

## **Title**

Immersive imaginative hedonism: daydreaming as experiential 'consumption'

## **Abstract**

Imaginative pleasure through daydreaming has been theorised to be important in understanding the experience of desire and as a factor in escalating consumption. However, there is a risk this underplays the range of potentially immersive and intense experiences of daydreaming, prior to and independent of the purchase or use of marketplace commodities. Drawing on in-depth interviews, participant diaries and projective techniques, this study brings empirical data to extant conceptual work on the consumer imagination to examine the variety of consequences of elaborate daydreaming for commodity acquisition. We suggest that it need not necessarily perpetuate or expand 'actual' consumption, but may instead engender a longer, more reflective, pleasurable and meaningful experience from which purchase or acquisition may never materialise. Our study challenges accepted theories that associate daydreaming with consumerism or see it as an inevitable precursor to consumer disappointment, while shining a more positive light on the role of fantasising in shaping consumers' decisions.

**Keywords:** consumerism, consumption, imagination, daydreaming, fantasy.

## **Introduction**

Consumers' ability to gain pleasure from daydreaming is established in marketing scholarship and practice. Whether by romanticising goods (Pollay, 1986), using mythical themes in advertisements (Thompson, 2004; Heath and Heath, 2016), or turning spaces of consumption into 'magical, fantastic, and enchanted settings' (Ritzer, 2010: 7), the marketing industry is built on the pervasiveness of daydreaming in individuals' daily lives. That 'happiness, identity, beauty, love, masculinity, youth, marital bliss or anything else' can be found in the market (Gabriel and Lang, 2015: 15) epitomizes both marketers' and consumers' ability and willingness to commodify fantasy.

In social psychology and neuroscience, the prevalence of daydreaming in our lives is widely discussed; a significant proportion of our waking time (as much as 50%) involves daydreaming (McMillan et al., 2013), with recent studies seeing it as a naturally occurring state of the brain (Poerio and Smallwood, 2016). Daydreaming can be understood in this scholarship as a 'mental activity that departs from reality' (Klinger, 2008: 225); a form of unconstrained, self-generated cognition in which thought is independent of, or unrelated to, the external environment (Poerio and Smallwood, 2016).

Despite its pervasiveness, daydreaming has not attracted sustained inquiry in marketing scholarship, where it remains undertheorized (Jenkins and Molesworth, 2018). Extant work is largely conceptual (Christensen 2002 is a notable exception), focused on desire (e.g. Belk, Ger and Askegaard, 2003), or linked to criticisms of marketing and consumer societies (e.g. Heath and Heath, 2016). Specifically, consumers' fantasizing (often alongside marketing and advertising) is implicated in driving a consumerist, hedonistic or materialistic society (Gabriel and Lang, 2015; Pollay and Mittal, 1993; Shankar et al., 2006). Seduced by alleged 'makers of dreams' (Gabriel and Lang, 2015, p. 101), consumers are

‘thought to exist in a permanent state of longing deluded by empty commercial promises, that cannot satisfy these desires’ (Arnould, 2007: 144).

Yet there is reason to suppose that daydreaming has a powerful influence on consumers beyond driving consumption. Fournier and Guiry (1993: 357) argued that in materialistic cultures thinking about ‘yet unacquired’ products and experiences is *intrinsically* enjoyable. Campbell’s (1987: 85) classic thesis of modern hedonism rests on the notion that it is ‘possible to gain pleasure from purely imaginary situations’, indeed more intensely than from consuming the product/service eventually purchased. In addition, Jenkins and Molesworth (2018) have conceptualised a much wider range of forms of consumer imagination than pre-purchase daydreaming, showing how daydreaming can vary according to temporal location, emotional implications, bodily sensations and more besides. What then does this mean for the portrait of consumer daydreaming as a ratchet for escalating material consumption?

In this paper, we take a phenomenological approach to examine daydreaming in consumers’ lives; first focusing our attention on the lived experience of daydreaming and then seeking to understand its role in consumers’ consumption activities. We therefore directly address calls for empirical investigation of daydreaming (d’Astous and Deschênes, 2005; Jenkins, Molesworth and Eccles, 2010; Jenkins and Molesworth, 2018). Sharing the view that data represents an important resource for problematizing and developing theory (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007: 1265), we anchor the process of theorization in an experiential account of the phenomenon as lived (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Gummesson, 2001). In doing so, we argue that marketing scholars have worked with a partial account of consumers’ imaginative capabilities - either by overlooking them entirely or identifying them with materialism and unsustainable consumption (e.g. Scott et al., 2014) - and that this hinders our understanding of other possible consequences of daydreaming on consumption

activities. Our contribution is thus threefold: first, we expand theory in the field by providing empirical material on consumer daydreaming; second, we expose the dialectic between the real and unreal dimensions of daydreams and their effects on consumers; finally, we illuminate the fluid intertwining of daydreams with consumption, revealing novel ways in which they may shape one another. Specifically, we elucidate how elaborate daydreams might not just *delay* the consummation of a consumer desire (thus slowing down one's rate of actual product/service acquisition and use) but may also constitute such an immersive and inherently gratifying experience for consumers it may *replace* the associated material consumption in 'reality'.

In the following sections, we briefly review psychological conceptualisations of daydreaming, and its key characteristics. We then review how, within cultural consumer research, individuals' capacity to daydream has been viewed primarily as an antecedent to product/service purchase. We borrow from the French philosopher Sartre (1940/2004) to consider the ontological nature of this phenomenon, which informs our data analysis. Finally, we articulate the implications of our study for scholarship on consumption.

### **Conceptualising daydreaming**

Empirical findings on the cultivation and effects of daydreaming are scarce, not least because of daydreaming's elusiveness (Ehn and Löfgren, 2010) and the difficulties in researching such an intensely private activity. A substantial body of work on daydreaming exists within psychology, much of it due to Singer and his collaborators. Daydreams, or fantasies (Valkenburg and van der Voort, 1994), are seen as 'a shift of attention away' from some task or object, towards inner responses, involving mental journeys through 'sequences of events, memories or creatively constructed images of future events' (Singer, 1975: 3). In this manuscript, we follow Valkenburg and van der Voort (1994), using the words daydream and fantasy interchangeably, and as umbrella terms to refer to different forms of imagining as

depicted by Singer (1975). Klinger (2008: 225) notes that in many cases, daydreaming is a spontaneous, unintended activity that ‘comes to mind unbidden and effortlessly’ and where deliberate and spontaneous thoughts often intermix.

Daydreaming serves several purposes, notably offering daydreamers ‘the ability to mentally experience’ events which are otherwise inaccessible (Jenkins and Molesworth, 2018: 2). It is commonly known to be a means with which to escape routines or otherwise unsatisfying circumstances, tensions, or selves (e.g. Ehn and Löfgren, 2010; Cohen and Taylor, 1992). Less well-known perhaps is the fact that daydreaming can create *real* emotions for daydreamers, and hence provide considerable pleasure (Singer, 1966), excitement, interest or intrigue (Singer, 1975), although not all daydreams are positive and constructive (McMillan et al. 2013). Neuroscientists have also argued that daydreaming is a driver of many everyday individual choices (Smallwood, Ruby and Singer, 2013). Considering its prevalence and its potential to be an emotion-laden experience as well as to influence behaviour, it is surprising that there has been relatively little empirical research into consumers’ experiences of daydreaming and its intersection with consumption.

### **The daydreaming consumer**

Consumption is deeply entwined with fantasies and imaginary constructions (e.g. Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982); escapism into the extraordinary or less mundane is at the core of many consumer experiences (e.g. Cova et al., 2018; Arnould and Price, 1993; Kozinets, 2002). From treasuring possessions to relive past events (MacInnis and Price, 1987), to enjoying aesthetic work for its therapeutic value (Venkatesh and Meamber, 2008), or travelling through digital virtual spaces (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010) to experience ‘mediated’ realities (Kuo, Lutz and Hiler, 2016), consumers’ imagination shapes consumption experience, sometimes quite notably. Visitors to Cézanne’s studio in Aix-en-

Provence ('an almost empty place'), for example, receive an 'authentic' heritage-based visiting experience (Derbaix and Gombault, 2016: 1460) purely as a result of what their imaginations bring to it. Indeed, daydreaming can be the source of experiences more powerful than those stimulated by our senses or constitute a form of experimental action in which an action's emotional yield is imagined before or in lieu of actual realization (Gabriel, 2008). It may produce the aesthetic-emotional experience of immersion without any service encounter or product purchase (cf. Carú and Cova, 2006); consumers can access their own secure world to create 'a lived, believed-in, situated, temporally embodied experience that radiates through a person's stream of consciousness, is felt and runs through the body' (Denzin, 1984: 66). In this sense, highly elaborated imagery experience (which may be multi-sensory) can secure the dreamer a 'substitute satisfaction' (see MacInnis and Price, 1987: 482).

Nonetheless, the dominant view in consumer research ties daydreaming to commodity acquisition. Campbell's (1987) dream-artists - skilled in perfecting elaborate daydreams around products or services in order to maximise the imagined, yet direct, psycho-physiological consequences of desire - are inevitably disappointed when the heightened desire is consummated in the selection, purchase and use of a product. For McCracken (1990) too, anticipating purchases serves as a 'bridge' to an imagined future or a synecdoche for the 'displaced meaning' held therein, which drives desire for commodities. When the possession does not satiate that desire, 'the consumer transfers anticipation to another object' so that 'the displaced meaning can remain displaced' (McCracken, 1990: 112) and the drive to consume is renewed.

This notwithstanding, cultivating *unfulfilled* yearning for desired goods has been regarded as a valuable 'consumption' experience in itself (d'Astous and Deschênes, 2005; Fournier and Guiry, 1993). Indeed, Campbell notes that modern imaginative hedonism is not

solely a catalyst for consumption. Rather, it goes hand-in-hand with deferred gratification. For Campbell (1987), consumer societies' apparent thirst for new commodities and insatiability are not a result of materialism but rather of the considerable pleasure to be had from imagining a dream as if it were real. Since *wanting* is more important than *having* for the hedonistic daydreamer, postponing consummation of a desire allows further opportunities to enjoy anticipatory pleasure and 'enjoyable discomforts' (Campbell, 1987: 88). Subsequent empirical work (Belk et al., 2003; Galak et al., 2013) supports Campbell's (1987) and McCracken's (1990) theses, in their conclusions that slowing or delaying gratification increases pleasure. Likewise, literature on self-gift giving shows that the sacrifice of abstaining from acquisitions in order that future self-gifts feel *earned*, confers pleasure and specialness to the experience (Mick and DeMoss, 1990).

What we know of the content of consumers' daydreams has been advanced by select empirical work within consumption studies (Belk et al., 2003; Christensen, 2002; Christensen et al., 2004; d'Astous and Deschênes, 2005; Fournier and Guiry, 1993; Phillips et al., 1995), which has focused on the wishes of the participants to own, use or enjoy not-yet-acquired products or services in the future. Jenkins et al. (2011) offer a less commodity-centric picture of consumers' imaginative activity, in which positive social relations and simple pleasures come to the fore. Indeed, Jenkins et al. (2010) have speculated that the content of consumers' daydreams may turn away from increasing material consumption and suggest two possible trajectories: towards the civic desires conceptualised in Soper's alternative hedonism, or an 'escape' into the worlds provided by digital virtual consumption. Jenkins and Molesworth (2018: 329) also differentiate between forms of imagining to show that the dominant conceptualisation of daydreaming in marketing theory is 'future orientated, pleasurable and based on desire' and that this effectively depoliticises markets as simply providers of that

pleasure. The connection between daydreaming and consumption thus appears to be complex, subtle, fluid and deserving of further empirical analysis.

Sartre's (1940/2004) phenomenological account of the imagination helps us in this task by detailing daydreaming's ontology and its potential effects. This foundational work by a major 20<sup>th</sup> century thinker provides a subtle and well-developed account of the imaginary, from which we can derive insights onto how dreams are *lived* and *retained*. Sartre (1940/2004: 125) posits that imagining functions as an 'incantation', where the object as imagined is an '*irreality*', only artificially kept alive. As Sartre says, it 'cannot be seen, touched, smelled, except irreally' (Sartre, 1940/2004: 136). However, it is produced by 'a consciousness that remains in the world' and, thus, it still *exists* 'irreally' (Sartre, 1940/2004: 186). In other words, it carries a 'layer of real existences', which Sartre calls 'the imaging consciousness' (p. 136). For Sartre there are 'intentions, movements, knowledge and feelings' that all combine to form the image, and 'intentions, movements, knowledge and feelings' that develop as a *reaction* to it. As such, the imaginary allows us to nourish sensations that behave 'in the face of the unreal as in the face of the real', and, in doing so, have the ability to deceive desires (Sartre, 1940/2004: 140).

Sartre further explains that one's whole body can aid in the imaginary process; for example, to form an image of a garden swing, one will likely make some bodily movement, however slight, often of the eyes (Webber, 2004). This fits well with psychological research on grounded (or embodied) cognition (Niedenthal et al, 2005; Barsalou, 2008). In broad terms, this is the idea the systems, in brain and throughout the body, that control the basic bodily functions of sense and movement play a significant role in all kinds of thought (see Barsalou, 2008). Researchers in this area have found evidence that virtual perceptions (such as mental images) and real bodily states created by motor systems in response to mental events, each play fundamental roles in cognition (Barsalou, 2008). These can be seen as



analogous to ‘quasi-observation’ of imagined objects and the ‘layer of real existences’ (including motor responses) in Sartre (1940/2004). These works suggest that the lived experience of daydreaming and consequences for the dreamer’s behaviour may be far more expansive than has been theorized in consumer research up to now.

## **Methodology**

Daydreaming is intensely private (Singer, 1975; McMillan et al., 2013), more so than dreams, since we perceive daydreams to be controllable (Person, 1995). This makes it hard to study, because participants may feel constrained to share such intimate thoughts. We aimed to develop a phenomenological understanding of daydreaming from the perspective of daydreamers and its reported consequences on their consumption. At the outset of this study, we conceptualised daydreaming in accord with Singer’s (1975) definition cited above. However, we sought participants’ understandings of daydreaming so as not to force them to fit an established classification and to encourage the reporting and discovery of alternative meanings or contemporary facets. We recruited a purposive sample of participants who claimed that they daydreamed frequently, recurrently, or about ‘things [they] would like to buy in the future’. To collect varied experiences, we sought diversity in terms of gender, age, marital status and occupation.

Following five pilot interviews, we conducted face-to-face depth interviews with a further 30 participants and requested these participants complete diaries. The interviews provided detailed, phenomenological accounts of participants’ experiences (Thompson et al., 1989; Taylor and Bogdan, 1998), while diaries added insights into the temporal dimensions of daydreams (Bolger, Davis and Rafaeli, 2003; Green et al., 2006). Some participants completed a paper diary (provided to them), while most used an electronic version (in Google

Docs). Over eight weeks, they were asked to record any daydream they wished to share, giving as much detail as they could, such as images, duration, associated feelings or bodily sensations, and any real-world consequence. Participants received a £50 voucher on completing the interviews and diary.

Data collection took place between December 2017 and June 2019, capturing varied seasons and calendrical events. We recruited via posters in supermarkets and university buildings, contacts within personal networks and an intermediary website ([callforparticipants.com](http://callforparticipants.com)). The course of the interview was largely determined by participants, and we used follow-up questions to obtain details and clarification (Thompson, 1996). Specifically, interviews were loosely structured around: perception of self as ‘daydreamer’, favourite daydreams (content, frequency, prompts, context, associated feelings), stories of past or current daydreams, their evolution and ‘consequences’ (emotional, physiological, interpersonal, consumption-related).

Follow-up interviews provided further insights into the daydreams in informants’ diaries. These interviews included four thought-bubble sentence-completion tasks to prompt insights into daydreaming that may be inhibited by embarrassment or fear of self-incrimination (Will et al., 1996). By inviting participants to comment on the phenomenon indirectly, we hoped to counteract tendencies to provide socially desirable answers (Doherty and Nelson, 2010).

The present analysis is based on the entire dataset from 35 participants, though three participants did not complete the diary and four did not attend the second interview. Further information on the informants can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1: Participants' details**

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation	Country of Origin	Marital Status
Alice	Female	44	IT Support	Portugal	Single
Helen	Female	38	PhD student and Lecturer	Indonesia	Married
Nayani	Female	31	PhD student / Teaching Assistant	Sri Lanka	In a relationship
Lewis	Male	48	Lecturer	UK	Married
Meghan	Female	31	Lecturer	Russia	In a relationship
Anaya	Female	24	Architect and MSc Student	India	In a relationship
Riham	Female	20	Second year UG	India	Single
Cam	Female	25	Post Graduate Student / Receptionist at a restaurant	Vietnam	In a relationship
Amira	Female	32	PhD Student	Pakistan	Married
Michael	Male	26	Librarian	UK	In a relationship
Harry	Male	41	Customer Service	UK	Single
Jim	Male	59	Retired	UK	Married
Li	Male	40	Academic	China	Single
Sally	Female	46	Entrepreneur	UK	Single
Nadir	Male	24	MSc student	Vietnam	Single
Vanessa	Female	30	Personal assistant	UK	In a relationship
Rene	Female	28	Final year PhD	Cyprus	Single
Lily	Female	20	Final year UG	UK	In a relationship
Grace	Female	32	Office Manager	UK	In a relationship
David	Male	47	IT support	UK	Single
Gail	Female	53	Part time employed	UK	Married
Carol	Female	58	Administrative	UK	Married
Isabella	Female	34	Teacher	UK	In a relationship
Clarisse	Female	48	Administrative	UK	Single
Sarah	Female	37	Healthcare	UK	Married
Belinda	Female	34	Primary Teacher	UK	In a relationship
Linda	Female	57	Administrative	UK	Married
Andrew	Male	36	Recruitment Officer	UK	Single
Edgar	Male	32	Consultant	UK	In a Relationship

Joanne	Female	55	Manager	UK	Separated
Kate	Female	40	Administrative	UK	Divorced
Julia	Female	63	Administrative	UK	Married
Sophia	Female	45	Event Manager/Sales	UK	Married
Freddie	Male	47	Unemployed	UK	Married
Jonathan	Male	34	Engineer	Italy	Single

Interviews were transcribed *verbatim*. Participants' names and any potentially identifying information have been changed to protect their anonymity. Since there is little peer-reviewed empirical data from consumers in this area, we quote extensively from interviews and diaries. The interpretive data analysis was iterative, with each interview transcript and diary being read and re-read, to develop a holistic understanding while progressively noting patterns (Spiggle, 1994; Thompson, 1996). The projective material was interpreted similarly, attending to commonalities and differences across the frames of reference participants used (Catterall and Ibbotson, 2000). During this process, the researchers met regularly to discuss points at which our understandings of participants' meanings diverged, and gradually identified overarching themes (Price et al., 2000). Discussing our findings with peers at conferences and seminars facilitated further reflection upon our interpretations. Although our data offer evidence of a variety of daydream types, our focus here is on pleasurable experiences to allow consideration of the positive potential of daydreaming.

### **Daydreaming as experiential consumption**

In the following, we first contextualize our interpretation of daydreaming experiences by presenting our participants' understandings thereof. We then illustrate the immersive nature of the phenomenon for some of our participants and the emotional and physiological consequences that are arguably underplayed by Campbell (Boden and Williams, 2002). We

proceed to detail how participants delayed the consummation of their consumer desires by prolonging pleasurable daydreaming. Indeed, we show how elaborate daydreams – even if centred on consumption – can offer such a pleasurable and immersive experience it replaces the associated ‘actual’ material consumption. Daydreaming appears in our study to be intrinsically gratifying, and can therefore change, delay or negate the need for a commodity purchase entirely.

### *Daydreaming as an experience that is lived*

While all participants could describe daydreams they had experienced, their description of the phenomenon and degree of elaboration differed. For some, daydreaming was understood primarily as anticipation (Jenkins and Molesworth, 2018) related to rational, low-elaboration planning or rehearsing of actions in the near future. It was also seen as an important source of creativity, ideas and ‘solutions’ in work domains. For others, daydreaming was understood as visualising past seen or invented images in detail, as ‘zoning out’ of the immediate environment, as solitary reflection, or as an enjoyable pastime that prompts no specific action. Commonly, it was described as a kind of vital energy (Gould, 1991) that affords hope and the promise of transformation. Corroborating Belk et al’s (2003) conclusion that we fear being without desire, daydreaming appeared crucial to establishing ‘something to look forward to’ (Vanessa), without which there is only ‘emptiness’ (Julia). Pleasurable daydreaming, was a ‘magical act’ (Sartre, 1940/2004: p. 125) leading dreamers to a pleasant, private space perceived to be totally within their control:

It’s like a little fortress of your own, when you’re in there you can’t be hurt. Whatever’s happening in real life, if you’re sad or even happy or anything like that, if you go in there you can create whatever you want, there’s no barriers, there’s no-one telling you that’s silly, you shouldn’t be doing that. You just do whatever you want, however long you want for, in whatever mode you want and you’re safe, it’s a nice little area. And it’s like a blank pad really. [Michael, interview]

No matter how old you are, it's a bit like ... you know like when a child goes to Disneyland for the first time and it's that magical experience, for me ... and because it's personal, that's what makes it magical because the only person who can see what you're daydreaming is you [...] It's magical and it's personal and it's tailored to you. [Kate, interview]

Daydreaming offers a 'blank pad' or 'wild card' (Ehn and Lögfren, 2010, p. 206) for dreamers to escape or free themselves from the external world (Webber, 2004; Sartre, 1940/2004). We also noticed that inscribing this space with detail could produce a highly engaging, sensory experience:

I've booked a hotel for me and my whole family... And that will just... I can see the look on [my daughter's] face now. And my granddaughter will be there and there's a swimming pool in this hotel [...] I can close my eyes and see her face [closes her eyes]. And I can hear my granddaughter saying 'Mamma, we go holiday! We go holiday! We go seaside!' [smiles broadly] [Julia, interview]

In the following excerpt, Michael shares his fantasy of an emergency at his place of work in which he emerges as a hero saviour. Such daydreams clearly offer a respite from boredom, but Michael's account also exemplifies how immersive daydreaming can be:

I had a daydream about what would happen if the library got taken hostage by terrorists in, like, a 'Die Hard' situation... And how I would react and how I would respond because I, like, know sort of secret exits and stuff like that and how I'd get people out. And *I was gone for about ten minutes* doing that... But yeah, [when I'm] daydreaming, things are quite detailed, I imagine what people say... normally I'm the hero, I guess. [Michael, interview, emphasis added]

Since the details of a daydream can be honed - sometimes over days, weeks or even months - the resulting emotional and physiological stimulation is sufficiently intense to be experienced as if it had actually happened in external or 'paramount' reality (Cohen and Taylor, 1992: 40).

In the next excerpt, Cam describes at length her daydreaming while waiting for customers at the restaurant where she works. As with many participants' accounts, a desire for social recognition is visible in Cam's fantasy, as demonstrated by the importance that she

attributes to her bosses and co-workers seeing her in a more powerful role than she experiences as an employee (and perhaps as a young, unmarried woman). However, the account below reveals a high degree of elaboration (Jenkins and Molesworth, 2018), so much so that Cam becomes engrossed in her imagination and is 'woken up' when interrupted:

Last night the daydream was mostly about my boyfriend coming here to see me... In the dream I was taking him to the same restaurant, we dressed up and walked in hand in hand, giving the owners a little surprise of my presence at their place in a different position. I greeted every staff in the restaurant and introduced my boyfriend to them, letting them know that we are going to get married really soon. People were so surprised when we started speaking in Chinese (which is true; he can). We ordered the food from the menu, the ones normally I would serve the customers but this time I could just enjoy everything with my boyfriend. The restaurant was decorated for Christmas already and was really busy. We finished our meal, said goodbye to everyone [...]. The whole time I was daydreaming, there were customers coming in and out and I was "woken up" to show them to the table but as soon as I returned to my position, I found myself trying to go back to where the dream ended and continued from there until the end. My mind added details into the dream here and there, [...] the navy dress I wore to the restaurant instead of the black uniform I was actually wearing, how we opened the small gifts they had on the table and put the paper crown on each other's heads (like what I saw customers do), and all the Christmas songs played in the restaurant. [Cam, diary entry]

Although confined to one's inner reality or imagination, daydreaming scenarios can provoke reactions akin to those felt in 'real' experience (see also Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010). As Kate describes:

Sometimes I'll daydream over the most stupidest random things. And then I just start bursting out laughing and people are like 'You alright?', 'Yeah, I was just thinking about something'. And that's how I like try and play it down, 'Oh yeah, I was just thinking about something I'd done last night', when really I'm thinking 'I didn't do it last night, I've done it in my head' [Kate, interview].

Kate reacts to unreal mental images as if they were real; her reaction exists and is observable. This ambiguity between fantasy and reality is also seen in her laughing about something that *happened* in her mind. Thus, we see a 'layer of real existences' around the daydream (Sartre,

1940/2004: 136). Similarly, Amira imagined a future helicopter ride enough times to make it feel like a 'real' event:

There was a holiday when I had spent months... It was the first time my husband was going to visit me in the US, and I wanted it to be really, really cool. And I spent a lot of money on going to the Grand Canyon and I bought a helicopter ride and a boat ride and like I...it was like, I dreamed and dreamed and dreamed and dreamed about it, like it was going to be like that ultimate holiday for us, right, because we hadn't had a honeymoon. Anyway, when we went there the Canyon was covered in clouds, we couldn't even see it. The boat ride was cancelled, the helicopter ride was cancelled [...] I had dreamed of taking that helicopter ride so many times before the trip that I think like I'd almost taken it. You know? [Amira, interview]

Daydreams were rarely experienced as a passive spectating of images. Aligned with Sartre's (1940/2004) view that the body cooperates in constituting the imagined phenomena, participants described experiencing their daydreams corporeally and reported physiological or behavioural sensations, such as mouth-watering, heart-racing, and crying. For example, while daydreaming about dancing, Cam started moving her hands, losing awareness of space and time. Amid a cold and wet winter, Harry felt excited and experienced 'goose bumps' imagining his upcoming holiday abroad, lying 'beside the pool with a bottle of beer, a good book and plenty of sun on [his] back'. Such bodily and affective reactions reveal the highly detailed imaging processing occurring in elaborated daydreams (MacInnis and Prince, 1987) which makes the experience of daydreaming more vivid and reified.

Research into embodied cognition further helps us to appreciate the link between bodily and cognitive states (Barsalou, 2008; Pocheptsova and Soman, 2011) that helps explain our daydreamers' experiences. The brain's motor and sensory systems are closely tied to cognition, with thoughts, apparent sensory perceptions, and bodily states each able to affect one another (Barsalou, 2008). Hence, a considerable amount of what we might call the 'real' value of a tangible experience, both in subjective experience and physiological states,



can be provided by a daydream. This interplay of fantasy and psycho-physiological responses offer daydreamers valuable experiences that are worth retaining.

### ***Prolonging imaginative pleasure and the consequences for material consumption***

As the previous sections elucidate, pleasurable daydreams can be highly immersive, providing sensory stimulation and bodily responses. In this section, we consider behavioural consequences of such immersive daydreaming for product/service acquisition and use.

For several of our participants, daydreaming was an intrinsically pleasurable experience that, even when stimulated by marketing activities and focused on consumption, was *known* as gratifying regardless of their actual fulfilment:

I still have that [an imagined beach scene] just because it's like my happy place in a way. So, in my head that's what - This always happens, 'this is what the holiday that I am going to is going to look like'. It never does. And I know it doesn't, like I'm saying it now, so I'm acknowledging it but I still think when I think about Cuba I still just see that, just because that's 'holiday'... it's just a silly ideal in my head, it's like we just got this amazing beach hut and like obviously it's white sand and blue sea and there's nobody there and it's...so I know it's an imagined place [...] I've accepted that but it's just nice to have it. [Vanessa, interview]

Vanessa's consciousness of the 'irreality' of her 'imagined place' does not preclude her from gaining pleasure from it or 'playing at satisfaction' (Sartre, 1940/2004, p. 126). Rather, daydreams can be embellished and savoured in their own right. Just as Belk et al (2003) observe that sustaining desire requires distance – an object or experience as unattainable – and lack of control over the object (i.e. not having it), our participants were well aware that anticipation is often more pleasurable than consummation:

I prefer December to Christmas Day because I think Christmas Day is an anti-climax. But I love December, I absolutely love all the preparing and choosing presents and all that kind of thing. My end isn't Christmas, it's just that month. It builds up to that, sure, but I actually always say- when I was a kid, I used to say to my mum "oh, Christmas Eve is much better than Christmas Day" [...] because it's still ... Christmas Day still hasn't happened ... [Vanessa, interview]

I think the anticipation is more pleasurable than actually getting the thing [...] like when I'm waiting for it, like when I place the order, when I wait for the thing to come, that like build-up of everything is a lot more enjoyable. [Riham, interview]

MacInnis and Price (1987) proposed that elaborate imagery is most useful when actual consumption is not a viable alternative, in which case daydreaming may provide a compensation strategy (d'Astous and Deschênes, 2005). Yet, our participants' accounts show daydreaming to also be a gratifying experience, when they were later able to realise their dreams. Indeed, some of them offered detailed explanations of how they actively prolonged dreams, undertaking activities that built-up excitement and extended the duration of the daydreaming, such as researching images or embellishing it via conversation with a trusted friend. Belinda, for example, makes a conscious decision to read about Africa before her upcoming holiday to Kenya, which she sees less as planning and more about lengthening and enhancing her holiday experience:

I don't like the idea of just you show up on the holiday, you have the holiday and then it's finished. I like to try and prolong it by like, you know, thinking about it in advance [...] So I've been talking to my partner and saying look, we've got some books from the library and I don't know, just trying to... because otherwise it can be just over really quickly can't it... Yeah, I like to, sort of maybe not even so much plan it, but just sort of... I was thinking of maybe getting some novels that are based in Africa, just so that you kind of get more of a feel for the holiday [...] so I suppose it's nice to imagine that you might read something and then when you're there you can be like oh I know about that because I've read about it [...] Or even if it's like facts I suppose, like the animals, like I know which animal that is because I've read about it or just other things like maybe if you read a novel and then you can imagine the scenario... [Belinda, interview]

These activities allow Belinda to not only build anticipation but to add details to her own daydream narrative that heighten the excitement of both the daydreaming and the eventual holiday experience. Similarly, Rene describes how daydreams can also be enjoyed collaboratively, which seems to add to the pleasure they offer:

I tell my mum about some of my daydreams but most of them I tell my best friend... If we're both dreaming about guys we like, we always talk about it [laughs]...it's fun [laughs]. Like if I daydreamed about something funny happening with the guy, like, I don't know, like he fell over or something silly like that...Or like he made a funny noise or some crazy things, I'll tell my best friend and she'll like we will laugh together...Or something insane like for example if he decided to be with a girl that he hates, like someone very unlikely. [...] I also want to go to Paris with my best friend. The one I tell my daydreams about. If I see a picture on Facebook, if it's a picture of Paris I'll share it with her and I'll say 'Yeah, we're going'. [laughs] [Rene, interview]

Moreover, some participants intentionally delayed the fulfilment of a longed-for scenario. This appears to derive partly from the fact that until a daydream is effectively realised, 'all' possibilities are open in one's imagination. While daydreams build up hope, desire and promises of transformation (Heath and Heath, 2016), the daydreams' fulfilment promptly ceases those exciting possibilities. It is, thus, not surprising that daydreamers may wish to keep hold of their dreams, mentally crafting minute details and rearranging possible scenarios.

Sartre (1940/2004) sheds light on this by suggesting that the imagination contains nothing that does not originate within us and that we are ultimately free to construct them as we wish. Hence, while it may seem as though we are observing objects or events within a daydream it is actually 'quasi-observation' (p. 84) of images that are exactly as we wish them to be, which can therefore teach us nothing that we did not already know. The argument that we can learn nothing new from (quasi-)observing phenomena within a daydream goes a great way to explaining why our participants sometimes preferred them to real experiences; the experience of the fantasy cannot be spoilt by learning, via observation, a fact that does not fit with how they wish the experience to be. In this sense, rather than fuelling consumption, daydreamers may avoid or delay purchase or use to prolong their fantasies. In our study, this is best illustrated by Michael:

When [my favourite TV series] finished, I didn't want it to finish so I refused to watch the last sort of two or three episodes...So, I just stopped, and I didn't watch it for about two weeks/three weeks. And my friends were like you know, you need to

finish it [...] I thought about it and I guess daydreamed how I wanted it to end. [...] So, in my head I could imagine 10/15 ways that it could end you know, maybe ten were happy, five were unhappy. But until I'd seen them, they were all possible. [Michael, interview]

Michael's refusal to watch the last episodes preserves the anticipatory pleasure of daydreaming - as hypothesised by Campbell (1987) - and delays an envisioned disillusionment, but it is hard to see this as fuelling consumption. On the contrary, embellishing, perfecting, or 'hyping' daydreams has led Michael to slow his consumption down. Here daydreaming seems to encourage 'savouring' (Loewenstein, 1987: 667), in which one derives value (in this case pleasure, excitement, hope, etc.) from anticipation of future consumption. Yet self-imposing such a delay may be less to do with increasing the enjoyment of the eventual consumption experience (Nowlis et al., 2004), but to be itself *more* enjoyable than the consumption experience in paramount reality is believed to be. Amateur wildlife photographer Clarisse keeps postponing the acquisition of a camera, with which she would take the 'perfect duck photograph' to win a photographic competition. The infinite possibilities of daydreaming and the pleasure they can provide are favoured over a reality that may be much less exciting:

One of the things that's stopping me is it's not going to be as good in reality as it is in my imagination [...] My concern is that I'll get the camera, I'll get the lens...And I could even just locally go to places and I won't take the picture as well as I think I can take it in my imagination [laughs]. And that's ... yeah and then I'll be like 'oh' ... and do I then blame the camera equipment or myself? Yeah, so that's what's prolonging it. And it's similar with ... Everything's possible when I'm daydreaming, everything's possible. [Clarisse, interview]

Hence, the anticipation of disillusionment may lead to a rejection of the marketplace and effectively restrain discretionary purchases or acquisitions. Our participants also explained how daydreaming, even about consumer goods, could curb consumption. Daydreaming intensely about an item prevented impulsive purchase of less desired items, as dreamers would rather save for the item of their fantasies (see also D'Astous and Deschênes, 2005).

For example, Cam's enduring fantasy about owning a fashionable, yellow coat prevented her from buying other items even while enjoying a girls' day out to the sales.

As theorised by McCracken (1990), the daydreaming process seemed central to the attribution of personal meanings to goods so that anticipatory daydreaming could sometimes also enhance, rather than diminish, the consummation experience. Yet some of our participants also described how this appeared to ensure the commodities *remained* meaningful after acquisition, rather than leading to an inevitable disillusionment. For instance, Meghan recalled how daydreaming about owning and wearing two 'long dreamed-about rings' that she could easily afford, made them much more valuable and 'meaningful' than items not the subject of such fantasies. Belinda used daydreaming to prolong the pleasure of her holiday, before, but also after, the actual consumption experience; as she recounted in the second interview, she takes pleasure talking about it, looking back at photographs and the paintings she produced for her home with photographs of animals taken on the trip. Similarly, the use of the same soap as the one used on a holiday invokes in Freddie a sensory dimension capable of rekindling his experience (MacInnis and Price, 1987) and associated sensations:

When showering at home using the same shower gel from holiday. I was transported in my mind back to our family holiday. Just remembering being back in the hotel room. Smelling the scent of the salty sea air and new and unusual sounds e.g. air con, breeze etc. Made me feel happy. [Freddie, diary]

With less disposable income, Kate talked proudly of possessions (e.g. a car) she acquired after much imagining, effort, waiting and saving. Kate's experience is akin to those reported in self-gift giving literature, in which the most treasured self-gifts are those perceived to be 'earned', often involving sacrifice (Heath et al., 2015):

The older that I've gotten, the more responsible I've become.... I want my daydreams to continue coming true. And in order for those to come true, one factor for me is I need to ensure that I know what I'm doing with my money. [...] I'm fond of what I've achieved and I'm proud that the things that I've daydreamed have actually manifest in

the present [...] if it takes time, it takes time but in order to help me along, I need my daydreams. My daydreams allow me to have something to look forward to, my daydreams validate that I am worth it, I can do things, I can get what someone else's got... [Kate, interview].

Like other participants, Kate explained that having to abstain from some personal acquisitions, knowing she must wait, extended the opportunity to daydream about goods and savour the process. In this respect, self-restraint or sacrifice played a role in prolonging imaginative pleasure, where some commodity purchases were foregone, either 'for the sake of an ideal' (Bourdillon 1980:12) or 'in the expectation or hope of greater gain' (Bourdillon 1980:11). This can be either an apparently superior material good or the pleasures of imagining itself.

A prevailing view in consumer research is that fantasies accelerate desire (e.g. Shankar et al., 2006), ultimately leading to consumption. However, we found they may sometimes be so elaborate as to lengthen a decision-making process, helping consumers discriminate between market offerings to a higher degree and choose more thoughtfully. Riham's pleasure in her daydream of the perfect outfit on which her peers (including her secret crush) would compliment her, caused her to daydream considerably about their reactions to every element of the outfit and thus to be highly selective in her choices. Again, rather than feeling disillusioned, this process appeared to enhance her overall pleasure when this dream came true:

When I walked out everyone was like complimenting me, like it worked, like what I had dreamed of was what I got...I had so many people come and talk to me, even the boy I like was like- they were all coming to me. And then I felt more like 'yeah, this is what I wanted'. [Riham, interview]

For Campbell (1987: 89) such imaginative anticipation yields most enjoyment for which he argues that 'individuals do not so much seek satisfaction from products, as pleasure from the self-illusory experiences which they construct from their associated meanings'. Once one's

daydream is achieved, and regardless of how it compares to prior fantasies, the outcome is both known and irreversible. However, while we agree with Campbell (1987: 86) that ‘attaining an object of desire is likely to eliminate the pleasures associated with anticipatory day-dreaming’, we challenge the implication that this necessarily leads to a cycle of desire-acquisition-use-disillusionment-renewed-desire. Indeed, our participants shared examples in which daydreaming was used to allow consumer desires to mature, to heighten the meaningfulness of an item or lengthening the decision process to avoid satisficing – or fade away entirely. This sentiment is nicely expressed by Alice:

Even when I don’t buy the things I’ve been dreaming of, when I don’t accomplish my dream of having them, I enjoy the daydreaming...even the fact that sometimes the dream is more intense, other times it fades, the process in itself gives me lots of pleasure...the process of planning, organizing, even if there is not a realization of the dream. [Alice, interview]

Elaborate daydreaming thus appeared to also have a pragmatic function in helping some daydreamers to avoid ‘unnecessary’ purchasing and to save money, since acquisition would not transpire should the daydream fade. This was well captured in Vanessa’s response to a sentence completion task (see Figure 1):

*Insert Figure 1 here*

For some in our study, daydreams were experienced as so real that no purchase was deemed necessary; for the daydreamer, the consumption experience has already happened. This is how Kate explains it, in her example of her daydreams of travelling to Egypt, a place which she has never visited in paramount reality:

And somebody would be like “Egypt?”, I’d be like “no I was just thinking about Egypt, I don’t know why”... then I try and lie and say “oh wouldn’t it be nice to go there?” But in my head, subconsciously, I have been. I have been. [...] and then my friend said to me the other day “Would you like to go?”, I’m like “No,

no” because to me I’ve already been. [...] I don’t know whether it was a [night] dream or whether I was daydreaming, I can’t even remember...I said “but I’ve been...” and then I realised “Kate you’re daydreaming, it’s not real”... But some people don’t understand when you try and explain it to them. [Kate, interview]

In this way, the stimulating and enthralling nature of elaborate daydreaming reveals how it can be, for some, so intrinsically gratifying as to delay or even negate the requirement to consummate associated consumer desires. Furthermore, it seems to play an important role in heightening the possibility of a *relationship* with an object that resists the rapid cycle of purchase, use and disposal common to Western consumers’ treatment of unexceptional, mass-produced goods as carriers of images rather than of meaning (Gabriel and Lang, 2015).

## **Discussion**

This study provides a useful counterpoint to literature that implicates fantasy or daydreaming in accelerating consumerism. Our findings suggest the interplay between daydreaming and consumption is more nuanced than reflected in Campbell’s (1987: 90) treatment of it as the motor of consumption or McCracken’s (1990) discussion of displaced meaning. For example, some participants repeatedly seek out opportunities to fantasise about purchases that they understand they cannot afford and speak about this as an unalloyed good, which, as Alice says, provides her with ‘the positive energy that [she] need[s] to live’. In d’Astous and Deschênes’ (2005: 8) terminology, some of our participants adopted behavioural strategies to ‘approach’ their daydream, such as searching for information, saving up, and reducing other consumption in preparation for acquiring daydreamed items. Yet our work suggests that the pleasure of daydreaming itself can motivate these behaviours, rather than heightening the desire to obtain a consumption object or the frustration of having to wait. Daydreaming can arouse such rich sensations it effectively delays material consumption, or replaces it entirely. When prolonged daydreams are realised, they seem to be endowed with added significance



for the dreamer provided by the time and effort invested in the process. Even when paramount reality fails to live up to the daydream, as it did for Amira, this need not result in renewed desire for consumption. Indeed, she considered her daydreaming to have somewhat lessened her loss.

In this study, desired future purchases served the role McCracken (1990) theorised, as a synecdoche of an ideal version of participants' selves and lifestyles. However, it seems premature to suppose this as solely an engine of consumption. Daydreamers (at least some of them) seem rather to exercise a substantial degree of awareness and control over the meaning that they have displaced onto the possessions of this imagined future. They seem to be able to use their dreams to create some of the effects of self-construction that we usually assign to possessions in paramount reality. That is to say that displacing meaning onto imagined purchases may achieve psychological and social benefits akin to those of actual purchases, hence dampening the urge to spend.

The importance of anticipation rather than the realization of the daydream is further explained by the possible futures and sensory stimuli that cease to exist when the daydream is realized in paramount reality. This raises the conundrum indicated by Belk et al. (2003); postponement of consummation could allow this pleasurable condition to continue indefinitely, but eventually the accompanying hope would fade. Even when unlikely to be realized here and now, our participants reported enjoying daydreams that may just happen 'one day'. The 'anticipatory pleasure' of consumption (Belk et al., 2003, 328; Campbell, 1987) emerges, thus, as a fundamental part of consumers' experience, which can be felt very intensely and enjoyed, knowingly, as a lived experience in itself. In this sense, we might rescue daydreaming from being seen within consumer research as merely a phase before largely inevitable purchase, or the misguided activity of naïve consumers, and recast it as an

important aspect in encouraging more reflective, sustainable ‘consumption’ at the consumer level.

Our findings serve to temper concerned accounts of consumers’ fantasies (and marketing’s influence thereon) in explaining consumerism’s expansionary dynamics. Rather than swiftly reducing participants’ hedonistic daydreams to a testimony and driver of a consumerist society of never-satisfied (and ultimately frustrated) consumers, our data allows for a more generous interpretation of imaginative hedonism and its effects. As in paramount reality, where mass consumption patterns are known to be inherently social, the pleasure afforded by daydreams – even those centred on commodity acquisition – was often entwined with social, relational and other aspirations that did not signal a materialistic quest for consumption objects by duped consumers. Indeed, the sensory stimulation afforded by pleasurable daydreaming focused fairly frequently on imagining joy or appreciative reactions of others, as with Julia’s daydream about her gift of a Christmas holiday to her family. Empirically, then, our findings partly corroborate those of Jenkins et al (2011); in many of our participants’ accounts of their daydreams, desire for consumption was subordinated to improved social relations. However, our study suggests that the potential of the consumer imagination for more responsible consumption may go beyond the trajectories identified by Jenkins et al. (2010) of dreams’ capacity to engineer an ‘alternative hedonism’ to, and escape from, what the market provides. Rather, this potential appears to be grounded in the immersive experiences provided by some daydreams and their ability to supply consumers with sufficient gratification to delay consumption and resist other temptations.

While extant literature usually stresses that daydreaming is a mental phenomenon, several of our participants’ accounts confirm that daydreams can be also an embodied experience. As elusive as they may be, dreams carry tangible sensations and affections that are *really* experienced both by dreamers (and others) and which may explain dreamers’

emotional involvement with the imaginary as described by Sartre (1940/2004). They may keep one focused on the target of desire (and, in this sense, inspire consumption) but they may also provide dreamers with tools for liberation, in that they replace materialization with something more ethereal yet full of possibilities. Daydreams may also resurface in response to goods (e.g. the scent of a perfume worn at a special time) enhancing their value. At any rate, consumption is not a mere product of daydreams, but interacts with them dialectically and fluidly, each shaping the other.

However, let us not be mistaken; daydreams sell, and advertisers and marketers alike have long endowed products and services with qualities that enchant, arouse fantasies and ultimately persuade. Indeed, while eschewing a purely materialistic view of fantasy, our daydreamers' accounts do not deny the socio-cultural practices of consumerist societies. Delaying consumption to prolong pleasurable fantasies, daydreaming of bringing happiness to others through gifts, or of celebrating one's achievements with acquisitions, are still aligned with consumer culture dynamics (Ehn and Lögfren, 2010) and marketing processes (Jenkins et al., 2010) that shape individuals' imaginative scenarios. Yet alongside such 'marketization of fantasy' (Jenkins and Molesworth, 2018, p. 329), individuals experience daydreams as intrinsically pleasurable, needing them as 'something to look forward to'. Importantly, at least some seem able to harness these daydreams as a means of creating value that requires less material consumption than others.

Further work is needed to establish the potential of elaborate daydreaming to encourage more mindful consumption (Sheth et al, 2011), and how it may relate to socio-demographic factors such as income. Given Stuppy, Mead and Osselaer's (2020) finding that individuals' choice of products tends to confirm their self-views, it would be interesting to investigate whether self-esteem also affects the content of one's daydreams. In addition, while we have focused on 'positive' daydreams, future studies could look at the effects on

consumption of darker fantasies, the sensations aroused by which participants may not wish to be unduly prolonged, or admitted as enjoyable, by dreamers. There is still much to investigate empirically to understand daydreaming's intersection with consumption, and the stimuli (e.g. company communications, window-shopping) that affect both. Finally, in light of studies highlighting the role of technology in stimulating fantasy and desire (such as Kozinets et al, 2017), it would be interesting to probe further into the part played by new media in feeding the imagination and in liberating or constraining individuals (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010) at times when opportunities to consume materially are denied. It is Sartre's (1940/2004:186) contention that we can imagine 'because we are transcendently free'. If this is so, can consumers use technology (and indeed marketing systems) to craft dreams that help them cope in times of absence? This seems particularly relevant when many social and physical liberties have necessarily been restricted by the Covid-19 pandemic, shining a new light on the significance of being 'free in one's mind'.

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