative research

First, quantitative research does not distinguish people from the 'world of nature' (Schutz, 1962). Schutz argues that positivism (quantitative research) ignores the fact that people make sense of the world around them, whereas objects of the natural sciences do not have this capacity for self reflection (Bryman and Bell, 2003). Another criticism of quantitative research suggests that measures developed by researchers are artificially connected to the concepts they are supposed to reveal. Blumer contends that analysing relationships between variables omits 'the process of interpretation that goes on in human groups' (1956:685). In other words, people who took part in the study did not actually produce the relationships identified between variables. Furthermore, the measurement process assumes that different members of a sample interpret the question similarly. For Cicourel (1964), different individuals simply do not interpret the same question the same way.

The ecological validity of quantitative research can also be debated. While this study relied on a self-completion questionnaire, one could argue that all the respondents might not hold the requisite knowledge to answer a specific question. Furthermore, one cannot be certain that the topic is similarly important in the every day life of the different respondents (Cicourel, 1982). The time frame in which participants took part in the experience could have been narrower (for example, part taking in an experience 'within the last two weeks' or 'last January'). Some participants might have gone through the experience last month while others reflected on something that happened more than 11 months ago. While one's recollection of an experience is likely to differ and fade overtime, the analysis had to deal with all the cases in the same way. One can question how accurately participants recall emotions, as these emotions are known to vary across time and events (Farber and Hall, 2007).

Another limitation of this piece of research is its potential replication. Any researcher trying to replicate this study could challenge the way in which answers to open-ended questions have been coded. It is at the discretion of the researcher to decide how many categories should be created and the fashion in which words should be allocated to one category or the other. Vaki et al. (2000) contends that 'items vary in the intensity to which they belong to different categories, even when the categories are distinct and well defined'. When conducting research on a similar topic, Dubois et al. (2001) also noticed that a given response might belong simultaneously to several response categories. For example, one could argue if the word 'tropical' should be categorised as 'outdoor/landscape' or 'Décor/Atmosphere ambience'. Alternatively, one could decide to create a new category that could be called 'destination'.

Finally, some practitioners argue that participants might say something but think differently. For Zaltman (2003), the reason why most new products or services fail within the first six months is because people surveyed fail to formulate what they really think or feel. In this study, most individuals believe that repeating the experience would be as enjoyable, but measures of their emotions and senses indicate otherwise. As noted previously, this contradiction will receive more attention at the next stage of the research project.

Looking forward to document 5

So far, this research project has allowed the author to gain an understanding of *what* were the dimensions of a luxurious event and to identify patterns of beliefs and behaviour towards the concept under study. Findings from this document suggest the need for further research on different topics surrounding the consumption of luxuries. First, the importance of polysensuality and emotions associated to the experience deserves more attention. Instead of investigating only a few sensory elements drawn from a wide range of activities (as in this document), one could consider studying an extensive range of sensory components and emotions derived from a given hedonic experience. This avenue should be explored from a practitioner's standpoint, as conducting such research might not be relevant at doctoral level. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how the researcher would go beyond listing different sensory cues relevant to a specific experience. Another avenue for research would be to investigate the sense making process people go through to define luxury. This question will be addressed through document five. The data will be gathered through one-to-one, in-depth interviews, which seems to be the best and most appropriate method of investigating this rather subjective topic. Document five will also gather all the knowledge gained since the beginning of the research project and propose a final conceptual framework. Document six will consist of a reflection on the journey towards completing the degree of Doctor of Business Administration

Reflective critique

Overall, conducting quantitative research has been a challenging experience. This part looks at how the research process could be improved if it had to be repeated.

Narrowing the time frame within which participants engaged in the experience would have allowed the researcher to adopt a different research design. Referred to as longitudinal design (Bryman and Bell, 2003), this research design would have allowed for the tracking of respondents at different points in time. The researcher could then have analysed how their recollection of the experience evolved.

Despite giving a lot of thoughts to the design of the questionnaire and consulting with practitioners, some questions lacked usefulness and relevance to the study. Questions pertaining to the theme of communitas for example did not allow the researcher to identify any interesting phenomenon. Furthermore, the types of experiences used to screen respondents could have been more precisely defined. First, physically demanding experiences could have been discerned from non-demanding activities. Each category would then have contained a wider range of experiences (for example, a dozen instead of five). This might have allowed phenomena specific to each type of experience to be brought to light.

While English is the United States official language, Spanish is spoken at home by more than 28 million people aged five and over (Shin and Bruno, 2003). In these households, Spanish is spoken as the mother tongue and English a second language. One could argue that it is more challenging for a participant to relate his emotions in a language that is not his mother tongue; the data collected is less likely to reflect what the participant really feels. Administering the questionnaire in two languages could have allowed participants more fluent in Spanish to provide richer verbatim, revealing their emotions more accurately.

A significant body of practitioners argues that online panels provided by different vendors are inconsistent. That is, a given panel could be biased towards female while another could be skewed towards a younger audience. A way of accessing a more homogeneous sample would be to blend several panels instead of only using Research Now's 'Valued Opinions'. Blending different panels would imply dealing with different vendors and complicate the hosting of the questionnaire and the fieldwork. Most importantly, the cost of collecting data would be much higher as every vendor would charge a setup fee as well as a minimum project fee.

Reflecting on the statistical analysis, all the conclusions are based on univariate and bivariate interpretation of the data. Using multivariate analysis could have shed light on relationships between three or more variables. For example, there might be a relationship between the age of the participant, his perception of newness of the experience and the extent to which it fulfils his extended self. Multivariate analysis is more complicated to implement and require advanced statistical knowledge. Given the fact that this project had to be completed in only a few months, the researcher did not have enough time to acquire the necessary expertise. To sum up, implementing these different ideas would have been possible if more time and money could have been allocated to this project.

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Appendix 1 – First questionnaire (June 2007)

Invitations:

A questionnaire about luxurious activities (holidays, restaurants, sports, leisure…)

Questionnaire

Thanks for taking the time to participate to this survey. This study aims at finding out more about your feelings and emotions for luxury. By taking part, you will contribute to a doctoral research project about luxuries.

S1. Which, if any, of the following activities have you participated in, in the past 12 months?

Going to a spa	1
Going on a luxurious vacation	2
Going to an up-scale restaurant	3
Taking part in a luxurious sport or leisure activity (such as flying an airplane, sailing on a yacht)	4
Taking part in any other activity that you would qualify as luxurious	5
Did not take part in any luxurious activity	6 = EXIT SURVEY

<u>Part 1 – Verifying findings from document 3 among a larger group</u>

Newness of perception and process

1. This activity…

Was something I had never done before	1
I have done something similar before, but most of the things I experienced were new to me	2
I have done something similar before, and some of the things I experienced were new to me	3
This activity is something I do on a regular basis	4

(Skip Q.2 if Code 4 at Q.1)

2. The fact that I experienced new things…
The new experience…

Made the activity exceptional; I will remember it forever	1
Contributed to making the activity more enjoyable	2
Did not influence whatsoever how much I enjoyed the activity	3

(Ask All)

3. Before engaging in this activity

I conducted thorough research, and knew exactly what I was going to experience	1
I knew to some extent what I was going to experience, but did not plan the activity precisely	2
I had no idea what the experience was going to be like; I had no agenda	3

(Ask only those who select codes 2 or 3 at Q.3, otherwise Skip to Q.7)

4. The fact that I did not plan everything precisely made the whole experience…

(Programmer: Rotate Order)

Stressful	1
Extraordinary	2
Exciting	3
Sad	4
Regretful	5
Genuine	6
Annoying	7
Surprising	8

5. If I participated in the exact same activity again…

I would enjoy it more than the first time	1
I would enjoy it as much as I did the first time	2
I would still enjoy it, but slightly less than the first time	3
I would enjoy it significantly less than the first time	4
I would not enjoy it at all	5

6. What would you change about the experience, to make it feel as enjoyable as, or more enjoyable than, the first time?

(Open ended)

Communitas

7. I experienced this activity…

On my own	1
With a friend	2
With a group of friends	3
With a member of my family or my partner	4
With several members of my family	5
With a group that involved both family members and friends	6

8. Once there,

I made a new friend	1
I met several people and we ended up as a group of friends	2
I had a romantic encounter	3
I did not meet anyone in particular there	4

(Ask Q.9 as long as did not answer Code 1 at Q.7 AND Code 4 at Q.8)

9a. Sharing the activity with someone, or a group…

Was the most important thing, it is what made the experience so enjoyable	1
Was important, but other components were more important	2
Did not affect the experience either way, neither positively nor negatively	3
I would have enjoyed the experience more if I had been on my own	4

9b. Furthermore…

This activity felt more luxurious because I shared it with someone/a group	1
This activity felt less luxurious because I shared it with someone/a group	2
Luxury has nothing to do with sharing this activity with someone/a group	3

2 Measuring sensitive responses and emotions

Polysensuality

10a. Did you have the opportunity during this experience to eat or drink something that you would qualify as luxurious?

Yes	1
No	2 (Skip to Q.11)

10b. On a scale from 1 to 10, how much did this taste contribute to make the overall experience of this activity luxurious?

1 (Did Not Contribute at All) 10 (Contributed Greatly)

10c. On a scale from 1 to 10, how intense was the emotion that this taste generated?

1 (Not Intense at All) 10 (Extremely Intense)

10d. On a scale from 1 to 10, how much does this taste contribute to your memories?

1 (Does not contribute at all to my memories) 10 (Contributes a Great Deal to my Memories)

11a. Did you touch anything (i.e: a towel, the leather of a chair) that you would qualify as luxurious?

Yes 1
No 2 (Skip to Q.12)

11b. On a scale from 1 to 10, how much did this touch contribute to making the overall experience of this activity luxurious?
1 (Did Not Contribute at All) 10 (Contributed Greatly)
11c. On a scale from 1 to 10, how intense was the emotion that this touch generated?
1 (Not Intense at All) 10 (Extremely Intense)
12d. On a scale from 1 to 10, how much does this touch contribute to your memories?
1 (Does not contribute at all to my memories) 10 (Contributes a Great Deal to my Memories)

12a. Thinking about the scents and the odors, do you remember smelling anything that you would associate with luxury?

Yes 1
No 2 (Skip to Q.13)

12b. On a scale from 1 to 10, how much did this scent contribute to making the overall experience of this activity luxurious?
1 (Did Not Contribute at All) 10 (Contributed Greatly)
12c. On a scale from 1 to 10, how intense was the emotion that this scent generated?
1 (Not Intense at All) 10 (Extremely Intense)
12d. On a scale from 1 to 10, how much does this scent contribute to your memories?
1 (Does not contribute at all to my memories) 10 (Contributes a Great Deal to my Memories)

13 Thinking about this overall experience, what words would be best associated with luxury

1. open ended Word 1
2. open ended Word 2
3. open ended Word 3

14 Thinking about this overall experience, what words would best describe your feelings

1. open ended Word 1
2. open ended Word 2
3. open ended Word 3

Involvement/ Deep interest

15 On a scale from 1 to 10, how physically demanding was this activity?

1- No physical activity was required
10 – The activity was physically very intense, beyond my limits

16 On a scale from 1 to 10, how involving was the activity?

1 - I did not pay much attention
10 - I was completely absorbed

The interpersonal effect of luxury consumption

17 Taking part in this activity

For each item:
1 strongly agree
2 agree
3 neither agree nor disagree
4 disagree
5 strongly disagree

17a Positively contributes to my personality
17b Makes me feel unique
17c Makes me feel that I am successful in life
17d Allowed me to reach a higher social status and distinguish myself from people in the lower classes of society

17e Allowed me to impress my friends and relatives
17f Allowed me to differentiate myself from people in the lower classes of society
17g Enabled me to copy what my friends/relatives do
17h Enabled me to copy what the elites I admire do

17i By taking part in this activity, I was neither trying to impress nor trying to copy anyone. I just wanted to enjoy something different from my daily routine

Drawbacks to consuming luxuries/ Knowledge

18 About consuming luxuries in general

For each item:
1 strongly agree
2 agree
3 neither agree nor disagree
4 disagree
5 strongly disagree

18a I think it is morally wrong to spend money on such luxury, while many people cannot even afford shelter
18b I feel guilty because I believe I should spend this money towards something more important (i.e. my child's education, my retirement).
18c I feel a bit guilty, but I'd rather not to think about it
18d I do not feel guilty at all

18e I think luxurious places are intimidating
18f I think consuming luxuries requires some specific knowledge/training

20 Are you

1 Male
2 Female

21 Are you

1 Married
2 Single
3 Divorced
4 Widowed
5 Living with partner
6 Living with parents

22 How old are you?

1 20-24
2 25-29
3 30-34
4 35-40

Appendix 2 – Second questionnaire (February 2008)

1 How much time do you spend watching TV in a week?

☐ I don't watch TV ☐ 20-30 hours
☐ 0-5 hours ☐ 30-40 hours
☐ 5-10 hours ☐ 40-50 hours
☐ 10-20 hours ☐ Over 50 hours

2 How often do you access the internet?

☐ Several times a day
☐ Roughly every day
☐ Several times a week but less than every day
☐ About once a week
☐ At least once a month but less than once a week
☐ Less than once a month
☐ Not sure

3 How many times did you take part in a luxurious activity over the last 12 months?

☐ 1 ☐ 4
☐ 2 ☐ 5 or more
☐ 3

4 Do you live?
In a major city (i.e: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago…) or its suburbs
In a smaller city or its suburbs
In a rural area

5 Is your habitation?
A House
A Condominium/apartment
Other

6 Do you

Own this property and don't repay any mortgage?
Own this property and repay a mortgage?
Rent ?
Live with your parents/family/ significant other?

7 Please select the highest level of education you have attained to date:

- ☐ 11th grade or lower
- ☐ High school graduate
- ☐ Some college, no degree
- ☐ Associate degree or equivalent
- ☐ Bachelor's degree or equivalent
- ☐ Master's degree or equivalent
- ☐ Doctorate
- ☐ Professional degree
- ☐ Other

8 Please select the highest level of education <u>the most educated of your parents</u> have attained to date:

- ☐ 11th grade or lower
- ☐ High school graduate
- ☐ Some college, no degree
- ☐ Associate degree or equivalent
- ☐ Bachelor's degree or equivalent
- ☐ Master's degree or equivalent
- ☐ Doctorate
- ☐ Professional degree
- ☐ Other

9 What is your occupation?

- ☐ Chairman / Board Member
- ☐ Company Owner / Founder / Partner
- ☐ Chief Executive / President
- ☐ CFO / Treasurer / Controller
- ☐ CIO / CTO
- ☐ Senior Vice President
- ☐ Vice President
- ☐ Senior Manager / Senior Associate
- ☐ Manager / Associate
- ☐ Assistant VP
- ☐ Assistant Director / Assistant Manager
- ☐ Supervisor
- ☐ Tradesman / Technical Specialist
- ☐ Other office/non-manual position (non-managerial)

- Managing Director / General Manager
- Department Head / Director
- Other skilled manual (non-managerial)
- Other

10 How many children do you financially support?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 or more

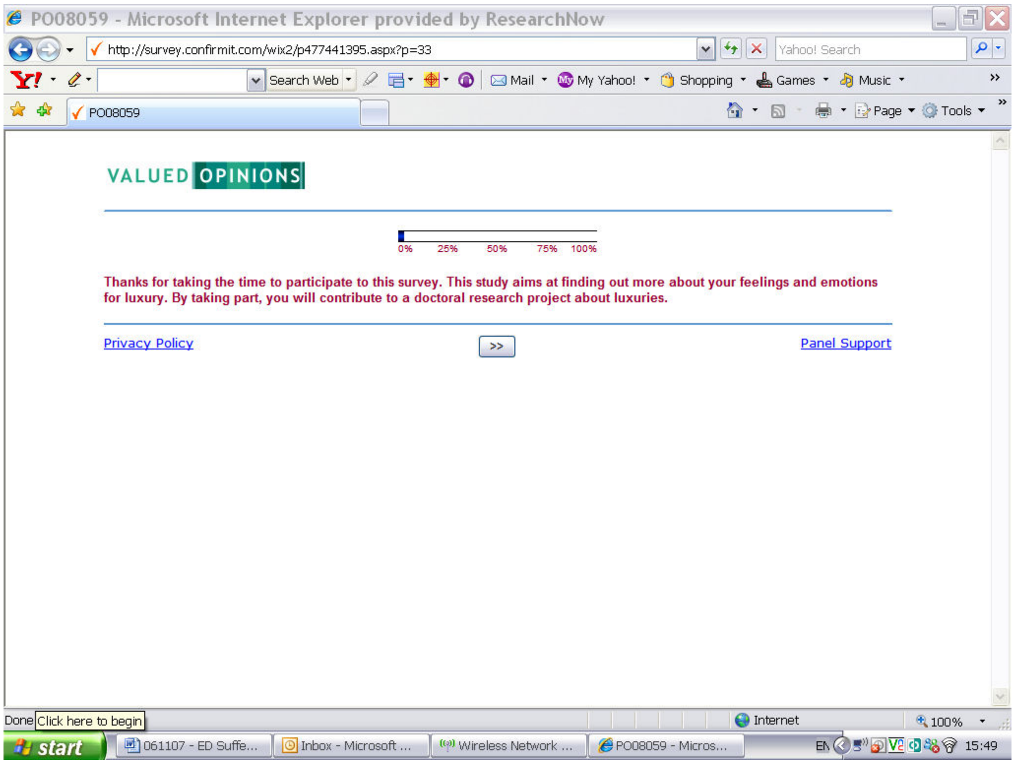
11 What are your ethnic origins?

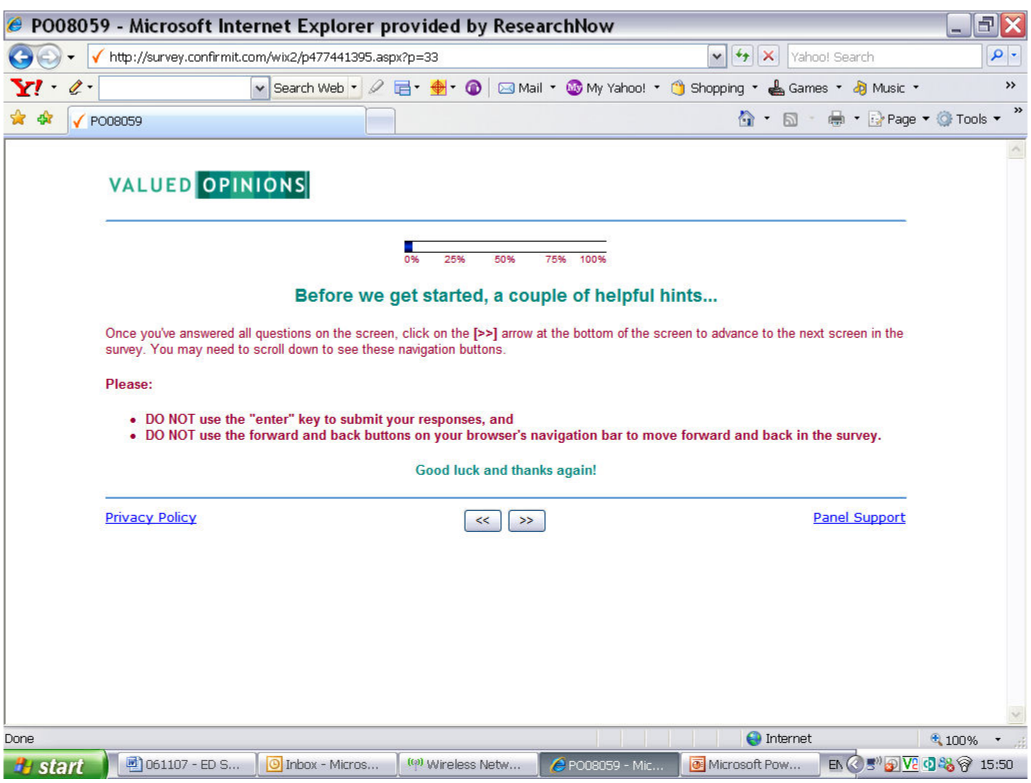
- Caucasian (Non-Hispanic)
- African American/Black
- Latino / Hispanic
- Native American
- East Asian / Pacific Islander
- Sub-continental Asian (from the region of India or Pakistan)
- Middle-Eastern / North African
- Multiracial
- Would rather not say

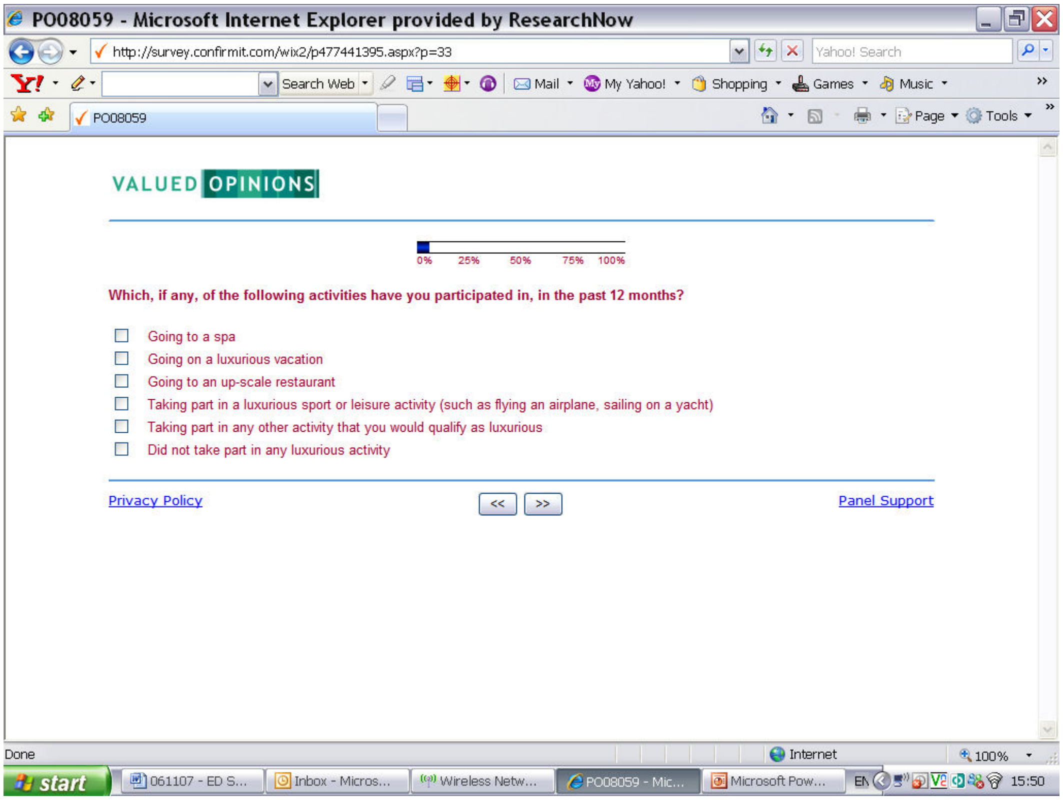
12 What is your annual household income?

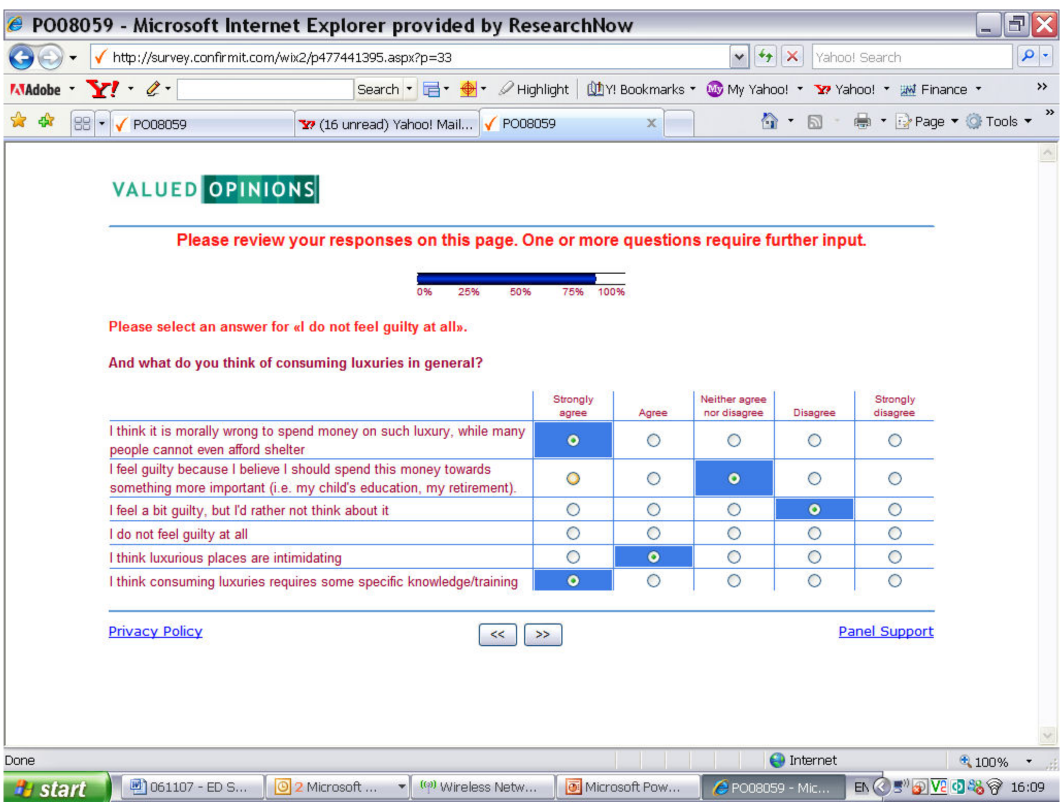
- Under $20,000
- $20,000 to $29,999
- $30,000 to $39,999
- $40,000 to $49,999
- $50,000 to $59,999
- $60,000 to $69,999
- $70,000 to $79,999
- $80,000 to $89,999
- $90,000 to $99,999
- $100,000 to $119,999
- $120,000 to $149,999
- $150,000 to $199,999
- Over $200,000
- Would rather not say

Appendix 3 – The online survey






P008059 - Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by ResearchNow
http://survey.confirmit.com/wix2/p477441395.aspx?p=33
VALUED OPINIONS
0% 25% 50% 75% 100%
Which, if any, of the following activities have you participated in, in the past 12 months?
Going to a spa
Going on a luxurious vacation
Going to an up-scale restaurant
Taking part in a luxurious sport or leisure activity (such as flying an airplane, sailing on a yacht)
Taking part in any other activity that you would qualify as luxurious
Did not take part in any luxurious activity
Privacy Policy
Panel Support
Done
Internet
start
15:50


P008059 - Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by ResearchNow
http://survey.confirmit.com/wix2/p477441395.aspx?p=33
VALUED OPINIONS
Please review your responses on this page. One or more questions require further input.
0% 25% 50% 75% 100%
Please select an answer for «I do not feel guilty at all».
And what do you think of consuming luxuries in general?
Strongly agree
Agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Disagree
Strongly disagree
I think it is morally wrong to spend money on such luxury, while many people cannot even afford shelter
I feel guilty because I believe I should spend this money towards something more important (i.e. my child's education, my retirement).
I feel a bit guilty, but I'd rather not think about it
I do not feel guilty at all
I think luxurious places are intimidating
I think consuming luxuries requires some specific knowledge/training
Privacy Policy
Panel Support
Done
Internet
start
16:09

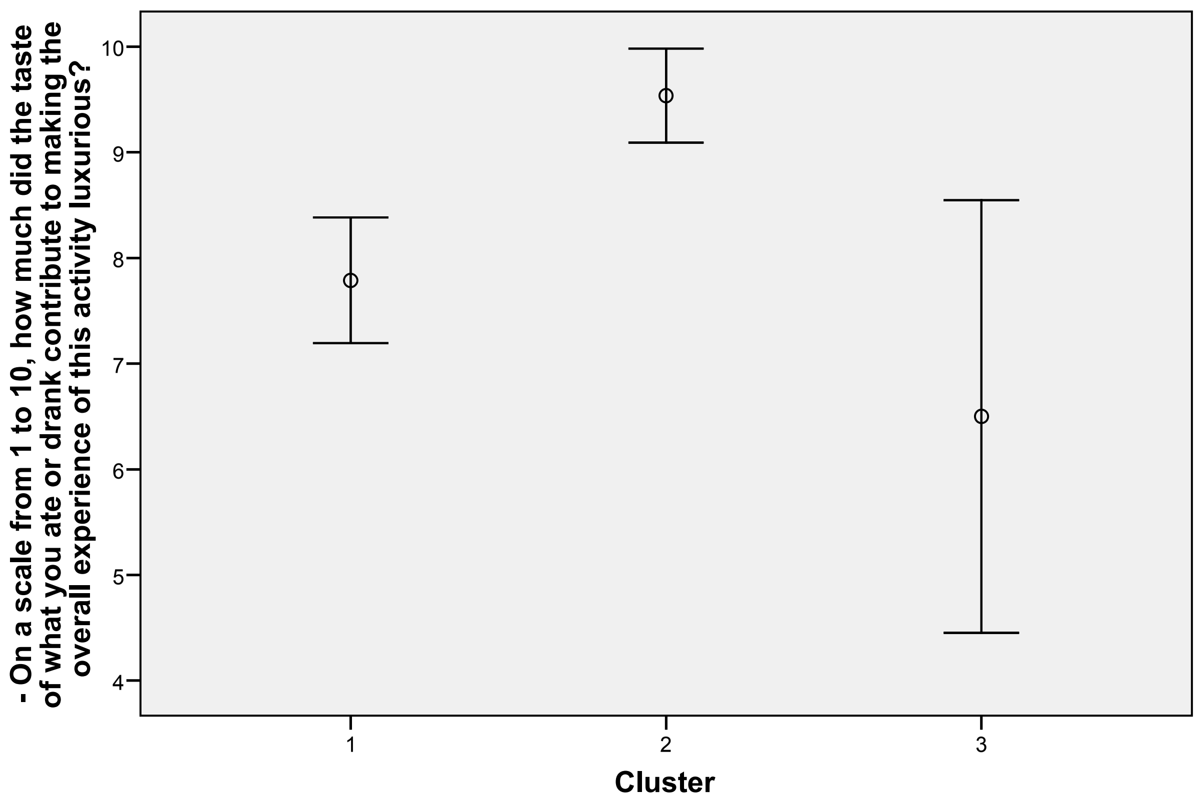
Appendix 4 – Statistical analysis

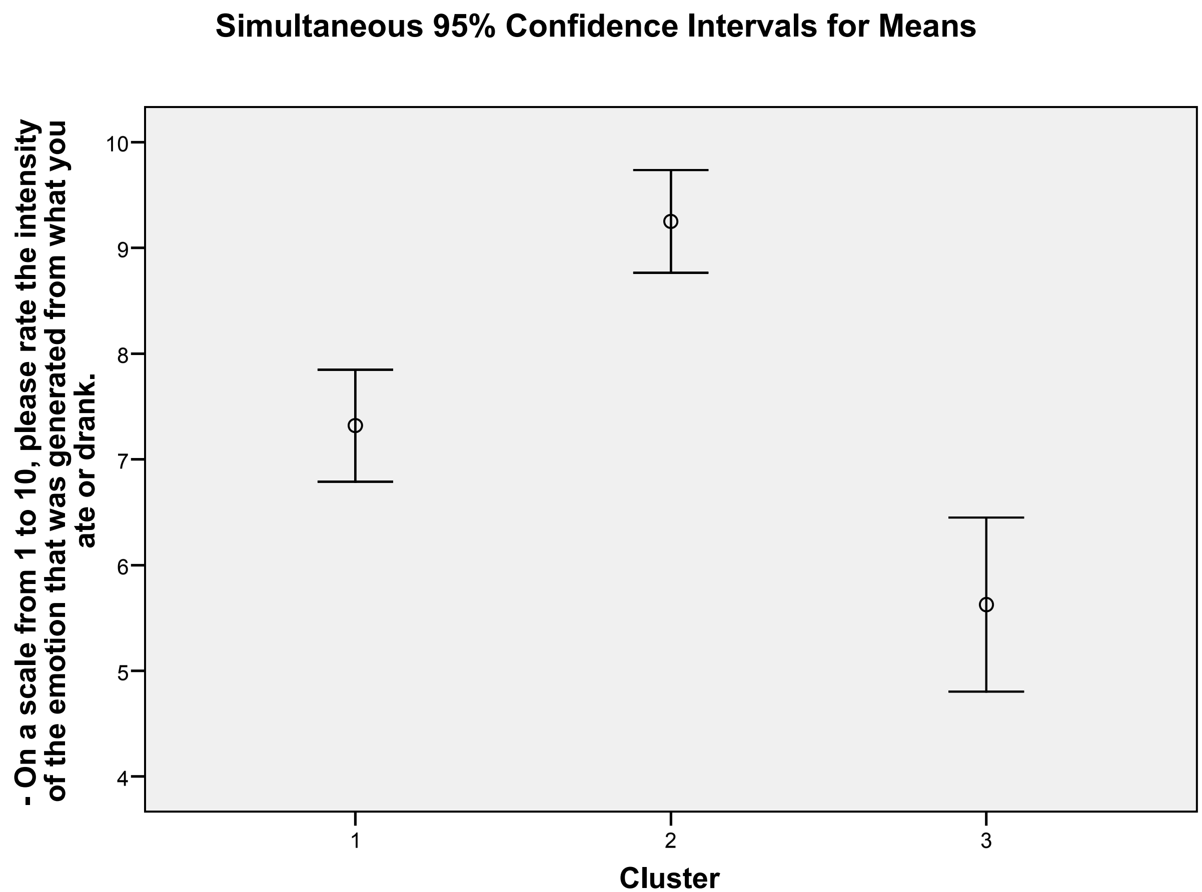
1 Cluster analysis

This activity... Activity: f('hC1St')f('hsq1bPipe').valueLabel()f('hC1En')

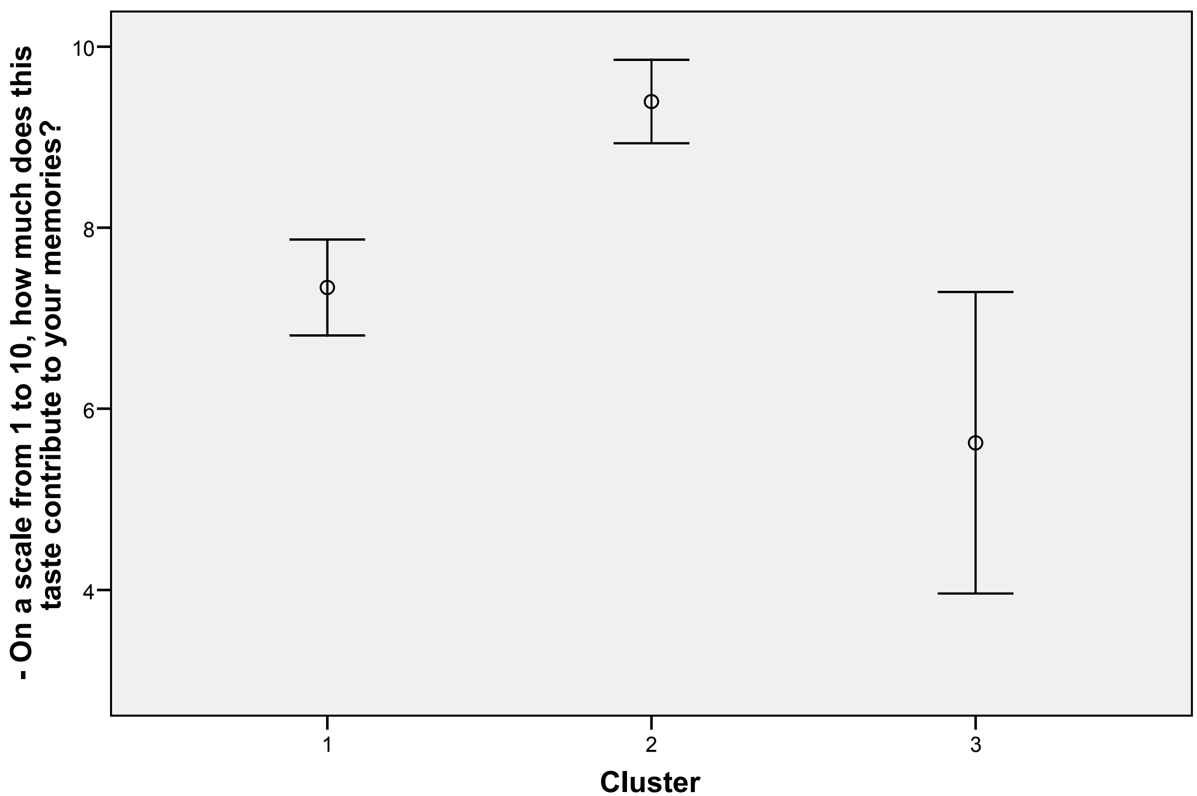
		Was something I had never done before		I have done something similar before, but most of the things		I have done something similar before, and some of the things		This activity is something I do on a regular basis	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Cluster	1	7	38.9%	20	80.0%	15	53.6%	5	41.7%
	2	11	61.1%	4	16.0%	9	32.1%	4	33.3%
	3	0	.0%	1	4.0%	4	14.3%	3	25.0%
	Combined	18	100.0%	25	100.0%	28	100.0%	12	100.0%

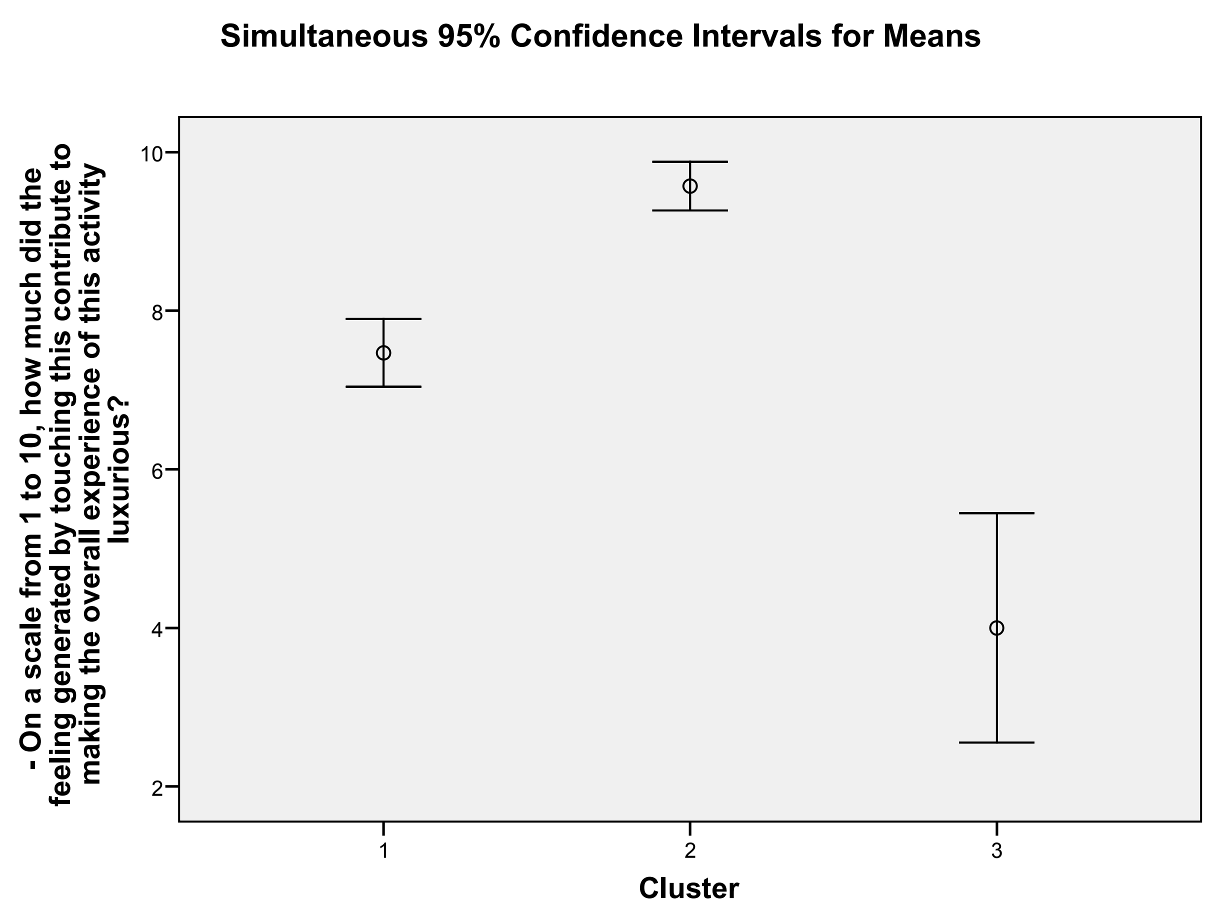
Simultaneous 95% Confidence Intervals for Means



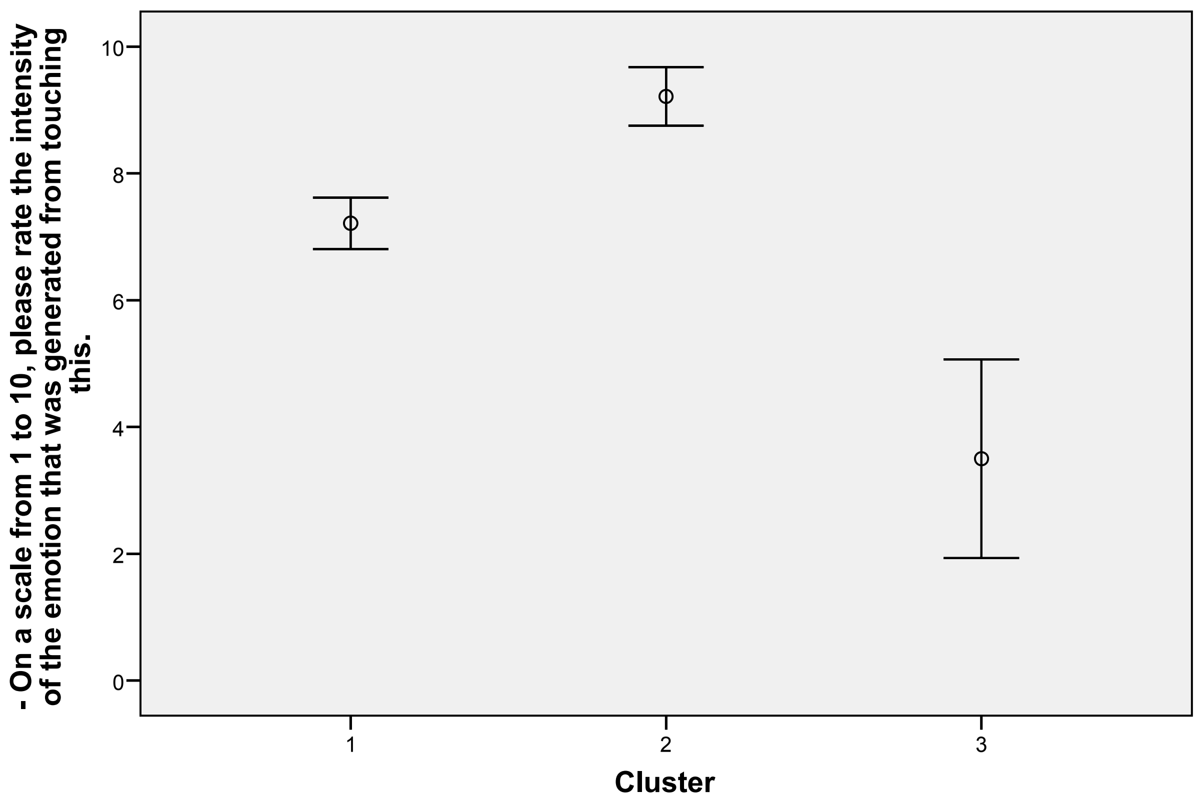

Simultaneous 95% Confidence Intervals for Means
- On a scale from 1 to 10, please rate the intensity of the emotion that was generated from what you ate or drank.
10
9
8
7
6
5
4
1
2
3
Cluster

Simultaneous 95% Confidence Intervals for Means

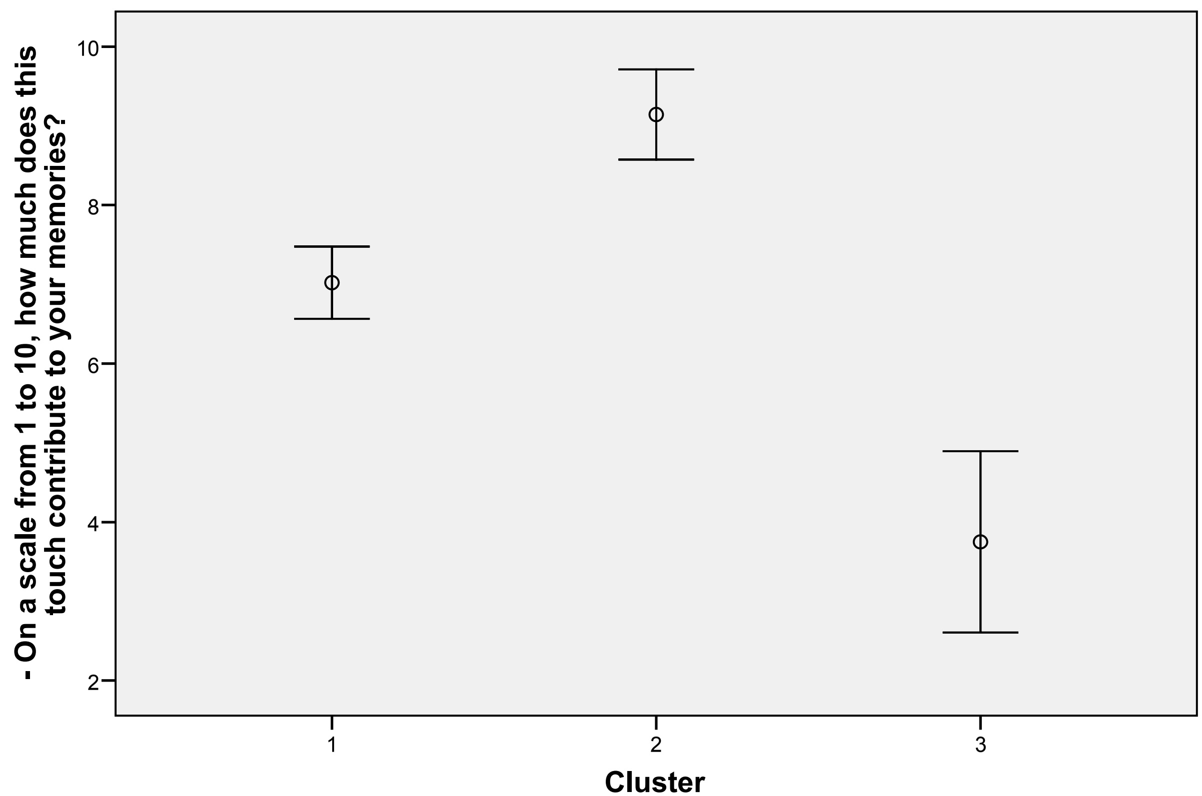



Simultaneous 95% Confidence Intervals for Means
- On a scale from 1 to 10, how much did the feeling generated by touching this contribute to making the overall experience of this activity luxurious?
10
8
6
4
2
1
2
3
Cluster

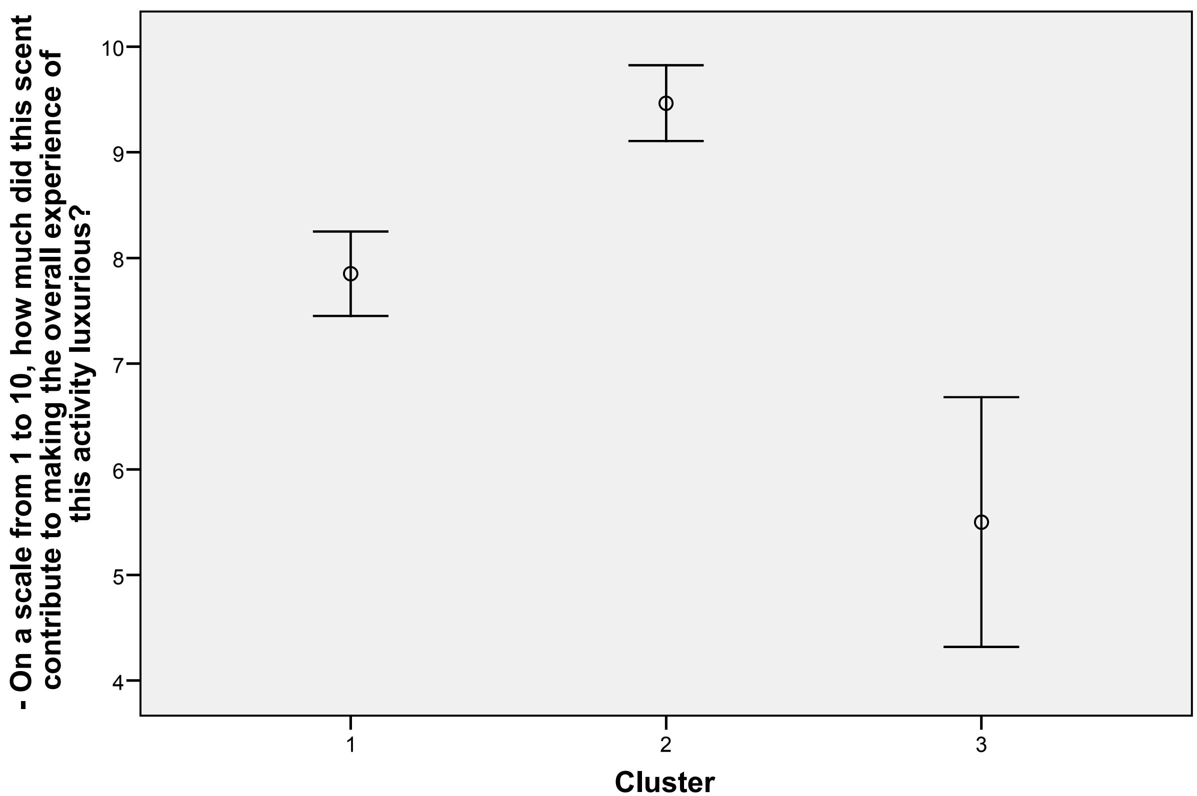
Simultaneous 95% Confidence Intervals for Means



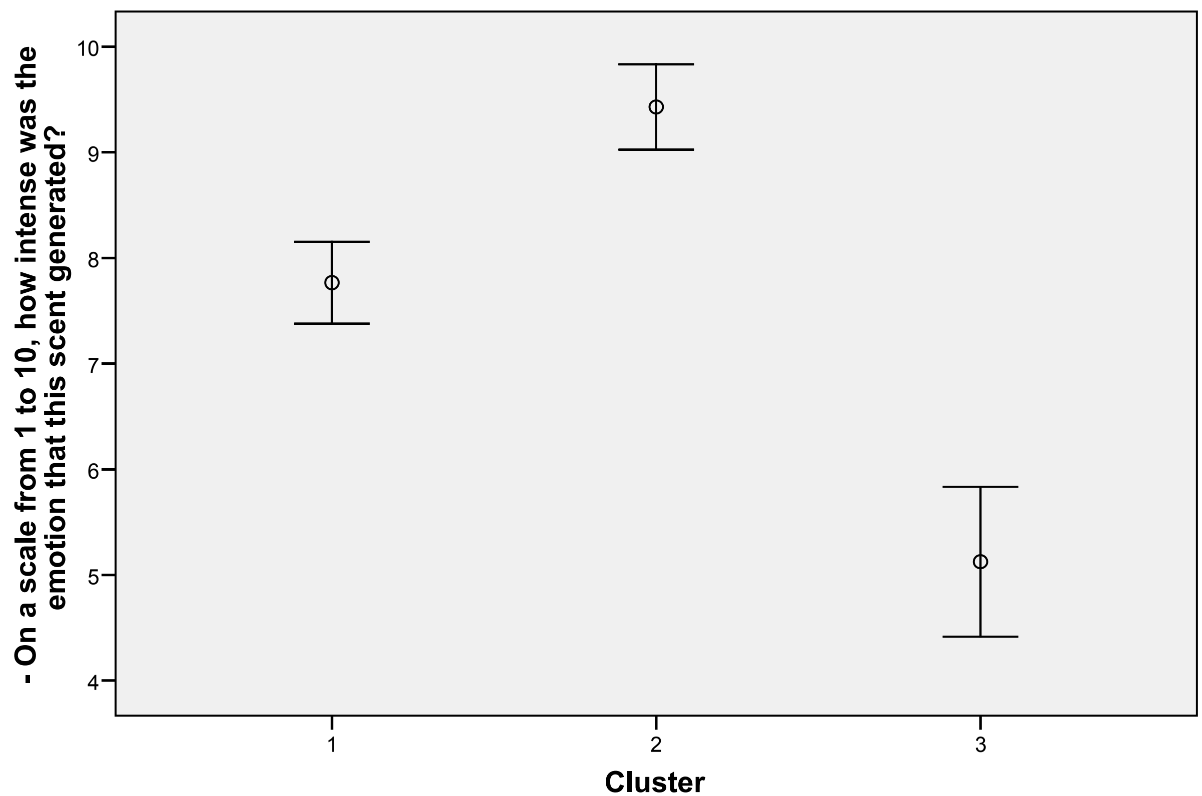
Simultaneous 95% Confidence Intervals for Means



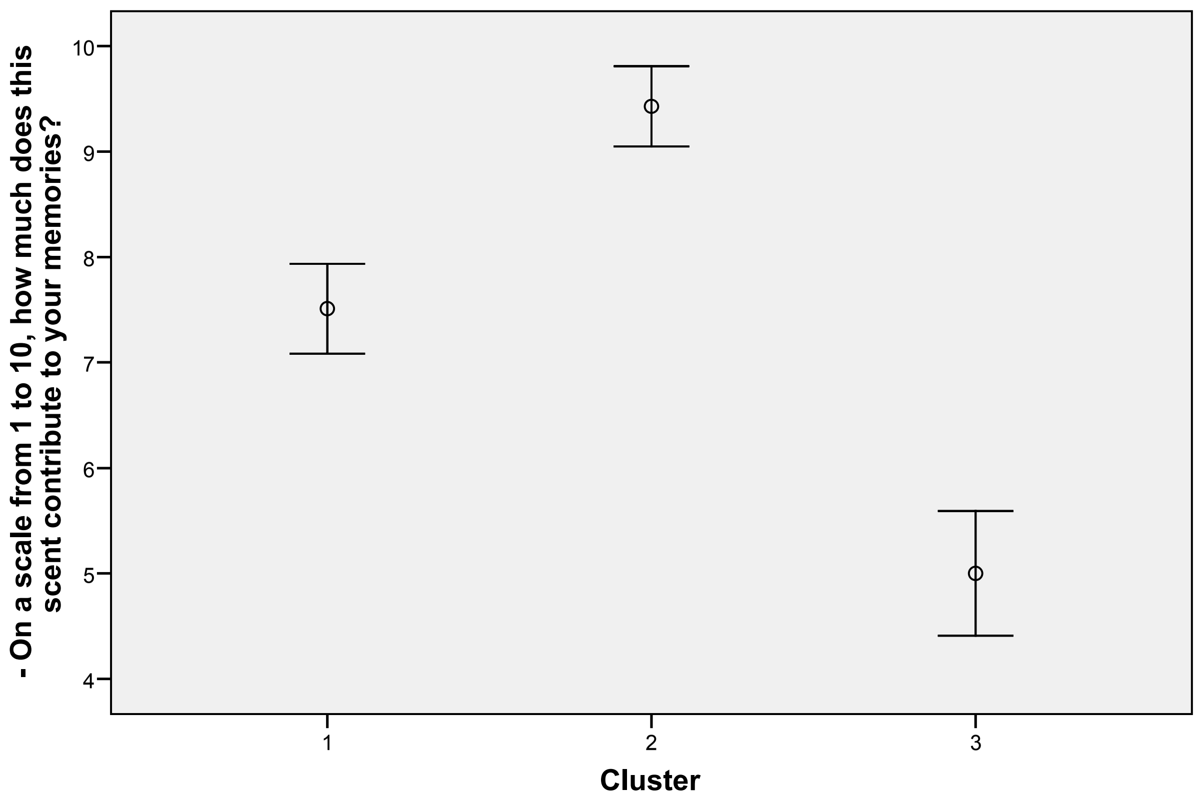
Simultaneous 95% Confidence Intervals for Means



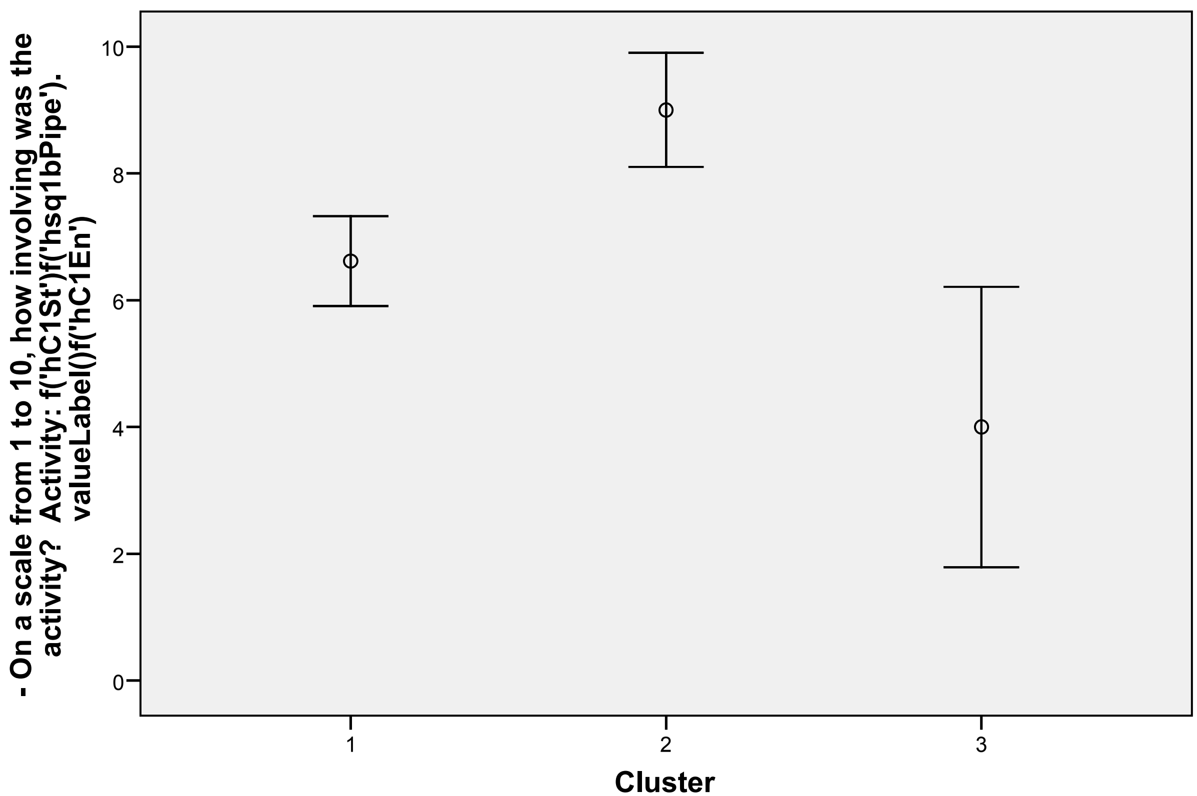
Simultaneous 95% Confidence Intervals for Means



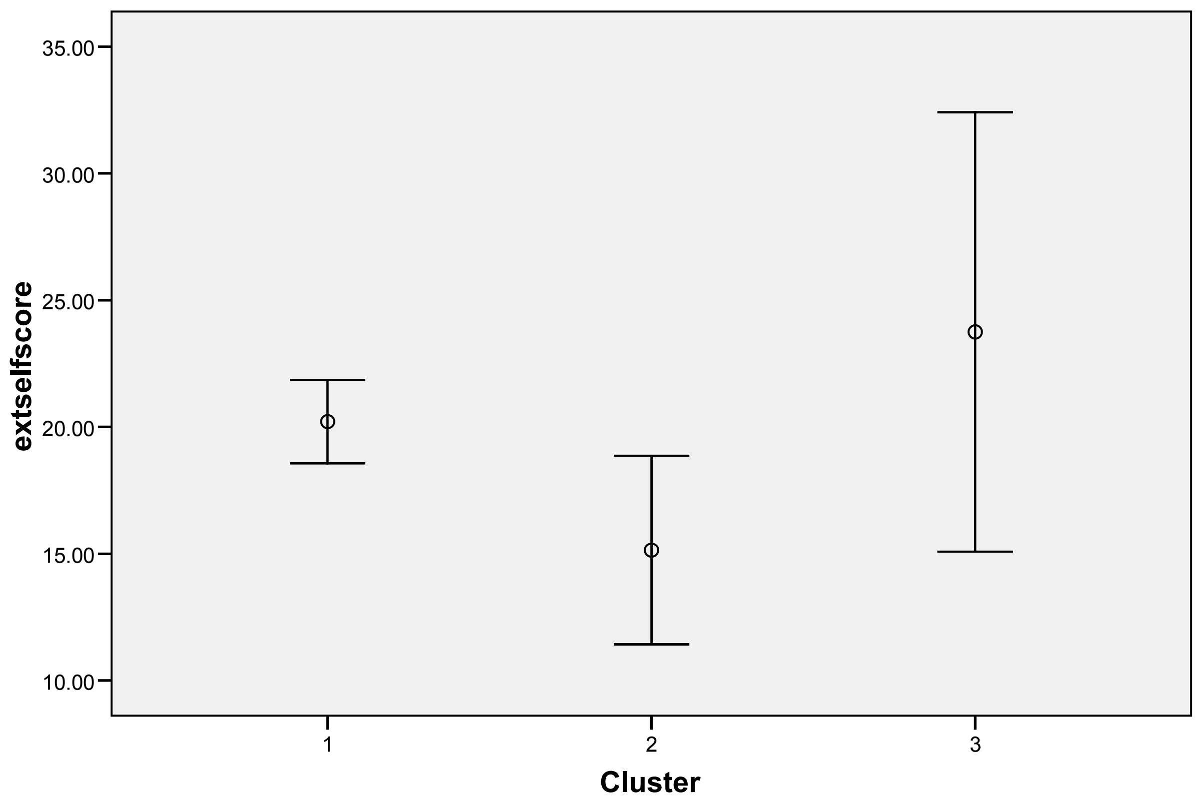
Simultaneous 95% Confidence Intervals for Means



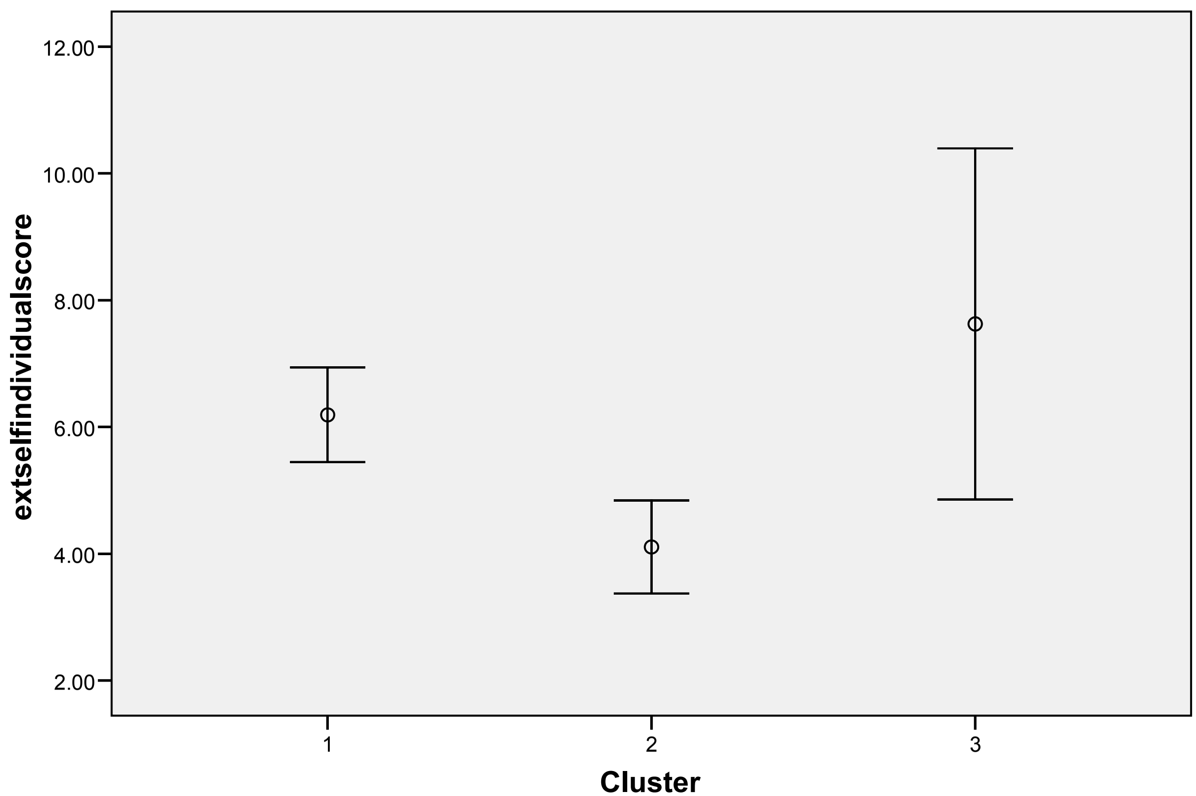
Simultaneous 95% Confidence Intervals for Means

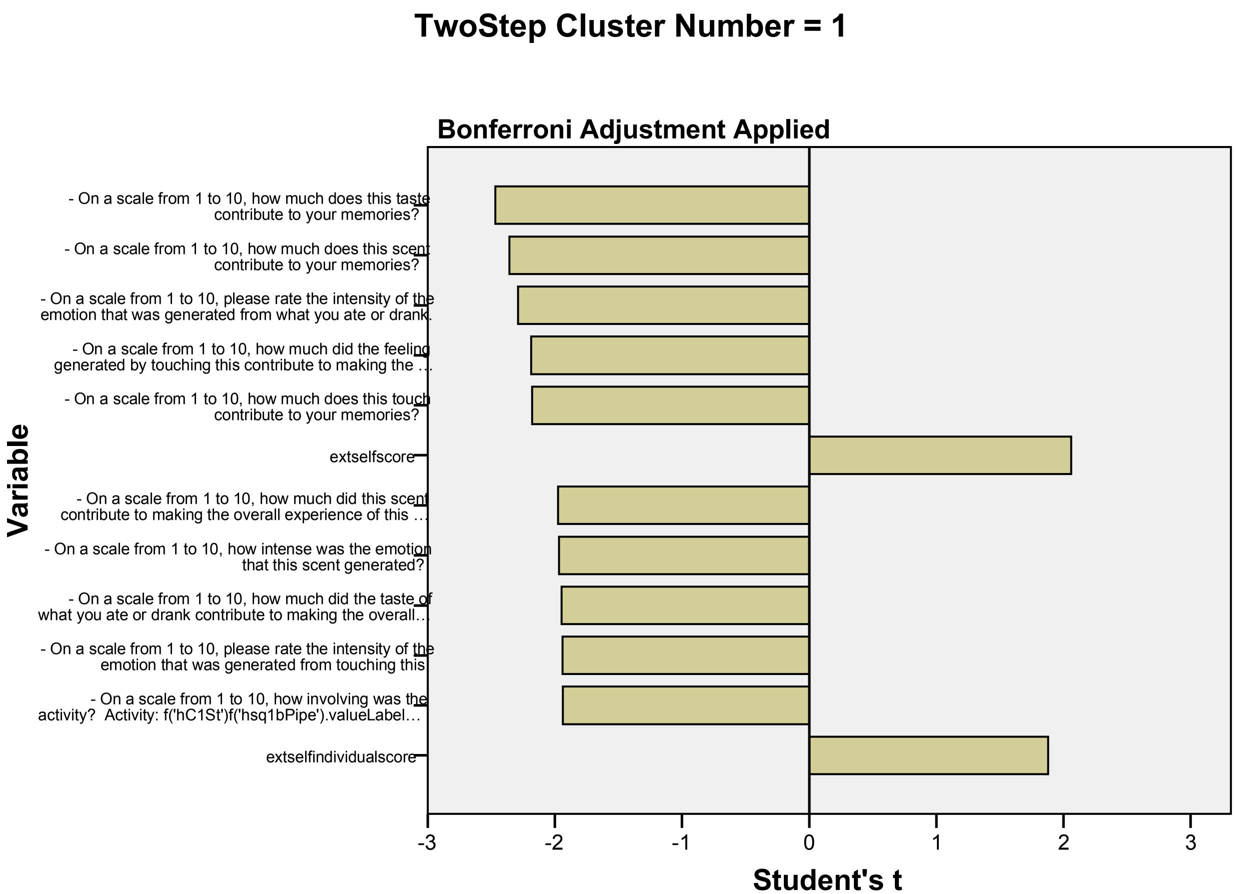


Simultaneous 95% Confidence Intervals for Means

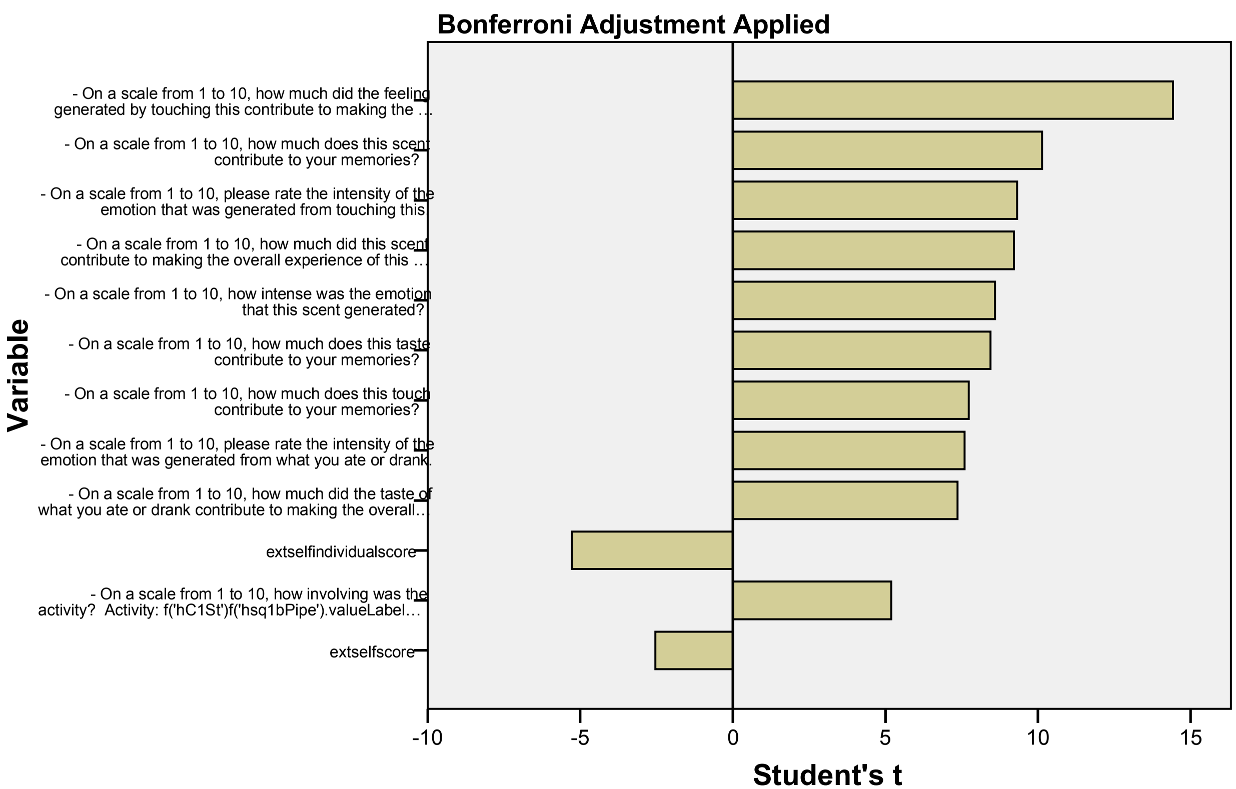


Simultaneous 95% Confidence Intervals for Means

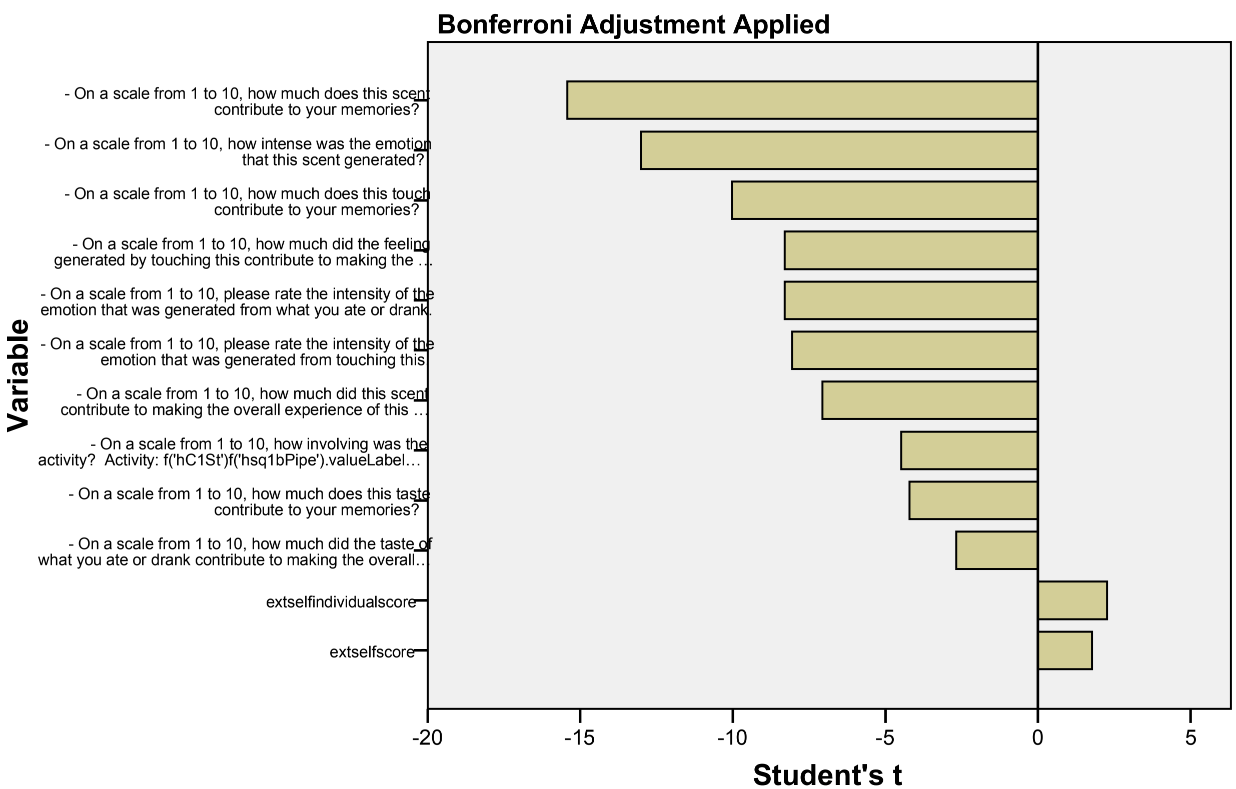



TwoStep Cluster Number = 1
Bonferroni Adjustment Applied
Variable
- On a scale from 1 to 10, how much does this taste contribute to your memories?
- On a scale from 1 to 10, how much does this scent contribute to your memories?
- On a scale from 1 to 10, please rate the intensity of the emotion that was generated from what you ate or drank.
- On a scale from 1 to 10, how much did the feeling generated by touching this contribute to making the …
- On a scale from 1 to 10, how much does this touch contribute to your memories?
extselfscore
- On a scale from 1 to 10, how much did this scent contribute to making the overall experience of this …
- On a scale from 1 to 10, how intense was the emotion that this scent generated?
- On a scale from 1 to 10, how much did the taste of what you ate or drank contribute to making the overall…
- On a scale from 1 to 10, please rate the intensity of the emotion that was generated from touching this
- On a scale from 1 to 10, how involving was the activity? Activity: f('hC1St')f('hsq1bPipe').valueLabel…
extselfindividualscore
-3
-2
-1
0
1
2
3
Student's t

TwoStep Cluster Number = 2



TwoStep Cluster Number = 3



2 Open ended question six

What would you change about the experience, to make it feel as enjoyable as, or more enjoyable than, the first time?

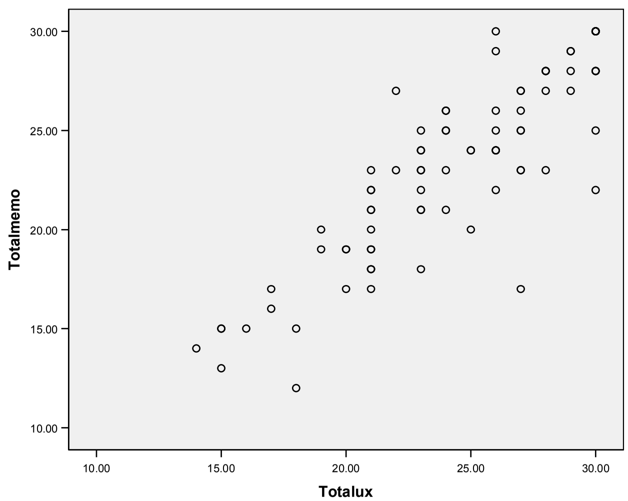
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	More Things	18	7.3	10.2	10.2
	New	15	6.0	8.5	18.6
	Same	72	29.0	40.7	59.3
	Less	3	1.2	1.7	61.0
	different	26	10.5	14.7	75.7
	More People/Communitas	12	4.8	6.8	82.5
	Planning	15	6.0	8.5	91.0
	8.00	16	6.5	9.0	100.0
	Total	177	71.4	100.0	
Missing	System	71	28.6		
Total		248	100.0		

Appendix 6 - Correlations between 'Totalux', 'Totalemo' and 'Totalemo'

Correlations

		Totalux	Totalmemo
Totalux	Pearson Correlation	1	.867(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	83	83
Totalmemo	Pearson Correlation	.867(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	83	83

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).



Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.927	2

Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Totalux	24.2651	4.33388	83
Totalmemo	23.2048	4.72347	83

Correlations

		Totalemo	Totalmemo
Totalemo	Pearson Correlation	1	.876**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	83	83
Totalmemo	Pearson Correlation	.876**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	83	83

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Correlations

		- On a scale from 1 to 10, how involving was the activity? Activity: f('hC1St')f('hsq1bPipe').valueLabel()f('hC1En')	Totalux	Totalemo	Totalmemo	CTaste	CTouch	CSmell
- On a scale from 1 to 10, how involving was the activity? Activity: f('hC1St')f('hsq1bPipe').valueLabel()f('hC1En')	Pearson Correlation	1	.524**	.604**	.561**	.434**	.426**	.457**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	248	83	83	83	185	144	138
Totalux	Pearson Correlation	.524**	1	.921**	.867**	**.835****	**.854****	**.870****
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	83	83	83	83	83	83	83
Totalemo	Pearson Correlation	.604**	.921**	1	.876**	**.800****	**.908****	**.853****
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	83	83	83	83	83	83	83
Totalmemo	Pearson Correlation	.561**	.867**	.876**	1	**.791****	**.885****	**.845****
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	83	83	83	83	83	83	83
CTaste	Pearson Correlation	.434**	.835**	.800**	.791**	1	.679**	.628**

	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	185	83	83	83	185	115	110
CTouch	Pearson Correlation	.426**	.854**	.908**	.885**	.679**	1	.760**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000		.000
	N	144	83	83	83	115	144	99
CSmell	Pearson Correlation	.457**	.870**	.853**	.845**	.628**	.760**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	138	83	83	83	110	99	138

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.951	7

Appendix 7 – Cluster analysis: self-concept

1. Internet usage and self-concept

Cluster Distribution

		N	% of Combined	% of Total
Cluster	1	41	45.6%	40.2%
	2	49	54.4%	48.0%
	Combined	90	100.0%	88.2%
Excluded Cases		12		11.8%
Total		102		100.0%

Cluster Profiles

Centroids

		Allowed me to differentiate myself from people in the lower classes of society - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...		Makes me feel that I am successful in life - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...		Makes me feel unique - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...		Allowed me to impress my friends and relatives - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Cluster	1	3.76	1.090	2.78	1.013	2.80	.872	3.44	1.050
	2	2.22	.963	1.63	.668	1.69	.713	2.14	1.021

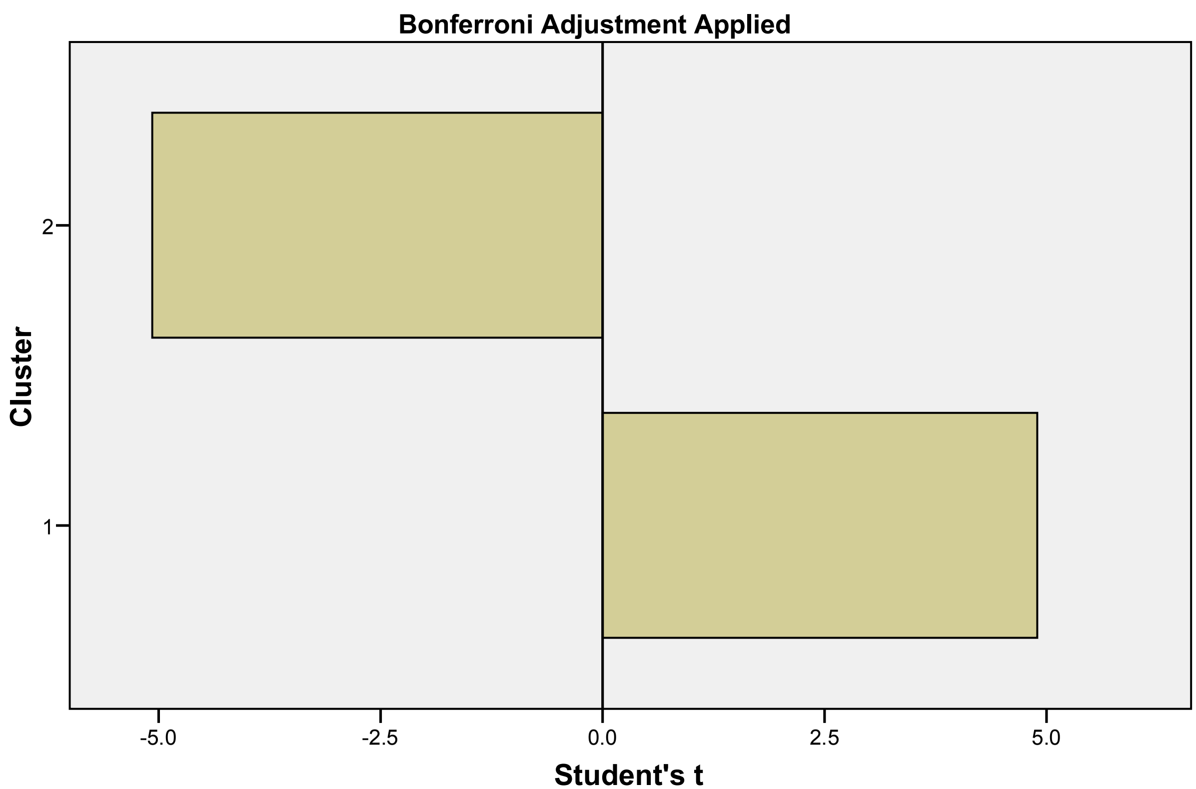
Combined	2.92	1.274	2.16	1.016	2.20	.962	2.73	1.216

Frequencies

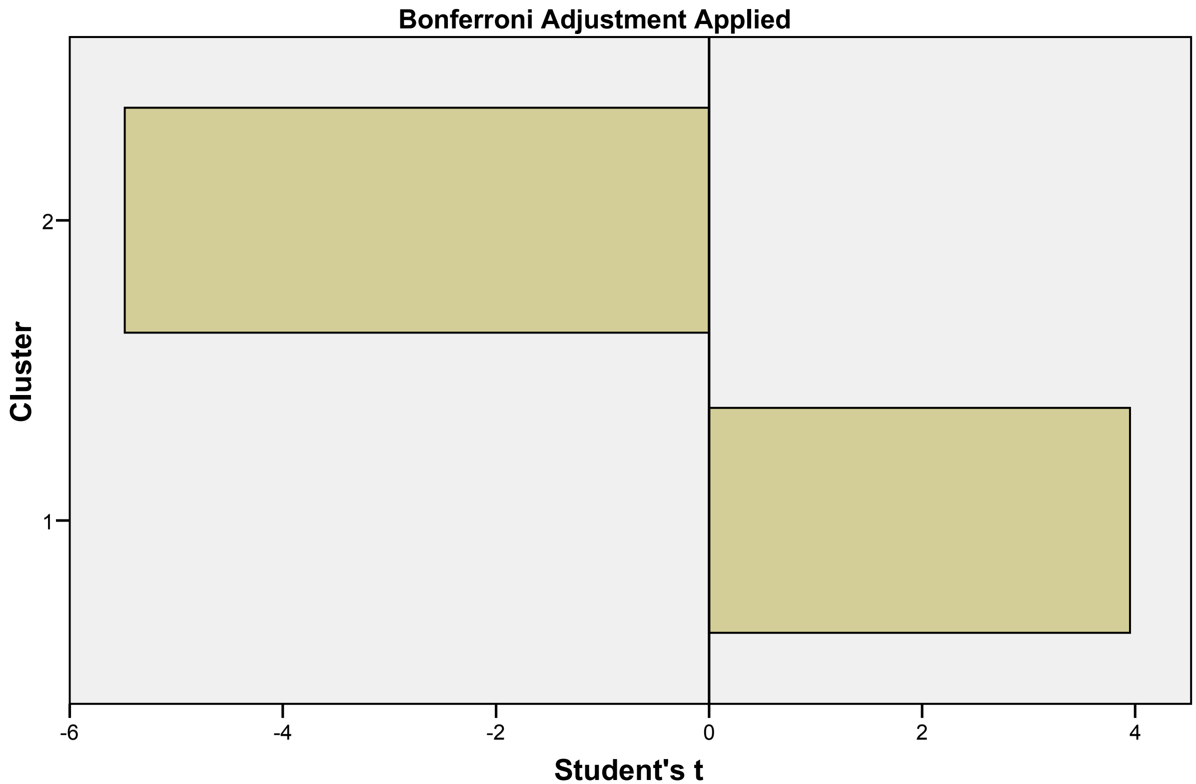
How often do you access the Internet?

		Several times a day		Roughly every day		Several times a week but less than every day	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Cluster	1	26	34.7%	13	100.0%	2	100.0%
	2	49	65.3%	0	.0%	0	.0%
	Combined	75	100.0%	13	100.0%	2	100.0%

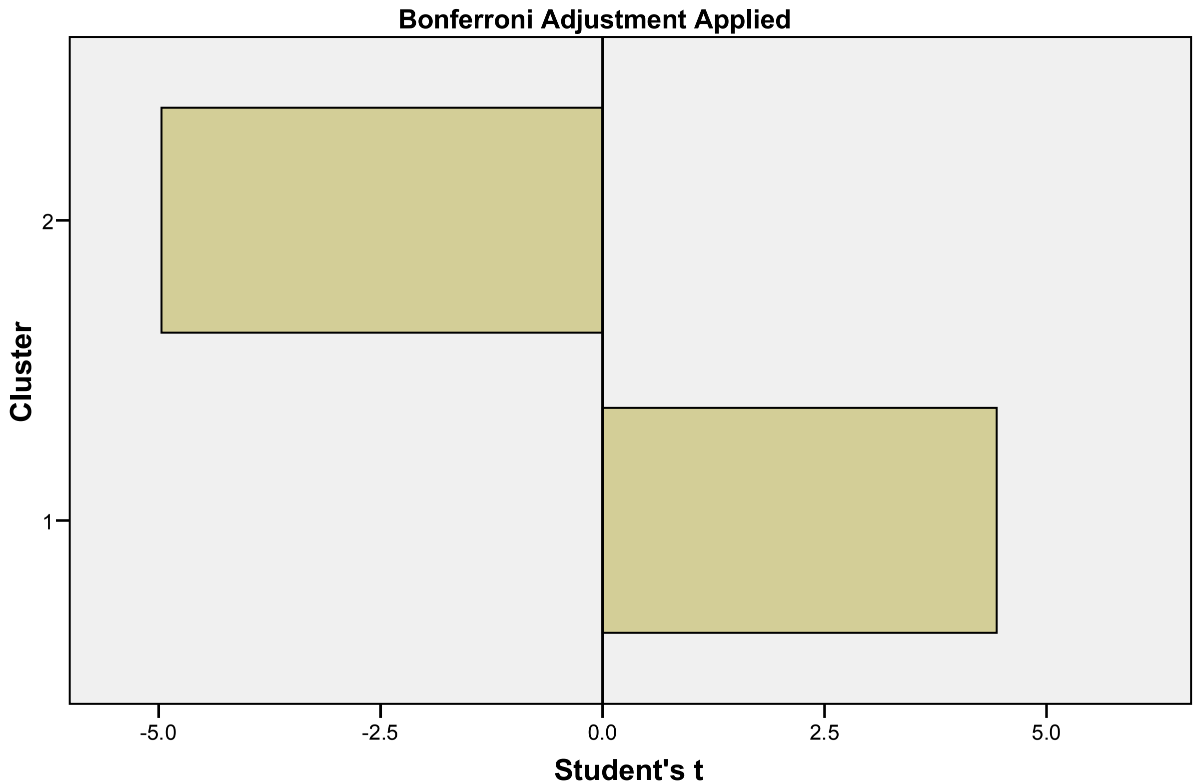
Allowed me to differentiate myself from people in the lower classes of society - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...



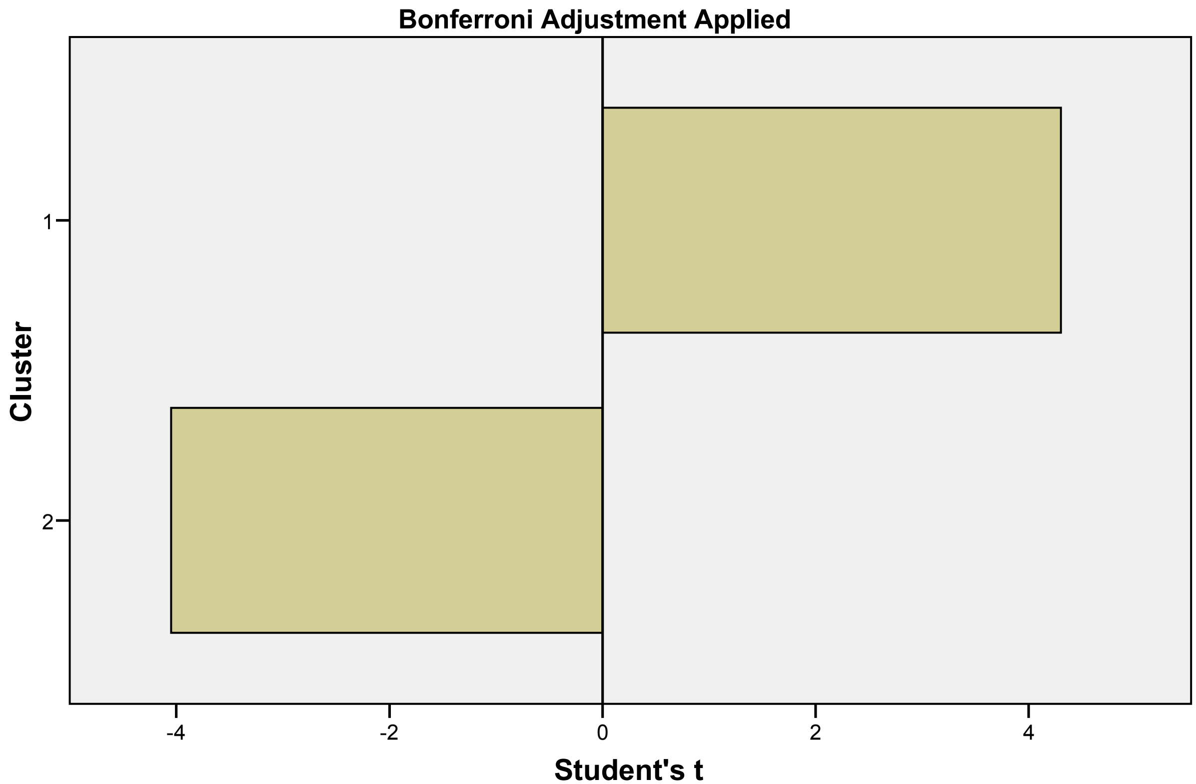
Makes me feel that I am successful in life - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...



Makes me feel unique - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...



Allowed me to impress my friends and relatives - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...



2. TV usage and self-concept

Cluster Distribution

		N	% of Combined	% of Total
Cluster	1	41	45.6%	40.2%
	2	21	23.3%	20.6%
	3	28	31.1%	27.5%
	Combined	90	100.0%	88.2%
Excluded Cases		12		11.8%
Total		102		100.0%

Cluster Profiles

Centroids

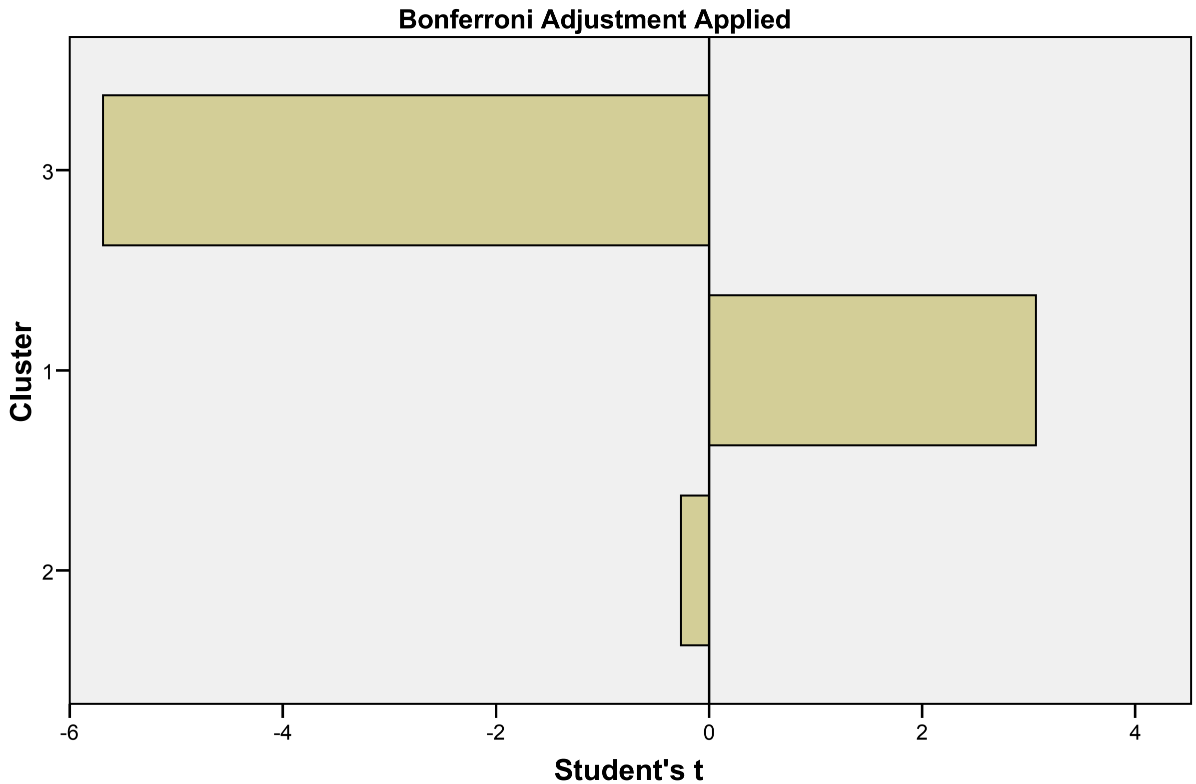
		Positively contributes to my personality - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...		Makes me feel unique - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...		Makes me feel that I am successful in life - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Cluster	1	2.49	.925	2.61	.919	2.49	1.052
	2	2.00	.775	2.29	.845	2.10	.831
	3	1.43	.573	1.54	.744	1.71	.937
	Combined	2.04	.911	2.20	.962	2.16	1.016

Frequencies

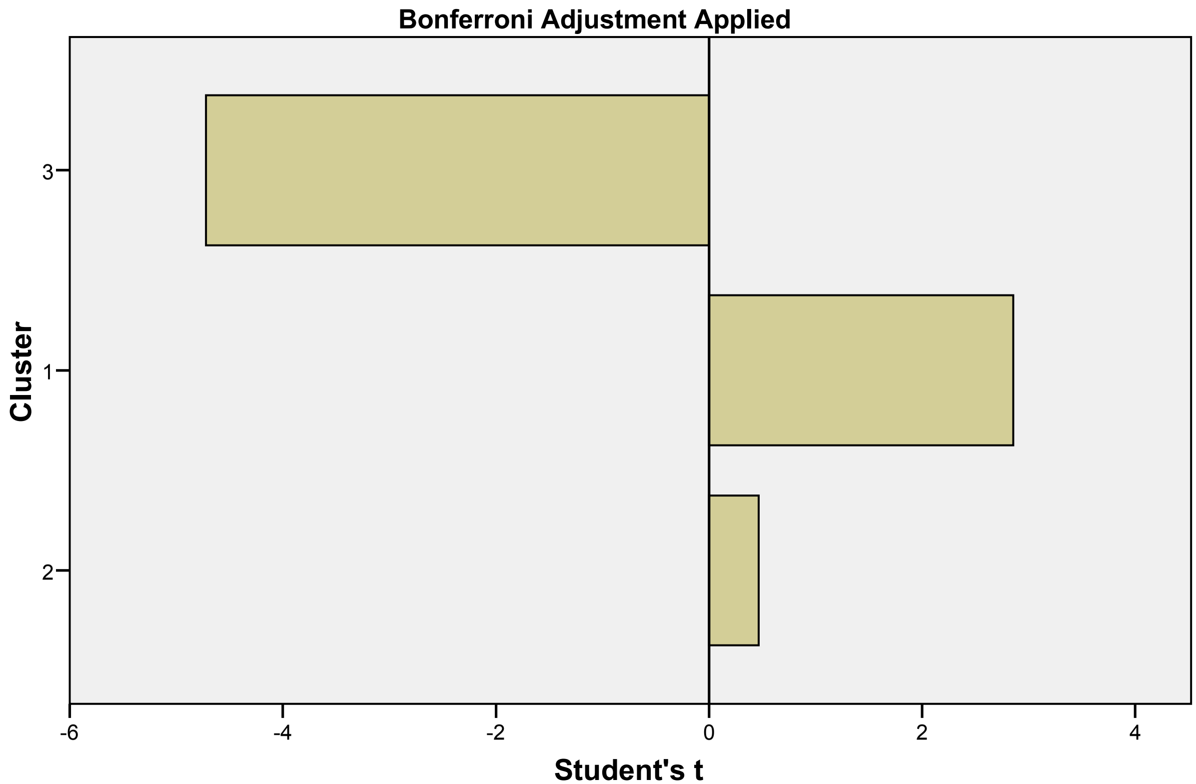
How much time do you spend watching TV in a week?

	0-4 hours		5-9 hours		10-19 hours		20-29 hours		30-39 hours		40-49 hours		50 or more hours	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1	0	.0%	0	.0%	34	100.0%	7	33.3%	0	.0%	0	.0%	0	.0%
2	2	100.0%	12	100.0%	0	.0%	0	.0%	0	.0%	3	100.0%	4	100.0%
3	0	.0%	0	.0%	0	.0%	14	66.7%	14	100.0%	0	.0%	0	.0%
Combined	2	100.0%	12	100.0%	34	100.0%	21	100.0%	14	100.0%	3	100.0%	4	100.0%

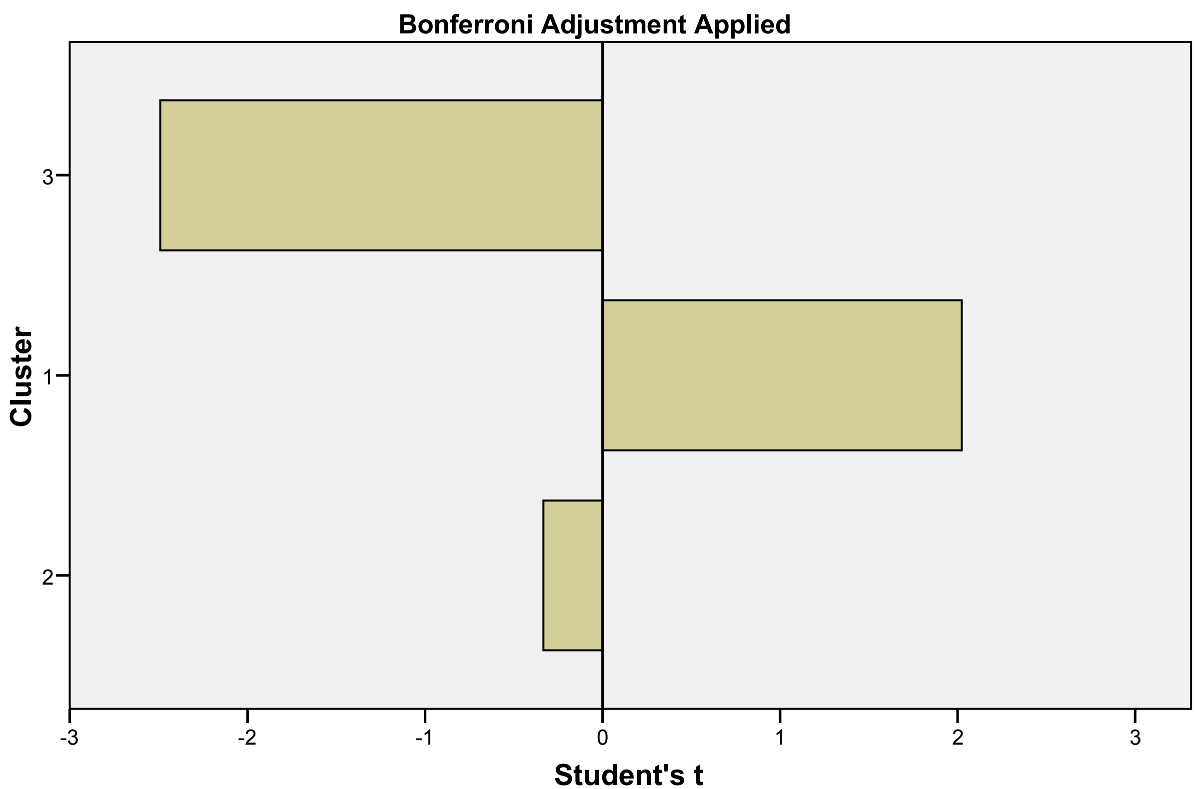
Positively contributes to my personality - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...



Makes me feel unique - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...



Makes me feel that I am successful in life - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...



3. Living environment and self-concept

Cluster Distribution

		N	% of Combined	% of Total
Cluster	1	42	46.7%	41.2%
	2	35	38.9%	34.3%
	3	13	14.4%	12.7%
	Combined	90	100.0%	88.2%
Excluded Cases		12		11.8%
Total		102		100.0%

Cluster Profiles

Centroids

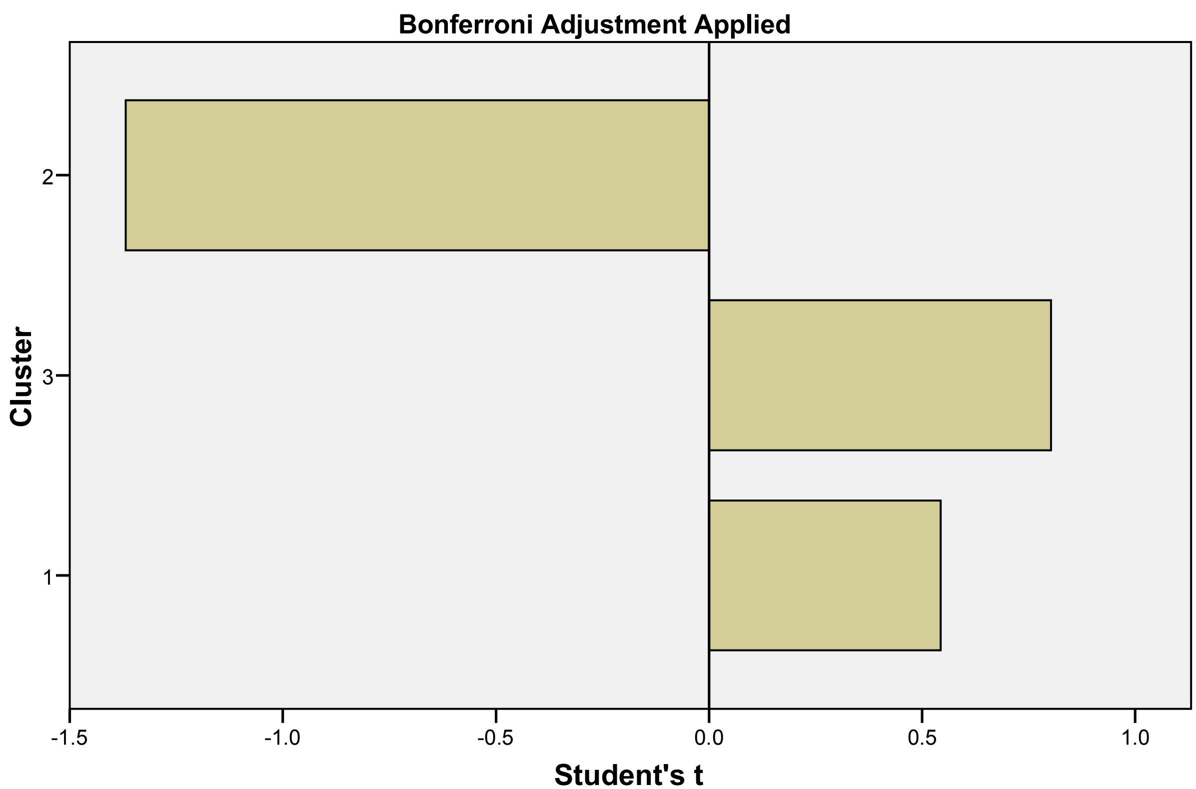
		Positively contributes to my personality - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...		Makes me feel unique - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...		Makes me feel that I am successful in life - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Cluster	1	2.12	.889	2.29	.864	2.31	.950
	2	1.86	.810	2.00	1.029	1.83	.891
	3	2.31	1.182	2.46	1.050	2.54	1.330
	Combined	2.04	.911	2.20	.962	2.16	1.016

Frequencies

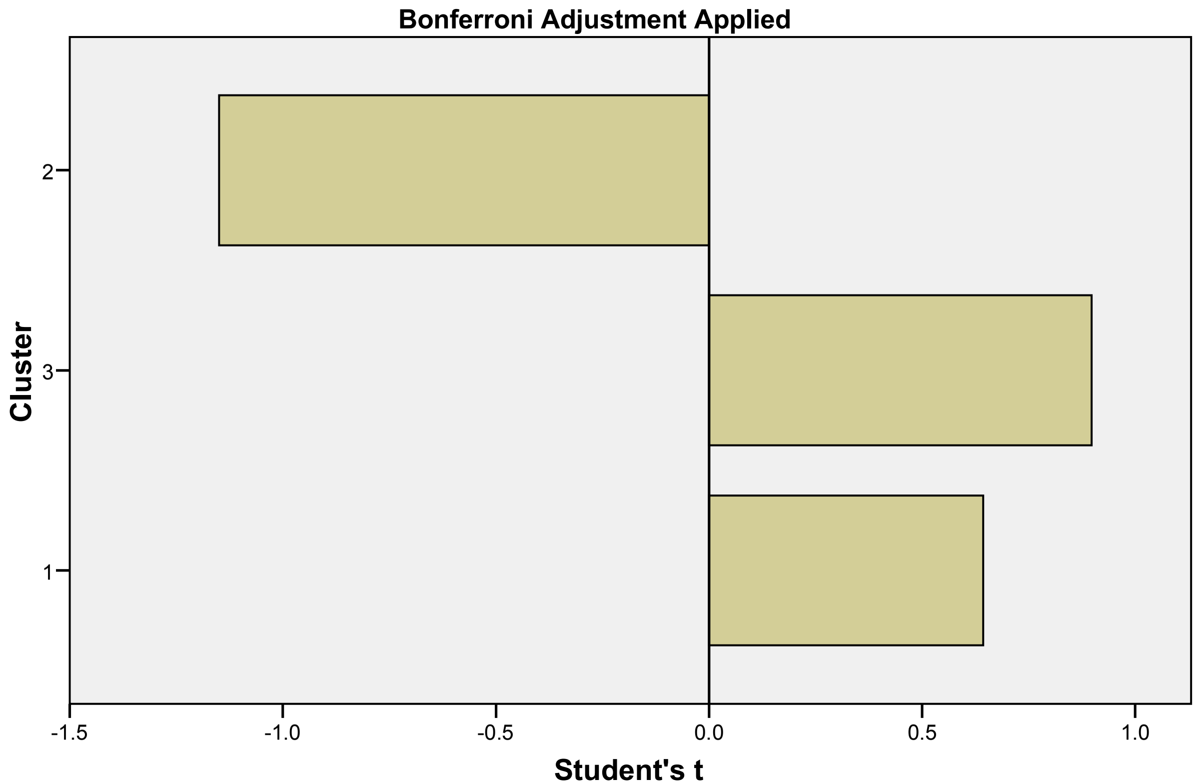
Do you live...?

		In a major city (i.e.: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago...) or		In a smaller city or its suburbs		In a rural area	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Cluster	1	0	.0%	42	100.0%	0	.0%
	2	35	100.0%	0	.0%	0	.0%
	3	0	.0%	0	.0%	13	100.0%
	Combined	35	100.0%	42	100.0%	13	100.0%

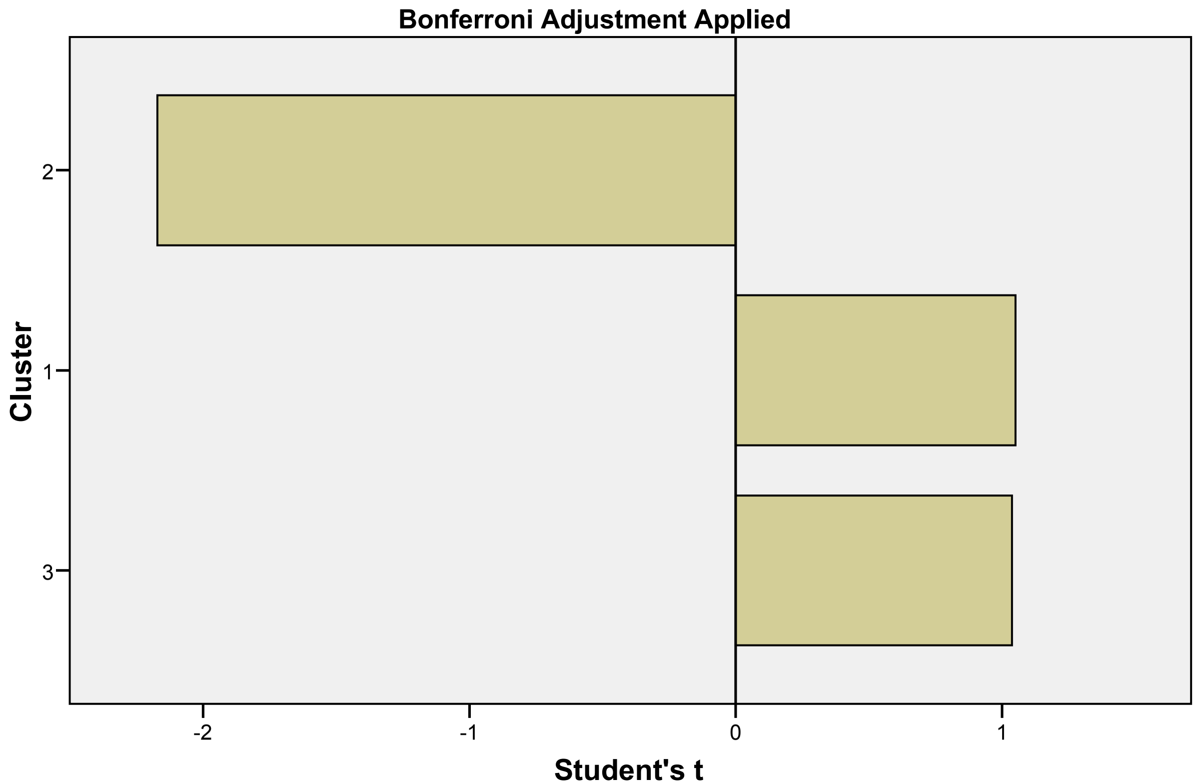
Positively contributes to my personality - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...



Makes me feel unique - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...



Makes me feel that I am successful in life - How much do you agree or disagree with the below statements? I feel that taking part in this activity...



4. Drawbacks to luxury consumption

Cluster Distribution

		N	% of Combined	% of Total
Cluster	1	28	31.1%	27.5%
	2	23	25.6%	22.5%
	3	39	43.3%	38.2%
	Combined	90	100.0%	88.2%
Excluded Cases		12		11.8%
Total		102		100.0%

Cluster Profiles

Centroids

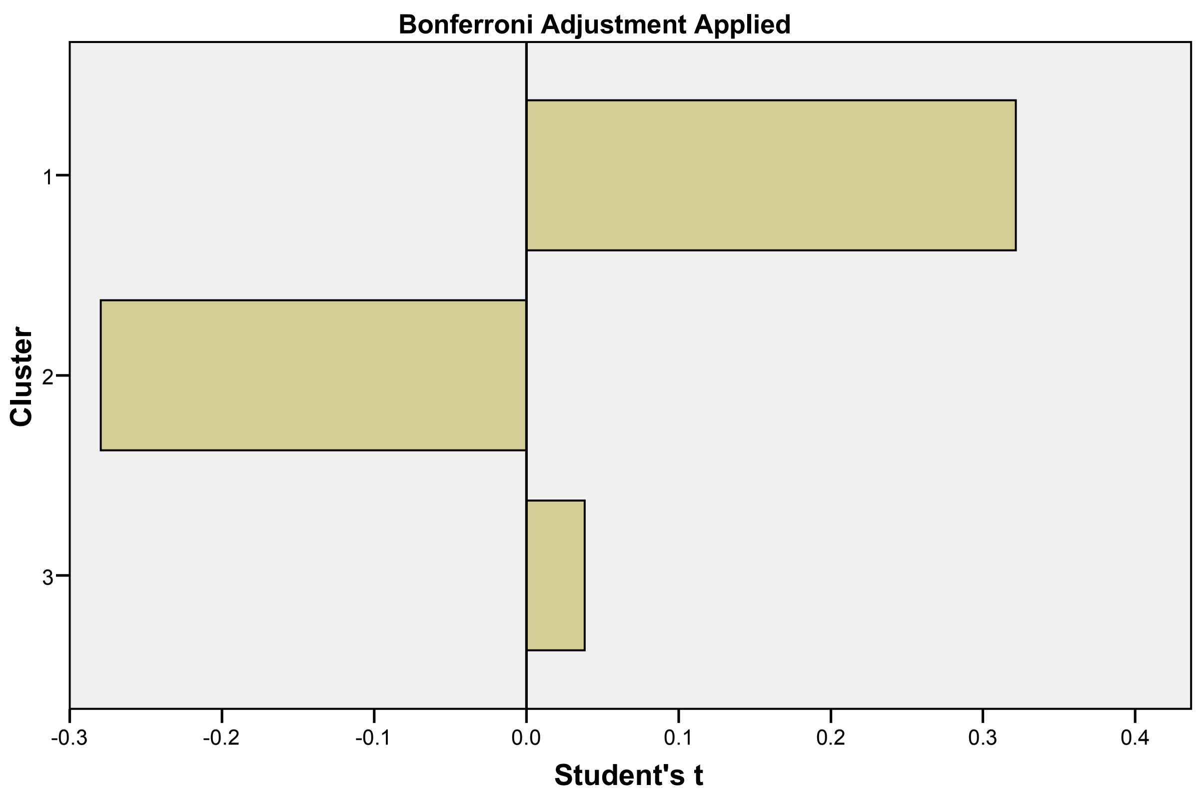
		I think it is morally wrong to spend money on such luxury, while many people cannot even afford shelter - And what do you think of consuming luxuries in general?		I feel guilty because I believe I should spend this money towards something more important (i.e. my child's education, my retirement) - And what do you think of consuming luxuries in general?		I think luxurious places are intimidating - And what do you think of consuming luxuries in general?		I think consuming luxuries requires some specific knowledge/training - And what do you think of consuming luxuries in general?	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Cluster	1	3.43	.836	3.21	.787	3.61	.875	3.25	.887
	2	3.30	1.259	3.30	1.105	2.74	1.251	2.39	.839
	3	3.38	1.115	3.23	1.158	3.28	1.297	2.95	1.099
	Combined	3.38	1.066	3.24	1.031	3.24	1.202	2.90	1.017

Frequencies

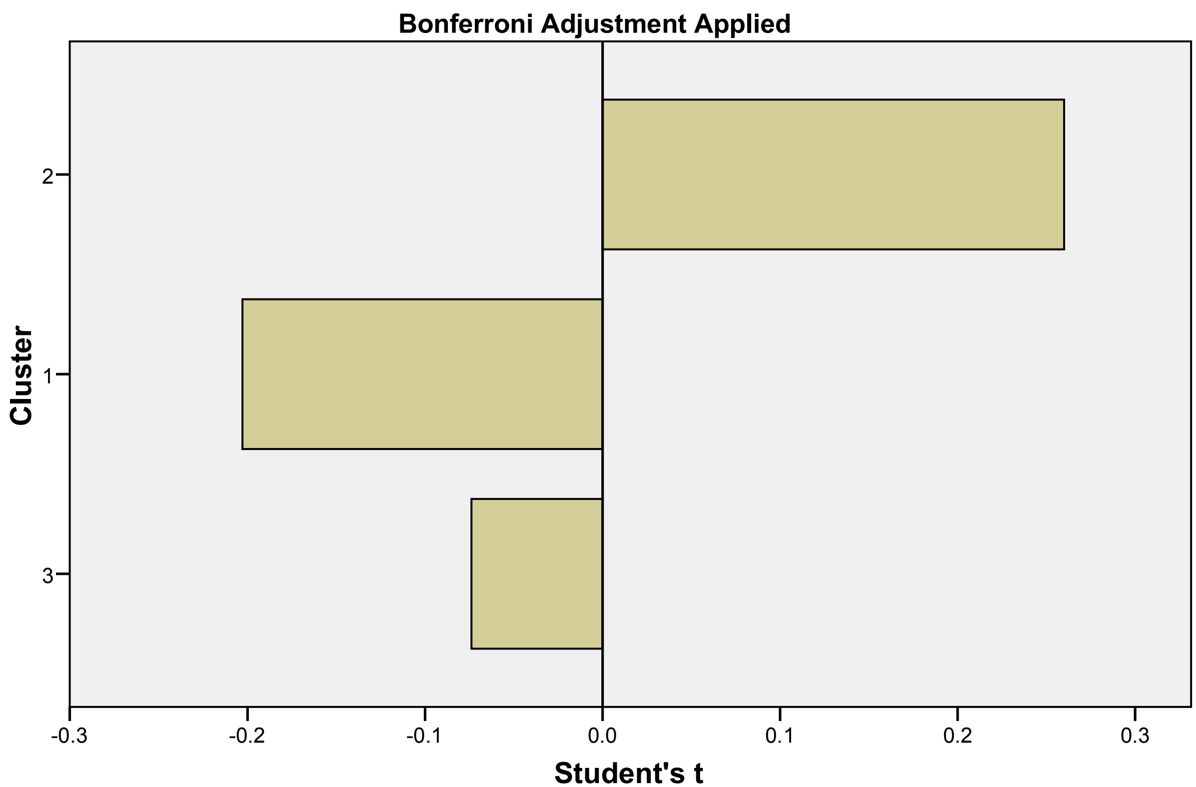
How many times did you take part in a luxurious activity over the last 12 months?

		1		2		3		4		5 or more	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Cluster	1	28	96.6%	0	.0%	0	.0%	0	.0%	0	.0%
	2	1	3.4%	0	.0%	0	.0%	2	22.2%	20	100.0%
	3	0	.0%	14	100.0%	18	100.0%	7	77.8%	0	.0%
	Combined	29	100.0%	14	100.0%	18	100.0%	9	100.0%	20	100.0%

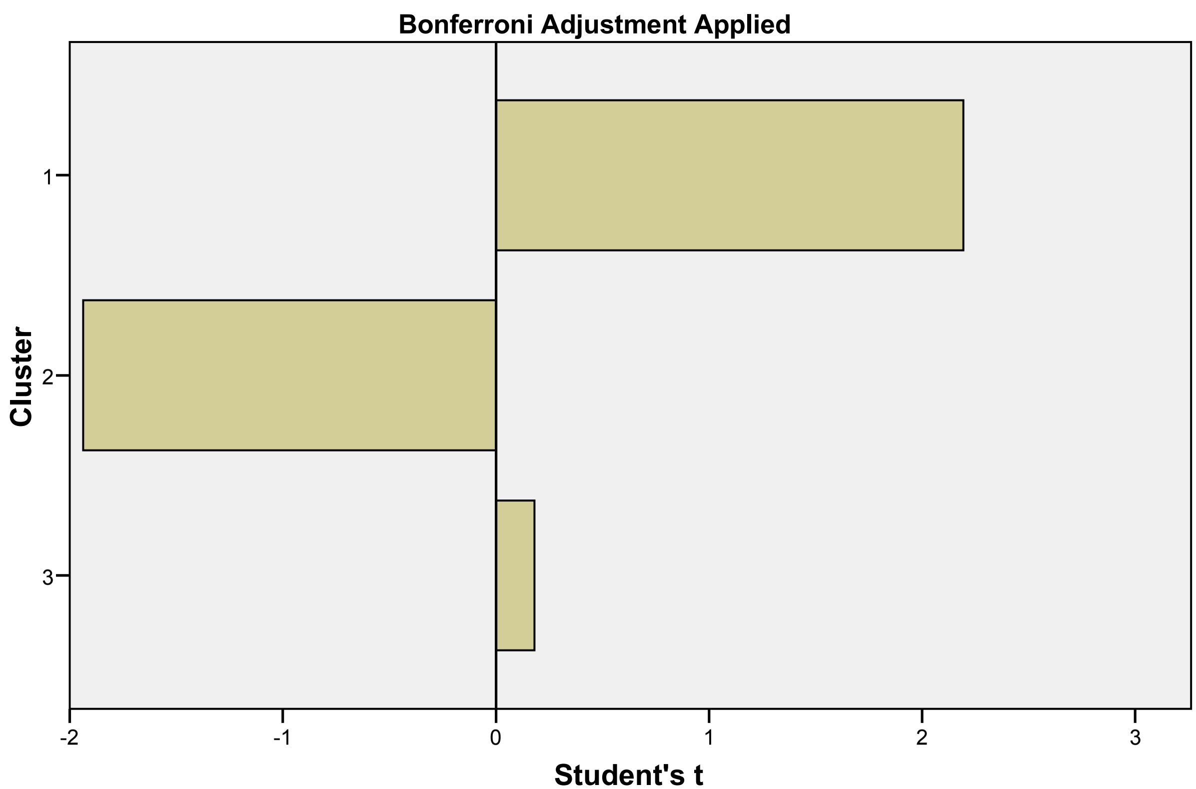
I think it is morally wrong to spend money on such luxury, while many people cannot even afford shelter - And what do you think of consuming luxuries in general?



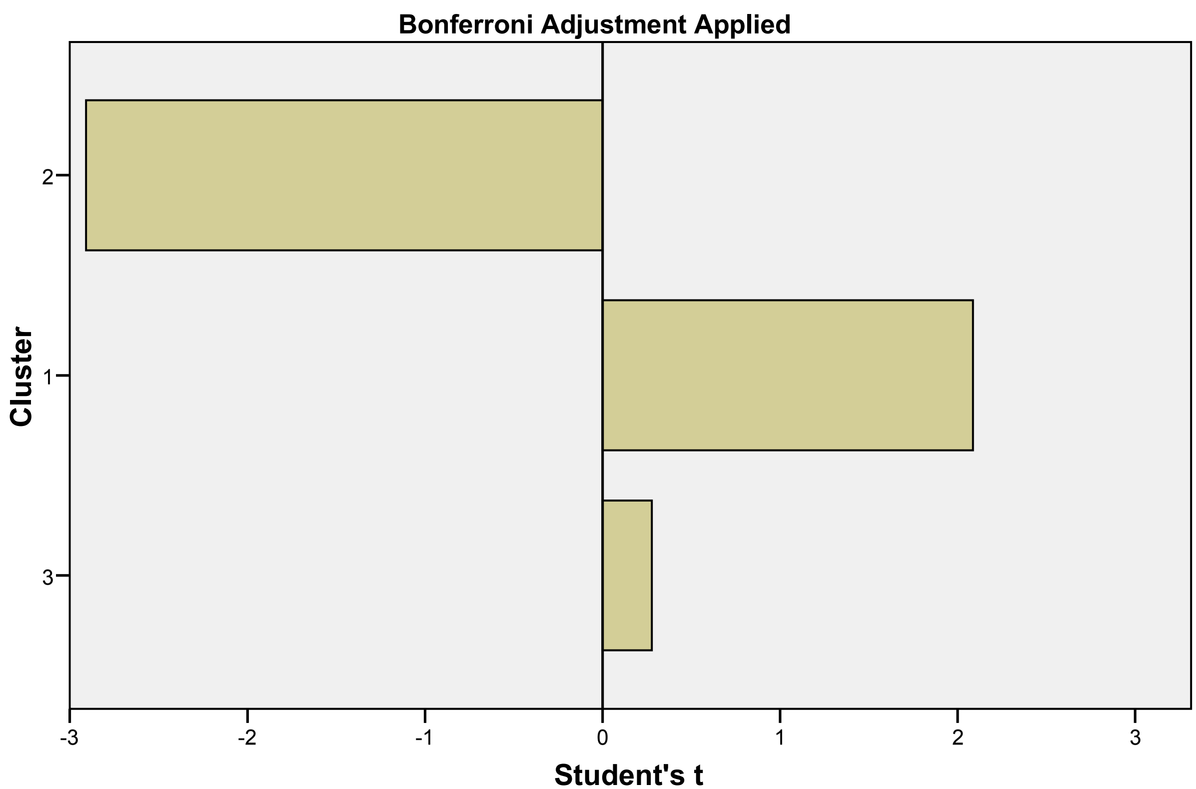
I feel guilty because I believe I should spend this money towards something more important (i.e. my child's education, my retirement) - And what do you think of consuming luxuries in general?



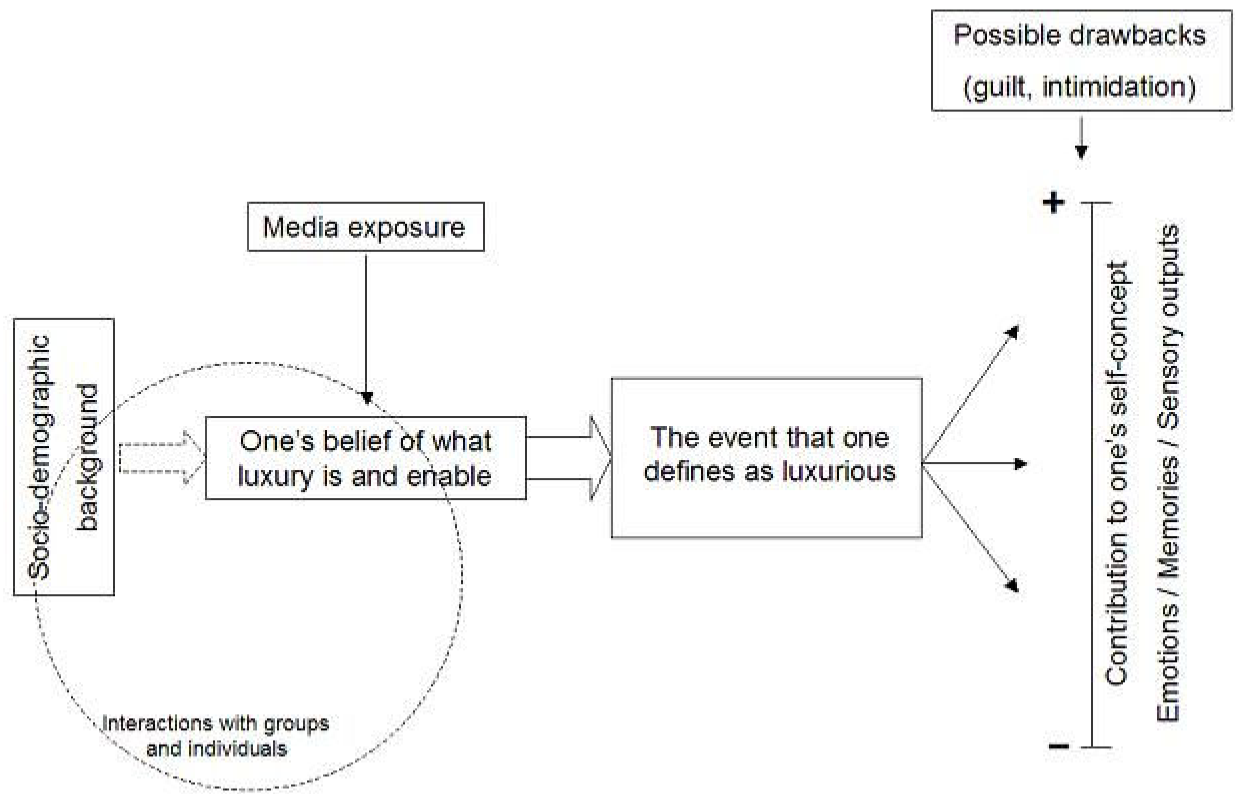
I think luxurious places are intimidating - And what do you think of consuming luxuries in general?



I think consuming luxuries requires some specific knowledge/training - And what do you think of consuming luxuries in general?



Appendix 8 – Conceptual framework



Doctor of Business Administration

Exploring hedonistic consumption from an identity perspective: an interpretative study

Document 5
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of The Nottingham Trent University for the degree of Doctorate of Business Administration

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February 2010

Table of contents – Document 5

Table of figures - Document 5

Introduction

This paper is the fifth in a series of six written as part of an investigation of consumer beliefs and attitudes towards luxuries. Numerous studies concerned with luxury consumption look at what luxury is and enables (Berry, 1994; Dubois and Laurent, 1996; Dubois et al., 2001; Lageat et al., 2003; Phau and Prendergast, 2001; Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). This document is aimed at filling a gap in knowledge by investigating how consumers create the meanings they associate with luxury and how consuming luxury influences their identity.

The research project so far

In order to better understand how it has evolved, it is worthwhile reminding the reader of the way this research project has been conducted so far. First, the literature review (document two) allowed the author to map the key concepts of the study of consumer behaviour towards luxury. The project then focused on classifying luxurious events according to the intensity of emotions generated (document 3). Conclusions from this investigation led to a quantitative piece of research (document 4) that allowed the author to identify patterns in participants' beliefs and attitudes towards the consumption of luxury services. Overall, primary and secondary research conducted brought to light that the concept of 'luxury' was difficult to grasp as every individual is likely to hold his or her own definition of what luxury is. On the other hand, further investigation is needed to understand how one arrives at his definition of luxury and how consuming luxuries may impact his identity. This will be the focus of the present paper.

Why this investigation is important

Conclusions from this piece of research will be of interest to both academics and practitioners. Bomsel (1995:2) posits that 'a luxury item is the association of an object and what this object represents; in other words, it is made of an objective, tangible element associated with an intangible, subjective idea'. Each consumer gives a unique meaning to the product, which suggests that there can be as many meanings as potential consumers of the product.

These meanings evolve overtime and tend to fade or even perish (Bomsel, 1995). It is therefore not possible to establish one definition of luxury and difficult to even classify people’s behaviour towards luxury consumption. One rather needs to understand how people develop the meanings they associate with luxury. This investigation will allow scholars to go beyond just categorizing the reasons why people engage in luxury consumption.

Practitioners are already aware of what the key components of luxury are (Dubois et al., 2001). Understanding how and why people create and associate certain meanings with their offerings will allow them to connect with their target audience at a deeper level. Future offerings can then be designed to address a larger and deeper range of consumer needs, besides obvious product features and benefits. Establishing this deeper connection should also help improve customer retention as marketers could develop stronger connections between the brand and its clients. Finally, understanding not only what consumers’ needs are but also where these needs originate from should enable the brands to create offerings that will have a longer lifespan.

Context of the study and scene setting

Although the degree of Doctor of Business Administration is being completed in the United Kingdom, the author relocated to the United States three years ago, both for professional and personal reasons. Conventional wisdom suggests that people with different backgrounds consume differently. Indeed, American consumers are in an ‘heightened state of emotionalism’ (Hauck and Stanforth, 2007:177), which drives them to purchase goods that meet both physical and emotional needs. It is argued that many Americans are running on a consumption treadmill whereby they are seeking to acquire more and more luxury goods. This phenomenon is not only affecting the upper class, but also middle and lower income families. At the same time, Americans are pressured to work longer hours. Indeed, a stream of authors highlighted that people had less and less free time, and might therefore be tempted to buy more goods and consume conspicuously to reach happiness (Hirsch, 1977; Schor, 1955).

In contrast with the United States, British workers work on average 37 hours/week and 15.5 hours when employed part-time (Office for National Statistics, 2009). Only a fifth of people employed work more than 45 hours a week. Interestingly, people in the United Kingdom worked more than 50 hours a week on average a century ago. Higher productivity and the entry of more women in the workforce led to a shorter working week (Office for National Statistics, 2009). Today, full-time workers are entitled to 28 days paid leave per year and a right to a day off each week (Peck, 2008). In light of Hirsh's (1977) and Shor's (1955) reasoning, British workers are likely to devote more free time to non-consumption related activities (such as spending time with their families) and be less tempted to accumulate goods and consume conspicuously.

Historically, people tend to reduce their savings and increase their debt in order to finance their spending (Frank, 1999). This trend seemed to hold throughout the development of this research project from Septembers 2005 until September 2008. Indeed, the total credit card debt in the United States was $665 billion in 2006 and rose to almost $973 billion by the end of 2008 (The Nilson report, 2009). However, an unprecedented financial crisis started in the United States just as the author started conducting the fieldwork for this paper. Indeed, investors lost confidence in the value of securitised mortgages (a process that involves packaging financial assets into securities), which triggered a crash of stock markets first in the United States and then worldwide in September-October 2008.

As a consequence, a large number of mortgage lenders, banks and insurance companies failed within only a few weeks (Norris, 2008). This crisis rapidly reached consumers for whom credit is now harder to obtain (Whitney, 2009). Unemployment soared as the United States lost 4.2 million jobs between February 2008 and February 2009, following on vast rounds of lay-offs and bankruptcies (Anderson, 2009). It is hard to gauge how this crisis will affect consumer behaviour in the long run, but it could certainly influence the responses of the participants to this study. The analysis of the data will bring to light how (if at all) this crisis is impacting the process people go through to create meaning when consuming luxuries.

Exploring hedonistic consumption through the lens of the experiential view

The previous section touched on the environment that surrounds the American consumer today. Following on research conducted as part of the literature review (document 2), the experiential view seems best suited for the study of these individuals. The experiential view acknowledges that purchase decisions are made based upon a wide range of characteristics. In contrast, the traditional 'information prospective perspective' considers the consumer as a problem solver (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982a).

Furthermore, the experiential view devotes attention to sensory pleasures and a product's aesthetic and subjective elements such as sociability or elegance (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982a). Experiences should not be viewed as a linear sequence of events, beginning with expectations and ending with outcomes (Patterson et al., 1998). They should be considered as emergent in which participants are motivated by the loosely defined goal of acquiring stories that contribute to enriching their life. In other words, the actual experience may differ from one's expectations, but the unexpected might become the most enjoyable and memorable aspect (Arnould and Price, 1993; Rolson, 1987; Sherl, 1988).

Plan of the document

This paper will first summarise the key findings brought to light through previous documents. It will then provide the reader with an update on the literature that pertains to the research project. This literature review will allow the author to update the conceptual framework of this study. The paper will then concentrate on the methodology and method chosen to gather and analyse data. Once collected, this data will be analysed using appropriate approaches. The findings will be discussed and contrasted with the literature reviewed earlier. Finally, conclusions will be drawn and implications for both academic and practitioners will be highlighted.

2. Key findings from earlier studies

The section below will provide the reader with an overview of how this research project developed and how ideas emerged overtime. Indeed, the DBA structure is cumulative and this section shows how findings from earlier studies informed the issues for this document.

2.1 Document three – an interpretative study

Context of the study

Document three focused on defining the concept of hedonic experience from the target audience's standpoint. Individuals who took part in this study were all between 20 and 30 years old, and lived either in Chicago or one of its close suburbs (this area is commonly called 'Chicagoland'). These participants were drawn from a wide range of occupational and educational backgrounds (from manual labourer to doctoral student). They have been recruited solely upon their interest for hedonic experiences, without enforcing any demographic quotas. The chosen method for this element of the research was semi-structured interviews. A total of eight participants have been recruited and took part in 60-90 minutes interviews, for which they received a $60 incentive. The findings of the study are summarised in the paragraphs below.

Key findings

First, the research allowed the author to develop contrasting definitions of different types of experiences. As described below, ordinary experiences consist of utilitarian purchases made routinely. These experiences do not involve any particular emotions or excitement. 'Treats' are experiences in between ordinary and extraordinary experiences. These events are not considered exceptional enough by participants to be classified as extraordinary, yet they differed sharply from the respondent's daily routine. Rather than imposing a term (as was done with 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary'), participants were asked to qualify this type of experience for themselves through an open-ended question.

Treats are more emotionally intense than ordinary experiences. Participants connect with the environment that feels more personal and less anonymous than ordinary experiences. Treats and extraordinary experiences have in common the themes of uniqueness and novelty. Finally, extraordinary experiences are perceived as expensive and, in many cases, associated with luxury. They are systematically associated with the idea of an exceptional cost. Most extraordinary experiences seem to be built around an ordinary, utilitarian purpose or fulfil basic needs such as a physiological need. Going to a spa, for example, fulfils the purpose of having ones nails trimmed. Expectations towards these events are often vague and the agenda loose. However, the lack of clear expectations or clear agendas greatly contributes to making the event extraordinary. Extraordinary experiences are mostly hedonic in nature and are new, fresh and exciting. Extraordinary experiences involve all five senses and were sometimes described by participants using the repertoire of extravaganza. These events are also characterised by the superior quality of service and the expert knowledge of the staff, acquired through appropriate qualifications and experience.

When reflecting on the events they went through, participants described experiences that were extraordinary at the time but do not seem as extraordinary now and would certainly not be extraordinary if lived through again. Extraordinary experiences seem, therefore, to be defined by reflecting on past experiences as well as projecting upon the next one. This definition might never be settled; participants seem to re-elaborate it following each extraordinary experience. The next event could also be different. The extraordinary experience being ‘new’ by nature, some new components might have to be introduced to replace the ones participants are now familiar with.

2.2 Document four. A piece of structured, survey-based research

Context of the study

Document four started from the premise that every individual holds his own definition of what luxury is and enables. It sought to identify patterns in participants' beliefs and attitudes towards the consumption of luxury services. Data was collected through an online questionnaire completed by 253 participants. These participants were recruited all over the United States, among individuals aged between 20 and 35.

Key findings

People's social-demographic background, media exposure and the environment in which they live shape their definition of luxury. One's social and cultural background is particularly important in the context of this investigation as it takes place in the United States, a country characterised by the diversity of its population. The term 'melting pot' is often employed to refer to the fusion of different ethnicities, nationalities and cultures. Sociologists also use the terms cultural pluralism and multiculturalism to describe the way in which ethnicities and cultures mix. That is, immigrants tend to retain their native cultures and heritage while blending into the majority European/Anglo-Saxon/American society (Gordon, 1964). Today, 100 million people who are minorities live in the United States; they are mainly from Hispanic, African-American, Asian and other descent.

Participants shape their definition of luxury through interactions with other individuals and groups in the community in which they live. Indeed, the bigger the city is, the less people seem impressed by the contribution that luxurious events make to their self. Conversely, participants living in the most remote areas are more concerned with the feelings of success and uniqueness. Another link has been identified between the extent to which one is exposed to media (specifically the internet and TV) and the contribution luxury makes to one's self-concept. Heavy internet users (people using internet several times a day), are less concerned with impressing others and feeling unique and successful. On the other hand, participants who access the internet less than one time a day are more concerned with consuming conspicuously and enhancing their self-concept through luxury experiences.

A similar correlation can be seen between the time one spends watching TV and the contribution that luxury makes to his self-concept. The more one watches TV, the less he is concerned with the contribution luxury events make to his self-concept. Conversely, participants who spend less time watching TV seem to rely more on luxury to help them to feel successful and unique. The study also enabled the author to verify findings from previous primary and secondary research. Indeed, a link was highlighted between the newness of the experience and the intensity of the resulting emotions, memories and senses. This link had already been suggested in many papers concerned with the experiential aspect of consumption (Caru and Cova, 2003; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982b; Mano and Oliver, 1993; Schmitt, 1999). A correlation has also been identified between the notion of luxury and sensory outputs, emotions, memories.

To sum up, the secondary research conducted so far brought to light patterns of beliefs and attitudes towards luxuries across different socio-demographic groups. It also enabled the researcher to highlight the contribution luxury makes to one's self-concept. Both documents three and four suggested the need for further research to uncover how these beliefs and attitudes emerge. The present paper will address the following research issues:

- Identify similar as well as different patterns of meanings held by participants about luxurious and hedonistic consumption

Previous research highlighted that each individual holds his own definition of luxury and hedonistic consumption. Despite this, some individuals might associate similar meanings with these concepts. This paper will bring to light these similarities on one hand and highlight contrasting views on the other.

- Explore the nexus of ties between luxury consumption and identity

In other words, this document will further investigate the impact that luxury consumption has on one's self-concept and identity.

- Explore the emotional aspect of luxury consumption

Luxury consumers are more likely to react emotionally to what the product symbolises and make an impulsive buying decision (Woods, 1960). This piece of research will determine how these emotions emerge.

3. Literature review and conceptual framework

The previous section briefly outlined findings form secondary research conducted over the last three years, which enabled the author to identify areas for further research. It is now necessary to review and critique the literature that pertains to the three research issues listed above. While a literature review has already been conducted as part of document two, this chapter will examine reading materials that specifically look at the concepts of luxury and hedonism. It will also cover the theme of identity, which is central to the research objectives this document will achieve. This literature review will enable the author to update the conceptual framework of the research project.

3.1 Hedonism

An historical introduction

Hedonism is derived from the Greek word ‘delight’; it is the thought that pleasure is the most important thing that one should pursue. The first philosopher to embrace hedonism was Democritus. For him, Hedonism was synonymous of ‘cheerfulness’ and ‘contentment’ (Taylor, 2005). In the fourth century BC, Aristipus of Cyrene founded the Cyrenaic school of hedonism that was characterised by the ethic of pleasure. Aristipus contended that humans value pleasure the highest and pain the lowest and that men should dedicate their life to pursuing and enjoying pleasure. The school further contended that bodily gratification was more intense and preferable to mental pleasure. Another form of hedonism is Epicureanism and was founded by the philosopher Epicurus (342-270 BC). Unlike the Cyrenaic school of hedonism, Epicureans believe that immediate acquisition of pleasure reduces desire overtime. For Epicurus, pleasure consisted of philosophical discussions and moderate life. Epicurus argued for less desires, enabling one to experience happiness more easily (Bergsma et al., 2007).

A contemporary definition of the concept

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (Soanes and Stevenson, 2008), hedonism refers to the pursuit of pleasure and self-indulgence. Pleasure itself is defined as a feeling of enjoyment and happy satisfaction (Soanes and Stevenson, 2008). In the academic literature, Woods (1960) notes that hedonic products are primarily consumed for affective purposes and sensory gratification. Therefore, these products generate emotional arousal (Mano and Oliver, 1993) and their benefits are evaluated on taste, aesthetics, sensory experience and symbolic meaning (Holbrook and Moore, 1981). The study of hedonism is not limited to luxury consumption. Indeed, scholars also devoted attention to extraordinary experiences in the context of rites of sacralization (Belk et al., 1989), sporting activity (Arnould and Price, 1993), forest environment (Williams and Harvey, 2001), restaurant environment (Hanefors and Mossberg, 2003) and tourism (Farber and Hall, 2007). On the other hand, the consumption of utilitarian goods is goal oriented and cognitively driven. It is aimed at accomplishing a functional, practical task (Strahilevitz et al., 1998). Consumers engaging in utilitarian consumption acts are more likely to make decisions on the basis of price and are more sensitive to rational claims (Woods, 1960).

Hedonic consumption has been linked to the pursuit of pleasure as using products might be multisensorial, fantastical and generate high emotions (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982a, 1982b). Other researchers determined that pleasure was cyclical. Its phases include the anticipation, the experience itself and the recollection of past pleasurable experience. In line with this reasoning, Goulding et al.'s paper on the clubbing experience (2009:765) describes a 'cycle of pleasure', where 'anticipating, planning, sharing and fantasizing about what is to come on the basis of memories of past experiences'. Indeed, the study reveals that clubbers go through a range of mental and physical preparation rituals that all contribute to the build-up of excitement (Goulding et al., 2009). In a similar vein, Campbell (1987) notes that one experiences pleasure by anticipating new products that have been idealised in daydreams. Consumption of the product results in disappointment as the product never really lives up to what one anticipated. What is in fact pleasurable is instead the contemplation of anticipated purchases (Campbell, 1987).

Criticisms of hedonism

Hedonism has been associated with consumerism and heavily criticised by certain scholars. For O'Shaugnessy and O'Shaugnessy (2002:525), 'a consumer society is defined as one directed largely by the accumulation and consumption of material goods … It is the search for instant gratification that we traditionally associate with hedonism. Popular discourse associates hedonism with self-obsession, materialism and introversion, and blames consumer marketing for its ingenuity and insistence (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2002).

It is argued that today's marketing practices lead consumers to think that the meaning of life is discovered through the hedonistic experience of material acquisition (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2002). Advertisers are even blamed for mocking values that are not tied to material possession, such as religion or marriage (McCartney, 2000). For Rohatyn (1990), hedonism is something that victimizes consumers who 'continue to "buy" expensive products … cheap slogans, corrupt candidates and (above all) the ideology of ceaseless consumption of material goods as a way of life … Even when we know that every new acquisition generates disappointment, restlessness and another round of conspicuous (hence pointless) consumption' (Rohatyn, 1990:78). Indeed, Western societies are sometimes criticized for their focus on conspicuous consumption (Marcuse, 1964) and material possessions (Belk, 1985).

Hedonism can be associated with psychological egoism, which contends that human beings act selfishly and are motivated only by their self-interest (Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy, 2004). Psychological egoism suggests that whenever one has the choice between two acts, he will always do the one that benefits him personally and never do the other. At the same time, people try to conceal the motives for their actions because they believe that such concealment is in their own interest. Psychological hedonism is a form of psychological egoism and implies that one will always choose the act that generates more hedonic value (Talbott, 2008).

Consumers engaging in hedonistic consumption simply ask themselves if the experience feels good or not. Bourdieu (1984) defines this as 'narrow hedonism' because individuals are consuming without attempting to calculate the full consequences of their acts. Marketers exploit this trend by selling through emotive images rather than focusing on product substance (Bourdieu, 1984). On the other hand, Campbell (1987) moves from narrow hedonism towards a broader view and contends that actions are not only driven by self-interest. Human motivations also involve moral obligations as consumers justify their actions to their moral self. Furthermore, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain does not cover all motivations for buying (Campbell, 1987). Campbell's reasoning distinguishes pleasure-seeking from satisfaction-seeking. Satisfaction-seeking is aimed at fulfilling biological needs such as hunger while pleasure-seeking is directed towards the quality of the experience that arises from certain patterns of sensations.

The empirical investigation of hedonism

Scholars concerned with consumer behaviour started devoting attention to the concept in the 1950s (Gardner and Levy, 1955; Levy, 1959). Levy (1959:118) looked at the symbolic aspect of consumption and noted that ‘people buy products not only for what they can do but also for what they mean’. In marketing, a stream of investigations called motivation research (Dichter, 1960) has been an important precursor to studies on hedonic consumption. Hirshman and Holbrook defined the concept of hedonic consumption in the 1980s as ‘those facets of consumer behaviour that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one’s experience with products … By multisensory we mean the receipt of experience in multiple sensory modalities including tastes, sounds, scents, tactile impressions and visual images’ (1982b:92). When engaging in hedonic consumption acts, one might ignore the reality and instead consider what he desires the reality to be (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982b).

The empirical investigation of hedonism is quite new and techniques for measuring and manipulating hedonic attributes are limited. Indeed, verbal descriptions must be supplemented by new methods that allow the investigation of non-verbal clues. Developing these methods is complicated by the fact that hedonic experiences are likely to vary over time. For example, a concert is a live event and the performance of the artists or even the composition of the cast may change overtime, which can threaten the reliability of the study (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982b).

The aspects of hedonism this study is going to investigate

Emotional desire vs utilitarian motives

Emotional desire might sometimes dominate utilitarian motives in the choice of products (Maslow, 1968). It was Dichter (1960) who brought to light the idea that emotions such as jealousy or love sometimes overrule the reasoning individuals use when making economic decisions. Despite being supported by psychoanalytic work (Freud, 1920-1922) and often depicted in TV shows and movies, these phenomenon received little attention in the context of consumer research (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982b). Indeed, emotional arousal is believed to be an important motivation for consuming certain products and services such as concerts and sporting events (Holbrook, 1980). Even in this difficult economic climate, practitioners seem convinced that emotion is the key to advertising effectiveness and is at the centre of the consumer's relationship with the brand (Murray, 2009).

In line with this reasoning, Pringle and Field (2009) concluded that advertising campaigns that emphasize emotions are twice as likely to generate revenue gains compared to rational ones. Luxury consumption is mostly driven by emotions and elicits a wealth of subjective responses. In fact, one could argue that certain purchases, such as jewellery, have no utilitarian features at all. For this reason, luxury is the product category that seems best suited to fulfil the lack of knowledge, as highlighted by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982b), on the role emotions play in the consumption process. The empirical research that will be conducted for the purpose of this paper will be aimed at fulfilling this need for knowledge.

The subjective meaning that supplements the tangible attributes of products

The hedonic approach acknowledges that consumers instil products with a subjective meaning that complements the product's concrete attributes (Hirschman, 1980, 1981). Indeed, sometimes a product's superior symbolic attributes might lead individuals to choose it despite its inferior tangible features (Levy, 1959). This notion is particularly important in the context of luxury consumption, where consumer choice is mostly based on emotions rather than functions (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). Numerous advertising campaigns for luxury goods are aimed at developing and highlighting these symbolic attributes as they contribute to enhancing the prestige of the brand and help justify the cost of these goods.

For example, Patek Philippe manufactures watches that retail at about £5,000. Instead of promoting the technical features of its watches (the utilitarian aspect of a watch is to indicate time and most manufacturers can fulfil this need for a lesser cost), Patek Philippe relies on the tagline 'some people feel that you never actually own a Patek Philippe. You merely take care of it for the next generation' (in Levine, 1997:1). Through this message, the brand helps its clients with creating a symbolic meaning for the watch (it becomes part of their estate, family and legacy become associated with the watch). It also undermines concerns a prospect might have with price and usefulness.

Fantasy and daydreaming

The symbolic aspect of products also translates into imaginative constructions of reality (Singer, 1966). Indeed, hedonic consumption is based on what consumers want reality to be rather than on what is real (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982b) and translates into fantasies on various themes. Individuals rely on symbolic attributes to construct what they desire reality to be instead of simply acting upon what they know to be real (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982b). For D'Astous and Deschênes (2005), daydreaming is a common activity among most consumers. These activities could include looking at pictures of resorts they will never visit, descriptions of entrees served at inaccessible restaurants and goods they will never buy. Campbell (1987) further contends that pleasurable sensations derive from looking at these images and enable hedonists to create other images that are known to be illusory but gain a stimulative effect by being treated as real.

Implications for this project

Researching the hedonistic aspect of luxury consumption is likely to be one of the most interesting, but also one of the most challenging parts of this investigation. Indeed, hedonism is not sustainable, but rather uncertain and fleeting (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2002). This aspect specifically applies to the dynamic experiences under study. Furthermore, participants to the study are likely to hold different hedonic capacities, which are ‘an individual’s ability to experience pleasurable effect’ (Dworkin and Saczynski, 1984:620). Also, research conducted on hedonism brings to light that hedonistic consumption is socially and culturally anchored. Indeed, Shaw and Clarke (1998) contend that consumption itself refers to values, lifestyles and symbolic meanings that are specific to local cultures.

Other academics have emphasised the impact of values in shaping consumer motivations (Carman, 1978; McCracken, 1986; Yau, 1988). Finally, one might experience hedonism for his own benefit but others might influence his experience. Movies and concerts are examples of events that are often consumed in the company of other people. Social influence might affect one’s perception of the experience and enjoyment might diminish when others offer negative opinions. Conversely, enjoyment might be enhanced by positive opinions about the shared stimuli (Raghunathan and Corfman, 2006).

3.2 The influence of groups, individuals and the media on luxury consumption

The previous paragraph suggested that one's social and cultural environment impact his perception of a luxury product or experience. Indeed, it is a well established belief that one develops his perception of luxury based upon one's interaction with people whom he aspires to be like and his peer reference group (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). The reference group becomes particularly influential in the case of status and conspicuous consumption (O'Cass and McEwen, 2004). Consumers are likely to look at other members of communities they belong to in order to identify social cues, indicators of which products and brands are perceived as prestigious (Clark et al., 2007). The following part will first look at a stream of research that devotes attention to the emergence of communities in today's consumer society. It will then investigate how luxury consumption impacts on one's position within these communities.

Social influence

Previous research brought to light that hedonic experiences shared with others are some of the most anticipated, enjoyable and memorable (Goulding et al., 2009; Maffesoli, 2007; Raghunathan and Corfman, 2006). Indeed, Maffesoli (2007) notes that sharing emotions provides the foundation for a community. In line with this reasoning, Cova et al. (2007) argue that consumers become members of 'tribes' that are defined by hobbies, passions and shared emotions rather than demographics such age, gender and income. These 'consumer tribes' do not simply consume goods in a sense of using and destroying them, but also contribute to shaping the meanings of products (Cova et al., 2007). Tribes give priority to human connections, which are always the core source of emotional value. Products on the other hand simply help facilitate linkages between these consumers. Indeed, social relationships (the 'links') are more important than things (products, brands, ideas and experiences) (Cova, 1997).

Unlike traditional tribes that are bound by kin-ship and geography, today's consumers rather belong to 'neo-tribes' that don't rely on historical tradition and are not bound by geography. Consumers do not belong to only one, but to many little tribes and the core meaning of human social life can be found in the multiple social groupings we all become involved in throughout our lives (Cova et al., 2007). For Maffesoli (1996), neo-tribes can be distinguished by their ephemerality. Membership in these groups is temporary as it is granted for the duration of the ritual only, making possible several memberships through switching allegiances (Malbon, 1998). Members can therefore assume different roles and identities by switching from one group to another. In the context of this project, the researcher will endeavour bringing to light any consumer tribes that might revolve around a specific luxury product, brand or experience. Having said this, the analysis will not focus only towards identifying communities, but will also look at what participants are trying to achieve within these groups. The following paragraph will help prepare for this analysis by mapping out different interpersonal aspects of luxury consumption.

Status consumption

A seminal contribution to the understanding of status consumption has been provided by Clark et al. (2007), who suggests that status seeking consumers are concerned with what the group considers the most prestigious. In contrast, role-relaxed consumers focus solely on the salient characteristics of the goods of services they purchase (Clark et al., 2007). Clark et al.'s conceptual framework maps the social, personal and market factors that influence consumption. This conceptual framework is particularly relevant in the context of this study, as luxury consumption is tied with the notions of status consumption and conspicuous consumption (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). Furthermore, research conducted as part of document three highlighted the influence of one's peer group when choosing and consuming luxuries. Status consumption allows a consumer to achieve distinction and recognition in the group. It differs from conspicuous consumption (which refers to consuming goods in order to display prosperity) and materialism (which refers to acquiring goods for their own sake) (Eastman and Goldsmith, 1999; O'Cass and McEwen, 2004).

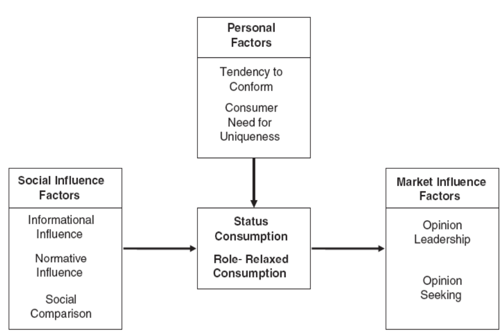

Figure 1: Hypothesized nomological network (Clark et al., 2007)

Consumers compare themselves with reference groups when deciding to purchase a specific brand or product (Bearden and Etzel, 1982). It is the ‘social norms’ that are established and enforced by these groups that influence consumer behaviour (Fisher and Ackerman, 1998). Social norms are rules or expectations prescribed to a group that define appropriate behaviour for group members (Burn, 2004). In order to elevate one’s status, the product or brand chosen by the status-seeking consumer must be widely recognised by the group as prestigious (Clark et al., 2007). The Stockholm Brat enclave (a community of young affluent individuals who gather at trendy and expensive night clubs in Stockholm), for example, dictates a social norm defined by the assembly, display and use of various consumption objects, enabling its members to be ‘in the know’ (Nancarrow et al., 2002). In this group, status is derived from participating in a practice whereby members dispose of accumulated excess ritually and conspicuously (Mauss, 1997).

In contrast with individuals who conform to the group’s rules, some consumers endeavour to express their uniqueness through the purchase of products that are not aligned with the group norms but are still considered acceptable by the group (Tian et al., 2001). For example, Brownlie et al’s (2007) study of tribal consumption among cruisers describes how participants satisfy the need to be unique by modifying their cars (examples of modifications include adding spoilers, neon lights and paint effects). These individuals ‘customise’ their vehicles in an effort to be different from the norm and stand out of the crowd, a tendency referred to as unpopular choice counterconformity (Tian et al., 2001).

Overall, scholars have investigated the expression of uniqueness through material possessions. This paper will look at whether events such as travelling or dining also enable the individual to distinguish himself. If so, it would be interesting to compare uniqueness expressed through material possessions versus uniqueness signalled through events.

Snob and Bandwagon

For some, consuming conspicuously allows them to satisfy their need for uniqueness. The more the product is perceived as unique, the more its perceived value increases. Conversely, its perceived value decreases as more people own it (Nagel and Holdon, 2002). In contrast with the need for uniqueness, other consumers pursue the need for conformity whereby possessing ostentatious and expensive products (or engaging in expensive activities) is a mean to fit in a specific social group (Dubois and Duquesne, 1993). Assimilation occurs when one compares himself with a financially or academically successful other person. Individuals experiencing assimilation are likely to fantasise about their own future wealth, which in turn increases their desire for luxury brands (Mandel et al., 2006).

Indeed, Americans tend to trade up for luxury brands (Silverstein and Fiske, 2003), as these products and services allow middle class families to reach the perception of prosperity (Schwartz, 2002). It is argued that consumers may engage in conspicuous consumption in order to obtain the product or brand’s intangible values (Solomon et al., 2002). These intangible values are known as: symbol of prestige, symbol of success, interested in status, indicates wealth, enhances one’s image and indicates achievement (Heath and Scott, 1998; O'Cass and McEwen, 2004; Wong and Ahuvia, 1998).

Role-relaxed consumers

Role-relaxed consumers are focused on the utilitarian aspect of products rather than the superficial aspects such as style, brand or sex-appeal (Kahle, 1995a). These individuals are concerned with maintaining self-respect rather than earning the respect of the reference group (Kahle, 1995b). They are therefore less attentive to group norms and influences. Furthermore, role-relaxed consumers are neither opinion leaders nor opinion seekers and are not susceptible to interpersonal or informative influence (Clark et al., 2007). Role-relaxed consumers tend to view themselves as intelligent, knowledgeable, logical, sensible and educated (Clark et al., 2007). While role-relaxed consumers have received some attention (Clark et al., 2007; Kahle, 1995a, 1995b), research into the motivations and influence of these individuals is still lacking. This research project already brought to light that luxury products have less utilitarian features and more hedonic benefits. Role-relaxed consumers of luxuries are likely to be motivated by aspects other than utilitarian features, which this study will unveil.

Conspicuous consumption

The most influential theory in the area of consumer behaviour towards luxuries is certainly Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class (1899). It is an attempt to understand conspicuous consumption through social and anthropological lenses in the United States at the end of the 19th century. More recently, Trigg (2001) described conspicuous consumption as the behaviour of an individual who displays wealth through extensive luxury expenditure and leisure activities. It is a way for one to emulate the social group that is in a higher hierarchical position (Trigg, 2001). Members of Stockholm's Brat community can be regarded as the latest variation of the theme unveiled by Veblen (Ostberg, 2007). These individuals stand up for their right to consume conspicuously for the purpose of differentiating themselves from 'the Joneses' or the 'Svenssons', their Swedish equivalent (Ostberg, 2007).

For Wong (1997), satisfaction in conspicuous consumption is derived from audience reaction rather than product quality or utility. More recently, some practitioners have argued that Americans were losing interest in conspicuous consumption. Indeed, many consumers are now focusing on acquiring less goods and seem to prefer custom made or artisan designed products (Bulla, 2008). In line with this reasoning, the CEO of WPP, Martin Sorrell, contends that conspicuous consumption is unproductive and should be discouraged (Benady, 2008). Other practitioners, from public relations and advertising agencies, argue that our society is moving away from materialism as buying recycled clothes or growing vegetables is gaining momentum, while 4X4 cars sales are sharply declining (Benady, 2008). While conspicuous consumption is clearly defined from an academic standpoint, marketers seem to be unsure of the relevance of this concept in today's society. This study will gauge the extent to which consumers are still averse to consuming conspicuously and investigate which meanings (positive and negative) individuals associate with conspicuous consumption.

Opinion leaders and opinion seekers

Consumers can become in turn both opinion leaders and opinion seekers about products and brands they buy. Flynn et al. (1996) define opinion leadership as a tendency to influence other individuals in specific domains. This means that one might be consulted by his peers about the choice of a watch or a car, for example, but never be sought for his opinion about electronics. Individuals observe and select opinion leaders depending on the domain of their expertise (Rogers, 1995) and seek their advice to search for, purchase and use specific products (Flynn et al., 1996). Opinion leaders have a tendency to stand out from the crowd and signal their uniqueness with behaviour that emphasise their difference. On the other hand, opinion seekers consult opinion leaders who are perceived as holding more domain-specific knowledge and experience (Flynn et al., 1996). Opinion seekers are also likely to spread word of mouth about the product category for which they sought advice from opinion leaders. It is therefore argued that overlaps exist between opinion leaders and opinion seekers (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008).

The influence of opinion leaders, culture and class

Consumers are not only influenced by their peers, but also by the media and public figures to whom they can relate. Indeed, the media often depicts American families as wealthy and successful and popular magazines such as In Style and People give their readers an opportunity to emulate celebrities. Images of success are also dominant in magazines, on television and in music. Some studies contend that the more people watch television, the higher their perception of what the average level of affluence is in the United States (O'Guinn and Shrum, 1997; Schor, 1999). When comparing themselves to more successful people, consumers alter their expectations towards their future wealth. This comparison also influences their brand preferences (Mandel et al., 2006). Increased desire for luxury brands occurs only when the depicted success is easy to imagine. Should one read about the success of a biologist, for example, his or her desire for luxury brands might not increase or would even decrease in many cases. On the other hand, a comparison with a successful business person appears to be more accessible and could positively affect one’s desire for luxury brands (Mandel et al., 2006).

Research conducted for the purpose of document four underlined that luxury consumers spent more time watching TV and browsing the internet than any other type of consumer. Luxury consumers therefore constitute a target group that is particularly suited to the study of the influence of opinion leaders. Participants to this study will create artworks using pictures sourced from any of the media sources that are available to them. The analysis of where these pictures are coming from (magazines, photographs, internet websites) and what characters are featured (politicians, entertainers or non-celebrities) will shed light on the level of influence that the media and opinion leaders have on luxury consumption.

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3.3 Self-concept and identity

To sum up, individuals exemplified in the previous part rely on the consumption of certain products or experiences to differentiate themselves and access specific social categories. Indeed, consumer research has recognised the link between need for uniqueness and tendency to conform with identity formation (Tian et al., 2001). In the research field of luxury consumption, scholars brought to light the idea that the supposed luxury of a brand or product enables the consumer to express his self or an idealised self (Lichtenstein et al., 1993; Roux, 1991). In the specific context of this project, the author is concerned with further investigating the link between identity formation and luxury consumption. The following paragraphs will therefore investigate the ties between identity, self and consumption.

Identity

For Dittmar (1992:73), identity is seen 'to encompass both personal and social characteristics of people as understood by themselves and others'. Some theorists refer to the notions of 'personal identity' and 'social identity' (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Identities are 'self-meanings' that are formed, maintained and confirmed through social categories (Burke and Reitzes, 1991). Individuals use social categories to create their social identity and define or locate themselves in the social environment (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). People form social categories through actions and engaging in self-representation in order to negotiate and confirm the meanings of these social categories (Burke and Reitzes, 1991).

In the field of consumer research, the Consumer Culture Theory made a significant contribution to the understanding of the ways in which consumers co-produce and co-constitute a coherent, although diversified and fragmented, sense of self (Belk, 1988; McCracken, 1986). These consumers do so by relying on market-generated materials; they rework and transform the symbolic meanings rooted in brands, retail settings, advertisements and material goods to express their lifestyle goals and identity (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Kozinets, 2001, 2002; Mick and Buhl, 1992) . Indeed, consumers construct narratives of identity through participating in the marketplace, which has become a source of symbolic and mythic resources (Belk, 1988; Hill, 1991; Holt, 2002; Levy, 1981). For consumer culture theorists, the market produces a variety of identity projects that consumers can choose to pursue (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). These identity projects are mostly goal driven (Mick and Buhl, 1992; Schau and Gilly, 2003) and are affected by ambivalence, internal contradictions, points of conflict and pathology (Dubois et al., 2001; Hirschman, 1992; Mick and Fournier, 1998; Murray, 2002; Otnes et al., 1997; Thompson, 1996). To deal with these complications, consumers rely on coping strategies, juxtaposition of ideals and meanings, and compensatory mechanisms (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). For example, consumers might achieve their goal of self-representation by creating personal websites and rely on a multitude of material objects, signs and symbols to construct a digital self (Schau and Gilly, 2003).

The Self

There are different discourses in the consumer behaviour literature defining the self. In the context of this project, the author will focus on the 'personal identity' view, which sees the self as a multi-layered, multi-faceted, psychological and social being reflecting continually on itself (Mittal, 2006). Belk (1988) developed a compendium supporting that people use material possessions to expand, extend and strengthen their sense of self. He uses the terms 'self', 'sense of self' and 'identity' to refer to one's subjective perception of who he or she is (Belk, 1988). Belk believes consumers possess a core self made of 'body, internal processes, ideas and experiences' (1988:141). This core self is augmented by 'persons, places and things to which one feels attached' (1988:141).

Belk (1988) further contends that our identity is structured as a story. These stories are elaborated around conflicts and their eventual resolution; conflicts determine what the story is about and the issue it addresses. People strive to resolve these identity conflicts throughout their lives even though each resolution is inherently imperfect (Belk, 1988). Ahuvia (2005) expands Belk's reasoning by contending that identity is a continuous variable. Objects, groups, experiences and beliefs are not either self or nonself but range from intensely identified (core self) to marginally identified (extended self) to not identified with the self (nonself). Items contribute to various extents to the self over a range of levels of attachments. Furthermore, they contribute to resolving some identity conflicts and serve as mementos of key relationships or events in peoples life (Ahuvia, 2005).

The importance of identity and self from a marketer's standpoint

A significant stream of research underlines the difficulties consumers face in developing and maintaining a sense of self. The wide range of offerings available in today's society gives people a great deal of choice about who they want to be and the life they want to live (Ahuvia, 2005). Consequently, people are more concerned with defining their true preferences and self and this concern has become a key driving force in consumption (Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Lasch, 1979; Sennett, 1977). Schenk and Holman (1980:612) suggest that consuming 'a brand may be highly congruent with the self image in one situation and not at all congruent in another situation'. For Cushman (1990), consumers maintain an empty-self as a black hole into which they fill products, although this hole never fills up.

Consumers struggle to define and fill up their self because of a significant absence of community, tradition, and shared meaning. The individual 'experiences these social absences and their consequences "interiorly" as a lack of personal conviction and worth, and it embodies the absences as a chronic, undifferentiated emotional hunger' (Cushman, 1990:600). For this reason, people try to identify the lifestyle that will bring fulfilment by engaging in serial rounds of consumption. Marketers are concerned with understanding what role products play in someone's 'I'. The term 'I' refers to the consumer self-identity and self-concept (Mittal, 2006). This self-concept is made of our bodies, success and competence, values and character, traits, and social roles and possessions (Mittal, 2006). Understanding consumers' 'I' allows marketers to position and promote products that fulfil one's self-identity (Mittal, 2006). A product can also relate to one's self by becoming a valued possession.

Product possession becomes part of one's extended-self through self-based choice, through one's investment in acquiring, using and bonding with the product and as a collection and memory marker. Most marketing efforts are directed towards self-based choice; understanding why one invests in a product requires a more consultative sales approach and a learning centred environment (Apple stores, for example, allow consumers to learn about the different products features). Marketers build brand images that are congruous with consumers' self-images. Indeed, brands contribute greatly to one's identity through the reconciliation of one's self-image with the group image (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Jenkins, 2004).

To sum up, these paragraphs brought to light the link between one's self, identity, social categories and consumption. Marketers must understand the selves of their consumers in order to promote products that fulfil their self-identity. Because of the many products available to consumers, there are also just as many opportunities for them to choose whom they want to be. Luxuries might have an even greater impact on one's personality and self because these goods are 'positional' (Law, 2004). Indeed, consumers don't only buy products but also the lifestyles, experiences, stories and emotions that these products convey (Bulmer and Oliver, 2004). It has been established that one's self might evolve according to the different products he consumes. Additionally, the perception of a luxury and its effect on one's self might evolve overtime. This paper will investigate the impact luxuries have on one's self and identity, regardless of whether products are consumed or not.

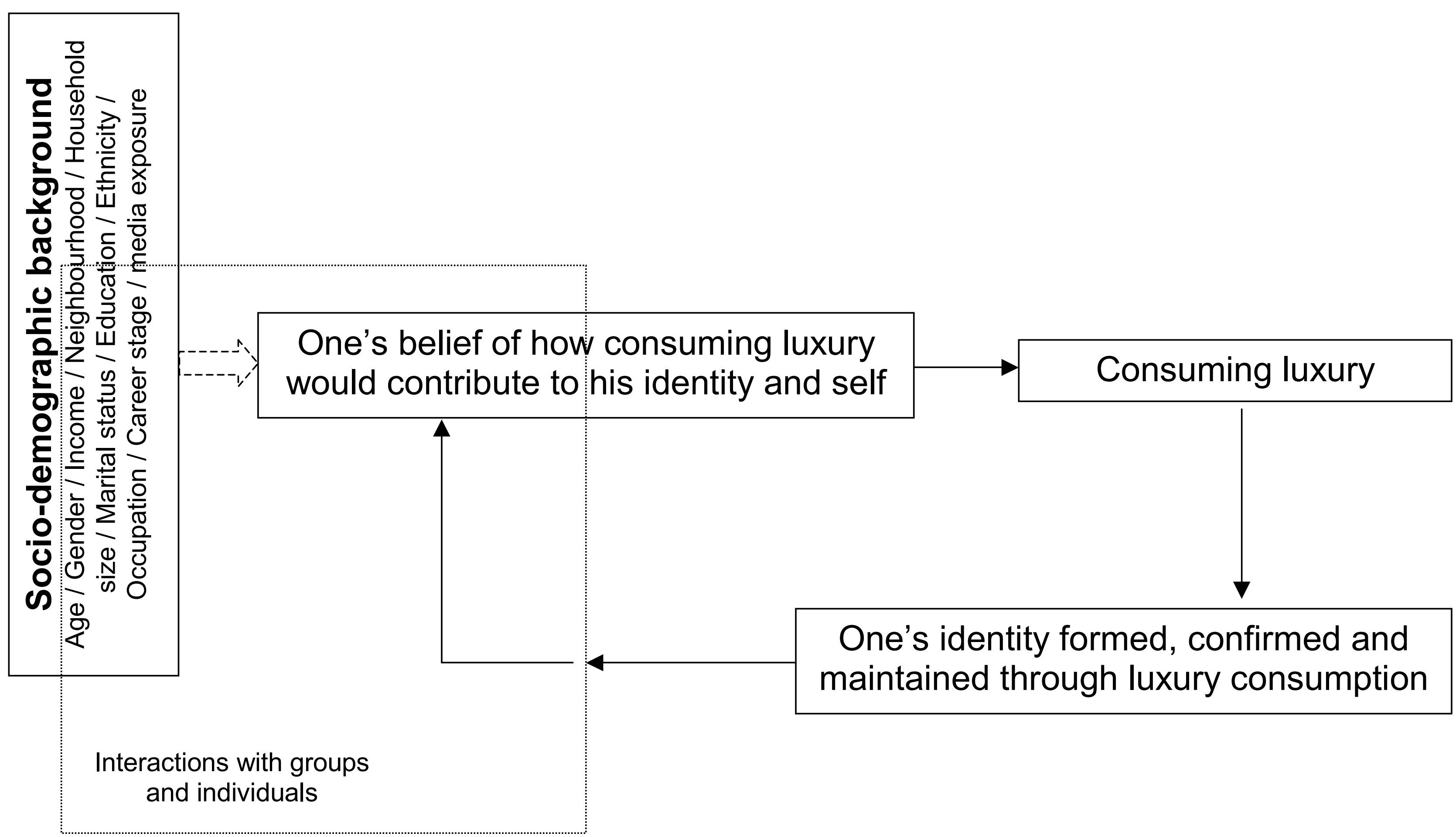
3.4 Revised conceptual framework

For Allison (1971:4) ‘conceptual models not only fix the mesh of the nets that the analyst drags through the material in order to explain a particular action; they also direct him to cast his nets in select ponds, at certain depths, in order to catch the fish he is after’. Thus far, this paper summarised findings from earlier studies and provided the reader with an update on the literature that pertains to the project. The conceptual framework presented in document four can now be modified to reflect the ideas uncovered through the literature review.

This revised framework illustrates the process people go through to create meanings for luxury. It acknowledges that every individual holds his own definition of what luxury is and enables. A wide range of socio-demographic elements as well as any exposure to the media contributes to shaping this definition and determining some of one’s motivations for engaging in luxury consumption.

Also, one’s interactions with groups and other individuals help in defining what he seeks to achieve through luxury consumption. Most importantly, consuming luxuries enables one to form, maintain and confirm his identity. The individual then revises his perception of what luxury is upon the outcomes of past consumption experiences and interactions with others. The revised framework reflects the dynamic nature of the concept under study as it repeats itself upon each new round of consumption.

Figure 2: The process people go through to create meanings for luxury



4 Methodology and Methods

The previous part reviewed and critiqued the literature that pertains to the research issues under study. Furthermore, findings from both primary and secondary research led to the reformulation of the conceptual framework of this research project. We must now look at how these research issues will be addressed. This chapter will define the methodology and method of choice for collecting and analysing data.

4.1 The choice of an interpretivist approach

The following section will briefly look at phenomenology as an intellectual tradition associated with interpretivism. It will then justify the choice of an interpretivist approach for the purpose of this research project. Finally, this part will describe the methods that will facilitate the collection and interpretation of the data.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is one of the main intellectual traditions that can be associated with interpretivism. Lester (2002:1) summarises the purpose of phenomenological research as 'to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation'. Phenomenological research takes its origins in the work of Husserl and Schutz. Husserl (1970) starts from the premise that phenomenological research is aimed at describing rather than explaining. For Schutz (1962,1964), who was influenced by Weber and Husserl, reality is socially constructed by members of society in the course of their everyday life. Indeed, beings rely on values, ideas, theories and common sense constructs to interpret the world they experience (Schutz, 1962). In the research field of marketing, Thompson has made a significant contribution to the development of phenomenology as a philosophy (Thompson, 1997, 1998; Thompson et al., 1989). Thompson and other scholars also contributed to the expansion of phenomenology as a method, through the investigation of gendered consumption and lifestyle (Thompson, 1996), self-conception (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995) and consumer uses of fashion discourses (Thompson and Haykto, 1997), to name but a few examples.

While phenomenology is the theoretical framework of this project, the author positions himself as an interpretivist who wants to understand how members of the society make sense of their world. It is therefore important to provide the reader with an understanding of interpretivism in general and how this approach is relevant to this study in particular.

Origins of interpretivism

The origins of constructivism-interpretivism can be found in Kant's work. For Kant (1966/1781), reality cannot be separated from the participant who experiences, processes and labels this reality. The intellectual heritage of interpretivism lies in Weber's notion of Verstehen (1947/ 1922); he describes sociology as 'is a science which attempts to the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects' (Weber, 1947:88/1922). Dilthey (1977/1894) is another important contributor to the development of constructivism. For him, every 'lived experience' takes place within a historical social reality. He further contends that these experiences are outside one's immediate awareness but could be brought to light through interpretivism (Dilthey, 1977/1894). For Hamilton (1994:63), Kant's standpoint was that 'human perception derives not only from evidence of the senses but also from the mental apparatus that serves to organize the incoming sense impressions' and that 'human claims about nature cannot be independent of inside-the-head processes of the knowing subject'.

Ontology and Epistemology

Interpretivists believe that reality cannot be separated from the person who observes it. Their standpoint is rooted in Husserl's notion of life-world (1970/1936). That is, one's perception of the world is bound to experiences that one has had throughout his life. The life-world is made of both objective and subjective characteristics. On one hand, one constantly negotiates the meaning of the world with people with whom he interacts. On the other, subjective characteristics reflect one's perception of the meaning of this world (Weber, 2004). Reality is constructed by individuals, rather than being an external entity (Hansen, 2004). Interpretivists adhere to a hermeneutical approach, which contends that truth is hidden and must be brought to light through deep reflection. The researcher-participants dialogue is a way (among others) to stimulate this reflection. Indeed, the interaction between the researcher and the object of his investigation is at the centre of the approach.

This dialogue allows the researcher and his participants to co-construct findings and interpretation (Ponterotto, 2005). This can be linked to hermeneutics, which refers to the process of interpreting human actions and utterances (Fisher, 2004). Indeed, the transactional relationships between settings, individuals with unique identities and situational influences mutually define human experience (Patterson et al., 1998). For this reason, experiences should be viewed as emergent narratives rather than as predictable outcomes (Patterson et al., 1998). Interpretive researchers recognize the importance of their own life-world in uncovering the truth. Indeed, the researcher already holds a preconception of the phenomenon under study, prior to conducting any empirical research (Weber, 2004). Conducting research (interviews) allows the researcher to evaluate if his preconception matches his understanding (lived-experience) of the participant's accounts. The researcher refines his interpretation until it matches his lived-experience (understanding) of the accounts given by participants (Weber, 2004). Interpretivists adhere to a relativist position that assumes equally valid, multiple and apprehendable realities (Schwandt, 1994). Constructionism argues that social actors produce and constantly revise social phenomena through social interactions. Becker (1982) takes the example of culture, which is constantly constructed and reconstructed by people. When confronted with new situations people must create new solutions in order to solve problems, because the culture they hold could not provide the perfect solution to every situation (Becker, 1982).

Interpretivism in the field of consumer behaviour

Consumer research was mainly conducted via positivist approaches until the 1980s. Between the 1980s and the 1990s, a significant research stream (Belk, 1988, 1995; Hirschman, 1990; Otnes, 1988; Saunders, 1988; Thompson et al., 1990) challenged traditional positivists theories by arguing that social science should rely on a wide range of analytical perspective, rather than a single approach to justify knowledge. Researchers progressively started to innovate and advocated the use hermeneutics and semiotics (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1993) and discourse analysis (Elliott, 1996). In the context of the subject matter under study, Hirshman and Holbrook (1982a) provide an interesting view on researching the experiential aspect of consumption. They suggest 'departing from the traditional positivist focus … and devotes increased attention to the mental events surrounding the act of consumption' (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982a:137).

Indeed, Hirshman and Holbrook (1982a) contend that ‘all aspects’ of the consumption experience must be investigated. MacLeod (1964) also argued that the researcher must look at the widest possible range of data, such as sounds and colours, feelings of attraction, fears, ecstasies, disillusionment as well as impressions of distance and duration. ‘These are data, given in experience, to be accepted as such and wondered about’ (MacLeod, 1964:51). For Levy (1980:50), the analysis of personal narratives is essential as it is ‘a protocol in which the consumer tells the story of how the product is consumed and can be examined for how the consumer interprets the consumption experience’.

Interpretive consumer research in the context of this study

More recently, interpretive consumer research has been the theme of a special issue of ‘Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal’. Indeed, a new cohort of researchers has recently devoted a great deal of attention to a wide range of qualitative and interpretivist methodologies. Cova and Eliott (2008) note the importance of innovating in interpretive consumer research in today’s environment. Indeed, market research now ‘entails understanding not how a product is purchased or used but the whole of the consumption experience, notably including its major subjective components as well as the hedonic aspect of searching for pleasure and enjoyment through consumption. Understanding a consumption experience is a prime goal of today’s market researchers, especially with the rise of experiential marketing approaches that seek to re-enchant people through consumption. Market research is expected to supply the keys that enable the construction of the experiential side of the company offering’ (Cova and Elliott, 2008:122). This confirms that an interpretive approach is particularly suited to the present study, as luxury consumption is inherently hedonic, experiential and generates a wealth of subjective responses.

Scholars concerned with interpretive consumer research often rely on the analysis of narratives to understand consumption (Pace, 2008; Shankar and Goulding, 2001 ; Shankar et al., 2001). Narrative analysis is also widely used by market researchers to provide companies with a deep understanding of consumer experiences (Caru and Cova, 2008). Hinchman and Hinchman (1997:xvi) define narratives as ‘discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offer insights about the world and/or people’s experiences of it’.

Narratives can also be considered ontologically as the essence of human behaviour. Indeed, our knowledge and emotions are organised in narrative form; narratives are also structures to create meanings for the events of life (Pace, 2008). In the context of this research project, the analysis of participants' narratives will unveil how people create meanings for luxuries. Semiotics will enable the author to understand how meanings are attributed as it focuses on meaning-making practices, which other academic disciplines treat as peripheral (Chandler, 2002). This method will be covered in further detail in the following chapter.

4.2 The choice of a method for collecting data

Now that a methodological approach has been chosen, data must be collected and analysed using methods suited to interpretive consumer research. The following paragraphs will look at how consumer narratives will be gathered and further elaborate on the choice of semiotics as a method of choice for analysing the data.

In line with Levy's suggestion (1980), collecting and analysing consumer narratives seems critical to the success of this project as it seeks to unveil how consumers interpret luxury. Indeed, personal accounts provide a perspective on aspects of the experience that are remembered, used and elaborated on, to create meaning for the person. The recollection is actually a stage of the event that one uses to reflect on his self and to the world at large (Bruner, 1990). However, attempting to measure all the dimensions of the experience during the lived event would be unrealistic in practice and likely to change the nature of the experience itself (McIntyre and Roggenbuck, 1998). The researcher will therefore collect data after the participants went through the luxury experiences and have been exposed to information and materials that deal with luxury. An innovative way to stimulate the recollection of past events is to ask participants to create a collage, which will allow them to create a virtual reality of the concept of luxury (Eisner and Barone, 1997).

Collage

Collage comes from French and means a glued work. It finds its origin in artworks from 1911 and 1912 by Braque and Picasso. For artists and writers, collages became almost a substitute for words and a form of visual poetry (Poling, 1996). Researchers concerned with creativity consider collages as a form of creative imaging and visualisation (Dudek and Cote, 1994). Indeed, art-based research has received more attention over the last decade and experimentations have resulted in hybrid forms of a wide range of art practices (Mullen, 2003). Eisner and Barone (1997) bring to light seven characteristics of art-based research. These are the creation of a virtual reality, the use of expressive language, the presence of ambiguity, the use of contextualized language, the personal signature of the researcher, the promotion of empathy and the presence of aesthetic form.

From a researcher's standpoint, collage is a critical medium with historical links to language. Collage is also multivalent and multidimensional and produces effects of fantasy, spontaneity, ephemerality and simultaneity. From a collagist's standpoint, the multiple levels of processes assure the emergence of intuitively and tacitly known content and the emergence of unexpected associations. There is an intuitive relationship between the parts, which are ordered and re-ordered until the achievement of a convincing overall pattern or schema (Eisner, 1991). While the collagist might seem to select images randomly, his selection is in fact likely to reveal mechanisms of analogy, metaphor and allusion. These processes are known to elicit awareness of patterns and hidden relationships (Eisner, 1991). People's visual experience is socially constituted and culturally shaped (Ball and Smith, 1992) and so is their perception of what luxury is and enables. Creating collages will allow participants to give a tangible aspect to an inherently intangible concept. While collages will enable people to lay out the signifiers they associate with the concept of luxury, the researcher must interact with participants in order to unveil the signified associated with these signifiers. Open-ended interviews would seem to be appropriate way to fulfil this objective.

In-depth interviews

The open-ended interview allows the researcher 'to enter in an empathic way, the lived experience of the person or group being studied' (McLeod, 1994:89). Le Bel and Dube (1998) also chose in-depth interviews as a method to investigate consumers' expressions and recollections of daily hedonic experiences, which is a topic closely related to this research. These authors reflected on the diverse and rich first-hand accounts identified using this research method. The interview appears to be the most widely employed method in qualitative research, mainly because of its flexibility. Unlike ethnographies, where the researcher has to be immersed in the respondent's life for several days, interviews can be conducted in short sessions. This method is less disruptive for the researcher as it does not require extended absences from work and family life (Bryman, 2004). It is particularly appropriate for the author who conducts this research project on a part -time basis, along with a holding down a full-time job and raising two children. These interviews will be videotaped, using a video camera that will be directly plugged into a laptop computer. This will facilitate the storage of the footage and most importantly their transcription, as both the footage and the word processor can be displayed simultaneously on the same screen. Furthermore using photographs (and therefore films) allows the researcher to examine a standard image repeatedly (Ball and Smith, 1992).

a. The choice of a method for analysing data

The meaningful aspects of the data can be best brought to light through the lens of symbolist and structuralist analysis. Rather than measuring isolated instances of content, symbolists and structuralists aim at a fuller analysis of the visual representations by relating it to its social and cultural setting (Ball and Smith, 1992). Firth (1973:15) notes that 'the essence of symbolism lies in the recognition of one thing as standing for (representing) another, the relation between them being that of concrete to abstract, particular to general'. The researcher must establish what are the individual and collective meanings carried by these symbols and investigate the logic of their patterning (Ball and Smith, 1992).

Contemporary structuralism finds it roots in the work of Saussure, who distinguishes the 'sound-image' (Saussure, 1983:16) or signifier from the concept or meaning of this specific sound-image, also referred to as the signified. This study of the 'role of signs as part of social life' (Saussure, 1983:15-16) is known as semiotics. Other contributors include Barthes (1967), Eco (1976) and Lotman (1990). Semiotics allows the analysis of a message that has been recorded (in the context of this study, video-recorded as well as hand-written notes from the researcher); this message is physically independent from the sender and the receiver. When communicating, the sender and the receiver do so on the basis of an agreement about visual, linguistics and oral signs, which can be defined as words or images that have an agreed meaning (Lawes, 2002).

The message is transmitted through the medium; different media can be broadly classified as either media of mass communication (i.e.: radio, TV) or interpersonal communication (e-mail, letter, telephone) (Chandler, 2002). Hodge and Kress (1988:1) contend that unlike many academic disciplines, 'semiotics offers the promise of a systematic, comprehensive and coherent study of communications phenomena as a whole, not just instances of it'. The researcher will devote attention to the analysis of the following components of semiotics:

Signs
Chandler (2002) highlights that individuals make meanings through the creation and interpretation of signs; these might be sounds, words, images, flavours, objects or acts that people invest with meaning. Indeed, anything can be a sign as long as it

signifies something to someone (Peirce, 1931-58). For example, the artwork created by Patrick (one of the participants to this research project) involves signs such as a sports car, a piece of jewellery and the brand name ‘Cartier’. One interprets things as signs by relating them to familiar systems of conventions. The meaningful use of signs is at the centre of the concerns of semiotics (Chandler, 2002). In the particular setting of this project, the most obvious signs are materialised by the pictures that participants chose to create their artwork. Other signs include words used by respondents to comment on their collages. The most significant signs will be highlighted in the findings and further analysed through the identification of signifiers and the signified.

Signifiers and signified

A sign is the association of a signifier and a signified (Saussure, 1983). A signifier is the form that the sign takes while the signified is the concept it represents. For example, Patrick explained during an in-depth interview that he associated the signifier ‘sports car’ with ‘speed’ and ‘women’. The link between a signifier and a signified is arbitrary and established through conventions of language. Modern structuralism is concerned with unveiling the hidden ‘codes’, ‘grammar’ and ‘structures’ underlying empirical phenomena (Ball and Smith, 1992:41). Levi-Strauss’s structuralism, for example, reduces the empirical data to a series of underlying binary oppositions, such as nature vs culture (Levi-Strauss, 1969). A key of the semiotic analysis is to identify in the text (here, the video recordings) what the important signifiers are and what they signify. For example, a participant might rely on the picture of a sports car to illustrate the signified ‘reliability‘ and ‘speed’.

Codes

Signs can only be meaningful if they are interpreted in relation to each other. Indeed, Jakobson (1971) brought to light the idea that texts can only be produced and interpreted if codes or conventions in communication exist. When analysed, a text must be related to the relevant codes. The researcher must be familiar with these codes as the relationship between signifiers and the signified might sometimes be arbitrary (Chandler, 2002). Codes are interpretive frameworks in which signs are organized into meaningful systems that correlate signifiers and the signified (Chandler, 2002). In this study, the multiple signs identified across collages and in-depth interview will be grouped into a handful of codes that illustrate and summarise the key themes that people associate with luxury consumption. For example, large jewels and expensive means of transportation are all believed to belong to the code of conspicuous consumption and extended self.

Metaphors and metonymies

Metaphors are figures of speech that link an object with an unrelated idea; the idea is constructed as an object. They enable the unfamiliar to be related to the familiar and require one to make an imaginative leap in order to identify the resemblance that the metaphor alludes to (Chandler, 2002). During our conversation, Sebastian (another participant to this study) tells the story of a wealthy man staying at a motel. This story is in fact a metaphorical expression that illustrates an aspect of living a luxury lifestyle. While metaphors express ideas (signified) as objects (signifiers), metonymies rely on a signified to stand for another signified that is related to it in some way (Chandler, 2002). For example, Patrick speaks about 'Jewish American Princesses', which is a metonymical expression that refers to young, wealthy American women with a strong educational background.

Access to and choosing respondents

After choosing a method for collecting data and presenting some tools for analysis, the following paragraphs will now look at how participants will be recruited. The study will rely on a purposive sample of population, which is defined as a group that is not representative of a larger population and is rather constructed to serve a specific purpose (Silverman, 2001). In line with this reasoning, Denzin and Lincoln (1998:202) contend that qualitative researchers 'seek out groups, settings and individuals ... where the processes being studied are most likely to occur'.

In the setting of this project, respondents will be recruited upon their interest in luxuries. Indeed, participants must be actively researching and consuming luxuries. In other words, they are expected to read publications, take part in activities, purchase goods, watch TV programs or be part of associations that they deem as luxurious. The invitation will not dictate the parameters of what is deemed as luxury, allowing participants to elaborate their own definition. Indeed, one of my main concerns is to elicit what people mean by luxury rather than exposing my own definition. The researcher will not specifically seek to obtain a representative sample of the entire population; no quotas will be applied on age, gender, social grade or ethnic origin. Indeed, the study will acknowledge the diversity of people's socio-economic backgrounds. However, within the methodological approach chosen, the researcher is more interested in the meanings participants attribute to luxury consumption rather than establishing a causal relationship between meaning-making and socio-demographic data.

A total of eight respondents will be recruited among distant acquaintances of the researcher and through word-of-mouth. Preliminary recruitment has been conducted through the online community ‘Craigslist.org’. This channel of recruitment should have allowed the author to recruit qualified participants living in the same geographical area within a minimum of time. However, two interviews were sufficient to highlight that participants recruited through this website were mostly motivated by the financial incentive ($60 for creating a collage and attending a 60-minute in-person interview), rather than by their interest in the concept under study or the research project itself.

Even if participants are somewhat connected to the researcher, they will have to be compensated for their time. As discussed previously, Americans are overwhelmed by marketing messages and market research. Over recent years, market researchers have been forced to progressively compensate respondents for participating in research projects. Today, the United States market research industry is made of 800 market research agencies and more than 700 focus group facilities that conduct thousands of research projects every week. The author took the initiative to contact a company that specialises in recruiting participants for qualitative market research projects. This company reported that it offered respondents up to $200 for taking part in an in depth interview of one hour and an half. The researcher will clearly mention in the advert that interviews will be conducted as part of his doctoral research, in an effort to limit the amount of incentives paid. Rather than receiving any money, acquaintances of the researcher will either enjoy a free lunch or receive a bottle of wine.

Ethical issues

Different ethical issues surround the conduct of qualitative research in general and in-depth interviews in particular. The first ethical rule that the researcher should comply with is called informed consent. On one hand, Silverman (2001) underlines the difficulty for the researcher to inform the participants without the risk of biasing the research. On the other, the researcher must behave in an ethical manner and make the purpose of the research clear, without being too specific about the research question (see Appendix 1: Consent form) (Silverman, 2001). Mason (1996) indicates that qualitative research can require involvement in the intimate life of the individual. Informed consent dictates giving information about the research, allowing the respondent to decide whether he or she will participate or not (Silverman, 2001). Furthermore, participants must be able to understand the information and participation must be voluntary. In the context of this research, it is recommended to obtain further consent regarding the way the data could be used (Silverman, 2001).

Another ethical issue identified is the potential invasion of the respondent's privacy. 'Qualitative researchers are guests in the private space of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998:103). The respondent's right of privacy is linked to the informed consent. The participant acknowledges that his right of privacy has been surrendered in the setting of the research project on the basis of the informed consent given. Subjects might refuse sometimes to answer certain questions pertaining to private realms, despite the fact that the interview remains private and confidential (Bryman, 2004). A further ethical concern pertaining to social research is potential harm to participants (Diener and Crandall, 1978). Harm can entail the loss of self-esteem, harm to respondents' development, stress or even inducing people to perform acts that are reprehensible. Different ethical codes enjoin researchers and help prevent any harmful or disturbing aspect of the research experience (Bryman, 2004). A way to address the issue of harm is by maintaining the confidentiality of the records (Bryman, 2004).

Finally, deception could occur if the research project was presented as something other than what it really is. It is observed that deception is fairly widespread in qualitative research as researchers intend to obtain more natural results by limiting the subjects' understanding of what the research project is about (Bryman, 2004). It is obviously very difficult for the researcher to draw the line between deceiving respondents and giving too much information, which would bias the data.

Quality of data and analysis

Within the field of marketing, there is an emerging consensus that both positivists and interpretivists approaches are valuable to investigate marketing phenomenon (Brown, 2003). Qualitative research is no longer considered as being merely soft or speculative and both the academic and practitioner communities recognize that qualitative methodologies help with developing theories and effective decision-making (Brown, 2003). Like any quantitative based studies, the importance of conducting valuable qualitative research lies in how rigorous an approach is taken to analysing the collected data. For example, researchers must be particularly diligent when analysing symbols as they are polysemic, which means that the same symbol may represent several things (Ball and Smith, 1992).

In the context of this research study, the author will implement different guidelines to ensure that analysis is systematic as well as transparent. First, this document intends to show the audience the evidence and the procedures that have led to specific conclusions (Seale, 1999). Furthermore, the researcher will carefully review and compare the data to ensure that the analysis is thorough and well documented. Finally, the analysis will be compared with existing literature and illustrated with quotes from participants that support and enrich the researcher's argument (Silverman, 2005).

5 Findings

The previous part justified the method chosen for collecting data and established how participants were going to be recruited. The actual data collection phase took place between October 2008 and February 2009. The data obtained through collages and in-depth interviews now has to be analysed in order to bring to light new and useful knowledge. The following section will first briefly introduce each participant. The reader will then be provided with an overview of the signs featured in each respondent's collage as well as a summary of the findings from the in-depth interviews.

5.1 Brief presentation of the participants

For a comparison of the participants' backgrounds, see Appendix 2: Profile of Participants.

Patrick Bourbon

Patrick is a French citizen in his early thirties who has lived in Chicago for seven years. Patrick comes from an upper-middle class family where education matters. Indeed, his father holds a medical doctorate and his sister is in the process of completing a PhD at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. Patrick holds two masters degrees and is a Chartered Financial Advisor. He is an analyst at UBS's investment banking division. Patrick owns a spacious loft in Chicago's west loop area, a trendy neighbourhood close to the business district. We met on a Sunday morning for brunch at an high-end hotel. Most tables around us were empty, preventing us from either getting distracted or being listened to. Patrick was dressed casually and rode his bike to come to the appointment. Note that Patrick's interview is the only one that has not been videotaped.

Sebastian James

Sebastian has been living in Chicago for over 15 years and was most recently employed as a print production manager for Whitehall Jewellers. Following on Whitehall's bankruptcy, Sebastian is in the process transitioning into the Search Engine Marketing industry. While he is not studying or job hunting, Sebastian enjoys playing golf in Hilton Head, South Carolina and at other United States golfing destinations. Sebastian also enjoys smoking cigars, the cinema and contemporary art exhibitions. His ethnic background is African-American.

The interview was conducted on Monday the 29th of October 2008, which was the first day of a deep financial crisis that started in the United States and was soon going to expand to international market places. This interview was being conducted while media were reporting the stock market crash and the beginning of the crisis. We often interrupted our conversation to listen to comments of business analysts aired on TV and exchange a few words with patrons at a table nearby. The interview took place in the upper-class neighbourhood of Lincoln Park at a casual Italian restaurant.

Scott Weber
Scott is native of Chicago and lives in the upper-class neighbourhood of Lincoln Park. He is a professional photographer. The interview took place at a Starbucks coffee branch located in Lincoln Park. The coffee place was quiet as the meeting took place on a Monday afternoon in a residential area. This allowed us to sit on large, comfortable couches and to use two coffee tables (one to discuss Scott's collage and one to set-up my laptop and video camera). This informal set-up eased the conversation and helped to undermine the pressure of the video camera. Scott was recruited through the website 'craigslist.org' and seemed primarily motivated by the financial incentive rather than contributing to this research project. Scott was casually dressed and was not really groomed (he did not comb his hair nor shave prior to attending our interview).

Steve Price
Steve is a native of Chicago and spent most of his life in the Midwest, although his occupation as an IT consultant gave him the opportunity to spend a year in Germany and travel extensively around the United States. Steve also lives in Lincoln Park; he is single and has a four years old daughter. While freelance IT consulting is Steve's primary occupation, he is also an actor for the advertising and film industries. The set up of the interview was the same as with Scott Weber (we sat on the same two comfortable couches at a Starbucks coffee shop). The informal tone of our meeting and Steve's acting background minimized the influence of the camera. Steve's main hobbies are flying small aircrafts and travelling over the United States and Europe.

Tanya Miller
Tanya is originally from Ohio, although her career gave her the opportunity to travel and live extensively across the United States. Tanya now lives with her husband in a suburb of Chicago, after spending many years living downtown. She started her career in market research before moving onto advertising. She has worked for major

advertising firms such as Gray and Ogilvy where she designed and executed product launch strategies for a wide range of consumer goods manufacturers.

Jennifer Schultz

Jennifer is originally from a small town in Oklahoma, where she spent the first 20 years of her life. Jen moved to Chicago three years ago to pursue a master's degree in Integrated Marketing Communication and now works as an administrative assistant in the market research industry (Jen is a co-worker of the author). Jen lives with a roommate in a two-bedroom apartment in Lincoln Park. While Jen enjoys going out in Chicago, she also often flies 'back home' to visit her friends and family in Oklahoma and Texas. Her parents are divorced and her mother recently retired from being a Chief Financial Officer at a medium size firm.

Lynnette Merkell

Lynette has been living in the Chicago area all her life. Lynette has three siblings and her father was a schoolteacher. Lynette emphasises that she comes from a modest family and never even went on an airplane before she was 24. She worked for ten years as a marketing executive for the John Hancock observatory, situated at the top floor of one of Chicago's tallest high-rises. Lynnette is now a stay-at-home mum taking care of her two children. She lives in a high-rise close to Chicago's business district with her husband Kevin, a tax partner at a large accounting firm. Kevin is also the father of five other children from a previous marriage and comes from a modest social background.

Lisa Wolfe

Lisa Wolfe has been living in Chicago for most of her life. She has been working as an independent interior designer for the last seven years, after spending over ten years working in the advertising industry. As with Tanya, Lisa is familiar with the methods and goals of consumer research. Lisa lives with her cat in Lakeview, a neighbourhood favoured by young professionals and members of the gay community. As an interior designer, Lisa travels to famous holiday resorts (such as Miami in Florida and Vail in Colorado) to supervise the decoration of her clients' properties.

5.2 Description of the collages and summary of the interviews

5.2.1 Patrick Bourbon

Figure 3: Patrick Bourbon's collage

An overview of Patrick's collage

Patrick used two pages for his collage and chose pictures from about a dozen magazines (which were provided by the author) including Chicago Social, Business Week and Conde Nast Portfolio. Each picture featured on the first page is displayed in full. One can distinguish two areas on this first sheet. At the top, Patrick chose to paste a modern building photographed by night intertwined with an indoor swimming pool. These signs can be associated with space as both pictures feature high ceilings and give an impression of volume. The two photos at the bottom left of the second page show high ceilings that can also be associated with space. In contrast with the top part, the bottom part of the collage features smaller images of a restaurant interior and various dishes. These small portions refer to the signified concept of taste, whereby flavours prevail to satisfy hunger.

The second page features six large, intertwined pictures. Most of them are only partially visible as they are much bigger than the page itself. The only picture that can be seen in full features two rings that look very large due to the orientation of the page and the size of the photo.

Another piece of jewellery can be seen on the right hand side of the artwork. This ring also looks very large compare to the size of the woman's hand. The sparkly stones mounted on both pieces of jewellery can be associated with rarity and preciousness. The size of the rings might refer to the concept of excess. This page also exemplifies the signified concepts of tradition and heritage through the distinctive monogramed Louis Vuitton pattern and a fleur de Lys. At the top left, the artwork includes the picture of a sports car, a signifier for speed and possibly freedom. Finally, the name brand Cartier can partially be read at the centre of the document.

How Patrick makes sense of luxury

Commenting on the pictures of dishes featured on the first page, Patrick emphasises that quality prevails over quantity. Indeed, Patrick goes to a fine dining restaurant to taste 'something innovative'. For Patrick, eating at a restaurant allows him to 'discover creativity' as well as 'new flavours' and 'eat something uncommon'. Photos of spacious interiors have been chosen because of their 'beautiful ceilings and volumes' and the fact that the table setting (at the bottom left on page one) has 'nice chairs' and 'several glasses'. Furthermore, Patrick included pictures of the ring and the brand Cartier and Louis Vuitton as they signify 'quality' and can easily be associated with high cost. The photo of a Porsche sport's car illustrates the concepts of 'speed' and 'reliability'. What seems important for Patrick is how he shares his interest for luxuries with like-minded people and differentiates or associates himself with groups of other luxury consumers.

For example, when choosing a restaurant, Patrick consults either with close friends or people who might be more distant but are 'knowledgeable about restaurants'. When asked to describe these people in more detail, Patrick emphasises that this person must be 'at a certain social level'. What matters is not where these people come from but the social level at which they are now. Patrick differentiates his understanding of luxury from that of 'most people'. He gets involved in luxurious experiences for his own benefit and makes 'fairly rational decisions' rather than paying high premiums for brand names. Other consumers of luxuries (who buy brand names such as Cartier or Louis Vuitton) are more concerned with showing off. In order to 'pose', they buy specific brands, live in landmark buildings (Patrick mentioned the 'Trump tower' in Chicago) and belong to certain clubs (such as 'the East Bank Club' health club in Chicago).

Patrick believes that ‘people playing tennis at East Bank Club are typically Jewish American Princesses’, a metonymical expression that refers to individuals who received a certain education, are wealthy and are concerned with their physical appearance. In contrast with these people’s reasoning, Patrick would rather ‘live in the building next to the Trump tower so that he can enjoy the same view at a more affordable cost’.

5.2.2 Sebastian James

Figure 4: Sebastian James's collage

An overview of Sebastian's collage

Sebastian's collage is organized around four pictures that include two advertisements, a cultural event hosted by the New Yorker Magazine and a photo of a TV show's cast. Sebastian created his collage at home prior to attending the interview. One must note the variety of materials chosen for his three pages artwork, which include some editorial content, a drawing, the logo of a cruise operator and some photographs. Sebastian's collage features many characters, both famous (such as Woody Allen and Tiger Woods) and ordinary that are of a similar age to Sebastian (on page two). Overall, these characters seem to complement each other and be engaged in relationships of different types. The drawing shown on page one (where the movie maker Woody Allen witnesses a lesbian relationship) depicts an encounter between an old man, Scarlett Johanson and Penelope Cruz and is described by the journalist as 'a lustful reawakening'. On page two, the heads of the dancers featured on the cruise operator advert cannot be seen on the collage, which lets the viewer imagine himself in place of this characters.

The bottom of the page shows four men dressed casually and one wearing a suit, although his tie and collar look undone. These signs can be associated with an informal lifestyle whereby people do not experience stress or concerns. The last picture features the golfer Tiger Woods and his caddy on a golf course. The scale above the characters' heads refers to the concepts of partnership, as one needs the other. Besides the emphasis on characters, the first page of Sebastian's artwork can be associated with culture and art. Indeed, the type of publication chosen (The New Yorker magazine publishes critiques, commentary, fiction and essays), the use of the word 'festival' and the drawing, all refer to knowledge and intellect.

How Sebastian makes sense of luxury

Sebastian chose a page of the New Yorker magazine to signify that culture is luxurious. 'One thing that seems luxurious to me is to teach yourself other things and have the means and the time to do it. Beyond material goods, luxury is also about engaging on the intellectual side and being able to 'stay abreast of what is going on with the smart guys'. Sebastian refers to the need to acquire knowledge and importantly, keeping this knowledge current ('stay abreast with what's going on'). 'The smart guys' is a metonym for professors, curators and people with intellectual interests in general. Sebastian further elaborates by describing an advert for a business school (that he could not find), which would signify the opportunity to teach oneself. Sebastian chose to include the advert for a cruise operator on page two because of what the brand means to him. He chose this picture to illustrate the theme of travel and adventure and he lives the experience vicariously through the advert ('I see myself on a boat … Cunard and I go around the world … They could have showed me pictures of the ship and I would have stepped on').

Commenting on a picture of men dressed casually (which is in fact the cast of a TV show called 'Entourage'), Sebastian emphasises 'these guys are living the luxurious Hollywood lifestyle; they live the life of luxury. They always have the newest cars, electronic devices. They hop on planes to Cannes and the French Riviera. They chew up all the luxurious places and plans'. In a same sentence, Sebastian uses a metaphor ('the luxurious Hollywood lifestyle') and enumerates the ideas his metaphor refers to (newest cars, electronic devices). The people he describes have high expectations towards the luxuries they consume and become rapidly 'blazé' hence they move onto something new.

Finally, Sebastian chose a picture of two golfers to illustrate what golf means to him. He insists that 'Tiger is just a guy in the world of golf' and rather associates golfing with 'going to Hilton Head Island (a resort in South Carolina), golfing the whole day, walking on the greens, enjoying a nice restaurant and good wine'. In a similar vein with the Cunard advert, this picture can be associated with trips Sebastian went on in the past and relives through these pictures. Sebastian envisions luxury as sets of experiences, expressed as signs organized in a coherent fashion, rather than just a brand or an object. His description of the New Yorker festival, the crew of ‘Entourage’ and golfing in Hilton Head exemplifies this reasoning. Besides commenting on his artwork, Sebastian made a point of sharing the experience of a wealthy friend, who is used to high-end hotels and cars.

‘After decades of staying at expensive hotels, he thought “why am I paying hundreds of dollars just to sleep?” He did well for himself and he had a Rolls Royce Silver Spur. He and his wife were driving across the country. She goes let’s look for a hotel. He starts looking for Motel 6s, she starts looking for Marriotts and Sheratons. He pulls in at a Motel 6 and she says don’t park a Rolls Royce at a Motel 6. The morning after the car got broken into. She is laughing; he is fuming…You don’t park a Rolls Royce at a Motel 6’.

While this story points to security issues at a well-known motel chain, it can also be interpreted as a metaphorical expression: ‘Rolls Royce Silver Spur’ refers to the idea of luxury. ‘Motel 6’ (a budget motel chain) is a signifier that stands for cheap accommodation, a lack of amenities and possibly of cleanliness or other negative clues. On the other hand, ‘Marriotts and Sheratons’ are signifiers that stand for high-end hotel chains. By favouring Motel 6 over Marriott and Sheraton, this individual wants to engage in a cost-conscious reasoning (the economics of paying to sleep) that contrasts with his overall lifestyle (cars much cheaper than a Rolls Royce can fulfil the need for transportation). Having his car broken into comes across as being a sanction for sleeping at a place that is not aligned with his lifestyle. The luxury lifestyle must be coherent (‘you don’t park a Rolls Royce at a motel 6’) and consistent overtime (‘decades of staying at expensive hotels’).

5.2.3 Scott Weber

An overview of Scott's collage

Scott relied on pictures found on the internet to create his collage. All the pictures but one have the same width and are aligned on the left side of the sheet. Indeed, this collage seems to read like a column as two-thirds of the page has been left blank. Pictures are displayed one next to the other rather than being intertwined. Note that the overall purple tone of the collage appeared when scanning the document and cannot be found on the original artwork. Scott uses many signs that can be associated with space, such as large blue skies and a spacious dining room. Other signs refer to the concept of financial wealth through pictures of coins, jewellery and an expensive car.

How Scott makes sense of luxury

Scott indicates that he chose most pictures based on the fact that 'these things cost a lot of money'. For him, these signs are luxurious because he does not have access to it on a daily basis. Scott also emphasizes that a limited audience can afford these luxuries and 'they would not be luxurious anymore if everyone had access to it'. Furthermore, Scott uses a technical repertoire to describe his artwork. 'A typical car does not have as many cylinders and is not as comfortable…The woman looks perfect…The silk is very high quality'. Reflecting on luxury experiences he went through, Scott says 'it lessens my image of what I have because I have seen something better so then I want to stay up there'.

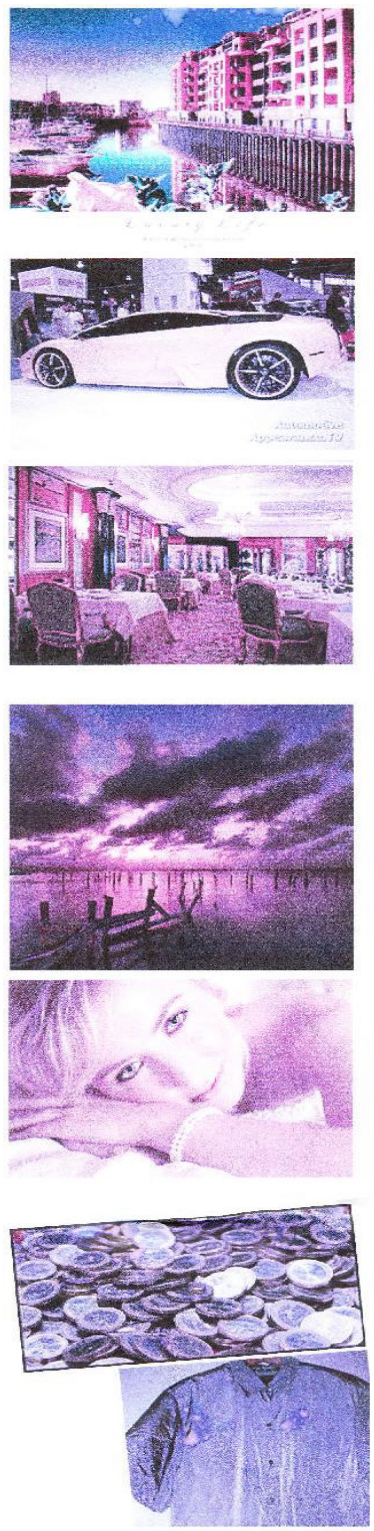


Figure 5: Scott Weber's collage

Overall, Scott is mostly concerned with the interpersonal aspect of luxury consumption. He enjoys consuming conspicuously as the performance of a car is less important than the way others perceive it. Furthermore, buying luxury items allows Scott to impress his group of friends. Scott declares that celebrities and other 'rich people' who set the standards for luxury do influence him.

5.2.4 Steve Price

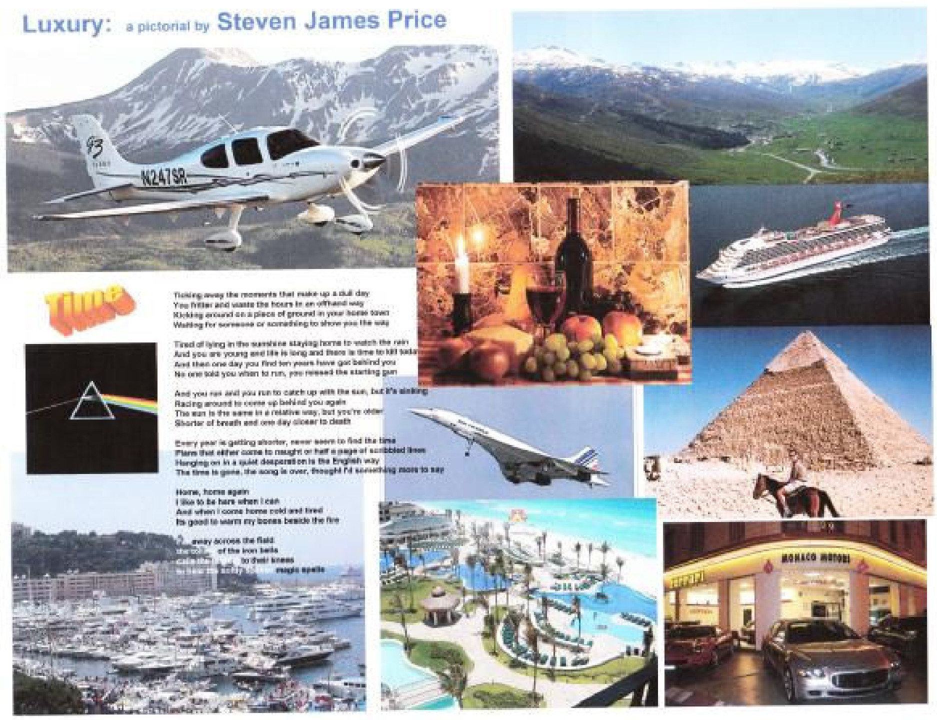


Figure 6: Steve Price's collage

An overview of Steve's collage

Steve produced his collage using a software and a variety of materials that include two personal pictures (the pyramid and 'Monaco motors' car dealership), photos sourced from the internet, the picture of a prism and a text. The overall layout of the document suggests that Steve devoted a great deal of time in putting together this collage. Unlike any other participant, Steve gave a title to his artwork: 'Luxury: a pictorial by Steve James Price'. Steve used many signs that can be associated with travel and adventure; exemplified through pictures of planes, cruise boats and resorts. The artwork features a variety of destinations in both cold and hot climates.

These landscapes are photographed at wide angles and show blue skies and water, which can be associated with the signified concept of space. These same planes, boats and cars also refers to the concept of freedom, whereby one can travel anywhere in the world. The private plane shown at the top left suggests that the pilot totally controls his freedom (in contrast with public transportation whereby one has to conform to set schedules). Steve also exemplifies the concept of time in two different ways. Some signs, such as the prism, the text about time and the still life painting come across as timeless.

On the other hand, the means of transportation represented refer to the signified of high speed and time saving. The concord plane included in the centre of the collage can be interpreted as an hybrid sign. It refers to very high speed (the aircraft could fly at 2,000 KM/h) but is no longer in service, which makes it timeless. Finally, this artwork also points to the concept of financial wealth, through signifiers such as a car dealership called ‘Monaco motors’ and other means of transportation that most people cannot afford.

How Steve makes sense of luxury

Steve approached the interview by discussing the themes that he associates with luxury rather than describing each picture one by one. He first correlates luxury with freedom and emphasises that travel in itself is a luxury. The plane featured on the top left corner of his artwork is a mean to be free. Steve further contends that ‘something luxurious is something you live and dream for’. He then elaborates on the theme of time, which he believes is ‘the biggest luxury of all’. ‘The concept of time itself is tremendous. You can fly another plane, take another cruise, another boat, you can do all these things again but you can never get the time back; maximizing that time and saving that time is a luxury’. Indeed, Steve believes that time is a luxury one can’t buy which is why he tries to ‘maximise’ every experience he gets involved in.

The means of transportation included in his collage signal luxury because they enable one ‘to get somewhere quicker faster’. Steve also described at length the role that money plays in luxury consumption. For him ‘money buys you freedom and offers choices that may not be available without those funds’. Money is also ‘a comparative element of luxury, as luxury is defined to some extent by comparison’. Finally, Steve gives an interesting account of how he enjoys luxury compared to ‘the general public’. ‘The general public’ here is a metonym that refers to anyone but Steve and his close group of friends. ‘The general public looks at someone who got all the grand and great things and that is a measure of personality. I look at someone differently, is the guy a show-off? I look at people’s personality … If someone has a passion for flying, they gonna love being in a Cesna, being in a balloon … the luxury is in the passion, it does not matter what the product is. Somebody who does not have that same passion is going to need something extra to try to make it luxurious because they are striving for something better because there is no passion, so they are trying to increase perceived value'. Steve fits clearly the description of a 'role-relaxed' consumer concerned with maintaining self-respect rather than earning the respect of other members of the group (Kahle, 1995b). He is therefore less considerate of group norms and influence.

5.2.5 Tanya Miller

Figure 7: Tania Miller's collage

An overview of Tanya's collage

Tanya was very prepared for our interview, as she gave a lot of thought to what luxury meant to her and produced a three pages collage using a software. Tanya's professional background clearly influenced her collage. Indeed, she seems to have designed her artwork from a consumer point of view while keeping in mind that she was creating it for a researcher. Most pictures come from image banks and are grouped under the themes that Tanya associates with luxury. Tanya's collage features many signifiers that stand for the concept of space, as it includes spacious houses, beaches and a large garden with a swimming pool. Furthermore, all the pictures on page two and the photo of a chauffeur driven car and private jet on page three exemplifies the signified of personal service, which Tanya labelled as 'expertise and outsourcing'.

A distinctive feature of this artwork is the painting and a photo of the Guggenheim museum (page one), which refer to knowledge and culture. Another specificity of Tanya's collage is the way in which she illustrates time allocation. Some tasks can be outsourced on one hand (to a personal chef, assistant, house keeper, designer) or rushed (travelling in a chauffeur driven car or on a private jet). On the other hand, time is spent in activities that are unproductive but may benefit to the participant (laying on a bed or hammock, spending time at resort, museum or with others. Finally, Tanya used signs that can be associated with freedom and travel, such as beaches, a sailboat and a private jet.

How Tanya makes sense of luxury

Tanya stated at the very start of the interview that her perception of luxury was very different from 'others'. For her, 'luxury is about doing things in a unique way'. A Cartier watch, for example, is not luxurious because it is available to everybody for purchase. 'Crowds of people shopping on Michigan Avenue does not speak of luxury. [It rather refers to] lots of people in desperation … Luxury does not come from "stuff" but from time, peace and freedom and solitude'. 'Michigan Avenue' is used here as a metonymical expression that relates to the signified of busy retail areas, also referred to as 'malls'. 'Crowds of people…in desperation' exemplifies the obsession of many American consumers to continually accumulate and consume always more material goods. Tanya rather owns 'less stuff that is more meaningful'. Conversely, a George Seurat painting (pictured) is unique and is not even available for purchase. Tanya included a picture of the Guggenheim museum to exemplify the opportunity to learn and discover new things. Indeed, she contends that a private tour of Grand Central station or air traffic control at O'Hare Airport would also be luxurious as both are opportunities to learn in a unique way. In line with Sebastian's comments, Tanya insists on the luxurious aspect of educating oneself in a unique way. That is, having the opportunity to learn from experts in their field, ideally on a one on one basis.

Tanya then chose to comment on her perception of time as a luxury. Her goal is to be able to control and manage her time so that she can be where she wants to be rather than where she has to be. She chose the picture of a private jet and chauffeur driven car to exemplify the theme of time saving. In contrast with private air travel, Tanya deals with the frustration of wasting time at security lines and dealing with the rigidity of airline's schedules. In a similar vein, the picture of a couple on a bed illustrates the preciousness of time.

Unlike Steve, Tanya believes that time can be bought; 'money may allow [you] to save, or to buy time'. The page dedicated to personal services illustrates Tanya's desire to outsource 'hours wasted away with no positive return'. Luxury seems to also be synonymous of togetherness. Gathering with friends and family enables

Tania to create memories and are occasions to celebrate together. For Tanya, togetherness is another example of luxury that one can't buy. It would be very unique to 'orchestrate' such event and bring together her mother's side of the family, so that family members can remember and pass onto the next generation what her grandparents did. Last but not least, Tanya has no concern with her position in the group, whether it is her family or friends. Commenting on the interpersonal aspect of luxury, Tanya contends that it has to do with people and groups one chooses to be surrounded by rather than trying to fit in a specific group.

5.2.6 Jennifer Schultz

Figure 8: Jennifer Schultz's collage

An overview of Jennifer's collage

Jennifer used local and national magazines to create her collage. She often cut around the borders of the items chosen, suggesting that she was concerned with the design of this artwork and its quality. In this artwork, each page seems to exemplify a specific theme. The first page features signs that all refer to physical appearance. Indeed, the brands and items have little or no functional aspect but all contribute to making one look better and allow one to be noticed by others. As in Patrick's collage, Jennifer chose to put a large piece of jewellery at the centre. This refers to rarity and excessiveness.

The second page is dedicated to characters that might be inspirational for the participant and are not part of her close group of friends or family. These three celebrities have very different backgrounds and occupations. Barack Obama is a politician who graduated from Harvard, Paris Hilton is the heiress of a wealthy American family and Britney Spears is an entertainer who comes from a modest family. The third page seems to illustrate experiences. The bottle of champagne, the table setting and the horseback-riding photo represent the concept of a special event. This page also includes a 'Quatrefoil', which is an heraldic sign as well as a distinctive architectural design that finds its roots in Christian symbolism.

How Jennifer makes sense of luxury

Jennifer approached the interview with a formal tone, which might have to do with the office setting where the interview took place. Jennifer chose the bracelet at the centrepiece of her collage (on page 1) because of the quality of its designed and referring to the diamonds, ‘the added sparkle to it’. Yet she states that ‘adding more diamonds would make it tacky’. Other pictures featured on page one have been chosen mainly because of their limited availability: one could not purchase Paul Mitchell and Louis Vuitton ‘at Wal-Mart’ and must go to specific retailers instead. ‘Wall Mart’ seems to be used here both as a reference to the firm itself and a metonymical expression that refers to a certain idea of low quality/low price/mass consumption retailing. Jennifer also chose the Louis Vuitton bag as ‘a lot of her friends back home own one and it is the one that she wants’. ‘Back home’ is used here as a metonymical expression that refers to the state of Oklahoma, where Jennifer is from.

Commenting on the third page of her artwork, Jennifer refers to horse racing as being ‘very much like high society’. Asked if she could fit in that group, Jennifer highlights that there would be a money barrier although she believes in her ability to assimilate. The quatrefoil featured on the right hand side of the horse event picture is an advertisement for a high rise under construction in Chicago. The quatrefoil ‘makes it better and high end just by using that symbol’. Finally, the glasses remind Jennifer of Jackie Kennedy, ‘that America, you know what I mean’. Jennifer associates the Kennedys with ‘Americana, a classic American family’. Going back to the second page of the collage, Jen chose pictures of ‘trendsetters’. These characters exemplify ‘the American dream’ and ‘the Americana thing’, which according to Jennifer can be achieved regardless of your social background. ‘Luxury comes with the American dream: you achieve the dream and luxury comes with it if you want it’. Asked about her choice of characters with very different backgrounds and occupations, Jennifer insisted that what mattered was how she perceived them rather than what they might have in common. Finally, Jennifer brought to light that luxury was personal: ‘I own things that are very luxurious, but they are luxury to me, I don’t think they would be luxury for Paris Hilton or Britney Spears’.

5.2.7 Lynette Merkell

Figure 9: Lynette Merkell's collage

An overview of Lynette's collage

Lynette's collage is articulated over three pages. The first page contains 12 elements while the second page features nine and the third page only two. Interestingly, the brands featured cover a wide range of industries, which includes hospitality, jewellery, writing instruments, home entertainment, automotive, spas and department stores. Furthermore, Lynette's artwork relies on spacious interiors, houses, in-flight seating and a sea view to illustrate the signified concept of space. This collage also features many signs that can be associated with travel and adventure. This theme is illustrated through two types of signs that contrast sharply. On one hand, the apartment and in-flight seating seem to be very conspicuous. On the other, the gazebo on the beach included on page two along with the swimming pool and beach set-up featured on page three are very unpretentious and simple.

As in several other collages, a large piece of jewellery occupies most of the second page. Here, the gold watch and its sapphire can be associated with rarity. The complexity of the watch's mechanism suggests the importance of superior craftsmanship. Finally, several signs (including, but not limited to the word 'champagne' and the red dress) exemplify the concept of a special event or occasion.

How Lynette makes sense of luxury

Rather than commenting on each picture one by one, Lynette started the interview by describing how she perceives the Peninsula Hotel. Lynette insists on how the hotel still makes her feel special even though she has been there several times. She knows that the Peninsula chain also own hotels in Tokyo and Hong Kong, and this seems to enhance her perception of the brand even though she has never been there. Lynette believes that walking into the hotel is very special as it gives her 'the feeling of luxe'. The Peninsula also reminds her of a teatime she shared with her mother, which felt like an exceptional event. Pictures of the department store Barneys and a large house, as well as the travel theme, illustrated on page three refer to things that Lynette could not afford but dreams of. These experiences are 'above the Peninsula' and favoured by a group that Lynette describes as 'South California socialites' or housewives of Orange County.

This metaphorical expression seems to refer to wealthy individuals who are concerned with their social life and leisure rather than their careers. Indeed, Lynette alludes to a reality TV show (called 'the Real Housewives of Orange County') in which professional success is a given and time is focused towards spending money rather than earning it. To sum up, Lynette's artwork illustrates two different types of experiences. On one hand, she exemplifies what she managed to access despite her modest socio-economic background. Growing up, Lynette always thought that travelling was a privilege and a luxury. Lynette was 24 when she first boarded an airplane and never took air travel for granted. On the other hand, her collage exemplifies experiences and goods that she cannot access yet but still 'dream[s]' of. Money is what will allow her to enjoy more exotic travel, larger seats on airplanes and more extravagant clothes and jewels.

5.2.8 Lisa Wolfe

Figure 10: Lisa Wolfe's collage

An overview of Lisa's collage

Lisa prepared her artwork at home prior to attending the interview. She mentioned having access to a numerous publications, given her professional occupation as an interior designer. Her collage spreads over seven pages and is made of 13 pictures; Lisa chose to include a maximum of two to three pictures per page. She used many signs that refer to the concept of comfort. Indeed, the chair included on page three, the fabric featured on page four and the pillows shown on page four and six are all signs of soft seating or bedding. Well-being is another closely related signified that is exemplified through the photo of a spa on page one, a swimming pool on page two and a bathtub on page seven. The signified concept of royalty is also illustrated though a women mounting a horse, the decoration of the spa featured on page one as well as the chair pictured on page three. This chair reminds the viewer of furniture designed for and owned by monarchs.

Another interesting feature of Lisa's artwork is the variety of colours and patterns exemplified through fabrics on page three and four, the harlequin floor on page five and the bathtub on page seven. Furthermore, the brand new car and skyline view shown on page six seem to refer to a modern interpretation of luxury, which sharply contrasts with all the other pictures that are rather rooted in history. Also, the characters pictured on page seven are photographed in very informal postures as if they ignored the camera. Finally, spacious interiors and wide outdoor views are signs that can be associated with space.

How Lisa makes sense of luxury

Overall, Lisa describes her collage in two very different ways. On one hand, she chose to exemplify the materialistic aspect of luxury. On the other, she describes a certain lifestyle that includes less tangible concepts such as 'seemlessness with nature' and 'freedom'. The horse, the spa (page one) and the chair (page three) represent something 'very regal'. 'It takes me back to the queens and king … to regalness … it is dripping royalty and history. Everything about it is just yummy … I just want to eat it is so gorgeous … the girl who rides the horse has the chair'. Lisa uses the repertoire of food and taste and seems to envision this luxury as a both abundant and refined meal. A brand new car (on page six) is something Lisa never owned. This specific Jaguar would make her 'feel like a rock star'. She posits that this car is 'total material show-off' and would be a symbol of her being successful. The fact that other people would watch her driving would be part of the enjoyment. The skyline view exemplifies 'the accomplishments it took us as mankind to get to this … it is powerful, the architecture, the lights … it is industrial but it is beautiful'.

On page two, Lisa meant to illustrate 'soothing, relaxing, very simple' experiences and the idea of 'getting back to nature'. 'There is something about stripping everything down; it adds a very special quality to it. It does not have a lot of inlay and goofy tiles and mosaic flashing off the sun and everything. It is the seamlessness with nature. We are from nature and getting back to nature is a luxurious feeling. It is all peaceful with nothing but birds. Just being there is enough for me'. Rather than being associated with money, these experiences are associated with the themes of solitude and time; they are opportunities to get away from people, allowing Lisa to be 'with [herself] and [her] head…The pool, it is free, it is a selfish little gift that just by being there I can enjoy myself'. Indeed, these experiences are opportunities to 'rejuvenate, write a journal and not speak'.

The theme of 'freedom' also comes to light from Lisa's artwork. Pictures featured on page seven exemplify this theme. The woman at the back of the car is 'on a road trip to Florida' that is 'wild and youthful'. Wearing 'her rock star high heels…she does not know exactly where she is going … Driving on an open road … she is wild and abandoned'. In a similar vein, the woman taking a bath 'turned her phone off and is gone and slept away … the world just melted away'. Both themes of 'nature' and 'freedom' come across as timeless. At the pool, Lisa notes that no one would ask her to leave because '[her] time is up' while at the spa, 'the clock is ticking'. This metonymical expression seems to refer to the time pressure that Lisa describes as 'frantic and chaotic'. The woman's road trip is not planned nor organized, she just 'threw it out there'. Finally, Lisa also associates the bathtub photo with timelessness. The fact that this woman turned her phone off signifies that she is free and does not care about time. Lisa notes that the sun shines in, which indicates that it might be the middle of the day, and questions 'who takes a bath in the middle of the day'?

6 Analysis of the codes identified through artworks and interviews

The previous section provided the reader with a summary of findings from artwork and conversations with participants. This brought to light the signs, metaphors and metonymies that respondents used to describe the meanings they associated with luxury. While these signs are abundant and very diverse, immersing myself in the data allows me to group them into codes according to what they seem to mean and enable. The following section will explain how the broad themes of identity and hedonism emerge from the empirical research conducted.

Numerous signs used in collages and expressed in interviews with participants seem to point to the theme of ‘identity’. For example, Lynette uses many images that signal financial wealth, which along with her comments about travel suggests that she is concerned with differentiating herself from others. On the other hand, most participants used pictures of exotic landscapes and large spaces and often used the words ‘freedom’ and ‘adventure’ to describe these images. While the theme of identity itself is quite broad, findings seem to point to four conceptual categories that will be described in more detail in the following paragraphs. Indeed, luxury seems to enable people to extend their self as well as to differentiate themselves from others. It can also be linked with the opportunity for one to expand his knowledge by learning from experts in their fields. Finally, adventure and freedom seem to contribute to forming, maintaining and confirming one’s identity.

6.1: Identity

6.1.1 Conspicuous consumption

Interestingly, most collages include at least one sign that can be linked to status or conspicuous consumption. The signs used to signal wealth are either large a piece of jewellery or a means of transportation. For example, Patrick and Jen chose pictures of large rings and bracelets to symbolise that these luxuries enable one to display his wealth. During our conversation, Jen described this bracelet as a mean to signal wealth to others, as ‘it looks expensive and it is expensive’. In a similar vein, Scott chose a picture of a sports car that enables its driver to ‘tell people that he is rich’. In other words, participants might acquire these items not necessarily for what they are or because they like them, but for what they mean to them and to others.

As suggested by Belk (1988), one could buy an expensive car or watch to extend his self and to give a tangible aspect to intangible concepts such as achievement and success. The self-image is therefore enhanced through the transfer of this product’s symbolic meaning to the self (Tian et al., 2001). Besides the contributions these goods make to the self, they also signal success to others and allow one to gain social recognition through conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899). While other research looked at why people engage in conspicuous consumption (Belk, 1988; Tian et al., 2001; Veblen, 1899), this empirical study is unique in that the participants don’t consume these goods nor do they intend to, but rather use the goods to signify luxury.

While these signs are luxurious, all participants but one (Scott) seem to agree that they carry the negative meaning of excess. In other words, what conspicuous consumers intend to achieve and how consuming conspicuously makes them feel contrasts with how others perceive them. Lisa, for example, chose the picture of a Jaguar to symbolise the type of car ‘someone who has made it’ would drive. For Lisa, who has never even owned a new car, buying a Jaguar would be a hedonic purchase generating high emotions of having ‘made it’ herself. In other words, owning a Jaguar would contribute to forming her identity by making her feel successful. On the other hand, Lisa is very critical towards ‘material show-offs’. This seems to corroborate the standpoint of the other participants who claim they don’t relate to people using such conspicuous signs to earn social status.

Indeed, conspicuous consumers are described as members of a group to which participants don't belong to and don't want to become a member of. Individuals who took part in this study rely on other activities to earn social status, such as educating oneself. These activities will be further investigated later on in this paper.

6.1.2 Social norm and status consumption

Overall, it is worthwhile to distinguish how participants relate to different groups and to shed light on what they intend to achieve through each of them.

The macro group made of personalities and other distant individuals that participants know through the media

Examples include the crew of 'Entourage' illustrated by Sebastian and Britney Spears, featured on Jennifer's collage. Sometimes, this group is not featured on the artwork but referred to as metonyms (for example, Lisa mentions 'the rock stars'). These personalities facilitate participants' daydreams and fantasies. As suggested in the literature, these individuals experience the bandwagon effect, whereby they try to assimilate to celebrities' lifestyles. Participants don't seem to seek membership in this group but rather to emulate celebrities' lifestyles. For example, I believe that Sebastian lives vicariously through Entourage's lifestyle when golfing in Hilton Head.

The macro group made of experts and intellectuals

This group includes curators, university professors and artists, to name but a few. In the traditional literature dealing with luxury (Dubois et al., 2001; Vigneron and Johnson, 1999), individuals earn membership in a given group according to their wealth. The present study challenges this assumption and shows that group membership can also be defined according to knowledge. Sebastian's desire to attend the New Yorker magazine conference illustrates how one might want to become member of a group that is not defined by wealth, even if this membership is somewhat temporary (the festival lasts only a few days) and other members are distant. This New Yorker magazine conference is an example of a neo-tribe that temporarily gathers members around a cultural event (Maffesoli, 1996). Living through this hedonistic experience will enable Sebastian to assume a temporary role and identity. The link between the code of knowledge and luxury will be further investigated later on.

The peer group

The literature review conducted for the purpose of this paper shed light on 'role-relaxed consumers', whom are concerned by pursuing pleasure for their own benefit rather than earning social status (Kahle, 1995b). Kahle (1995a) notes that role-relaxed consumers see themselves as intelligent, knowledgeable, educated, self-confident and self-respecting. Based on my conversations with participants, I believe that most of them are, to a certain extent, role-relaxed. Indeed, these consumers are not concerned with earning the respect of any reference group, but rather focus on enjoying a hedonic experience while enhancing their knowledge and self-confidence. For example, when visiting a museum Tanya does not intend to impress anyone but rather concentrate on her own pleasure. Furthermore, the knowledge acquired through this hedonic experience likely helps Tanya to form and maintain her identity, as it contributes to expanding her self-esteem.

Another example is Lisa, who highlights how she can get 'amazed' by a specific fabric because she knows how it is made and what it is worth although 'none of [her] friends would understand'. She therefore does not need to earn status within her micro group since its members do not hold the same knowledge anyway.

Furthermore, unlike material possessions that people can consume conspicuously, participants can only comment on events they participated in. Beside these three groups, participants often referred to 'the general public', from which they want to distinguish themselves. The following paragraph will devote attention to consumers nee

6.1.3 Consumers need for uniqueness

Participants to this study distinguish themselves through knowledge they acquire or services they have access to rather than relying on the goods they own. Tanya exemplifies this reasoning as she describes luxury as 'experiencing things in a unique way' rather than being part of 'the general public, the cattle call'. Tanya also used images of 'personal assistant and designer', indicating that these services are not shared with anyone else. In line with Tanya's reasoning, Steve distinguishes himself from what he refers to as 'the general public'. These signs, as I understand

them, point to the processes of how participants establish a ‘unique’ identity by differentiating themselves from others.
In the academic literature, this phenomenon is referred to as ‘consumer need for uniqueness’ (Burns and Warren, 1998; Fromkin and Snyder, 1980; Snyder and Fromkin, 1977; Tian et al., 2001; Vigneron and Johnson, 1999), although most articles start from the premise that people express this uniqueness through the products they purchase.

In the particular context of this study, participants seem to differentiate themselves not only though the products they buy but also through the processes and meanings they associate with luxury. ‘Others’ are described as being more concerned with the materialistic and conspicuous aspect of luxury consumption. For example, Patrick argues that he is different from other consumers because he makes decisions that are ‘more rational’. Steve emphasise that he is more concerned with ‘passion’ and ‘fun’ rather than with the products themselves. Engaging in hedonic experiences such as flying airplanes enables Steve to both achieve sensory gratification and confirm his identity as a unique individual whom is not part of ‘the general public’.

Interestingly, ‘others’ are often described in negative terms. Tanya, for example, refers to people shopping at department stores and shopping malls as ‘crowds of people … in desperation’. This description seems to exemplify criticisms towards consumerism whereby one keeps acquiring more goods and becomes rapidly disappointed with recent purchases (Rohatyn, 1990). This particularly severe critic of mass consumption might be linked to the timing of this research project. The unprecedented economical crisis that affected the United States from October 2008 onwards caused a sharp decline in retail sales and triggered changes in the way Americans consume. Historically, personal consumption accounted for 70 percent of the American economy and 1,500 shopping malls were in operation across the country (Segal, 2009). These malls multiplied and became larger overtime, to the point that some of them became destinations marketed by tour operators (the largest mall in the country, the Mall of America has 520 stores, an amusement park and even a wedding chapel) (Segal, 2009).

The recent recession led to a drop in consumer spending and a rise in criticisms of excessive shopping behaviour (Segal, 2009). In order to acquire more superfluous goods, many households had been borrowing more money than they could possibly payback, which contributed to triggering the current economic crisis (Kenny, 2008).

In the particular context of this study, participants seem to have given two meanings to the concept of 'general public'. First, excluding themselves from 'the public' enables respondents to confirm their identity by emphasising that they are different as they behave in a unique way. Secondly, participants might be anxious to distance themselves from the general public, who is caught up in the current economic crisis.

To summarise, the previous paragraphs brought to light what this study allowed us to confirm and learn about the interpersonal aspects of luxury consumption. Scholars concerned with this notion often 'classify' consumers according to one motivation only. Indeed, literature reviewed in this paper and through document two distinguishes 'snobs' from 'bandwagons' (Mason, 1981) and 'role-relaxed' (Clark et al., 2007; Kahle, 1995a, 1995b), to name but a few categories. I believe that both collages and interviews bring to light that the same individual (Lisa, for example) can fit into several categories and be in turn both 'snob' and 'role-relaxed'. In other words, self-extension is only one meaning among others that participants give to luxury consumption. All participants but one emphasized that signalling wealth was not the main reason why they consume luxury. Although this finding might be limited by the fact that people may struggle to admit that they do indeed engage in status consumption.

6.1.4 Educating oneself to access luxury

A number of conversations I had with respondents in conjunction with their artworks point to associations between luxury and the process of educating oneself. For example, Sebastian used images of the New Yorker festival to signify that 'luxury is also about engaging on the intellectual side'. He further contends that luxury to him 'is to teach yourself other things'. In line with Sebastian's reasoning, Patrick used signs of uncommon dishes to symbolise that consuming luxury is an opportunity to 'discover creativity' and 'new flavours'. He then likes to discuss his dinner experiences with people who have a similar interest and 'know about the restaurant scene and fine dining'. These signs suggest that participants rely on hedonic experiences to establish a social identity and associate themselves with certain groups. As suggested in the literature reviewed for the purpose of this paper, social identity consists of group classification that enables individuals to locate themselves and others within the social environment (Tajfel and Turner, 1985).

Social identity is mostly constructed through activities (such as the ones described by participants to this study), which are 'coherent behaviour patterns directed at the achievement of identity-related goals' (Kleine et al., 1993:211). Furthermore, identification enables one to vicariously take part in accomplishments that are beyond his powers (Katz and Khan, 1966). One might identify himself with all sorts of groups including institutions and organizations. Museums and festivals for example allow individuals to perceive 'oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) of which he or she is a member' (Mael and Ashforth, 1992:104). On the other hand, products are regarded for their activity-enabling or instrumental character rather than as ends in themselves (Jr. and Levy, 1963).

In the specific context of this study, participants seem to associate luxury with certain social groups. Membership in these groups is not granted according to material possession but upon one's educational background. Education in itself is not necessarily a luxury but a means to access groups that participants associate with luxury. Indeed, what makes these groups luxurious is the level of expertise of their members. For example, Sebastian mentioned attending the New Yorker festival to 'stay abreast with the smart guys' and Lisa referred to 'seasoned interior designers'. Acquiring specific knowledge through hedonic experiences seems to impact participants' identity by emphasising their uniqueness and allowing them to distance themselves from others. An example includes conversations I have had with Steve (who holds a pilot license) where he refers to the number of hours he has flown.

6.1.5 freedom/travel/adventure

Numerous artworks feature images of large indoor spaces. For example, Patrick uses pictures of a large contemporary building as well as an indoor swimming pool. In a similar vein, Lynette uses the picture of a vast apartment with high ceilings. During our interview, she located the apartment in Miami and commented on how such property makes her feel like being 'in a different world'. Empirical research conducted by other scholars brought to light that large indoor spaces (such as high ceilings represented on Patrick's artwork) could be linked with the concept of freedom while smaller spaces refer rather to confinement. (Meyers-Levy and Zhu, 2007). Space affects the manner in which individuals process information and respond and larger volumes of space enable a greater degree of abstraction. Rather than analysing items specifically, individuals elaborate meaning by relating all the items to each other (Einstein and Hunt, 1980; Hunt and Einstein, 1981; Meyers-Levy and Zhu, 2007).

Furthermore, all collages feature images of large outdoor spaces and exotic landscapes. For example, Steve's collage relies on many photographs that he took while travelling the world. During our conversation, Steve explained that these pictures illustrate freedom and adventure, both of which he associates with luxury. Similarly, Tanya chose pictures of beaches and boats to illustrate the theme of freedom. In her comments, she put an emphasis on the ability to travel anywhere at anytime and discover places such as the ones featured in her artwork. Overall, these images and comments point to a link between luxury and the concept of travel and the concepts of freedom and independence. Indeed, independence has been at the centre of the traditional consumer sovereignty model, which contends that consumers are autonomous individuals and free to chose (Friedman and Friedman, 1980). The broad concept of freedom is an important component of American culture. It is often used in a political context to signify the rebellion against any form of government. Freedom can be associated with many values such as entrepreneurism and individualism (Hirschman, 2003).

However, consumers are in fact far from being autonomous and independent. They rather choose between offerings provided by different institutions (Galbraith, 1985; Miller, 1987; Schumacher, 1993). In the specific context of this study, participants aspire to be free, although they often relied on advertisements from tour operators and airlines found in magazines (for example, Sebastian chose a Cunard advert and Lynette a Singapore Airline advert) to illustrate the linkage between freedom and luxury. Furthermore, practitioners are known to design advertisements using signs that signify people's desire for adventure and paradise. Indeed, adverts such as the ones chosen by participants to illustrate hedonic experiences enable the construction of meaning, fantasy and identity in order to attract visitors (Waitt, 1997). Interestingly, each participant tries to differentiate himself and emphasise how unique his vision of luxury is. In practice, the signs they choose to express this difference are very similar (for example beaches, boats and landscapes in warm climates). Indeed, these consumers might find themselves in an ongoing struggle to sustain their individuality when they realise that others express their own independence by relying on the same pictures and brands (Caruana et al., 2008).

Practitioners both contribute to promoting independence and individuality as a positive personality trait on one hand and comodify independence by creating mass-market offerings on the other (Caruana et al., 2008). To sum up, participants form self-meanings of independence and freedom by relying on signs that refer to exotic places where hedonism can supposedly be experienced. Based on the literature reviewed and materials collected through secondary research, I believe that participants use signs referring to luxurious destinations in order to clearly differentiate themselves from 'the general public' (for whom these places are out of reach) and assimilate with members of an elite social category. Indeed, participants combine recollections of places they have travelled to and pictures of places they have not visited. By doing so, people illustrate what they feel is an hedonic experience that only the elite can access, which enables them engage in self-representation and confirm the meaning they give to such social category.

When commenting on the signs they chose to symbolise freedom and adventure, participants also associated these pictures with saving time and/or having more free time. For example, Tanya chose the picture of a private jet to signify that such means of transportation would enable one to 'control and manage your time and be where you want to and not where you have to'. Steve relied on the lyrics of a song to illustrate that 'time is the ultimate luxury'. Steve tries to 'maximise [his use of] time' as 'you can never get the time back'.

These signs, as I understand them, enable participants to confirm elements of their social and personal identities. First, they identify with a social category whose members have very little free time because of the importance and amount of work they have to deliver. As highlighted in document three, balancing work and personal life is more challenging in the United States than in any other society. Firms often require people to work long hours and many expect employees to be available 24/7. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, workers employed full-time in the United States get an average of 3.9 weeks of holiday a year, while United Kingdom employees enjoy 6.6 weeks and employees in France enjoy 7 weeks (Glanz, 2006). Furthermore, the Families and Work Institute in the United States (FWI) brought to light that more than a third of United States workers will not take all their holiday leave (Glanz, 2006). According to recent surveys, the vast majority of employees admit that the balance between their personal and professional life is unhealthy (Glanz, 2006). It is therefore not surprising that participants to this study endeavour to make the most of their time off work. They confirm their personal identity by using signs that can be linked to time management, which demonstrate their ability to overcome this challenge and devote as much time as they can to the pursuit of pleasure.

Finally, I believe these narratives can also be linked to the concepts of independence and individuality. When Tanya mentions that she wants to 'take control of her time', she suggests that she would like to decide about her schedule (without having to report to a superior) and disregard professional obligations. Independence seems, therefore, to be tightly linked to money. Enjoying more free time is only possible if one is wealthy enough so that he does not have to work or work only a little bit. On the other hand, chauffeur driven cars and private jets allow one to save time but are significantly more expensive than slower means of transportation. Working in one's own time or not working at all is a way for one to go against social norms and develop one's authentic or independent self.

To summarise, this section brought to light how participants confirm their personal and social identity through narratives and actions that refer to freedom, independence, adventure and time management. People seem in fact to rely heavily on money to access what they deem as 'freedom'. Indeed, the planes, cars and exotic resorts featured in the artworks come at an expense and the only way to keep enjoying these is to spend more. Beside a small elite group of individuals who inherited and/or are independently wealthy, the only way for most people to access this 'freedom' is to work longer hours and expand their careers.

6.2 Hedonism

Participants also used numerous signs that point to the theme of hedonism. The following paragraphs will group these signs into three main codes and contrast findings from this empirical research with the literature that looked at hedonism.

6.2.1 Fantasy and daydreaming through non-consumption

In many cases, participants illustrated and commented on products that they could not or would not purchase. For example, Lisa comments on her desire to acquire certain fabrics ('I just want to eat, it is so gorgeous') while admitting that she could not afford fabrics at '$300 a yard'. Tanya, on her hand, chose a George Seurat painting that also seems inaccessible because of its uniqueness and price. These signs, as I understand them, allow participants to fantasise and daydream about a lifestyle they might never access. Indeed, the literature concerned with hedonic consumption links hedonism and imaginative constructions of reality (Singer, 1966). These absorbing experiences, as the ones illustrated on Tanya's or Lisa's artworks, allow participants to immerse themselves into the reality created by the product (Swanson, 1978).

Realistically, these participants are unlikely to ever purchase these products, neither in the near future nor in the long term. Interestingly, they seem aware of this limitation. For example, Lisa highlights that 'I'd love to think that one day I will have a house big enough to do an entry way without looking goofy. The idea of having my own staircase coming down is something I might never have'. Other comments from Patrick and Tanya support this standpoint. Indeed, daydreaming does not occur in anticipation of a concrete projected purchase, as these goals will remain unreachable for most participants. But constructing a mental representation of an experience has similar characteristics with a real experience (Dadds et al., 1997; Kosslyn, 1994).

6.2.2 Fantasy and daydreaming through consumption

While marketers and scholars were already aware of a relationship between fantasy, daydreaming and consumption, the present study brings to light that luxuries enable a much deeper and more elaborated construction of reality. These daydreams are made possible by the knowledge consumers' hold on one hand and the products themselves on the other. When Patrick reflects on a meal he had at a fine dining restaurant, he refers to ‘molecular cooking’ and daydreams about some day dining at ‘Fernand Adria in Spain’. Patrick fantasises that he will access something rare (only a few chefs in the world rely on molecular cooking) and very elaborated (the process involves concentrating the tastes by combining chemistry and traditional cooking techniques). Furthermore, the knowledge he holds enables him to appreciate how unique these dishes are and to daydream about dining in Spain at a restaurant that is renown worldwide.

As discussed previously, consuming luxuries enables one to acquire new knowledge. Knowing about products contributes to fantasies and daydreams, which in turn leads to the consumption of other luxuries (Patrick is likely to visit Fernan Adrria’s restaurant ‘within a year or two’). Critics of hedonism emphasise that every new acquisition generates disappointment and leads to another round of consumption (Rohatyn, 1990). On the other hand, the empirical work conducted for the purpose of this research project brings to light some positive aspects of consuming luxuries. These are the construction of more elaborated fantasies and daydreams, made possible by the knowledge the consumer acquired through the consumption process.

6.2.3 Emotional desire vs utilitarian motives

As noted in the literature review, emotional arousal seems to be an important motivation towards consuming luxuries and emotions might often overrule utilitarian motives. Indeed, several participants to this study described consumption experiences that seem to have been driven mostly by emotions. For example, one could argue that Sebastian’s trip to Hilton Head Island is only driven by emotions as playing golf has little or even no utilitarian aspect. The same reasoning applies to Steve’s trip to Monaco and Lynette’s ‘staycation’ (Lynette and her family stayed in Chicago for their holidays, which she described as a ‘staycation’). Reflecting on my conversations with these participants, I contend that they engage in these experiences to fulfil part of their dream. Sebastian might not have travelled to Hilton Head Island because he needed to play golf, but because doing so enabled him to live vicariously the luxury lifestyle depicted by the crew of ‘Entourage’.

Steve’s travel to Monaco did not serve any utilitarian purpose either, but allowed him to feel part of the wealthy crowd that lives there. To sum up, fantasy and daydreaming seem to lead to decisions based on emotional desire rather than utilitarian motive. Luxurious events such as trips to Monaco and Hilton Head Island enable fantasizing by allowing the participants to become someone else. Indeed, engaging in these activities allows participants to form a new identity and be temporarily part of a social category that consumption makes instantly accessible. In other words, consuming these experiences is a shortcut for accessing this social status, without having to go through the whole process of earning membership through accomplishments, wealth and fame.

6.2.4 Meanings derived from non-consumption

Finally, the following paragraphs will concentrate on the positive meanings associated with non-consumption. Indeed, findings from this research bring to light how participants can associate positive meanings with luxury and hedonism without engaging in a round of consumption per se. For example, Lisa describes a hypothetical stay in a garden that, I believe, can be interpreted as an hedonic experience. ‘It is very soothing, relaxing, the old tree that is just enormous, overshadowing everything – it is the go back to nature thing – you can almost smell the flowers there. Having that kind of peace and quiet with nature around you like that is very nice. I can see myself enjoying this on my own. It is quiet time, that’s part of the luxury for me – I love to be very inflecting – to sit to think about things and read books and take naps and write my journal and I am not speaking. I can see myself experiencing complete and utter solitude there. It rejuvenates me in a way – it forces me to slow down’.

In this text, Lisa is primarily concerned with her own pleasure and personal benefit, which are the main tenets of hedonism. On the other hand, her description of a hedonistic experience sharply contrasts with findings from the literature review. Indeed, Lisa’s experience does not involve consuming anything, responding to any advertising or marketing campaign and acquiring positional goods, to name but a few of the negative features that scholars usually associate with the concept. Conversely, Lisa’s account of a hedonistic experience can be linked back to Epicurus, who argues for less desires and positions happiness as the highest good (Bergsma et al., 2007).

Indeed, consumers like Lisa are referred to as ‘non-materialists’ (Richins, 1994) and enjoy hedonism from non-consumption. In line with empirical findings brought to light by Arnould and Price (1993), staying in a garden or at the seaside allows Lisa (similar statements have been made by Scott, Steve, Tanya and Lynette) to experience a communion with nature. Furthermore, this communion with nature seems to be an opportunity for personal growth and renewal of the self. As with participants to a river rafting trip (Arnould and Price, 1993), isolating oneself in a garden or in a remote location (as suggested by Tanya) provides participants with 'a sense of place and purpose, a rationale for behaviour' (Donohue, 1991:14). Such retreat seems to allow participants to experience feelings of self-discovery and personal transformation (Arnould and Price, 1993).

6.3 Addressing the research issues

So far, this section provided the reader with an analysis of the findings from the empirical research conducted for the purpose of this paper. Findings from this study and their analysis will now allow the author to address the research issues highlighted at the beginning of this paper.

- Identify similar as well as different patterns of meanings held by participants about luxurious and hedonistic consumption

While participants relied on a wide range of signs to illustrate what luxury meant to them, this analysis established that different signs could in fact refer to similar meanings. Overall, most participants seem to associate luxury with conspicuous consumption, social status, need for uniqueness, education, travel and adventure. They also associate luxury and hedonistic consumption with fantasies and daydreams as well as meanings derived from non-consumption.

- Explore the nexus of ties between luxury consumption and identity

This empirical research brought to light that people rely on luxury to form, confirm and maintain their identity. The luxury products and events they participate in or consume or the knowledge they acquire enables an individual to differentiate himself from 'the general public'. On the other end, luxury allows them to earn temporary or permanent membership in elite groups of intellectuals or consumers.

- Explore the emotional aspect of luxury consumption.

Regardless of whether they are consumed or not, luxuries enable the construction of realities through fantasies and daydreams. People's responses to luxuries are rather emotional because they use luxuries as devices that make these daydreams feel more real and accessible. Indeed, luxuries act as shortcuts to these constructed realities, making them accessible immediately.

Conclusion

During the last four years, I investigated people's perception of what luxury is and enables. I first thought that I knew what luxury 'was' before realising that my definition might differ from others. I therefore attempted to define luxury from the targeted audience's standpoint. Preliminary secondary research brought to light the fact that everyone had his own definition of what he deems luxurious, even within a sample group that is intended to be homogeneous. However, some commonalities could be found about the ways luxury made people feel. Precisely, this last document investigated how participants created meaning for luxury and the impact that luxury had on their identity. This piece of study allowed new and useful knowledge to be gained.

First, items that common wisdom associates with conspicuous consumption (such as large pieces of jewellery and sports cars) are no longer desirable as they signify excessive consumption, among other negative meanings. This sharply contrasts with the academic literature dealing with the concept of luxury, which often starts from the premise that the goods are desirable and enable consumers to display their wealth ostentatiously (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). This shift in the perception of consumers likely stems from the current financial crisis and the harsh criticisms towards excessive consumption relayed by the media.

Furthermore, this study brings to light that in certain groups of luxury consumers, membership is granted upon knowledge and expertise rather than money. This surprised me since most of the materials reviewed relied on money as a means to classifying luxury and its consumers. Also, luxury consumption seems to be tied with the themes of travel and adventure, which enable participants to create self-meanings for 'independence' and 'freedom'. While people might pursue freedom, they are in fact relying heavily on money to access the exotic places they associate with adventure and luxury. Constrained by a society that seems obsessed with career achievements, participants are also eager to control their time as a way to express their independence and individuality. From a researcher's standpoint, I was expecting to find signs referring to travel and adventure but am rather surprised with the meanings these signs convey.

Consuming luxuries enables people to construct fantasies and daydreams that stem not only from the product themselves but also from the knowledge the individual holds and gains about these products. Engaging in these consumption activities allows participants to live vicariously the life of people belonging to a social category that would be too hard to access otherwise. In other words, luxury consumption is a means to live and daydream about other lifestyles and allows one to form a new, temporary identity. Indeed, consumers don't earn membership in the groups they aspire to (i.e: the sheer fact of playing golf in Hilton Head does not grant access to Tiger Woods' micro-group) but instead creates imaginary, idealised groups. A significant stream of research already determined that consumption was playing an important role in identity construction by contributing to the formation of one's personal and social identity (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Belk, 1988; Berger, 1966; Burke and Reitzes, 1991; Dittmar, 1992; Giddens, 1991; McCracken, 1990). Findings from this study extend this argument by showing that belonging to an idealised, imaginary social category is a strong source for identity formation. Consumers can concentrate on creating self-meanings without having to worry about earning membership and maintaining status, as they would in a real group.

Finally, I was surprised to hear that certain acts of non-consumption can also be linked to luxury and hedonism. In this setting, luxury is synonymous with retreating from the consumer society in order to focus on one's self and reflect on one's life experiences. Paradoxically, one needs to be wealthy enough so that he can afford to take time off to retreat. Sitting in a garden writing a journal sharply contrasts with other types of luxurious events, such as private air travel or exotic vacations. However, luxury derived from both consumption and non-consumption enables individuals to satisfy the same need. That is, forming and maintaining their identity.

7.1 Implication for practitioners

The implications of this research are of significance for marketers in the field of luxury goods and services as the research contributes to a new and updated explanation of what luxury means and enables. The recommendations below will help practitioners with designing strategies that will make a greater impact on today's luxury consumers.

First, marketers should devote more attention to the impact their offering might have on their prospect's personal identity. Practitioners must envision the different contributions their product will make to their consumer's self and the new identities this product will enable the consumer to form. These constructed identities could even become the starting point of the new product development process. Marketers could ask their prospective clients to define who they would like to become and elaborate new products and marketing campaigns according to these narratives. In the meantime, professionals must keep in mind that people's aspirations are changing and what was perceived as a positive trait (such as conspicuous consumption) a few months ago might now be interpreted as a negative one.

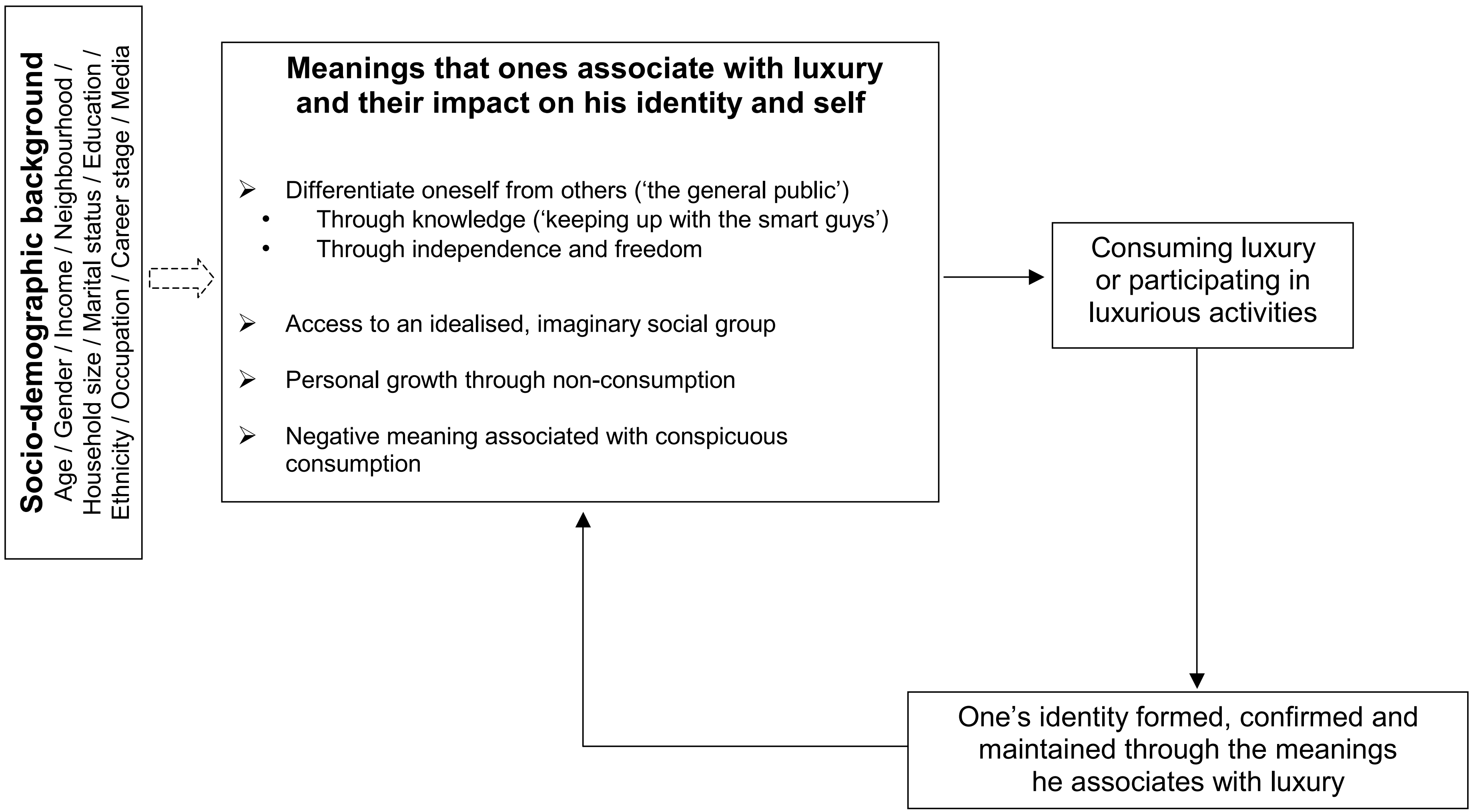
This paper exemplifies how innovative research techniques such as collages and semiotics can provide useful insights into consumers' minds. While most market research projects look at unveiling which products could succeed and how consumers would use them, collages and in-depth interviews allow the researcher to understand how a specific offering could affect the prospect's identity. Furthermore, collages enable an understanding of how participants make sense of whole concepts (i.e. luxury), rather than narrowly focusing on a given product or category. Most importantly, collages give participants an opportunity to create narratives by using the signs of their choice rather than being constrained by materials provided by researchers. Marketers can use these narratives as a base for the advertisements and marketing materials that will promote their offering. In light of Shankar et al.'s (2001) recommendations, they should however leave gaps in these narratives that prospective clients will fill in for themselves by constructing their own stories.

Finally, marketers must educate their clients about the intangible aspects of their products and brands. Consumers will indeed rely on this knowledge to construct the emotions and daydreams that will be associated with the product. This can be implemented through learning sessions led by product experts. For example, a brand manufacturer could have a master watchmaker lecturing on the history of the brand and the craftsmanship of the product. This would contribute to marketing through word-of-mouth, as participants would most likely discuss their training session with their peers. The wine and spirit industry may be a source of best practices towards running these sessions, as these professionals already have experience with educating ordinary people to appreciate complex products.

7.2 Reformulation of the new, modified conceptual framework

Section three provided the reader with a conceptual framework for this study, which was developed based upon findings brought to light through document two, three and four. Primary and secondary research conducted for the purpose of this paper enabled my understanding of hedonic consumption to evolve. The initial conceptual framework can now be amended to reflect the new knowledge gained through this piece of research. The revised conceptual framework acknowledges the importance of a wide range of socio-economic factors and the media in shaping the meanings that one associates with luxury as well as the impact these meanings might have on someone's identity and self. Participants to this study rely on luxury to differentiate themselves; access an imaginary, idealised group; and/or focus on their personal growth. However, these participants tie conspicuous consumption to a negative meaning. Consuming luxuries or participating in luxurious activities (luxury and hedonism are sometimes linked to non-consumption) enables one to form, maintain and confirm his identity. The individual then revises his perception of what luxury is and enables upon the outcomes of past experiences. This revised framework no longer isolates interactions with others because these interactions seem to take place throughout the overall process. This process is dynamic as it repeats itself upon each new round of consumption or new activity.

Figure 11: Revised conceptual framework: The process people go through to create meanings for luxury



To sum up, this exploration of hedonistic consumption from an identity perspective enabled the author to confirm existing knowledge about social norm and status consumption as well as challenging the existing literature about conspicuous consumption. This paper also brought new knowledge to light about the ties between identity formation, fantasies and luxury; hedonism derived form non-consumption; and the linkage between luxury and knowledge.

Findings from this research suggest several new directions for substantive research on the following specific key themes. First, very little is known about the aspects of luxury and hedonism that are not directly related to money and consumption. Another research project could focus on gaining a better understanding of the relation between luxury and education as well as exploring the nexus of ties between time and luxury. More attention could also be devoted to hedonism derived from non-consumption and the linkage between luxury and the refusal to consume.

Rather than analysing consumer's recollections of experiences, being immersed in a lived experience could actually allow to devote attention to 'all aspects' of the consumption experience (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982a). Furthermore, ethnography would provide an expanded understanding of the social aspect of luxury consumption, as it involves analysing interactions between members (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994) and study the way in which behaviour is organised (Spradley et al., 2004; Triandis, 1980).

Finally, it has been established that findings from this research have been impacted by a recent, unprecedented financial crisis. It would be interesting to monitor how consumers' perception of luxury, materialism and conspicuous consumption evolve overtime.

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Appendix 1 – Consent form

RESEARCH PROJECT: LUXURY CONSUMPTION

SUMMARY

You are being asked to be in a research study.

- Your decision to be in this study is voluntary.
- If you decide to be in this study and then change your mind, you can leave the study at any time.
- The study will be video taped. The footage will be used for research purposes only and remain confidential.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:
The purpose of this research study is to investigate consumer experiences as part of a doctoral research project

This interview will last for a maximum of an hour.

I have read the information in this consent form. All my questions about the study and my participation in it have been answered. I freely consent to be in this research study.

By signing this consent form, I have not given up any of my legal rights.

____
Subject Name

<u>CONSENT SIGNATURE:</u>

____________________________________ __________________
Signature of Subject Date

____________________________________ __________________
Signature of Person Conducting Informed Consent Discussion Date

Appendix 2 – Profile of Participants

	Patrick Bourbon	Sebastian James	Scott Weber	Lynnette Given	Steve Price	Tanya Miller	Jen Schultz	Lisa Wolfe
Age	33	45	35	43	45	41	24	43
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female	Female
Neighbourhood	West Loop	Northern Suburbs	Lincoln Park	West Loop	Lincoln Park	Western Suburbs	Lincoln Park	Wrigley Ville
Annual Household Income	$180-230k	$150-200k	$50-80k	above $500k	$130-160k	$150-180k	$40-60k	$50-80k
Marital status/Dependants	Single	Married	Single	Married, 5 dependents	Single, 1 dependent	Married	Single	Single
Educational background	Engineering degree +CFA	Bachelor Degree	Bachelor Degree	Bachelor Degree	Bachelor Degree	Bachelor Degree	Masters degree (marketing)	Bachelor degree
Ethnic background	White Caucasian	African American	White Caucasian	White Caucasian	White Caucasian	White Caucasian	White Caucasian	White Caucasian
Occupation	Investment Banking / asset manager	Re-qualifying in Search Engine Marketing	Photographer	Stay at home mum after being a marketing manager	IT consultant	VP in advertising/PR agency	Administrative assistant in the market research industry	Interior designer
Career stage	Mid-career	Transitioning now Mid-career when he left the printing industry	Mid-career	NA now. Mid-career when she left her employment	Mid-career	Mid-career	Entry level	Mid-career

Doctor of Business Administration

A reflective journal on my journey through completing this doctoral program

Document 6
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of The Nottingham Trent University for the degree of Doctorate of Business Administration

Emmanuel Probst
October 2009

Table of contents – Document 6

Introduction

How I decided to embark on the DBA Journey

The idea of studying for a doctorate degree came to mind while completing an MBA at the University of Hull between September 2004 and July 2005.I enrolled in an MBA program because of the prestige of this degree, which is still highly recognised in the market research industry. On the other hand, I rapidly became aware that the reputation of the degree was fading as more and more universities started teaching MBA programs. Furthermore, the MBA allows one to gain skills across a wide range of disciplines but does not enable one to engage in an in-depth investigation of a specific topic. I came to the conclusion that completing a DBA would allow me to gain expertise in the topic under study while reaching the highest possible academic level. While some would argue that earning a DBA is not as prestigious as a PhD, professional doctorates seem more relevant to the corporate/ business environment.

Interest in the topic

My interest for luxury goes back to my teenage years, when I remember displaying luxury adverts in my room and collecting books and articles that dealt with the subject. Besançon, the city where I grew up in France is located 70 miles west of the Swiss border. Earning my driver's license allowed me to attend the 'Basel fair', which showcases the most expensive jewellery and watches in the world. From my standpoint, the jewellery and watches displayed were as fascinating as the wealthy international clientele that was attending the fair. Overtime, my interest for luxuries evolved from looking only at the goods and their price tags towards understanding these consumers from a marketer's standpoint. I therefore chose to write my MBA dissertation on the way of targeting the niche market of high spending consumers. While writing this piece of work was an enjoyable experience, I was aware of its lack of depth and robust conceptual framework. Enrolling in the DBA program allowed me to gain a thorough understanding of people's behaviour towards luxury consumption. Importantly, it also enabled me to better understand my own personal identity and why I am so fascinated with luxuries. Reflecting on the literature reviewed and findings from document five, I now understand that I have been relying on luxuries to differentiate myself and access specific social groups. For example, I have had the opportunity to eat at many fine-dining restaurants and enjoy sharing these experiences with people who have a similar interest. Each diner and conversation with an ‘expert’ allows me to expand my knowledge and leads to visiting other restaurants as well as learning new food preparation techniques. In other words, dining at luxurious restaurants enables me to build my identity as a food ‘expert’; this would not be possible through casual dining, as these chefs rely on more common and less elaborated techniques.

The secret black book

I kept a diary of thoughts and critical incidents as they occurred to me over the last three years. Since I was often writing and referring to the diary without sharing its content with anyone, my wife renamed it the ‘secret black book’. I have always been worried about losing or damaging this book and can now confirm that I kept it safe for the last four years! Ironically, there are only five or six blank pages left in this book (out of 130). I will use these last few pages to reflect on the viva voce process. This final paper is grounded on notes written in the secret black book.

This document will first look at the key learning outcomes I had to address at the start of this journey. It will then describe how the project evolved overtime, the challenges that emerged and how these challenges have been overcome. Finally, this document will investigate the contribution the DBA already made and will make to my professional life.

3 Personal development

Understanding different theories

I clearly remember a specific lecture given during the first learning set, designed to help students understanding the different theories that pertain to the DBA. Colin Fisher, our program leader, endeavoured to shed light on ‘ologies’ and ‘isms’. Gaining an understanding of different approaches took me months, as I was confused by different approaches (Positivism, constructionism …) and the terms used to define them (epistemology and ontology for example). Reading about these approaches sometimes felt that like adding to the confusion. Phenomenology for example was referred to as a methodology as well as a method. Reading ‘Researching and writing a dissertation for business students’ (Fisher, 2004) again and again allowed me to progressively grasp what these theories meant and most importantly how they could help me make sense of the world.

Early readings about my research topic suggested that an interpretivist approach would be best suited to address the topic’s key research objectives. Reflecting on my life experience, I was also feeling that my ‘personality’ was clearly leaning towards constructivism and the belief that reality was socially constructed. As discussed earlier, I certainly rely on social categories and interactions with others to define my own identity. As suggested in the literature reviewed (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Burke and Reitzes, 1991), acts of consumption (among other actions) allow people to form social groups, which in turn define social norms. For example, Diners and food critics contribute to helping chefs creating new dishes, by defining which flavours they enjoy and which techniques can be deemed innovative.

On the other hand, the curriculum requires investigating and adopting different theoretical standpoints. While some of the theories and methods covered were not the best suited for this research project, researching and applying each of them contributed to widening my thinking and making this overall thesis more robust. For example, conducting a quantitative survey allowed me to verify findings from qualitative, one on one interviews. Also, analysing collages for the purpose of document five allowed me to learn about symbolism and structuralism while bringing to light the importance the social organisation of the visual experience.

From buzzwords to defined constructs

Being a successful marketer is about differentiating the brand one represents from the group. As practitioners, marketers also endeavour to differentiate themselves from their peers. In other words, marketers are also involved in the process of identity creation described by Berger (1966:107-109), whereby 'One identifies oneself, as one is identified by others, by being located in a common world'. One way to be identified by others as 'better' and 'different' is to use 'buzzwords', which are words used primarily to impress a layperson. Some buzzwords simply allow one to confirm his membership among his peer group.

For example, marketers often use the expression 'dinkies', which stands for Double Income No Kids. On the other hand, the ultimate goal of marketers is to differentiate themselves by creating new buzzwords, which are supposed to embrace new ideas, often presented as major breakthrough in the discipline. Until recently, I was using as many buzzwords as I could, at industry networking events but also in my writing. The feedback I received after submitting the first version of document one forced me to realise that these buzzwords were ill defined from a practitioner's standpoint and meaningless for scholars. Further reading of articles published in academic journals allowed me to understand that my writing should refer to clearly defined concepts supported by streams of researchers. Later on, the literature review enabled me to identify what were the key concepts that pertained to the project and to select the definitions that would help me frame the subject matter under study.

I still attend many industry events, which gives me an opportunity to hear new buzzwords. While I try not to embarrass my peers, I am now surprised to see how challenging it is for people to precisely define what these words embrace. Reflecting on this whole learning curve, the DBA allowed me to evolve from using superficial ideas and terms towards engaging in constructive debates grounded in robust academic knowledge.

Relying on only a few sentences to describe a large project

From my standpoint, learning modules were as much an opportunity to learn from lectures, as they were to share with peers. One specific session required each of us to present our projects to others using only three to five sentences. The statement not only had to be short, but also had to be clear to an audience of non-academics, unfamiliar with the topic.

The research project looks at consumer behaviour towards luxuries. Everyone holds his own definition of luxury, elaborated upon his socio-demographic background, his exposure to media and his interactions with others. The study relies on a wide range of disciplines (such as social psychology) to analyse how these elements are combined and what are the outcomes of luxury consumption. The main objective of this project is to provide guidelines to marketers concerned with targeting these consumers. Completing the exercise was a lot more challenging than I expected but the learning outcomes were extremely valuable. First, this taught me how to expose the main tenets of my project within an appropriate timeframe. Indeed, a minute or two fits in any conversation and leaves participants free to ask further questions. Furthermore, it bans the use of jargon (for example: phenomenology), which would make some participants feel uncomfortable and could come across as condescending. Finally, it stimulates interest and leads to further questions.

In my professional life, I now use a similar statement to explain what the firm I work for specialises in and how our offering is different from competitors' offerings. This statement is particularly useful when talking to new prospects over the phone, as prospective clients are often overwhelmed with sales calls. This exercise taught me how to sound more confident and stand out from my competitors. Conversely, I often ask people to describe with a few sentences the work they do and how they differentiate themselves. It is not uncommon to meet people, even at a senior level, challenged and sometimes embarrassed by this question.

Creating conceptual frameworks

Conceptual framework is another term that I had never heard before attending the first learning session. Reflecting on my learning skills, I believe that my memory is rather visual and I understand better each component of a situation when looking at the overall context in which they evolve. Conceptual frameworks have enabled me to deepen my understanding of the world and to understand how concepts are related and interact. When reviewing an article, I often print the conceptual framework and refer to it while reading the content, which enables me to visualise what premises the author starts from and where his reasoning is aiming at. The conceptual framework that describes the subject matter under study is displayed in front of my desk. I refer to it very often in order to make sure that my writing pertains to the project and to reassure me of the coherence of my reasoning.

Conceptual frameworks don't only apply in academia, but also allow corporations to digest complex ideas (Flaim, 2008). As a practitioner, I now often use analytical schemes to enable my clients or associates to understand a complex process or situation at a glance. Conceptual frameworks are specifically useful to support oral presentations. Roam (2008) even contends that a cocktail napkin is big enough to draw a picture that solves a problem or sums up an idea or business plan.

3 Project development

Reflecting on document 1

I wrote the first version of document one shortly after completing an MBA program, where I was used to covering a wide range of disciplines and issues in a few thousand words. The MBA taught me how to write from a practitioner's standpoint and suggest solutions to almost every challenge of a product's marketing mix. In line with this reasoning, document one outlined how I was going to investigate luxury from both the consumer and the practitioner's standpoints and rely on three or four disciplines to elaborate an ideal approach to marketing luxuries! Addressing thoroughly the four initial research questions would have required undertaking has many DBAs. Not surprisingly, supervisors forced me to concentrate on one standpoint (the consumer) and two to three key concepts; the key objective of the project would be to provide 'a' (vs 'the') understanding of a narrowly defined group of consumers (rather than the entire European and American population) towards luxury consumption. It took me several days to fully understand the feedback form I received and several weeks to adapt to the DBA's learning style.

The evolutions of the research question

Despite a rough start, I passed document one and decided on what should be the key concepts covered in the literature review. The key objectives were now to define the concept of luxury, while gaining an understanding of the interpersonal and experiential aspects of luxury consumption. The literature review allowed me to elaborate the first conceptual framework and to identify the research question that would be addressed through document three. This qualitative piece of research would look at how people defined the concept of luxury.

Early research conducted for the purpose of this document brought to light a critical insight that was going to affect the overall research project: every individual interviewed seemed to hold his or her own definition of what luxury was. For some, luxury was synonymous of expensive brands or visiting museums; others felt like engaging in luxury consumption when going to shopping malls or buying a new notebook. The research project therefore had to be refocused towards the understanding of extraordinary and hedonic experiences, two constructs approached through the literature review. Framing the research question of document three was challenging, but the methodology seemed best suited to the overall research project and the collection and analysis of the data was a rather enjoyable experience.

Findings from document three were then to be verified among a wider audience through a quantitative piece of research. This fourth document would align with a positivist approach and rely on a survey to collect data. In all honesty, I was not keen on taking a positivist standpoint, thinking that the subjective nature of my research topic would conflict with the thought that reality could be objective. I wrote a questionnaire anyway and used an online panel to collect about 300 completed interviews. I then spent a great deal of time trying to make sense of the data and bring to light new phenomenon. It took me almost two months to realize that this analysis was not highlighting anything new and its results were predictable (for example, it is quite obvious that the senses of smell, taste and touch all contribute to making an experience luxurious). I therefore had to recontact participants and collect more demographic data. This second set of data enabled me to identify patterns of beliefs and attitudes towards luxurious experiences among different demographic groups. This analysis pointed to the need for further research in order to understand the process people go through to create meanings for luxury. Collages and in-depth interviews conducted for the purpose of document five enabled me to bring this process to light and to understand the impact luxury consumption had on people's identity.

4 Challenges encountered

Reflecting on the overall experience, I feel that the most challenging time was at the start of the program. When enrolling, I almost perceived the DBA as a longer, more thorough and harder MBA. I failed document one because I was planning on writing a large practical assignment (in other words, a longer version of my MBA dissertation) and did not grasp that a doctorate degree required looking at the subject matter through a more subjective, philosophical lens. Interestingly, I also struggled at the start of both the DMS and MBA programs I went through. My first DMS assignment quoted only two references and was very poorly structured. I also barely passed the first MBA module, as the paper I submitted was too short and looked only at a narrow range of ideas.

Conventional wisdom suggests that studying for a doctoral degree is challenging for anyone, given its length and the level of its learning objectives. A specific challenge that I encountered was to write the DBA in English. Indeed, English is not my mother tongue and I rapidly realised that my writing style was not meeting my supervisors' expectations. My style was too 'casual' and I was often using buzzwords (such as 'upscale services or 'xfluents') in place of precisely defined concepts. This stemmed mainly from my readings, which were almost exclusively mainstream magazine articles and 'how to' books for managers. I remember one lecturer from the University describing my readings as 'airport books' published by 'the Heathrow School of management'!

I had to learn how to write in an acceptable academic style, mainly through reading from a wide range of academic materials. I also created a 'cheat sheet' called 'Key words and expressions'. The document features key sentences that are ready to use at the start of a paragraph, to contrast two arguments or highlight the shortcomings of an article. As examples, entries included *'there is an emerging literature that suggests XXX'* and *'in an important step toward facilitating research on XXX'*. I also created a reference document regrouping definitions of key concepts, such as *'epiphany'* and *'semiotic'*. Improving my writing skills positively impacted both my research project and professional life, as I now feel more comfortable elaborating large proposals that present a wide range of ideas in a coherent fashion.

Personal life

One particularity of a three to four year degree is that life evolves a lot between the time of enrolment and the graduation ceremony and this ultimately affects the progress of the research project. My wife and I were just married when I enrolled in the DBA, which was also just after I started to work at a new company called Research Now. At the time, I was working normal office hours, was travelling very little and was living only 1.5 hours away from Nottingham. It was therefore easy for me to spend a whole day at the British Library, study at night or travel to Nottingham to meet with my supervisors. Concentrating on my degree became a lot more challenging from the 17^{th} of September 2006, when our first boy was born, six hours after I finished drafting document 2.

We moved to the United States two months later, where I started travelling all over the country for work, while taking care of my young family. My new routine involved a few hours of studying on weekends while making the most of my time away from home, reading in hotel rooms or on airplanes. Despite an 11 hour commute, I managed to attend all the learning sets held in Nottingham and met with my supervisors several times over the last two years. Having said all this, I also learned that trying to work and study too much was counterproductive. A good night of sleep or a weekend off studying is sometimes necessary to step back and look at the project from a more mature standpoint. Also, papers written after a 14 hour day tend to lack structure and coherence.

When studying for my MBA, I was writing assignments 10 days before the deadline, even if the learning module had started three months earlier. It is safe to assume that most students behave in a similar fashion, given that the university library was empty at the beginning of each semester and overcrowded days before assignments were due. I later learned at my expense the limitations of this method. First, I could write a few thousand words over a ten-day period, but certainly not a 20,000 words assignment. Most importantly, one must allow time to mature his ideas, which involves reading and thinking for several days before writing anything. This reasoning sharply contrasts with what is required in my professional environment, whereby most clients expect to receive proposals within two working days.

Reflecting on these two very different processes, I now realise that the buzzwords and superficial ideas practitioners associate with them are a means to save time and mask the lack of thorough thinking. In my professional environment (end even, to some extent through my MBA program), I always used the same concepts and made them fit any proposal or document. In fact, the focus was towards using these few buzzwords and ideas prior to trying to address any research question. When studying for my MBA, my supervisor stressed that I had to use the competitive five forces model (Porter, 2004), just because evaluators would expect to find this framework in any MBA dissertation. At the opposite, the DBA process forced me to explore a range of ideas before deciding which ones were the most relevant to the research matter under study.

The first version of document one lacked coherence and robustness mainly because it was written over a few days with only two objectives in mind, which were the deadline and the word count. I wrote document two following a completely different process. First, I had many meetings with my supervisors to guide my reading and select the concepts that were most relevant to the research project. Furthermore, I wrote abstracts for every article I read and later decided which ones should be included in the final document. Finally, I did not hesitate at times to delete some content that was either not relevant or robust enough. The learning process I went through between document one and two strongly impacted my sense of self, whereby I felt that I was evolving from being only a marketer towards also becoming a researcher. I now switch between these two selves, whether I am studying or working. Having said this, I never completely feel that I am one or the other as I always have in mind what my other self is.

Communication with supervisors and classmates

As a matter of fact, studying for a doctorate degree is a lonely experience and communicating with the supervisory team is often the only way to involve in an in-depth conversation about the project. Having two supervisors felt reassuring at the beginning but lead to some misunderstandings and challenges overtime. Indeed, not one or two, but six members of the academic team did, at some point, provide guidance and supervise the project to different extents. Consequently, the supervision lacked coherence at times and made the arrangement of meetings more difficult. I also felt that supervisors were very involved in fulfilling other University duties, preventing them from allocating more time to the supervision of my project. Reflecting on the whole supervision experience, I would rather have communicated with only one supervisor who could have overseen the project from start to finish and allocated more time to providing me with guidance.

Beyond the supervisory team, learning modules gave me the opportunity to share with other cohort members. While everyone's project is very different and highly specialised, I greatly benefited from sharing ideas with others. Indeed, these meetings made me realise that everyone encountered challenges, sometimes similar to mine, regardless of their background and the subject under study. We rapidly became a group of friends and decided to add a more informal component to the learning modules: some meetings were held at a pub nearby the University and would be followed by drinks at a 1970s club that we renamed 'the Library' in order to give it a more formal consonance. Besides the learning modules, regular virtual meetings with other cohort members significantly contributed to bringing some new ideas into the project and keeping me motivated.

5 Professional development

Inside the organisation

Unfortunately, the company I work for never had much interest in my DBA nor supported me. I even felt the frustration of one of my managers, whom enrolled in a PhD himself a few years ago but completed only the coursework without ever writing the thesis. Within the market research industry, one must distinguish market research firms, which look at overall business questions and give recommendations from data collection firms (such as the one I work for), which concentrate solely on completing the fieldwork. Doctorates are highly regarded in full-service market research firms but are almost irrelevant to fieldwork companies. Studying for a DBA will allow me to advance my career in the market research industry but is unlikely to ever become useful within Research Now.

Outside the organisation / among industry peers

While Research Now does not really support me in my studies, my role enables me to attend many industry conferences endorsed by recognised professional associations, such as the Advertising Research Foundation and the Market Research Foundation. These conferences gave me the opportunity to learn about methods that pertained to my project and share some of my findings with my peers.

I found out about collages (a method for collecting visual data used for the purpose of document five) when attending a conference on market research innovations during summer 2008. The presenter gave details on how to implement collages and analyse the results. Participants even had the opportunity to practice through a group assignment. Peers also helped me with writing the questionnaire for document five and advised on how to sample the target audience under study. On the other hand, most market researchers whom I discussed my project with were very interested in my findings on communities and reference groups. Indeed, the importance of one’s micro and macro group in selecting and consuming products is now widely recognised and online communities became a method of choice for collecting data among both consumers and professionals.

The focus towards luxuries also enabled me to approach several advertising, public relation and consulting firms that specialise in this industry. One of them, Winsper Inc., hired me on a freelance basis to write a white paper covering ‘the 6 Ps of luxury marketing’. Written from a practitioner’s standpoint and for a marketer’s audience, the document brings to light the importance of people, product, passion, pleasure, purpose and price in the marketing of luxury goods. The document concludes that affluent consumers are a segmented audience and each subgroup respond better to a different combination of these six dimensions. Finally, a balance scorecard enables readers to apply the 6Ps to their own product and advertising campaign. To sum up, attending industry events and consulting for an advertising firm allowed me to utilise what I learnt through the DBA program as well as provided me with methods and ideas. Most importantly, I learned how to transition back and forth between academia and the business environment, which I believe is an important skill.

Evolution of my professional practices

Studying for the DBA also greatly impacted my professional practices. I can now relate to peers whom are educated at the doctoral level as I have a better understanding of how they construct their reasoning. When consulting with clients, I can now rely on a much wider range of knowledge and reflect on my own experience of conducting primary research. Finally, I became more autonomous as I often had to solve issues by myself and was studying remotely. Overall, I became a more informed practitioner and evolved from a sales person whom simply marketed his firm’s offering towards being a consultative sales professional. Indeed, I now rely on research and knowledge to elaborate solutions that are specific to each client. Obtaining a DBA should make a significant contribution towards advancing my career as doctoral degrees are highly recognised in the market research industry. Informal conversations with prospective employers indicate that the learning outcomes of the degree and my ability to undertake such a challenge are more important than my findings on luxury consumption.

Concluding remarks on the overall experience

Completing the DBA has been a journey marked with difficulties and frustrations overshadowed by the wealth of knowledge I acquired and the excitement derived from the overall research process. I never considered quitting, despite some disappointments as well as many sleepless nights and sunny weekends spent studying. I learned a lot about the process by which people make sense of luxury consumption and made a modest contribution to both the academic and professional communities. Overtime, some of the knowledge acquired will become inaccurate or irrelevant. A good example is people's use of the internet. Common wisdom suggests that behaviour brought to light today could not have been uncovered five years ago and is likely to become obsolete or even disappear within the next five years. Furthermore, I am likely to forget a lot of what I learned, specifically knowledge that can't be used in everyday life.

What will remain is the feeling of having achieved a big challenge and the significant contribution that the DBA made to the evolution of my sense of self in both my professional practice and private life. Alderson (1957:191) notes that 'the individual's concept or image of himself is central to the phenomenal field in which he lives and attempts to satisfy his needs … there is one basic drive or purpose transcending all others in the life of the individual. That is the goal of maintaining and enhancing a favorable self-image in the midst of the stream of experience'. In the context of this study, 'experience' almost always refers to consumption; in my case, it mostly refers to this studying journey.

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