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*Master's Degree in Marketing*

*Chair of Consumer Behaviour*

**Does indulging always lead to regret? An exploratory study on the  
ambivalent valence of indulgent behaviours**

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**Academic Year 2018/2019**

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# Introduction

Most of the research on indulgence has characterised such behaviours as something to be avoided. Many purchase and consumption decisions involve an intrapersonal struggle between consumers' righteous, prudent side and their indulgent, pleasure-seeking side. While purchasing and consuming necessities or virtues is considered farsighted and responsible, yielding to hedonic temptations or vices is viewed as impulsive and wasteful.

Consumers behave indulgently when they choose vices over virtues, yielding to temptations and immediate pleasures, despite long-term interests to avoid such behaviours. Short-sighted indulgences are ultimately seen as less legitimate compared to more righteous choices. As a result, indulgences are thought to lead to remorse and negative emotions, such as regret and guilt. These negative feelings, in turn, cause a reversal of preferences, prompting consumers to wish they had behaved more responsibly. The tendency to succumb to impulse and seek immediate pleasure, at the expense of long-term interests, is attributed to time-inconsistent preferences or the tendency to overweight short-term rewards relative to more long-term ones.

However, a recent stream of research has proposed an alternative positive view of indulgence, premised on the notion that choices of virtues over vices evoke an anticipatory regret and a feeling of missing out on the pleasures of life. In the long run, when wistful feelings are stronger, indulging is thought to lead to less regret and more satisfaction.

The aim of this study is to explore the potential *ambivalent valence* attributed by consumers to indulgent behaviours. In particular, the objective of our research is to explore whether and when indulgent behaviours may evoke positive emotions (versus negative emotions, such as guilt and regret).

The first chapter gives an overview of the relevance of indulgent behaviours in consumers' everyday life. It introduces the domains associated with indulgent behaviours, providing an overview of the markets and identifying the psychological mechanisms underlying such purchase and consumption decisions.

The second chapter provides a literature review on indulgent behaviours. It reviews the *self-control dilemma*, that is the internal conflict between the pursuit of different behavioural plans, *myopia* and *hyperopia*, that is the difficulty of deviating from "doing the right thing", and the emotional consequences (typically negative) associated with overspending and impulsive buying. Further, a possible positive view of indulgence is proposed, suggesting that indulgent

consumption might make consumers feel good or happy and serve as a mood-repairing strategy to mitigate negative emotions such as sadness, or even that, in the long run, it might lead to satisfaction.

Finally, the third chapter is dedicated to the qualitative research aiming at exploring the ambivalent valence attributed by consumers to indulgence. The objective of the research, the methodology of analysis, the data analysis, and the results are presented in this chapter.

# Chapter 1

## 1.1 Indulgent consumption

Be it deciding to spend money now or save it for later, or choosing between hedonic and utilitarian goods, consumers are confronted with vice-virtue conflicts on a daily basis. Everyday life is rich of temptations that challenge our capacity for self-control or willpower. The desire for a product turns into a temptation if it goes against a long-term goal, such as craving a chocolate cake while having the goal of losing weight or desiring to buy a luxury car while having the goal of saving money. Impulses may be difficult to resist as they involve anticipated pleasurable experiences. As such, hedonically tempting products tend to evoke conflict in consumers, appealing to our indulgent inclinations while at the same time threatening our long-term goals.

Every day, consumers face purchase and consumption decisions that involve an intrapersonal fight between the competing strengths of self-control and desire. We say, “I really shouldn’t”, the price is too high, the product is not desperately needed, and so we reasonably should not buy it. However, our sensible concerns compete against our wants, impulses, and emotions, demanding the gratification of the purchase and wanting to believe that the purchased product will bring true happiness, at least for a while. We make resolutions to ourselves that we won’t consume so impulsively, or we promise ourselves that this will be the last time we give into temptation. Yet, despite such ambivalence towards temptations and resolutions not to lose self-control again, consumers often end up repeating the same indulgent behaviours.

Self-control literature concludes that indulgent behaviour is characterised by time-inconsistent preferences, or a tendency to overweight short-term rewards relative to more distant ones and to ignore the costs of one’s actions in the short-term <sup>1</sup>. Consumers are seen as easily tempted by choices that promise immediate pleasure and therefore act indulgently, despite long-term interests to avoid such behaviours. These short-sighted indulgences are ultimately seen as less legitimate compared to more righteous goals to abstain <sup>2</sup>. As a result, indulgences are thought to lead to remorse and negative emotions such as regret, guilt, or shame. These negative feelings in turn

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<sup>1</sup> Ramanathan, S., & Williams, P. (2007). Immediate and delayed emotional consequences of indulgence: The moderating influence of personality type on mixed emotions. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 34(2), 212-223.

<sup>2</sup> Hoch, S. J., & Loewenstein, G. F. (1991). Time-inconsistent preferences and consumer self-control. *Journal of consumer research*, 17(4), 492-507.

cause a reversal of preferences, consistent with long-term goals, prompting consumers to wish they had behaved more responsibly.

Literature on hedonic consumption traditionally associates indulgence with the domains of food and luxury. In this study, we intend to investigate indulgent behaviours associated not only with the purchase of indulgent products, but also with the relatively unexplored hedonically tempting experiential purchases.

## **1.2 Indulging in products**

The availability and affordability of hedonic products, that involve an anticipated pleasure but conflict with long-term goals, require consumers to resist temptations every day. Hedonic products are inherently characterised by instant pleasure, regardless of whether the consumption serves a practical purpose or is pursued for its own sake. Consumers often find themselves making tempting choices against their own better judgment and self-interest. In these situations, pursuing the immediate pleasure of consumption conflicts with pursuing some higher-order, long-term, or life-time goals. In the following paragraphs, we investigate the different product categories typically associated with indulgent consumption, namely luxury and food.

### **1.2.1 Luxury**

The word *luxury* originate from the Latin word *luxus*, which means indulgence of the senses, regardless of cost <sup>3</sup>. Luxury is by definition “something adding to pleasure or comfort but not absolutely necessary” <sup>4</sup>. The purchase of luxury goods, therefore, does not respond to any need or necessity, but rather provides pleasure and comfort. In this paragraph, we provide an overview of the luxury market, identify its key trends, and describe the psychological mechanisms associated with the indulgent purchase of luxury goods.

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<sup>3</sup> Salehzadeh, R., & Pool, J. K. (2017). Brand attitude and perceived value and purchase intention toward global luxury brands. *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, 29(2), 74-82.

<sup>4</sup> Definition of *luxury*, Merriam Webster Dictionary.

## Figures and trends

The annual Global Powers of Luxury Goods report by Deloitte <sup>5</sup> identifies the world's largest luxury goods companies and discusses the trends shaping the luxury market. Despite slowing economy, luxury goods market displays growth. In an age of fast changing trends, luxury companies have started to keep an eye on the new consumer classes of the future, are committing to make significant investments in digital marketing and increasingly using social media to engage their customers.

The world's Top 100 luxury goods companies generated revenues of US\$ 247 billion in FY 2017, up from US\$ 217 billion in the previous year. Annual growth jumped to 10.8%, much higher than the previous year's 1.0% growth. More than 70% of the companies reported growth in their luxury sales, with nearly half of these recording double-digit year-on-year growth. Italy was once again the leading luxury goods country in terms of number of companies, while France was the best-performing country in terms of sales growth.

The Global Powers of Luxury Goods 2019 report identifies also 5 industry trends:

- **The emergence of a new luxury segment - the HENRYs**

A new consumer class is rising nowadays and is going to become increasingly relevant in the future: the HENRYs (High-Earners-Not-Rich-Yet). Aged on average 43, with an income of more than US\$ 100,000 and investable assets of less than US\$ 1 million, they are digital savvy, love online shopping and are big spenders. With HENRYs likely to become some of the wealthiest members of society, the potential benefits of engaging this new customer segment are considerable. Since they are heavily influenced by modern technology and use of social media in their buying decisions, luxury brands have started to use social media platforms to engage customers.

- **Luxury brands usage of social media as a part of their marketing strategy**

To stimulate interest among Millennials and Gen Z, luxury brands are increasingly using social media to engage with young consumers, while keeping their brand value intact by emphasizing products' aspirational characteristics rather than their accessibility. Finally, many luxury brands are also developing relationships with influencers and niche bloggers, who advocate the brand within social communities.

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<sup>5</sup> Deloitte (2019). Global Powers of Luxury Goods 2019, Bridging the gap between the old and the new.

- **Legacy luxury brands re-examine the value of brand heritage and history**

To appeal to the growing Millennial population, high-end companies are abandoning previous long-held beliefs that exclusivity and high prices were essential brand characteristics. Some brands are replacing reliance on heritage with radical redesigns, including brand contamination with streetwear firms.

- **From omnichannel luxury to omnipersonal luxury**

To appeal to tech savvy young generation, which looks for individualized brand relationship, brands are focusing their business around consumer demands, through omnipersonal services. Luxury brands are responding to the growing need towards personalization by providing individualized consumer products.

- **Building relationships based on data**

Luxury brands are redesigning customer engagement techniques by using data analytics tools. Big data help luxury brands to provide personalized and superior customer service through consumer segmentation, behaviour and sentiment analysis, and predictive analytics. Several luxury brands have already started to take advantage of AI-powered technologies, such as machine learning and analytics, to offer more personalized customer services.

## **Psychological mechanisms underlying luxury purchase**

“Luxury brands offer more than mere objects: they provide reference of good taste. [...] Luxury items provide extra pleasure and flatter all senses at once”<sup>6</sup>. Literature defines luxury goods as goods for which the simple use or display brings esteem on the owner, apart from any functional utility<sup>7</sup>. Luxury products enable consumers to satisfy psychological and functional needs, and these psychological benefits distinguish them from non-luxury products. Luxury brands compete on the ability to evoke exclusivity, a well-known brand identity, brand awareness and perceived

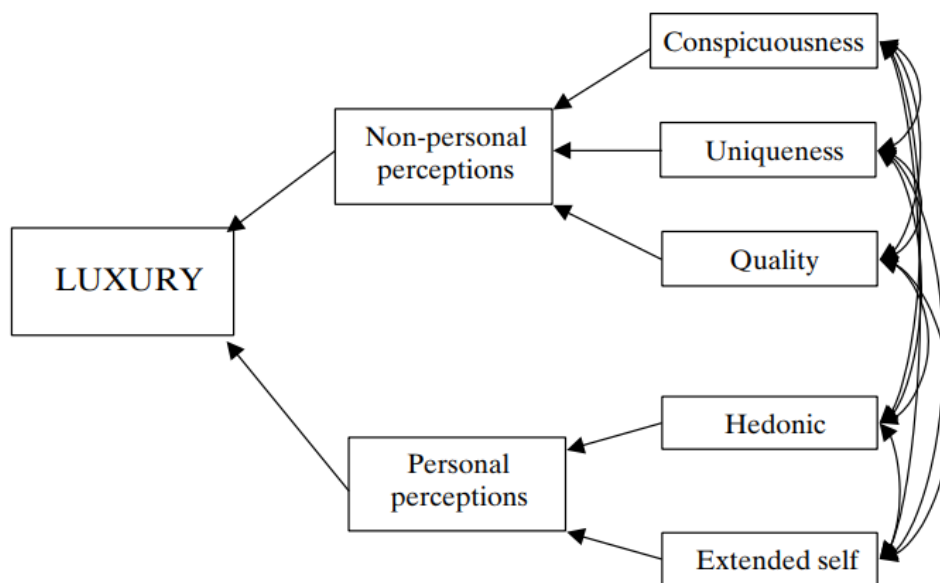
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<sup>6</sup> Kapferer, J. N. (1997). Managing luxury brands. *Journal of brand management*, 4(4), 251-259.

<sup>7</sup> Vigneron, F., & Johnson, L. W. (2004). Measuring perceptions of brand luxury. *Journal of brand management*, 11(6), 484-506.



quality<sup>8</sup>. Vigneron and Johnson (1999)<sup>9</sup> propose a conceptual framework of luxury-seeking consumer behaviour, to explain consumers' decision-making process in the context of luxury brands. The framework includes personal aspects, such as hedonist and perfectionist motives, as well as interpersonal aspects, such as snobbery, conspicuousness and bandwagon motives, the latter inspired by the work of Mason (1992)<sup>10</sup>. In this view, luxury consumption involves purchasing a product that represents value to both the individual and vis à vis significant others. Vigneron and Johnson (1999) suggest that the luxury-seeking consumer's decision-making process is explained by five factors, three reflecting non-personal-oriented perceptions, namely perceived conspicuousness, perceived uniqueness and perceived quality, and two personal-oriented perceptions, namely perceived extended self and perceived hedonism, as shown in figure below.



- **Perceived conspicuousness**

Consumers consider reference group influences when publicly consuming luxury products. The consumption of luxury brands may matter to individuals in search of social

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<sup>8</sup> Phau, I., & Prendergast, G. (2000). Consuming luxury brands: the relevance of the 'rarity principle'. *Journal of Brand Management*, 8(2), 122-138.

<sup>9</sup> Vigneron, F., & Johnson, L. W. (1999). A review and a conceptual framework of prestige-seeking consumer behavior. *Academy of marketing science review*, 1(1), 1-15.

<sup>10</sup> Mason, R. (1992). Modelling the demand for status goods. *ACR Special Volumes*.

representation and position. This means that the social status associated with a brand is an important factor in conspicuous consumption. Furthermore, consumers who perceive price as a synonym for quality often perceive high price as an indicator of luxury <sup>11</sup>.

- **Perceived uniqueness**

Scarcity or limited supply of products enhances consumers' preferences for a brand <sup>12</sup>. Individuals express a need for uniqueness when they search for something that is difficult to obtain. Uniqueness is sought to enhance one's self-image and social image by breaking the rules or avoiding similar consumption. Perceptions of exclusivity and rarity enhance the desire for a brand, and this desirability is increased when the brand is also perceived as expensive <sup>13</sup>. A luxury brand that is difficult to find because of its uniqueness, such as a limited edition, and which is expensive compared to normal standards, is perceived as even more valuable.

- **Perceived quality**

It is expected that luxury brands offer superior product qualities compared with non-luxury brands. Perfectionist consumers may perceive that a luxury brand has a superior value because they may assume that it will have a greater brand quality and superior characteristics compared with a non-luxury brand. These characteristics include, but are not restricted to technology, engineering, design, sophistication and craftsmanship. In addition, high prices may make luxury products more desirable as consumers perceive higher prices as an indication of greater quality <sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Lichtenstein, D. R., Ridgway, N. M., & Netemeyer, R. G. (1993). Price perceptions and consumer shopping behavior: a field study. *Journal of marketing research*, 30(2), 234-245.

<sup>12</sup> Lynn, M. (1991). Scarcity effects on value: A quantitative review of the commodity theory literature. *Psychology & Marketing*, 8(1), 43-57.

<sup>13</sup> Groth, J. C., & McDaniel, S. W. (1993). The exclusive value principle: the basis for prestige pricing. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 10(1), 10-16.

<sup>14</sup> Rao, A. R., & Monroe, K. B. (1989). The effect of price, brand name, and store name on buyers' perceptions of product quality: An integrative review. *Journal of marketing Research*, 26(3), 351-357.

- **Perceived extended self**

Consumers may try to embed the symbolic meaning of luxury brands into their own identity<sup>15</sup>. The construction of one's self appears to be determinant in luxury consumption. The concept of 'extended self'<sup>16</sup> suggests that people consider their possessions as part of identity. Thus, 'luxury imitators' may use the perceived extended-self dimension conveyed by luxury brands to enhance their self-concept<sup>17</sup>. Consumers who are highly concerned with social acceptance and conformity with reference groups may value possessions that are more publicly visible and expensive.

- **Perceived hedonism**

Luxury-seekers are considered hedonic consumers when they are looking for personal rewards and fulfilment acquired through the purchase and consumption of products evaluated for their subjective emotional benefits and intrinsically pleasing properties, rather than functional benefits<sup>18</sup>. Consumers who rely on their own personal opinion, and who are not susceptible to interpersonal influence when considering luxury brands, expect sensory gratification and sensory pleasure from the consumption.

Luxury products enable consumers to satisfy psychological needs, such as social acceptance, reputation and prestige, self-actualization and self-fulfilment. However, consumers may be reluctant to purchase luxuries because luxuries are less easily justified, especially in the presence of a less wasteful alternative<sup>19</sup>. Typically, luxury products tend to evoke conflict in consumers, who are motivated to enjoy themselves but at the same time try to justify the indulgent purchase.

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<sup>15</sup> Holt, D. B. (1995). How consumers consume: A typology of consumption practices. *Journal of consumer research*, 22(1), 1-16.

<sup>16</sup> Belk, R. W. (1988). Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of consumer research*, 15(2), 139-168.

<sup>17</sup> Dittmar, H. (1994). Material possessions as stereotypes: Material images of different socio-economic groups. *Journal of Economic psychology*, 15(4), 561-585.

<sup>18</sup> Sheth, J. N., Newman, B. I., & Gross, B. L. (1991). Why we buy what we buy: A theory of consumption values. *Journal of business research*, 22(2), 159-170.

<sup>19</sup> Alba, J. W., & Williams, E. F. (2013). Pleasure principles: A review of research on hedonic consumption. *Journal of consumer psychology*, 23(1), 2-18.

## 1.2.2 Food

Food plays a central role in the life of consumers. It is the source of nutrition and hedonic experiences, it serves a social and cultural function, and has considerable economic significance since a major proportion of the household budget is allocated to purchasing food<sup>20</sup>. While food consumption contains an element of necessity not possessed by other purchasing realms (e.g., not everybody buys expensive cars, but everybody must eat), food choices cannot be adequately understood as purely functional. In this paragraph, we provide an overview of the food market and identify the psychological mechanisms associated with the indulgent consumption of food.

### Figures and trends

In 2018, the food market realized revenues of US\$ 3.6 trillion worldwide, with an increase of 5.6% compared to 2017<sup>21</sup>. Spending on restaurants and hotels is expected to grow faster than spending for food and beverages for at-home consumption, underlining the growing importance of food services.

In the Food Report 2019, consumer insights and key market trends, such as grocerants and food ecommerce, are discussed:

- **Supermarkets forage into away-from-home food**

The grocerant trend denotes the diversification of supermarkets into food services, by introducing ready-to-eat and take-out meals, such as fresh-cut salad, and offering dining areas for on premise consumption. The trend is driven by consumers' increasing preference for fresh over packaged products and by consumers' ever-tightening time budgets. Direct competitors in this marketplace are first and foremost delivery apps which aim to bring regular restaurant's offerings to consumers' homes.

- **Online food retail benefits from a physical presence**

Although physical grocery retail stores are still the dominant sales channels for food, grocery is an emerging category in ecommerce. Grocery retailers are adopting click-and-collect formats that allow consumers to buy their groceries online – saving them the time

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<sup>20</sup> Steenkamp, J. B. E. (1993). Food consumption behavior. *ACR European Advances*.

<sup>21</sup> Statista (2019). Food Report 2019.

– while at the same time not adding to logistical costs at the retailer’s end. Retailers are experimenting with new formats that combine channels to open up online shopping’s final frontier.

- **Consumers long for health and sustainability**

Consumers are increasingly interested in food. Food is a popular topic in online conversations where consumers engage with food content by talking about it, sharing or liking it. The online dialogue is increasingly driven by bloggers, vloggers and similar influencers. Among product features consumers care about, health and sustainability rank high.

Consumers’ increasing awareness of healthy and sustainable food results in a preference for organic food (food that has been produced by farmers aiming at making agriculture as sustainable as possible by using as little synthetic fertilizers and pesticides in the production process as possible) and a willingness to pay a premium price for sustainability. Worldwide organic food sales have almost tripled between 2005 and 2017<sup>22</sup>. However, consumers often do not translate positive attitudes and intentions concerning healthy eating into action<sup>23</sup>, which is reflected in the increasing prevalence of overeating and obesity. More than one in two adults and nearly one in six children are overweight or obese and obesity rates are projected to increase further by 2030<sup>24</sup>. The availability and affordability of tempting but unhealthy food require consumers to exert self-control every day.

## **Psychological mechanisms underlying food consumption**

Consumer food choice behaviour is complex and influenced by a multitude of interacting variables, such as personal factors, social factors and the context of food choice. Literature on food choice behaviour (Falk et al., 1996; Furst et al., 1996) propose a conceptual model of food choice process. The model seeks to explain habitual and unconscious food practices. Events and experiences over the life course are viewed as shaping current food choices through the

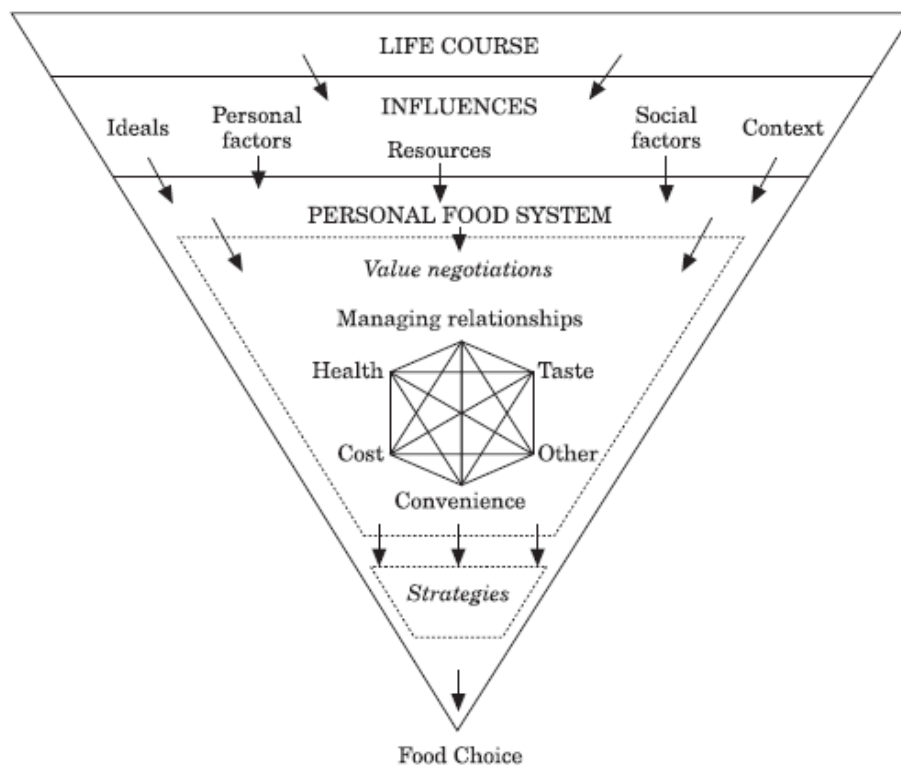
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<sup>22</sup> Statista (2019). Food Report 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Conner, M., & Armitage, C. J. (2006). Social psychological models of food choice. *Frontiers in nutritional science*, 3, 41.

<sup>24</sup> OECD (2017). Obesity Update 2017.

influences of ideals, personal factors, resources, social relationships, and food contexts <sup>25</sup>, as shown in figure below.



Factors involved in food choice are grouped into three major components: (1) life course, (2) influences and (3) personal food system. The relationship of these components to one another generates the process or pathway leading to the point of food choice. The life course includes the personal roles and the social, cultural and physical environments to which a person has been and is exposed. A person’s life course generates a set of influences: ideals, personal factors, resources, social factors and food context. These influences inform and shape people’s personal food systems, including conscious value negotiations and unconscious strategies that may occur in a food-related choice situation.

In the model proposed by Mela (2001), food choices are influenced by many factors, most importantly availability. However, the desire to consume one item over another may be viewed as

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<sup>25</sup> Furst, T., Connors, M., Bisogni, C. A., Sobal, J., & Falk, L. W. (1996). Food choice: a conceptual model of the process. *Appetite*, 26(3), 247-266.

an outcome of sensory hedonic likes, situation (perceived appropriateness and cues), and current internal state <sup>26</sup>:

- **Current internal state** refers to the immediate momentary psychological (mood) or physiological state (hunger or thirst). Consumers' immediate psycho-physiological state may prompt a desire for specific foods, such as the desire for coffee or chocolate.
- **Liking** refers to general pleasure derived from a food or foods. Throughout life, an individual's socioeconomic and cultural environment will largely determine the opportunities and contexts for particular sensory experiences. These determine what foods will be experienced and the frequency and conditions in which they will be experienced.
- **Perceived appropriateness** refers to the usual use-context (where, when, and with whom) in which a food is eaten. The matching of foods and use-contexts may initially be determined by social and individual conventions but becomes integrated into a system of cues that may motivate desires for eating specific foods under specific circumstances.

In addition, Mela (2001) suggests that food choice is not just about taste preferences, distinguishing between the desire for or motivation to eat certain foods and the actual pleasure derived from eating them.

Different streams of research on food consumption have proposed contrasting conceptualizations of eating pleasure. Research aiming to understand overeating and self-regulation failures has taken a negative view of eating pleasure, equating it with the satisfaction of visceral impulses triggered by the environment or by negative emotions (Loewenstein, 1996). Conversely, research on the social and cultural dimensions of eating has taken a more positive view of eating pleasure by focusing on the "Epicurean" aesthetic facets of eating (Johnston & Baumann, 2007).

In the field of behavioural decision-making, Loewenstein (1996) introduced the notion of "visceral factors" to understand how pleasure could lead to self-regulation failures such as overeating. These visceral factors encompass physiological needs (such as hunger) but also psychological drives (such as emotions and cravings). Visceral factors are manifested by a hedonic sensation (e.g. the aversive response to hunger or cravings), which increases desires and

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<sup>26</sup> Mela, D. J. (2001). Determinants of food choice: relationships with obesity and weight control. *Obesity research*, 9(11), 249-255.

is followed by a short-lived sensation of pleasure when the visceral drive is satisfied<sup>27</sup>. More specifically, in the domain of food, van Strien et al. (1986) propose two broad categories of visceral factors that can trigger eating for pleasure: external food sensory cues and internal emotions<sup>28</sup>. The mere sight, smell or taste of a pleasant food can trigger visceral urges to eat (and the pleasure that accompanies the satisfaction of such urges) even in the absence of hunger. Like external factors, emotions can also trigger visceral eating urges, leading to the anticipation of pleasure and the reward that goes with satisfying such urges. Other theories suggest that consumers, especially restrained eaters, actively seek pleasurable food as a way of regulating negative emotions<sup>29</sup>. For example, people eat more indulgent food when watching a sad movie. Other studies propose that threatening people's identity and ego increases consumption of indulgent food<sup>30</sup>. For example, people eat more treats after being socially rejected, or negatively stereotyped.

In contrast to visceral pleasure, Epicurean eating pleasure is defined as “the enduring pleasure derived from the aesthetic appreciation of the sensory and symbolic value of the food”<sup>31</sup>. This kind of pleasure is unrelated to impulses, is largely within consumers' volition, and can be pursued as an end in itself. The Epicurean view holds that eating pleasure involves the appreciation of fine food, the sensory experience of “gourmet” cuisine, and the symbolic associations with the food. The sensory experience of fine dining induces consumers to give into indulgent behaviours.

In the domain of eating behaviour, consumers often encounter scenarios in which their healthy eating goals are at odds with the desire to indulge.

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<sup>27</sup> Loewenstein, G. (1996). Out of control: Visceral influences on behavior. *Organizational behavior and human decision processes*, 65(3), 272-292.

<sup>28</sup> Van Strien, T., Frijters, J. E., Bergers, G. P., & Defares, P. B. (1986). The Dutch Eating Behavior Questionnaire (DEBQ) for assessment of restrained, emotional, and external eating behavior. *International journal of eating disorders*, 5(2), 295-315.

<sup>29</sup> Macht, M. (2008). How emotions affect eating: a five-way model. *Appetite*, 50(1), 1-11.

<sup>30</sup> Lambird, K. H., & Mann, T. (2006). When do ego threats lead to self-regulation failure? Negative consequences of defensive high self-esteem. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32(9), 1177-1187.

<sup>31</sup> Cornil, Y., & Chandon, P. (2016). Pleasure as an ally of healthy eating? Contrasting visceral and Epicurean eating pleasure and their association with portion size preferences and wellbeing. *Appetite*, 104, 52-59.



## 1.3 Indulging in experiences

Consumers are more interested in hedonic experiences, such as vacations or dine out, and events, such as concerts or social events. Consumers increasingly prefer to spend money on an experience or an event over buying something desirable. By definition <sup>32</sup>, *experiential purchases* are those made with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience: an event that one lives through. *Material purchases* are those made with the primary intention of acquiring a material good: a tangible object that is kept in one's possession. In this paragraph, we discuss the trends of the experience market and the psychological mechanisms underlying the experiential purchase.

### Figures and trends

Consumers are increasingly choosing to spend money on enriching experiences over products. Spending on experiences such as travel, leisure and foodservice is expected to rise to US\$ 8.0 trillion by 2030 <sup>33</sup>. The experience trend is arising across sectors, from the value placed on the dine-in experience in consumer foodservice, and the importance of the shopping experience in the retail sector, through to the priority consumers give to experiences such as holidays, over purchasing the latest smartphone. Retailers and restaurateurs are tackling this trend by creating intimate and unique experiences with consumers, providing a flowing shopping environment whether online or in-store and personalising their offering.

To meet this trend, consumer-facing businesses are focusing on <sup>34</sup>:

- **A sense of community:** Experiences can be exclusive yet inclusive. A prime example of this is an easily-accessed community, which offers exclusive experiences only to its most loyal members.
- **Authenticity:** Consumers increasingly want authentic, natural and local experiences.

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<sup>32</sup> Van Boven, L., & Gilovich, T. (2003). To do or to have? That is the question. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 1193-1202.

<sup>33</sup> Bremner C. & Boumphrey S. (2017). How Should Business Respond to the Rising Demand for Experiential Consumption? *Euromonitor International*.

<sup>34</sup> Bremner C. & Boumphrey S. (2017). How Should Business Respond to the Rising Demand for Experiential Consumption? *Euromonitor International*.

- **Technology:** Technology will increasingly play a role in consumers' interactions with brands, whether in the path to purchase, during the experience or afterwards when they share their stories and images online with friends and family. The experience does not even need to be real for consumers to enjoy and engage with it.
- **Customisation:** A unique one to one brand-consumer relationship offers deeper engagement, higher return on investments and loyalty.
- **Brand love:** Many brands are becoming creative about how they can engage before, during and after the purchase to develop consumer brand love by providing value-added engagement and experiences.

### **Psychological mechanisms underlying experiential purchase**

The nature of the purchase (e.g. product or experience) is a determinant of long-term enjoyment, in terms of whether people derive more happiness from purchasing possessions or experiences. Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) suggest that experiences elicit greater happiness, despite the fact that possessions remain in consumers' lives while experiences are temporary<sup>35</sup>. Over time, positive past experiences may become even more positive. The recollection of experiential purchases makes people happier than remembering material purchases, as people forget unpleasant facts, affectionately remember the past experience and prove to be willing to re-purchase or re-experience<sup>36</sup>. Material purchases cause regrets of action, which are more likely to be experienced in the short-term, while experiential purchases prompt regrets of inactions, which are more likely to be experienced in the long-term. Experiences are also more likely to be social and to be discussed with others, both of which can increase enjoyment of positive experiences<sup>37</sup>. Moreover, experiential purchases are less subject to comparison that could diminish enjoyment of them than are material purchases.

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<sup>35</sup> Van Boven, L., & Gilovich, T. (2003). To do or to have? That is the question. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 1193-1202.

<sup>36</sup> Klaaren, J. K., Hodges, S. D., & Wilson, T. D. (1994). The role of affective expectations in subjective experience and decision-making. *Social Cognition*, 12, 77-101.

<sup>37</sup> Raghunathan, R., & Corfman, K. (2006). Is happiness shared doubled and sadness shared halved? Social influences on enjoyment of hedonic experiences. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 43, 386-394.

Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) suggest at least three reasons why experiential purchases make people happier than material purchases<sup>38</sup>:

- **Experiences are more open to positive reinterpretation**

Experiences are more open than material possessions to increasingly favourable interpretations and evaluations with the passage of time. People adapt to material advances, requiring continued increases to achieve the same level of satisfaction. Previous experiences, in contrast, exist only as mental representations. These mental representations can be sharpened, levelled, embellished, and reconfigured to create a much rosier retrospective view than the event enjoyed originally.

- **Experiences are more central to one's identity**

A person's life is the sum of his or her experiences. The accumulation of rich experiences thus creates a richer life. The same cannot be said of material possessions. As important and gratifying as they can be, they remain "out there," separate from the individual who attained them. Experiences, on the contrary, can provide greater hedonic value because they contribute much more to the construction of the self than material possessions.

- **Experiences have greater "social value"**

Experiences are more pleasurable to talk about and they more effectively foster successful social relationships, which are closely associated with happiness. Furthermore, because experiences are more likely to have a typical narrative structure with a beginning, middle, and end, both listeners and storytellers may enjoy conversing about experiences more than about possessions.

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<sup>38</sup> Van Boven, L., & Gilovich, T. (2003). To do or to have? That is the question. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 1193-1202.

## Chapter 2

### 2.1 Choosing vices over virtues: a definition of indulgence

“Many purchase and consumption decisions involve an intrapersonal struggle between consumers’ righteous, prudent side and their indulgent, pleasure-seeking side”<sup>39</sup>. While purchasing and consuming utilitarian necessities or virtues is considered farsighted and responsible, yielding to hedonic temptations or vices is viewed as impulsive and wasteful.

Consumers often make trade-offs between spending money on necessities or on goods representing indulgences or nonessential luxuries<sup>40</sup>. Necessities can be defined as items that cannot be done without; conversely, indulgence represents yielding to the wishes or desires of oneself, as because of a weak will or an amiable nature. Indulgence is closely related to luxury and hedonics, involving spending on items, typically hedonic rather than utilitarian, perceived as luxuries relative to one’s means. In trade-offs between necessities (or virtues) and luxuries (or vices), the latter are at an inherent disadvantage because, by definition, necessities are at a higher status in the hierarchy of need. According to Maslow’s theory of human motivation (1943)<sup>41</sup>, there are 5 sets of goals, or basic needs, which are related to each other and are arranged in a hierarchy of “prepotency”. When the most “prepotent” goal is realized, the next higher need emerges. Thus, individuals must satisfy the lowest needs, namely physiological needs, before progressing on to meet higher level needs, namely safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization. Consequently, when considering choices between indulgences and necessities, consumers usually select the necessity. However, although consumers may often find it less painful and easier to justify spending money on a necessity, they may feel that they are neglecting the nonessential yet important benefits of indulgence that go beyond the indispensable minimum.

A product-based approach<sup>42</sup> suggest that, although the consumption of many goods involves both hedonic and utilitarian aspects to varying degrees, consumers characterise some products as

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<sup>39</sup> Keinan, A., & Kivetz, R. (2008). Remediating Hyperopia: The effects of self-control regret on consumer behavior, *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 45 (6), pag. 676-689.

<sup>40</sup> Kivetz, R., & Simonson, I. (2002). Self-control for the righteous: Toward a theory of precommitment to indulgence. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29(2), 199-217.

<sup>41</sup> Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological review*, 50(4), 370.

<sup>42</sup> Wertenbroch, K. (1998). Consumption self-control by rationing quantities of virtue and vice. *Marketing Science*, 17, 317–337.

primarily hedonic and others as primarily utilitarian. Hedonic goods (or vices) provide an affective and sensory experience of aesthetic or sensual pleasure, fantasy, and fun <sup>43</sup>. Utilitarian goods (or virtues) are instrumental and goal oriented, and accomplishes a functional or practical task <sup>44</sup>. A goal-based perspective <sup>45</sup> focuses on whether the consumer is pursuing utilitarian or hedonic objectives. Hedonic consumption is seen as person-driven, with products serving merely as a means to a pleasurable end. However, many consumption decisions are driven by some combination of utilitarian and hedonic motives. A single product, such as a smartphone or a laptop, can simultaneously help its user pursue dual utilitarian and hedonic goals. Finally, a motivational perspective raises the question of what it means to achieve a hedonic objective. Consider some particularly risky leisure pursuits, such as kayaking, skydiving, or gambling. Aside from pleasure and thrill-seeking, consumption of these activities is motivated by a need for group membership or a sense of community, self-expression, and personal growth and achievement. Even relatively mundane consumption behaviors can be motivated by a desire for adventure, social interaction, and mood enhancement <sup>46</sup>. In such consumption experiences, “hedonic goods” are purchased for the non-hedonic objectives of status-seeking or identity-signaling. Despite the diverse approaches, Alba and Williams (2013) suggest an intuitively appealing definition of hedonic temptations. “A vital component of hedonic consumption is whether the experience of consuming the product or event is pleasurable. Regardless of whether the consumption serves a practical purpose or is pursued on its own merits, whether it happens volitionally or by happenstance, and whether it is compared to other forms of consumption or is examined on its own, a universal and essential feature of hedonic consumption is that it is (and is expected to be) pleasurable.” <sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> Hirschman, E. C., & Holbrook, M. B. (1982). Hedonic consumption: emerging concepts, methods and propositions. *Journal of marketing*, 46(3), 92-101.

<sup>44</sup> Strahilevitz, M., & Myers, J. G. (1998). Donations to charity as purchase incentives: How well they work may depend on what you are trying to sell. *Journal of consumer research*, 24(4), 434-446.

<sup>45</sup> Batra, R., & Ahtola, O. T. (1991). Measuring the hedonic and utilitarian sources of consumer attitudes. *Marketing Letters*, 2, 159–170.

<sup>46</sup> Arnold, M. J., & Reynolds, K. E. (2003). Hedonic shopping motivations. *Journal of Retailing*, 79, 77–95.

<sup>47</sup> Alba, J. W., & Williams, E. F. (2013). Pleasure principles: A review of research on hedonic consumption. *Journal of consumer psychology*, 23(1), 2-18.

Bazerman et al. (1998)<sup>48</sup> suggest that we can distinguish between affective preferences (“wants”) and cognitive or reasoned preferences (“shoulds”) that underlie consumer choice. The want versus should distinction is compatible with the distinction between hedonic and utilitarian goods: items that are high on hedonic value are likely to be subject to want preferences, and items that are high on utilitarian value are likely to be subject to should preferences. Consumers experience an interpersonal conflict when facing the choice of buying the product they want versus buying the product they think they should purchase for health or budgetary reasons. Much consumer behaviour is based on visceral responses that go against long-term self-interest. Thus, the “want self” can be seen as the visceral reaction, while the “should self” as the more reasoned response.

## 2.2 The self-control dilemma

Everyday life is full of temptations that challenge our capacity for self-control or willpower. We are often good at resisting temptation. Sometimes, however, self-control loses the upper hand and we give into temptations. Such situations are typically experienced as a conflict between two antagonistic forces that exert incompatible influences: one force calls on us to do what we believe is reasonable, whereas the other urges us to do what pleasure dictates<sup>49</sup>. Hur et al. (2005)<sup>50</sup> frame self-control as a struggle between two antagonistic forces: an impelling force (i.e., desire that impels an individual to act) and a restraining force (i.e., a sense of conflict and willpower that necessitate restraint). That is, people fail in self-control due to either of the two distinct forces: (1) when their desire becomes too strong to resist, or (2) when they experience insufficient feelings of conflict toward temptation indulgence and fail to realize a need for self-control.

The *self-control dilemma* represents the internal conflict between the pursuit of different behavioural plans, one of which is of greater long-term importance than the other<sup>51</sup>. To accomplish the higher priority goals, consumers need to resist the momentarily appealing yet

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<sup>48</sup> Bazerman, M. H., Tenbrunsel, A. E., & Wade-Benzoni, K. (1998). Negotiating with yourself and losing: Making decisions with competing internal preferences. *Academy of Management Review*, 23(2), 225-241.

<sup>49</sup> Hofmann, W., Friese, M., & Strack, F. (2009). Impulse and self-control from a dual-systems perspective. *Perspectives on psychological science*, 4(2), 162-176.

<sup>50</sup> Hur, J. D., Koo, M., & Hofmann, W. (2015). When temptations come alive: How anthropomorphism undermines self-control. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 42(2), 340-358.

<sup>51</sup> Loewenstein, G. (1996). Out of control: Visceral influences on behavior. *Organizational behavior and human decision processes*, 65(3), 272-292.

lower priority enticements with which the more important goals are in conflict. Such interfering temptations are triggered by situational cues that promise immediate gratification at the cost of significant long-term outcomes<sup>52</sup>. An appropriate response to temptations involves the exercise of self-control. The term “self-control” refers to the self’s capacity to alter its own states and responses<sup>53</sup>. Thus, self-control overrides one incipient pattern of response and replaces it with another. These responses may include thoughts, changing emotions, and regulating impulses (or resisting temptations). Impulses refer to incipient behavioural responses that result from the encounter between a motivation and an activating stimulus. Impulsive behaviour is understood as behaviour that is not consciously planned, but results from a spontaneous impulse. Impulsive purchasing involves getting a sudden urge to buy something, without advance intention or plan, and then acting on that impulse without considering whether the purchase is consistent with long-term goals. Consumers do not resist these impulses when self-control fails.

Self-control failure may be a cause of impulsive purchasing: conflicting goals undermine control, such as when the goal of feeling satisfied immediately (the spontaneous impulse) conflicts with the goal of saving money (the higher priority long-term goal). Baumeister (2002) identifies at least three causes of self-control failures:

- **Standards**

Standards refer to one’s goals, ideals, and norms. Consumers who know what they want are less likely to indulge in impulse buying. Conversely, uncertain or conflicting goals undermine the basis for self-control and make consumers more susceptible. In particular, we may hold goals that are in conflict with regard to a particular indulgence. We may want to save money, but we would also like to own something that will make us happy. Naturally, we cannot be sure whether a particular purchase will confer a great deal of happiness on us, and so it is difficult to resolve the conflict between the two goals. Normally consumers control their behavior so as to pursue high standards and desirable long-term goals. They try to eat healthy foods, they avoid procrastination, they delay gratification when delay will produce better rewards, and they restrain their impulses. However, sometimes these restraints break down, so that they become more likely to eat unhealthy foods, procrastinate, seek immediate gratification, and give into temptations.

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<sup>52</sup> Fishbach, A., Friedman, R. S., & Kruglanski, A. W. (2003). Leading us not into temptation: Momentary allurements elicit overriding goal activation. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 84(2), 296.

<sup>53</sup> Baumeister, R. F. (2002). Yielding to temptation: Self-control failure, impulsive purchasing, and consumer behavior. *Journal of consumer Research*, 28(4), 670-676.

- **Monitoring**

Monitoring means keeping track of the relevant behaviour. When people lose track of their behaviour, self-control breaks down. Consider people on a diet. When dieters have broken their diet, they stop keeping track of their food, and this can contribute to eating binges. In contrast, successful dieters typically keep careful track of the foods they eat and how many calories these contain. In the same way, when people keep careful track of their money and expenditures, impulsive purchases are less likely.

- **The capacity to change**

The capacity to change refers to the capacity to alter the self. In the specific situation of the impulse purchase, the crucial question is whether the consumer can gather up whatever is needed to resist the temptation to buy. The willpower or strength theory suggests that the self employs some kind of strength or energy resource that surpasses the power of the impulse. Exerting self-control seems to deplete crucial resources within the self. These resources are then no longer available to help the person on the subsequent self-control task. This state of reduced capacity for self-control is called “*ego depletion*”. These resources not only show short-term exhaustion and replenishment after rest, but also seem to be able to grow stronger through regular exercise<sup>54</sup>. People in a state of ego depletion are more likely to yield to temptation and buy impulsively. Ego-depleted consumers will be less able to regulate their behavior toward their long-term goals of saving their money, losing weight, or purchasing only products that will be of advantage in the long run. When they are depleted from dieting, breaking habits, or controlling their emotions, they may be likely to engage in impulsive purchases.

The view that indulgent behaviours are caused by impulsive factors undermining our self-control abilities is firmly established within self-regulation literature<sup>55</sup> and society. However, an impulsive breakdown of the self-control system is not the only route to indulgence. Sometimes consumers actively relent their self-control efforts, rather than lose self-control, by relying on

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<sup>54</sup> Muraven, M., Baumeister, R. F., & Tice, D. M. (1999). Longitudinal improvement of self-regulation through practice: Building self-control strength through repeated exercise. *The Journal of social psychology*, 139(4), 446-457.

<sup>55</sup> Baumeister, R. F., & Heatherton, T. F. (1996). Self-regulation failure: An overview. *Psychological inquiry*, 7(1), 1-15.



justifications to permit themselves a forbidden pleasure <sup>56</sup>. Thus, in some cases, hedonic consumption is not the consequence of impulsive factors, but the result of more reasoned processes.

### 2.3 Myopia versus hyperopia

Literature on self-control is premised on the notion that people are short-sighted or “myopic” and easily tempted by hedonic choices that promise immediate pleasure. The tendency to succumb to impulse and seek immediate pleasure, at the expense of long-term interests, is attributed to time-inconsistent preferences, namely people overweight the present relative to the future. Literature on self-control suggests that people not only yield to temptations they had originally planned to resist but also subsequently reverse their preference and regret their myopic behaviour. As Baumeister (2002) states, “self-control represents the capacity to resist temptation, especially those relevant to impulsive purchases and other expenditures that are likely to be regretted later on”. Every day, consumers choose between options with immediate benefits but delayed costs (vices) and options with immediate costs but delayed benefits (virtues). In such everyday self-control dilemmas, minimizing long-term regret calls for choosing indulgence. Yielding to short-sighted indulgences evoke remorse and negative emotions such as regrets, guilt, shame or embarrassment. These negative feelings, in turn, cause a reversal of preferences, that motivates consumers to pursue long-term goals.

Kivetz and Simonson (2002) and Kivetz and Keinan (2006) propose that consumers often suffer from a reverse self-control problem - namely, excessive farsightedness and overcontrol, or “hyperopia”. Hyperopic consumers overemphasize virtue and necessity at the expense of indulgence and luxury. Hyperopia can be defined as the difficulty of deviating from doing the right thing and acting responsibly. Kivetz and Simonson (2002) suggest that consumers who recognize their tendency to avoid temptations and focus on doing “the right thing” precommit to indulgences to ensure that the goal of seeking pleasure is realized. Whereby consumers recognize the self-control problem, if the opportunity occurs, they try to overcome the issue through precommitment to indulgence, in order to avoid spending on necessities and savings <sup>57</sup>. They

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<sup>56</sup> De Witt Huberts, J. C., Evers, C., & De Ridder, D. T. (2012). License to sin: Self-licensing as a mechanism underlying hedonic consumption. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 42(4), 490-496.

<sup>57</sup> Kivetz, R., & Simonson, I. (2002). Self-control for the righteous: Toward a theory of precommitment to indulgence. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29(2), 199-217.

suggest that hyperopic consumers perceive themselves as not having enough indulgence and therefore seek ways to correct this imbalance in their lives, forcing themselves to indulge and spend on items of which they can do without but that enrich the pleasure of life. Myopic and hyperopic self-control problems can coexist, not only across individuals, but also within an individual. One might have problems resisting cigarettes or chocolate, but at the same time could still present a tendency to overcontrol indulgence.

Furthermore, Kivetz and Keinan (2006) propose that, though in the short-term it appears preferable to choose virtue over vice, over time such righteous behavior generates increasing regret. While yielding to temptation (myopia) can certainly be harmful, overcontrol and excessive farsightedness (hyperopia) can also have negative long-term consequences<sup>58</sup>. In particular, with the passage of time, choices of virtues over vices evoke increasing regret. With the passage of time, the hyperopic behaviour causes the consumers a wistful feeling of missing out on the pleasures of life. This means that both myopia and hyperopia can lead to regret: yielding to temptation generates regret in the short run but righteous choices of virtue and necessities lead to a stronger regret in the long run. The intensity and type of regret is connected to time: the passage of time attenuates regret about choosing vice and accentuates regret about choosing virtue because of the decay of indulgence guilt and the intensification of feelings of missing out on the pleasures of life. While guilt is a short-lived emotion, missing out is a contemplative feeling that arises gradually. In other words, in the short-term hyperopia will appear preferable to consumers, but over time it will generate increasing regret.

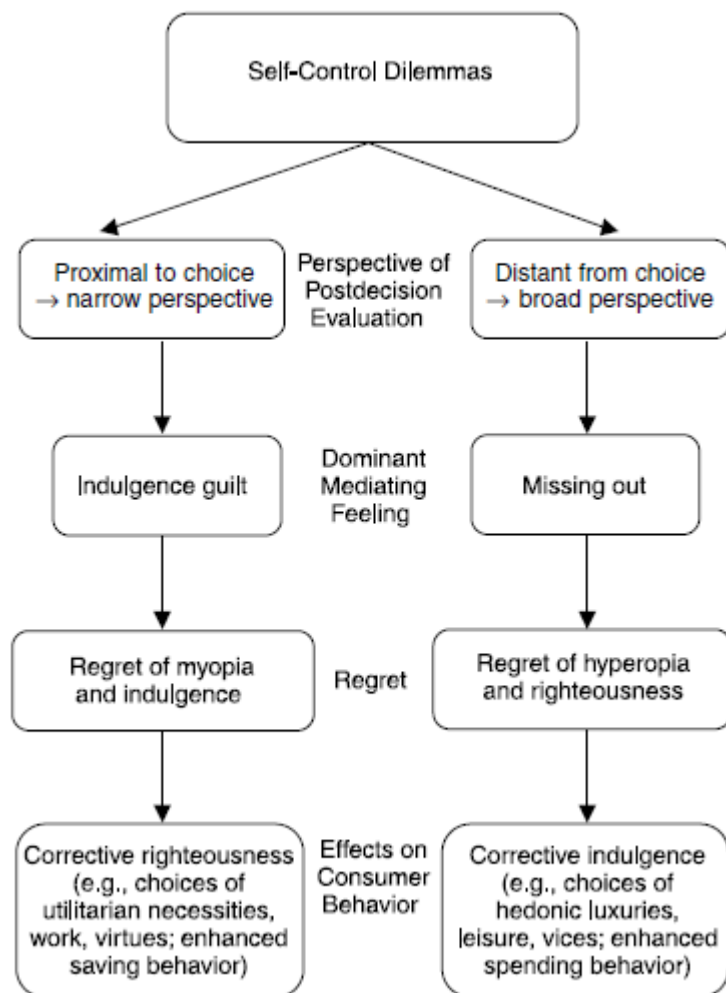
An alternative explanation to the same matter can be given through the concept of errors of commission versus errors of omission. Gilovich and Medvec (1995) state that regret follows a systematic time course: actions (or errors of commission) evoke more regret in the short-term, but inactions (or errors of omission) create more regret in the long-term<sup>59</sup>. In this perspective, choices of indulgence are viewed as against the norm and therefore as “sins” of commission or actions, while righteous choices are perceived as the normal behaviour and therefore as “sins” of omission or inactions.

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<sup>58</sup> Kivetz, R., & Keinan, A. (2006). Repenting hyperopia: An analysis of self-control regrets. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 33(2), 273-282.

<sup>59</sup> Gilovich, T., & Medvec, V. H. (1995). The experience of regret: what, when, and why. *Psychological review*, 102(2), 379.

Keinan and Kivetz (2008), premised on the perspective that vices are regretted in the short run, and virtues are regretted in the long run, suggest that anticipating long-term regret can influence preference and motivate consumers to counteract their righteous behaviours. In other words, they propose that while short-term regret impels consumers to select virtues and purchase necessities, long-term regret drives consumers to choose vices and purchase indulgent products. When evaluated in a long temporal perspective, selecting virtue over vice is more likely to evoke remorse, so anticipating long-term regret will drive consumers to choose vices over virtues, and to spend more on shopping<sup>60</sup>. The conceptual framework proposed by Keinan and Kivetz (2008) is shown in figure below.



<sup>60</sup> Keinan, A., & Kivetz, R. (2008). Remediating hyperopia: The effects of self-control regret on consumer behavior. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 45(6), 676-689.

## 2.4 Emotional consequences of indulging

### 2.4.1 Negative emotions associated with indulgence: guilt and regret

Most of the research conducted on indulgent consumption in the fields of psychology and consumer behaviour has characterised it as something to be avoided. Choosing indulgence over necessities is understood to be likely to evoke guilt or regret.

Guilt refers to an individual's "unpleasant emotional state associated with possible objections to his or her actions, inactions, circumstances, or intentions" (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). Consumer guilt appears to be correlate to impulsive buying (Rook, 1987), overspending (Pirisi, 1995), and compulsive consumption (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). Eating a chocolate cake may be pleasurable and satisfying, however, our satisfaction with a chocolate cake may be lower if we see such indulgent consumption as a "bad thing" and cannot stop thinking about it. Such unpleasant and self-conscious guilt feeling (Baumeister, Stillwell & Heatherton 1994) arises when individuals think they have violated an internal moral, societal or ethical standard (Kugler & Jones 1992). Guilt feelings are associated with regret over the "bad thing done" and are likely to be accompanied by a strong sense of wrongdoing and remorse. Such guilt feelings are elicited from impulsive (Mukhopadhyay & Johar 2007) and compulsive (O'Guinn & Faber 1989) buying and lack of self-control (Kivetz & Keinan 2006). Consumers are more likely to feel guilty about choosing indulgent products, such as hedonic food (desserts or gourmet restaurant dinners) than utilitarian products <sup>61</sup>. In particular, consumers making indulgent choices feel more guilty in the short term than consumers making utilitarian choices <sup>62</sup>. Consumers feeling guilty of having consumed an indulgent product may in the short-term ruminate about such consumption <sup>63</sup>.

Regret theory holds that people compare actual outcomes with what the outcome would have been if another alternative had been chosen <sup>64</sup>. People experience regret when the alternative not selected is better, and they experience rejoicing when the alternative not selected is worse. Regret

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<sup>61</sup> Kivetz, R., & Simonson, I. (2002). Self-control for the righteous: Toward a theory of precommitment to indulgence. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29(2), 199-217.

<sup>62</sup> Kivetz, R., & Keinan, A. (2006). Repenting hyperopia: An analysis of self-control regrets. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 33(2), 273-282.

<sup>63</sup> Lunardo, R., & Saintives, C. (2015). Feeling a Little Guilt but Ruminating a Lot: How Indulgence Impacts Guilt and its Consequences. *Ideas in Marketing: Finding the New and Polishing the Old* (805-813). Springer, Cham.

<sup>64</sup> Loomes, G., & Sugden, R. (1982). Regret theory: An alternative theory of rational choice under uncertainty. *Economic Journal*, 92, 805-824.

can affect consumers at two different times. First, it can impact them after the decision by moving people to roll back the effects of a suboptimal choice or to rejoice over a good decision (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). Second, regret can affect consumers before the decision as they anticipate any regret they may feel after the choice is actually made (Loomes & Sugden, 1982). During the time before the actual decision, regret stems from a comparison between two potential choices, the selected option and the foregone option. In a consumer decision-making context, consumers are motivated to minimize regret before and after planned and impulse purchases (Rook, 1987). Before a planned purchase, consumers minimize anticipated post-purchase regret by planning, searching, and carefully deliberating<sup>65</sup>. After the planned purchase, consumers may experience rejoicing or self-congratulating over a good decision. In the impulsive context, the minimization of regret before purchase is more complex and stems from past “anticipated pleasurable experiences” (Rook, 1987). Thus, the regret to be minimized is that of missed opportunities to live large through immediate gratification. Although the impulse purchase, by definition, has no prior intent (Rook & Fisher, 1995), for some types of impulse purchases, the successive steps that placed the consumer in harm’s way of the impulse purchase may have a hint of intent and wilfulness. Traditionally, research has considered the moment of choice in an impulse-purchase situation as a “sudden, often powerful and persistent urge to buy something immediately with diminished regard for its consequences” (Rook, 1987). The impulse is comprised of anticipated pleasures and immediate gratifications and the suddenness of the purchase precludes thoughtful information search and careful deliberation. At the moment of impulsive decision making, the regret to be minimized is losing the opportunity to experience the pleasures of the purchase and the attendant immediate gratification to indulge in a treat. Thus, by purchasing the hedonic product, consumers minimize that regret by participating fully in immediate pleasures, because they may anticipate, potential negative consequences and regret that may result after the purchase (Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991; Rook, 1987). When consumers act impulsively and deviate from the conventional or the ordinary way of doing things, greater regret is likely to follow. Thus, after making an impulse purchase, when comparing reality (the impulsive purchase) with imagined alternatives (showing restraint), consumers are likely to experience regret resulting from their actions. Regret that sets in after the impulse purchase is minimized by consumers in a variety of ways, such as confessing to their impulsive actions or justifying the impulse (Rook, 1987).

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<sup>65</sup> Spears, N. (2006). Just moseying around and happening upon it versus a master plan: Minimizing regret in impulse versus planned sales promotion purchases. *Psychology & Marketing*, 23, 57–73.

### **2.4.2. A positive approach towards indulgence**

Some researchers have acknowledged positive outcomes arising from indulgence. Indulgent consumption provides people with enjoyment and satisfies physiological needs that the acquisition of necessities may not meet (Xu & Schwarz, 2009). It makes consumers feel good or happy (Ramanathan & Williams, 2007) and serves as a mood-repairing strategy to mitigate negative emotions such as sadness (Atalay & Meloy, 2011). However, the focus of previous research was on short-term positive affective outcomes. With regard to long-term outcomes, the traditional approach has characterised indulgent behaviours as negative: “indulgent acts can have serious negative consequences for individual consumers and for society at large” (Ramanathan & Williams, 2007).

A recent stream of research proposes an alternative approach suggesting that, in the long run, indulging can lead to satisfaction. This approach is premised on the notion that choices of virtues over vices (or indulgences) evoke an anticipatory regret and a feeling of missing out on the pleasures of life (Haws & Poynor, 2008; Kivetz & Keinan, 2006). Long-term perspectives give rise to wistful feelings whose realization grows over time. The desired experiences and memories that are evoked by an assessment of life are more likely to involve pleasure than necessity, a bias that favours feelings of missing out over emotions of indulgence guilt. Thus, wistful feelings of missing out on the pleasures of life are predicted to increase over time, predominating when a righteous choice is evaluated from a long-term temporal perspective. When evaluating distant past decisions, consumers would regret righteous decisions more than supposed short-sighted ones. Kivetz and Keinan (2006) conclude that, in the long run, when feelings of missing out on the pleasures of life are stronger, indulging can lead to less regret and more satisfaction.

## Chapter 3 - Qualitative Research

### 3.1 Objective

The research intends to investigate the potential ambivalent valence attributed by consumers to indulgent behaviours.

Most of the research on indulgence has characterised such behaviours as something to be avoided. However, a recent stream of research has proposed an alternative positive view of indulgence, premised on the notion that choices of virtues over vices evoke an anticipatory regret and a feeling of missing out on the pleasures of life. In the long run, when wistful feelings are stronger, indulging is thought to lead to less regret and more satisfaction (Kivetz and Keinan, 2006).

Building on these findings, our research aims at exploring the ambivalent nature of indulgent behaviours through an exploratory analysis of consumers' personal experiences of indulging. The objective of our research is to explore *whether* and *when* indulgent behaviours may evoke not only negative emotions, such as guilt, regret and frustration, but also positive ones. The study, thus, investigates consumers' experiences of indulging in diverse categories (products versus experiences).

Further, this study aims at identifying the distinctive elements characterising positive (versus negative) indulgent behaviours. In particular, the study intends to understand whether consumers associate unique dimensions to indulgence perceived as positive.

## **3.2 Methodology**

### **3.2.1 Data collection**

To investigate the nature of indulgent behaviours, we collected and examined the content of consumers' narratives describing personal experiences of indulging. We recruited 105 respondents for a paid online survey through Amazon Mechanical Turk. The sample can be characterised as follows: 43 men (41%) and 62 women (59%) from the USA participated in the survey. The average age was 39 years. Undergraduate degrees accounted for 68% of the sample, and high school education for 32%.

Participants were asked to recall a personal indulgent behaviour. In order not to bias the responses, we decided not to provide a definition of indulgence, rather we asked the following introductory question: *“Please narrate a personal experience of indulgence that you can remember. Try to describe in detail the experience and your sensations while indulging”*. Participants were then asked to answer 16 questions, both open-ended and closed-ended, investigating the object of their indulgent behaviour, the drivers of their choice, the emotions perceived before and after indulging, the perceived conflict, if any, while indulging, and their willingness to repeat their choice. We also investigated whether the respondents thought the indulgence was worth it and why. Finally, they answered socio-demographic questions.

We opted for a qualitative analysis, as the objective of the research is primarily explorative, namely, to investigate the positive (versus negative) valence of indulgent behaviours. The choice of open-ended questions was driven by the purpose of gaining insights on consumers' perception of indulgent behaviours without defining the phenomenon a priori.

### **3.2.2 Analysis**

Once the data collection was completed, we coded the consumers' narratives. We identified the following discriminant dimensions through textual analysis:

- Object of the indulgence
- Drivers
- Emotions before and after the indulgence
- Willingness to repeat the indulgent choice
- Worth it



We then conducted a series of cross-analysis on these dimensions in order to identify the distinguishing factors of perceived positive versus negative indulgent behaviours.

### ***1. Object of the indulgence***

In order to investigate whether the different product category in which the indulgence can be classified affects the valence attributed by the consumer to the indulgent behaviour, we coded the consumers' descriptions of the object of their indulgence and identified different domains.

First, we identified two macro-categories: "Product" and "Experience". We then detailed the classification and coded the consumers' narratives as follows:

- "Product"
  - "Food"
  - "Luxury"
  - "Other product"
- "Experience"
  - "Restaurant Dinner"
  - "Vacation"
  - "Other experience"

### ***2. Drivers***

We identified external (or situational) and internal (or psychological) drivers of indulgent behaviours. *External drivers* refer to environmental factors that are not under the consumers' control: a promotion or a discount <sup>66</sup>, exposure to an advertising campaign <sup>67</sup>, the involvement of a peer or partner in the decision-making process <sup>68</sup>, a prior shopping restraint <sup>69</sup>, windfall gains <sup>70</sup>.

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<sup>66</sup> Heilman, C. M., Nakamoto, K., & Rao, A. G. (2002). Pleasant surprises: Consumer response to unexpected in-store coupons. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 39(2), 242-252.

<sup>67</sup> Mukhopadhyay, A., & Johar, G. V. (2007). Tempted or not? The effect of recent purchase history on responses to affective advertising. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 33(4), 445-453.

<sup>68</sup> Lowe, M. L., & Haws, K. L. (2014). (Im) moral support: the social outcomes of parallel self-control decisions. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 41(2), 489-505.

<sup>69</sup> Mukhopadhyay, A., & Johar, G. V. (2009). Indulgence as self-reward for prior shopping restraint: A justification-based mechanism. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 19(3), 334-345.

Conversely, *internal drivers* refer to physiological and psychological factors that drive consumers' purchase and consumption behaviours: visceral states <sup>71</sup>, emotions <sup>72</sup>, the desire for a self-reward or self-gift <sup>73</sup>.

### ***3. Emotions before and after the indulgence***

With the aim of investigating the ambivalent nature of indulgence, we coded consumers' narratives based on described emotional states before and after indulging. Based on this discrimination, we conducted a textual analysis of the narratives focused on emotional states experienced before and after the indulgent behaviour. Respondents narrated they felt both negative and positive emotions, such as excitement, anxiety, indecision, happiness, euphoria, guilt, and regret, resulting in a state of internal conflict before and/or after the indulgence.

### ***4. Willingness to repeat the indulgent choice***

To gain insights on consumers' perception of indulgence, we decided to consider a further variable: the willingness to repeat the experience. In particular, we clustered the respondents into those who would repeat the indulgent choice and those who would not and coded their responses on emotions and thoughts after the indulgence, in order to identify what made the indulgence an experience to repeat.

### ***5. Was indulgence worth it?***

In order to identify the elements that make the indulgence positive, we considered whether the respondents stated the indulgence was worth it and why. We clustered the indulgences into worth it and not worth it, and then coded the responses to identify what made the indulgent experience worthy.

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<sup>70</sup> O'curry, S., & Strahilevitz, M. (2001). Probability and mode of acquisition effects on choices between hedonic and utilitarian options. *Marketing Letters*, 12(1), 37-49.

<sup>71</sup> Loewenstein, G. (1996). Out of control: Visceral influences on behavior. *Organizational behavior and human decision processes*, 65(3), 272-292.

<sup>72</sup> Tice, D. M., Bratslavsky, E., & Baumeister, R. F. (2001). Emotional distress regulation takes precedence over impulse control: If you feel bad, do it!. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 80(1), 53.

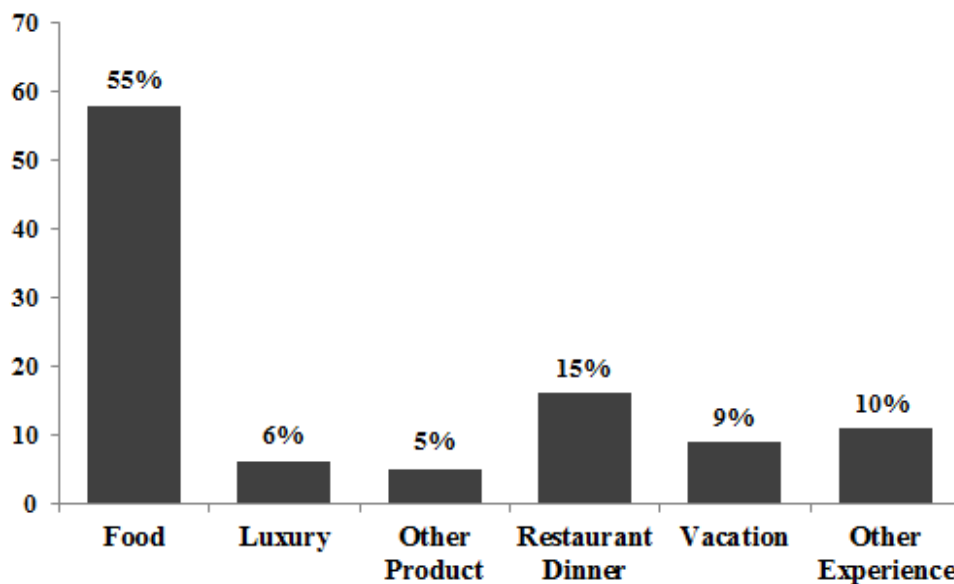
<sup>73</sup> Mick, D. G., & DeMoss, M. (1990). Self-gifts: Phenomenological insights from four contexts. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17(3), 322-332.

We identified the frequency distribution for each dimension, and then conducted a series of cross-analysis to test whether the selected dimensions distinguish the positive versus negative valence attributed by consumers to the indulgent behaviour. Results will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

### 3.3 Results

#### 3.3.1 Indulgence domains

The first objective of this research was to understand whether consumers associate indulgence exclusively with the domains of food and luxury or not. In particular, we aimed at investigating if other unexplored domains are associated with this phenomenon from the consumer's perspective. Results are illustrated in chart below.



We found that two-thirds of interviewed consumers associated indulgence with *products* purchase and consumption. In particular, 55% of respondents narrated a personal experience of indulgence in the domain of food, while only 6% of respondents recalled an indulgence in the context of luxury and premium price products. 5% of respondents associated indulgent consumption with other products, such as tobacco, or alcohol.

Conversely, 34% of interviewed consumers associated indulgence with pleasurable *experiences*. In particular, 15% recalled a restaurant dinner, 10% a vacation, and 9% other experiences, such as binge watching, gambling, resting, or a day at the spa.

Results are coherent with literature on indulgence, as a great number of consumers associated indulgent consumption with the consumption of tasty but unhealthy food. Further, we found that consumers recalled personal experiences of indulgence in domains alternative to food, such as vacations, dinners out, or relax at home.

### **3.3.2 The ambivalent valence of indulgence**

In order to determine the valence that consumers attributed to indulgence, we considered the *emotions felt before and after the indulgent behaviour*. We conducted a textual analysis to distinguish negative emotions, such as guilt, regret, remorse, and anxiety, from positive emotions, such as happiness, satisfaction, and euphoria. We found that positive and negative indulgence resulted characterised by diverse emotional states experienced both before and after the indulgence.

In particular, indulgent behaviours to which consumers attributed a *negative valence* were characterised by a state of high tension between contrasting emotions before the indulgence, such as anxiety and excitement, and by a worsening emotional state after the indulgence, with feelings of guilt and regret. To illustrate:

*“I felt very excited and anxious on the possibilities of what I could buy with the money I had. Right after the indulgence I felt nervous.” (M 50, USA)*

*“I felt excited and conflicted before the indulgence. Afterwards, I hated myself, reflected on how much I spent and swore to never do that again.” (F 28, USA)*

*“I felt excited, and I was definitely hungry. But I also felt like I probably should stop eating. Right after, I felt guilty and dissatisfied.” (M 21, USA)*

*“I was excited but anxious. I didn't want to gain weight but at the same time I knew the dessert was going to be way too tasty to resist.” (F 35, USA)*

Conversely, indulgent behaviours to which consumers attributed a *positive valence*, were characterised by a state of tension between conflicting emotions before the indulgence, and by a state of emotional fulfilment after the indulgence. To illustrate:

*“I was worried that I would have feelings of remorse for spending so much on that expensive bag. Afterwards, I felt satisfied and happy. I didn't feel any remorse.”(F 60, USA)*

*“I felt anxious and I wondered if I was being immature buying a pair of designer shoes. I felt like I deserved it, I felt confident and happy.” (F 33, USA)*

*“I was stressed and worried and I did not think the expense would be worth it. Then, I felt relaxed.” (F 30, USA)*

*“There was a little bit of anxiety beforehand because of the money, but I felt excited about trying something new. I felt relaxed after.” (F 40, USA)*

Interestingly, more than half of respondents seemed to attribute a positive valence to their indulgent behaviours, as shown in chart below.

Positive		Negative	
# Respondents	% Respondents	# Respondents	% Respondents
57	54%	48	46%

### **3.3.3 Positive versus negative indulgence across categories**

We conducted a cross-analysis to understand if the indulgence domain affected the valence that consumers attributed to the indulgence. We considered as variables the *object of the indulgence*, namely product or experience, and the *valence*, namely positive or negative. We found that indulgent behaviours were narrated from a positive view across all contexts. In particular, 48% of respondents who indulged in products and 67% of respondents who indulged in experiences attributed a *positive valence* to their indulgent behaviours. Interestingly, the percentage of positive indulgences resulted higher in the domain of experiences than in the domain of products. This insight is consistent with the view proposed by literature on indulgence that traditionally associates the phenomenon with a negative view, focusing particularly on food consumption. Results are illustrated below.

	Positive		Negative	
	# Respondents	% Respondents	# Respondents	% Respondents
<b>Product</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>52%</b>
<b>Experience</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>33%</b>

Further, we deepened our analysis and considered subcategories. Results for the macro category of *products* revealed that consumers associated indulgence mainly with negative emotions when they recalled indulging in food. On the contrary, when consumers narrated an indulgence in luxury products, they described mainly positive emotions. Our findings confirm the traditional negative view of indulgence in the domain of food. Conversely, when the phenomenon is observed in domains other than food, the prevailing view appears the positive one.

	Positive		Negative	
	# Respondents	% Respondents	# Respondents	% Respondents
<b>Food</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>59%</b>
<b>Luxury</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>83%</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>17%</b>
<b>Other Product</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>20%</b>

Results for the macro category of *experiences* show a generalised perceived positive valence. Consumers indulging in pleasurable experiences, such as dinners out, vacations and gambling, associated their personal experiences with overall positive emotions.

	Positive		Negative	
	# Respondents	% Respondents	# Respondents	% Respondents
<b>Restaurant Dinner</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>69%</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>31%</b>
<b>Vacation</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>56%</b>
<b>Other Experience</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>82%</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>18%</b>

### 3.3.4. Willingness to repeat the indulgence

With the aim of confirming the finding that the indulgence domain affects the valence attributed to the indulgence, we conducted a new cross analysis, crossing the *object of the indulgence*, namely product or experience, with the *willingness to repeat the indulgent choice*. We expected that respondents who indulged in experiences (attributing mainly a positive valence to the indulgence) would repeat their choice. Results show that almost 90% of consumers who indulged in experiences would repeat the indulgence, confirming the perceived positive valence of indulgences in this category.

	Willingness to repeat the Indulgence			
	Yes		No	
	# Respondents	% Respondents	# Respondents	% Respondents
Product	39	57%	30	43%
Experience	32	89%	4	11%

### 3.3.5. Dimensions of positive indulgence

A further objective of our research was to identify the distinguishing factors of perceived positive indulgent behaviours. Interesting insights on positive indulgence emerged from our textual analysis of consumers' narratives. In particular, positive experiences of indulgence resulted characterised by distinguishing dimensions, such as the *uniqueness* of the moment, the *permanence over time* and the role of the *self*.

#### 1. Self

Indulgent experiences were perceived to enhance consumers' self-identity. Thus, the role of the self was crucial when consumers narrated positive experiences of indulgence. To illustrate:

*"I bought myself a pair of designer shoes when I got my annual bonus. I felt like I deserved it and it improved my confidence whenever I wore it." (F 33, USA)*

*"I felt like I was being very independent and free."(F 24, USA)*

*"I bought myself a new great quality bicycle. It made me feel like a boss."(M 26, USA)*

*"I felt like I was doing something good for myself." (M 23, USA)*

## **2. Uniqueness**

When consumers recalled positive indulgences, the products or experiences in which they indulged were narrated as something special and out from the ordinary. The uniqueness might characterised the context of the choice or the choice itself. To illustrate:

*“I’m able to appreciate it more because it doesn’t happen often.” (F 27, USA)*

*“I enjoyed the cake and had no regret. I only do it once a year.” (F 60, USA)*

*“It was a very special experience. I only experience this luxury on vacation.” (M 53, USA)*

*“Ultimately, I was ready to go back to my normal life.” (M 38, USA)*

## **3. Permanence over time**

A further dimension characterising positive indulgences is their permanence over time. Positive indulgences were described as something that did not exhaust in the event, but that lasted over time. Consumers recalled the indulgent experiences with nostalgia after long time, or had desired the object of the indulgence since a long time. To illustrate:

*“I felt the anticipation of finally getting it. I had been planning on buying it for about a month”(F 42, USA)*

*“The item I purchased was timeless and, looking back on it, the years of enjoyment I have received from it made it worth it.” (F 40, USA)*

*“It was a dream bag and it was expensive. I denied myself for a long time because I felt it was not justifiable.”(F48, USA)*

*“It was an experience I will not soon forget.” (M 42, USA)*

*“It was wonderful to treat ourselves and experience it together. It is a memory we both treasure.” (F 50, USA)*



### 3.3.6. What makes the indulgence worth it

Further, we considered whether the respondents said the indulgence was worth it and why. We coded the elements that made the indulgent experience worthy, in order to better characterise perceived positive indulgence. Consumers' responses are summarised below.

	Worth it		Not worth it	
	# Respondents	% Respondents	# Respondents	% Respondents
<b>Product</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>29%</b>
<b>Experience</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0%</b>

When asked why the indulgent experience was worthy, respondents mentioned reasons such as the *uniqueness* or *extraordinariness* of the experience, the *timelessness* of the experience, and the role of others (*sharing*).

#### 1. Extraordinariness

*“The fact that it is not an everyday experience made it worth indulging!” (F 64, USA)*

*“It is not every day that I get to enjoy such a fine meal, and for that reason alone it was worth it.” (M 42, USA)*

*“It was a time to celebrate. I think special occasions call for a bit of indulgence.” (F 32, USA)*

#### 2. Timelessness

*“The item I purchased was timeless.” (F 40, USA)*

*“It will last me years.” (F 33, USA)*

*“I had a great time with my friends. It's an experience I won't forget”. (M 38, USA)*

#### 3. Sharing

*“Sharing the experience with a partner made it worth indulging.” (F 50, USA)*

*“Spending time with family and sharing a nice moment made it worth it.” (M 20, USA)*

## Conclusion

The objective of the research was to investigate the potential ambivalent nature of indulgent behaviours. In particular, the qualitative research was aimed at exploring *whether* and *when* consumers perceived indulgent behaviours as positive (versus negative), through an exploratory analysis of their personal experiences of indulging. More than half of respondents attributed a positive valence to their indulgent behaviours and said would repeat their choice.

A further objective of this research was to understand whether consumers associated indulgence with domains other than food and luxury. Two-thirds of respondents associated indulgence with products purchase and consumption, consistently with literature. However, one-third of respondents associated indulgence with pleasurable experiences. In particular, they recalled indulging in restaurant dinners, vacations, and other experiences, such as binge watching, gambling, resting, or a day at the spa. The results showed that consumers associated indulgence with domains alternative to food and luxury.

An interesting finding was that indulgent behaviours were narrated from a positive view across all contexts. In particular, half of respondents who indulged in products and two-thirds of respondents who indulged in experiences attributed a positive valence to their indulgent behaviours. The high positive valence of indulgence in experiences is consistent with literature that proposed a negative view of indulgence, focusing particularly on products purchase and consumption.

The ultimate objective of the study was to identify the distinctive factors characterising positive (versus negative) indulgent behaviours. Positive experiences of indulgence resulted characterised by diverse distinctive dimensions, such as the uniqueness of the moment, the permanence over time and the role of the self. In particular, indulgent experiences were perceived to enhance consumers' self-identity. The products or experiences in which consumers indulged were seen as something special and unique. Finally, positive indulgences did not exhaust in the event, but lasted over time: consumers recalled the indulgent experiences with nostalgia after long time, or had desired the object of the indulgence since a long time.

# Appendix

## Online Survey

Dear participant,  
Thank you for contributing to our questionnaire.

Please remember that there are not right or wrong answers, and that we are interested just in your opinion.

We ask you to respond to the following questions as completely as possible.

The questionnaire will last less than 10 minutes and your answers will remain anonymous.

Thank you again for your contribution !



Please narrate a personal experience of indulgence that you can remember. Try to describe in detail the experience and your sensations while indulging.



Do you remember how you felt before indulging? Which emotions did you feel? Which thoughts or considerations came to your mind?



Please describe in detail the object of your indulgence: you indulged in a... (product, experience, luxury, consumption, activity).



Describe how you felt right after indulging and today recalling the indulgence.



Would you repeat today the same choice you made?

Yes

No



Would you say it was worth indulging?

Yes

No



Which factors made it worth indulging?



Could you recall conversely an indulgence that was NOT worth it? Why wasn't it worth indulging in that case?



As for the first experience of indulgence you described, can you think about any sense of conflict that you perceived when you indulged? If yes, the perceived conflict was between what? Please articulate.



In your opinion which are the consequences, if there are any, of the indulgence you described? Which would have been instead the consequences of avoiding the indulgence? Please illustrate.



How pleasant was the indulgence you described?

1 not at all	2	3	4	5	6	7 very much
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Did you experience psychological well-being related to the indulgence described?

Yes
No



Did you experience happiness related to the indulgence described?

Yes
No



Did you experience any sense of guilt related to the indulgence described?

Yes

No



Would you say that you experienced any kind of "regret" related to the indulgence described?

Yes

No





To what extent did you experience regret?

1 not at all	2	3	4	5	6	7 very much
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How would you describe the regret you experienced?



**Gender**

Female

Male

Other

**Age**

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?

No school completed

School diploma (not including high school)

High school diploma

Bachelor's degree

Master's degree

**Profession**

Thank you for participating.

Your survey completion code is:

5676749

To receive payment for participating, click "Accept HIT" in the Mechanical Turk window, enter this code, then click "Submit".

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*Department of Business and Management*

*Master's Degree in Marketing*

*Chair of Consumer Behaviour*

**Does indulging always lead to regret? An exploratory study on the  
ambivalent valence of indulgent behaviours**

*Summary*

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# Chapter 1

## 1.1 Indulgent consumption

Everyday life is rich of temptations that challenge our capacity for self-control or willpower. The desire for a product turns into a temptation if it goes against a long-term goal, such as craving a chocolate cake while having the goal of losing weight or desiring to buy a luxury car while having the goal of saving money. Impulses may be difficult to resist as they involve anticipated pleasurable experiences. As such, hedonically tempting products tend to evoke conflict in consumers, appealing to our indulgent inclinations while at the same time threatening our long-term goals. Self-control literature concludes that indulgent behaviour is characterised by time-inconsistent preferences, or a tendency to overweight short-term rewards relative to more distant ones and to ignore the costs of one's actions in the short-term<sup>74</sup>. Consumers are seen as easily tempted by choices that promise immediate pleasure and therefore act indulgently, despite long-term interests to avoid such behaviours. Short-sighted indulgences are ultimately seen as less legitimate compared to more righteous goals to abstain<sup>75</sup>. As a result, indulgences are thought to lead to negative feelings such as regret and guilt. These negative feelings in turn cause a reversal of preferences, consistent with long-term goals, prompting consumers to wish they had behaved more responsibly.

## 1.2 Indulging in products

Hedonic products are inherently characterised by instant pleasure, regardless of whether the consumption serves a practical purpose or is pursued for its own sake. Consumers often find themselves making tempting choices, in which pursuing the immediate pleasure of consumption conflicts with pursuing some higher-order long-term goals, such as saving money or losing weight. Product categories typically associated with indulgent consumption are luxury and food.

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<sup>74</sup> Ramanathan, S., & Williams, P. (2007). Immediate and delayed emotional consequences of indulgence: The moderating influence of personality type on mixed emotions. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 34(2), 212-223.

<sup>75</sup> Hoch, S. J., & Loewenstein, G. F. (1991). Time-inconsistent preferences and consumer self-control. *Journal of consumer research*, 17(4), 492-507.

### 1.2.1 Luxury

Luxury is by definition “something adding to pleasure or comfort but not absolutely necessary”<sup>76</sup>. The purchase of luxury goods does not respond to any need or necessity, but rather provides pleasure and comfort. The world’s Top 100 luxury goods companies generated revenues of US\$ 247 billion in FY 2017, up from US\$ 217 billion in the previous year. Annual growth jumped to 10.8%, much higher than the previous year’s 1.0% growth. More than 70% of the companies reported growth in their luxury sales, with nearly half of these recording double-digit year-on-year growth<sup>77</sup>. In an age of fast changing trends, luxury companies have started to keep an eye on the new consumer classes of the future, are committing to make significant investments in digital marketing and increasingly using social media to engage their customers. Literature defines luxury goods as goods for which the simple use or display brings esteem on the owner, apart from any functional utility<sup>78</sup>. Vigneron and Johnson (1999) propose a conceptual framework of luxury-seeking consumer behaviour, to explain consumers’ decision-making process in the context of luxury brands<sup>79</sup>. The framework includes personal aspects, such as hedonist and perfectionist motives, as well as interpersonal aspects, such as snobbery, conspicuousness and bandwagon motives. In this view, luxury consumption involves purchasing a product that represents value to both the individual and vis a` vis significant others.

### 1.2.2 Food

Food plays a central role in the life of consumers. It is the source of nutrition and hedonic experiences, it serves a social and cultural function, and has considerable economic significance since a major proportion of the household budget is allocated to purchasing food<sup>80</sup>. In 2018, the food market realized revenues of US\$ 3.6 trillion worldwide, with an increase of 5.6% compared to 2017<sup>81</sup>. Spending on restaurants and hotels is expected to grow faster than spending for food and beverages for at-home consumption, underlining the growing importance of food services.

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<sup>76</sup> Definition of *luxury*, Merriam Webster Dictionary.

<sup>77</sup> Deloitte (2019). Global Powers of Luxury Goods 2019, Bridging the gap between the old and the new.

<sup>78</sup> Vigneron, F., & Johnson, L. W. (2004). Measuring perceptions of brand luxury. *Journal of brand management*, 11(6), 484-506.

<sup>79</sup> Vigneron, F., & Johnson, L. W. (1999). A review and a conceptual framework of prestige-seeking consumer behavior. *Academy of marketing science review*, 1(1), 1-15.

<sup>80</sup> Steenkamp, J. B. E. (1993). Food consumption behavior. *ACR European Advances*.

<sup>81</sup> Statista (2019). Food Report 2019.

While food consumption contains an element of necessity not possessed by other purchasing realms, food choices cannot be adequately understood as purely functional. Consumer food choice behaviour is complex and influenced by a multitude of interacting variables, such as personal factors, social factors and the context of food choice. Literature on food choice behaviour (Falk et al., 1996; Furst et al., 1996) propose a conceptual model of food choice process. Events and experiences over the life course are viewed as shaping current food choices through the influences of ideals, personal factors, resources, social relationships, and food contexts<sup>82</sup>. In the model proposed by Mela (2001), food choices are influenced by many factors, most importantly availability. However, the desire to consume one item over another may be viewed as an outcome of sensory hedonic likes, situation, and current internal state<sup>83</sup>. Different streams of research on food consumption have proposed contrasting conceptualizations of eating pleasure. Research aiming to understand overeating and self-regulation failures has taken a negative view of eating pleasure, equating it with the satisfaction of visceral impulses triggered by the environment or by negative emotions (Loewenstein, 1996). In the field of behavioural decision-making, Loewenstein (1996) introduced the notion of “visceral factors” to understand how pleasure could lead to self-regulation failures such as overeating. These visceral factors encompass physiological needs (such as hunger) but also psychological drives (such as emotions and cravings). Visceral factors are manifested by a hedonic sensation, which increases desires and is followed by a short-lived sensation of pleasure when the visceral drive is satisfied<sup>84</sup>. In the domain of food, van Strien et al. (1986) propose two broad categories of visceral factors that can trigger eating for pleasure: external food sensory cues and internal emotions<sup>85</sup>. The mere sight, smell or taste of a pleasant food can trigger visceral urges to eat, and the pleasure that accompanies the satisfaction of such urges, even in the absence of hunger. Like external factors, emotions can also trigger visceral eating urges, leading to the anticipation of pleasure and the reward that goes with satisfying such urges.

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<sup>82</sup> Furst, T., Connors, M., Bisogni, C. A., Sobal, J., & Falk, L. W. (1996). Food choice: a conceptual model of the process. *Appetite*, 26(3), 247-266.

<sup>83</sup> Mela, D. J. (2001). Determinants of food choice: relationships with obesity and weight control. *Obesity research*, 9(11), 249-255.

<sup>84</sup> Loewenstein, G. (1996). Out of control: Visceral influences on behavior. *Organizational behavior and human decision processes*, 65(3), 272-292.

<sup>85</sup> Van Strien, T., Frijters, J. E., Bergers, G. P., & Defares, P. B. (1986). The Dutch Eating Behavior Questionnaire (DEBQ) for assessment of restrained, emotional, and external eating behavior. *International journal of eating disorders*, 5(2), 295-315.

### 1.3 Indulging in experiences

Consumers increasingly prefer to spend money on hedonic experiences, such as vacations or dine out, and events, such as concerts or social events, over buying something desirable. By definition<sup>86</sup>, *experiential purchases* are those made with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience: an event that one lives through. Spending on experiences such as travel, leisure and foodservice is expected to rise to US\$ 8.0 trillion by 2030<sup>87</sup>. The experience trend is arising across sectors, from the value placed on the dine-in experience in consumer foodservice, and the importance of the shopping experience in the retail sector, through to the priority consumers give to experiences such as holidays, over purchasing a desirable product. The nature of the purchase (e.g. product or experience) is a determinant of long-term enjoyment, in terms of whether people derive more happiness from purchasing possessions or experiences. Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) suggest that experiences elicit greater happiness, despite the fact that possessions remain in consumers' lives while experiences are temporary<sup>88</sup>. Over time, positive past experiences may become even more positive. The recollection of experiential purchases makes people happier than remembering material purchases, as people forget unpleasant facts and affectionately remember the past experience<sup>89</sup>. Experiences are also more likely to be social and to be discussed with others, both of which can increase enjoyment of positive experiences<sup>90</sup>.

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<sup>86</sup> Van Boven, L., & Gilovich, T. (2003). To do or to have? That is the question. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 1193-1202.

<sup>87</sup> Bremner C. & Boumphrey S. (2017). How Should Business Respond to the Rising Demand for Experiential Consumption? *Euromonitor International*.

<sup>88</sup> Van Boven, L., & Gilovich, T. (2003). To do or to have? That is the question. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 1193-1202.

<sup>89</sup> Klaaren, J. K., Hodges, S. D., & Wilson, T. D. (1994). The role of affective expectations in subjective experience and decision-making. *Social Cognition*, 12, 77-101.

<sup>90</sup> Raghunathan, R., & Corfman, K. (2006). Is happiness shared doubled and sadness shared halved? Social influences on enjoyment of hedonic experiences. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 43, 386-394.

## Chapter 2

### 2. 1 Choosing vices over virtues: a definition of indulgence

Every day consumers make trade-offs between spending money on necessities or on goods representing indulgences or nonessential luxuries <sup>91</sup>. *Necessities* can be defined as items that cannot be done without; conversely, *indulgence* represents yielding to wishes or desires, as because of a weak will or an amiable nature. In trade-offs between necessities (or virtues) and luxuries (or vices), the latter are at an inherent disadvantage because, by definition, necessities are at a higher status in the hierarchy of need <sup>92</sup>. Although consumers may find it less painful to justify spending money on necessities, they may feel that they are neglecting the nonessential yet important benefits of indulgence that go beyond the indispensable minimum. A product-based approach <sup>93</sup> suggest that *hedonic goods* (or vices) provide an affective and sensory experience of aesthetic or sensual pleasure, fantasy, and fun <sup>94</sup>, while *utilitarian goods* (or virtues) are instrumental and goal oriented, and accomplishes a functional or practical task <sup>95</sup>. Alba and Williams (2013) suggest an intuitively appealing definition of hedonic temptations. “A vital component of hedonic consumption is whether the experience of consuming the product or event is pleasurable. Regardless of whether the consumption serves a practical purpose or is pursued on its own merits, whether it happens volitionally or by happenstance, and whether it is compared to other forms of consumption or is examined on its own, a universal and essential feature of hedonic consumption is that it is (and is expected to be) pleasurable.” <sup>96</sup>. Bazerman et al. (1998) <sup>97</sup> suggest that we can distinguish between affective preferences (“wants”) and cognitive or

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<sup>91</sup> Kivetz, R., & Simonson, I. (2002). Self-control for the righteous: Toward a theory of precommitment to indulgence. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29(2), 199-217.

<sup>92</sup> Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological review*, 50(4), 370.

<sup>93</sup> Wertenbroch, K. (1998). Consumption self-control by rationing quantities of virtue and vice. *Marketing Science*, 17, 317–337.

<sup>94</sup> Hirschman, E. C., & Holbrook, M. B. (1982). Hedonic consumption: emerging concepts, methods and propositions. *Journal of marketing*, 46(3), 92-101.

<sup>95</sup> Strahilevitz, M., & Myers, J. G. (1998). Donations to charity as purchase incentives: How well they work may depend on what you are trying to sell. *Journal of consumer research*, 24(4), 434-446.

<sup>96</sup> Alba, J. W., & Williams, E. F. (2013). Pleasure principles: A review of research on hedonic consumption. *Journal of consumer psychology*, 23(1), 2-18.

<sup>97</sup> Bazerman, M. H., Tenbrunsel, A. E., & Wade-Benzoni, K. (1998). Negotiating with yourself and losing: Making decisions with competing internal preferences. *Academy of Management Review*, 23(2), 225-241.

reasoned preferences (“shoulds”) that underlie consumer choice. The want versus should distinction is compatible with the distinction between hedonic and utilitarian goods: items that are high on hedonic value are likely to be subject to want preferences, and items that are high on utilitarian value are likely to be subject to should preferences. Consumers experience an interpersonal conflict when facing the choice of buying the product they want versus buying the product they think they should purchase for health or budgetary reasons.

## 2.2 The self-control dilemma

Everyday life is full of temptations that challenge our capacity for self-control or willpower. We are often good at resisting temptation. However, sometimes, self-control loses the upper hand and we give into temptations. Such situations are typically experienced as a conflict between two antagonistic forces that exert incompatible influences: one force calls on us to do what we believe is reasonable, whereas the other urges us to do what pleasure dictates<sup>98</sup>. The *self-control dilemma* represents the internal conflict between the pursuit of different behavioural plans, one of which is of greater long-term importance than the other<sup>99</sup>. To accomplish the higher priority goals, consumers need to resist the momentarily appealing yet lower priority enticements with which the more important goals are in conflict. Such interfering temptations are triggered by situational cues that promise immediate gratification at the cost of significant long-term outcomes<sup>100</sup>. An appropriate response to temptations involves the exercise of self-control. The term “*self-control*” refers to the self’s capacity to alter its own states and responses<sup>101</sup>. These responses may include thoughts, changing emotions, and regulating impulses (or resisting temptations). Impulses refer to incipient behavioural responses that result from the encounter between a motivation and an activating stimulus. *Impulsive behaviour* is understood as behaviour that is not consciously planned, but results from a spontaneous impulse. *Impulsive purchasing* involves getting a sudden urge to buy something, without advance intention or plan, and then acting on that impulse without considering whether the purchase is consistent with long-term goals. Consumers do not

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<sup>98</sup> Hofmann, W., Friese, M., & Strack, F. (2009). Impulse and self-control from a dual-systems perspective. *Perspectives on psychological science*, 4(2), 162-176.

<sup>99</sup> Loewenstein, G. (1996). Out of control: Visceral influences on behavior. *Organizational behavior and human decision processes*, 65(3), 272-292.

<sup>100</sup> Fishbach, A., Friedman, R. S., & Kruglanski, A. W. (2003). Leading us not into temptation: Momentary allurements elicit overriding goal activation. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 84(2), 296.

<sup>101</sup> Baumeister, R. F. (2002). Yielding to temptation: Self-control failure, impulsive purchasing, and consumer behavior. *Journal of consumer Research*, 28(4), 670-676.



resist these impulses when self-control fails. Self-control failure may be a cause of impulsive purchasing: conflicting goals undermine control, such as when the goal of feeling satisfied immediately (the spontaneous impulse) conflicts with the goal of saving money (the higher priority long-term goal). Baumeister (2002) identifies at least three causes of self-control failures, namely *standards* (one's goals, ideals, and norms), *monitoring* (keeping track of the relevant behaviour), and the *capacity to change* (the capacity to alter the self). An impulsive breakdown of the self-control system is not the only route to indulgence. Sometimes consumers actively relent their self-control efforts, rather than lose self-control, by relying on justifications to permit themselves a forbidden pleasure<sup>102</sup>. Thus, in some cases, hedonic consumption is not the consequence of impulsive factors, but the result of more reasoned processes.

### 2.3 Myopia versus hyperopia

Literature on self-control is premised on the notion that people are short-sighted or “myopic” and easily tempted by hedonic choices that promise immediate pleasure. The tendency to succumb to impulse and seek immediate pleasure, at the expense of long-term interests, is attributed to time-inconsistent preferences, namely people overweight the present relative to the future. Literature on self-control suggests that people not only yield to temptations they had originally planned to resist but also subsequently reverse their preference and regret their myopic behaviour. As Baumeister (2002) states, “self-control represents the capacity to resist temptation, especially those relevant to impulsive purchases and other expenditures that are likely to be regretted later on”. Every day, consumers choose between options with immediate benefits but delayed costs (vices) and options with immediate costs but delayed benefits (virtues). In such everyday self-control dilemmas, minimizing long-term regret calls for choosing indulgence. Yielding to short-sighted indulgences evoke remorse and negative emotions such as regret and guilt. These negative feelings, in turn, cause a reversal of preferences, that motivates consumers to pursue long-term goals. Kivetz and Simonson (2002) and Kivetz and Keinan (2006) propose that consumers often suffer from a reverse self-control problem - namely, excessive farsightedness and overcontrol, or “hyperopia”. Hyperopic consumers overemphasize virtue and necessity at the expense of indulgence and luxury. *Hyperopia* can be defined as the difficulty of deviating from doing the right thing and acting responsibly. Kivetz and Simonson (2002) suggest that consumers who recognize their tendency to avoid temptations and focus on doing “the right thing”

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<sup>102</sup> De Witt Huberts, J. C., Evers, C., & De Ridder, D. T. (2012). License to sin: Self-licensing as a mechanism underlying hedonic consumption. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 42(4), 490-496.

precommit to indulgences to ensure that the goal of seeking pleasure is realized. Furthermore, Kivetz and Keinan (2006) propose that, though in the short-term it appears preferable to choose virtue over vice, over time such righteous behavior generates increasing regret. While yielding to temptation (myopia) can certainly be harmful, overcontrol and excessive farsightedness (hyperopia) can also have negative long-term consequences<sup>103</sup>. In particular, with the passage of time, choices of virtues over vices evoke increasing regret, as the hyperopic behaviour causes the consumers a wistful feeling of missing out on the pleasures of life.

## **2.4 Emotional consequences of indulging**

### **2.4.1 Negative emotions associated with indulgence: guilt and regret**

Most of the research on indulgent consumption has characterised it as something to be avoided. Choosing indulgence over necessities is understood to be likely to evoke guilt or regret. Guilt refers to an individual's "unpleasant emotional state associated with possible objections to his or her actions, inactions, circumstances, or intentions" (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). Consumer guilt appears to be correlate to impulsive buying (Rook, 1987), overspending (Pirisi, 1995), and compulsive consumption (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). Eating a chocolate cake may be pleasurable and satisfying, however, our satisfaction with a chocolate cake may be lower if we see such indulgent consumption as a "bad thing" and cannot stop thinking about it. Such unpleasant and self-conscious guilt feeling (Baumeister, Stillwell & Heatherton 1994) arises when individuals think they have violated an internal moral, societal or ethical standard (Kugler & Jones 1992). Guilt feelings are associated with regret over the "bad thing done" and are likely to be accompanied by a strong sense of wrongdoing and remorse. Consumers are more likely to feel guilty about choosing indulgent products, such as hedonic food (desserts or gourmet restaurant dinners), than utilitarian products<sup>104</sup>. Regret theory holds that people compare actual outcomes with what the outcome would have been if another alternative had been chosen<sup>105</sup>. People experience regret when the alternative not selected is better. Regret can affect consumers at two different times: before and after the decision (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). During the time

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<sup>103</sup> Kivetz, R., & Keinan, A. (2006). Repenting hyperopia: An analysis of self-control regrets. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 33(2), 273-282.

<sup>104</sup> Kivetz, R., & Simonson, I. (2002). Self-control for the righteous: Toward a theory of precommitment to indulgence. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29(2), 199-217.

<sup>105</sup> Loomes, G., & Sugden, R. (1982). Regret theory: An alternative theory of rational choice under uncertainty. *Economic Journal*, 92, 805-824.

before the actual decision, regret stems from a comparison between two potential choices, the selected option and the foregone option. In a consumer decision-making context, consumers are motivated to minimize regret before and after planned and impulse purchases (Rook, 1987). In the impulsive context, the minimization of regret before purchase stems from past “anticipated pleasurable experiences” (Rook, 1987). The regret to be minimized is that of missed opportunities to experience the pleasures of the purchase and the immediate gratification to indulge in a treat. When consumers act impulsively and deviate from the conventional or the ordinary way of doing things, greater regret is likely to follow. Thus, after making an impulse purchase, when comparing reality (the impulsive purchase) with imagined alternatives (showing restraint), consumers are likely to experience regret resulting from their actions.

### **2.4.2. A positive approach towards indulgence**

Some researchers propose that indulgent consumption provides people with enjoyment and satisfies physiological needs that the acquisition of necessities may not meet (Xu & Schwarz, 2009). It makes consumers feel good or happy (Ramanathan & Williams, 2007) and serves as a mood-repairing strategy to mitigate negative emotions such as sadness (Atalay & Meloy, 2011). However, the focus of previous research was on short-term positive affective outcomes. With regard to long-term outcomes, the traditional approach has characterised indulgent behaviours as negative: “indulgent acts can have serious negative consequences for individual consumers and for society at large” (Ramanathan & Williams, 2007). A recent stream of research proposes an alternative approach suggesting that, in the long run, indulging can lead to satisfaction. This approach is premised on the notion that choices of virtues over vices (or indulgences) evoke an anticipatory regret and a feeling of missing out on the pleasures of life (Haws & Poynor, 2008; Kivetz & Keinan, 2006). Long-term perspectives give rise to wistful feelings of missing out on the pleasures of life. When evaluating distant past decisions, consumers would regret righteous decisions more than supposed short-sighted ones. Kivetz and Keinan (2006) conclude that, in the long run, when feelings of missing out on the pleasures of life are stronger, indulging can lead to less regret and more satisfaction.

# Chapter 3 - Qualitative Research

## 3.1 Objective

The research intends to investigate the potential ambivalent valence attributed by consumers to indulgent behaviours. Most of the research on indulgence has characterised such behaviours as something to be avoided. However, a recent stream of research has proposed an alternative positive view of indulgence, premised on the notion that choices of virtues over vices evoke an anticipatory regret and a feeling of missing out on the pleasures of life. In the long run, when wistful feelings are stronger, indulging is thought to lead to less regret and more satisfaction (Kivetz and Keinan, 2006). Building on these findings, our research aims at exploring the ambivalent nature of indulgent behaviours through an exploratory analysis of consumers' personal experiences of indulging. The objective of our research is to explore *whether* and *when* indulgent behaviours may evoke not only negative emotions, such as guilt, regret and frustration, but also positive ones. The study, thus, investigates consumers' experiences of indulging in diverse categories (products versus experiences). Further, this study aims at identifying the distinctive elements characterising positive (versus negative) indulgent behaviours. In particular, the study intends to understand whether consumers associate unique dimensions to indulgence perceived as positive.

## 3.2 Methodology

### 3.2.1 Data collection

To investigate the nature of indulgent behaviours, we collected and examined the content of consumers' narratives describing personal experiences of indulging. We recruited 105 respondents for a paid online survey. Participants were asked to recall a personal indulgent behaviour. In order not to bias the responses, we decided not to provide a definition of indulgence, rather we asked the following introductory question: *“Please narrate a personal experience of indulgence that you can remember. Try to describe in detail the experience and your sensations while indulging”*. Participants were then asked to answer 16 questions, both open-ended and closed-ended, investigating the object of their indulgent behaviour, the drivers of their choice, the emotions perceived before and after indulging, the perceived conflict, if any, while indulging, and their willingness to repeat their choice. We also investigated whether the respondents thought the indulgence was worth it and why. Finally, they answered socio-demographic questions. We opted for a qualitative analysis, as the objective of the research is

primarily explorative, namely, to investigate the positive versus negative valence of indulgent behaviours. The choice of open-ended questions was driven by the purpose of gaining insights on consumers' perception of indulgent behaviours without defining the phenomenon a priori.

### **3.2.2 Analysis**

Once the data collection was completed, we coded the consumers' narratives. First, we coded the consumers' descriptions of the *object* of their indulgence and identified different domains through textual analysis. In particular, we identified the macro-categories "*product*" and "*experience*" and detailed the classification into subcategories: "*food*", "*luxury*", and "*other product*", and "*restaurant dinner*", "*vacation*", and "*other experience*". Second, we coded consumers' narratives based on described *emotional states* before and after indulging. Based on this discrimination, we conducted a textual analysis of the narratives and identified both negative and positive emotions, such as excitement, anxiety, indecision, happiness, euphoria, guilt, and regret, resulting in a state of internal conflict before and/or after the indulgence. We decided to consider the further variable *willingness to repeat the experience*. In particular, we clustered the respondents into those who would repeat the indulgent choice and those who would not and coded their responses in order to identify what made the indulgence an experience to repeat. Finally, we considered whether the respondents stated the indulgence was worth it and why. We clustered the indulgences into worth it and not worth it, and then coded the responses to identify what made the indulgent experience worth it. Finally, we identified the frequency distribution for each dimension and conducted a series of cross-analysis to test whether the selected dimensions distinguish the positive versus negative valence attributed by consumers to the indulgent behaviour.

## **3.3 Results**

### **3.3.1 Indulgence domains**

The first objective of this research was to understand whether consumers associate indulgence exclusively with the domains of food and luxury or not. In particular, we aimed at investigating if other unexplored domains are associated with this phenomenon from the consumer's perspective. We found that two-thirds of interviewed consumers associated indulgence with *products* purchase and consumption. In particular, 55% of respondents narrated a personal experience of indulgence in the domain of *food*, while only 6% of respondents recalled an indulgence in the context of *luxury* and premium price products. 5% of respondents associated indulgent consumption with *other products*, such as tobacco, or alcohol. Conversely, 34% of interviewed

consumers associated indulgence with pleasurable *experiences*. In particular, 15% recalled a *restaurant dinner*, 10% a *vacation*, and 9% *other experiences*, such as binge watching, gambling, resting, or a day at the spa. Results are coherent with literature on indulgence, as a great number of consumers associated indulgent consumption with the consumption of tasty but unhealthy food. Further, we found that consumers recalled personal experiences of indulgence in domains alternative to food, such as vacations, dinners out, or relax at home.

### **3.3.2 The ambivalent valence of indulgence**

In order to determine the valence that consumers attributed to indulgence, we considered the *emotions felt before and after the indulgent behaviour*. We conducted a textual analysis to distinguish negative emotions, such as guilt, regret, remorse, and anxiety, from positive emotions, such as happiness, satisfaction, and euphoria. We found that positive and negative indulgence resulted characterised by diverse emotional states experienced both before and after the indulgence. In particular, indulgent behaviours to which consumers attributed a *negative valence* were characterised by a state of high tension between contrasting emotions before the indulgence, such as anxiety and excitement, and by a worsening emotional state after the indulgence, with feelings of guilt and regret. Conversely, indulgent behaviours to which consumers attributed a *positive valence*, were characterised by a state of tension between conflicting emotions before the indulgence, and by a state of emotional fulfilment after the indulgence. Interestingly, more than half of respondents seemed to attribute a positive valence to their indulgent behaviours.

### **3.3.3 Positive versus negative indulgence across categories**

We conducted a cross-analysis to understand if the indulgence domain affected the valence that consumers attributed to the indulgence. We considered as variables the *object of the indulgence*, namely product or experience, and the *valence*, namely positive or negative. We found that indulgent behaviours were narrated from a positive view across all contexts. In particular, 48% of respondents who indulged in products and 67% of respondents who indulged in experiences attributed a *positive valence* to their indulgent behaviours. Interestingly, the percentage of positive indulgences resulted higher in the domain of experiences than in the domain of products. This insight is consistent with the view proposed by literature on indulgence that traditionally associate the phenomenon with a negative view, focusing particularly on food consumption. Further, we deepened our analysis and considered subcategories. Results for the macro category of *products* revealed that consumers associated indulgence mainly with negative emotions when they recalled indulging in food. On the contrary, when consumers narrated an indulgence in

luxury products, they described mainly positive emotions. Our findings confirm the traditional negative view of indulgence in the domain of food. Conversely, when the phenomenon is observed in domains other than food, the prevailing view appears the positive one. In the macro category of *experiences*, consumers indulging in dinners out, vacations and gambling, associated their personal experiences with overall positive emotions.

### **3.3.4. Willingness to repeat the indulgence**

With the aim of confirming the finding that the indulgence domain affects the valence attributed to the indulgence, we conducted a new cross analysis, crossing the *object of the indulgence* with the *willingness to repeat the indulgent choice*. We expected that respondents who indulged in experiences (attributing mainly a positive valence to the indulgence) would repeat their choice. Results show that almost 90% of consumers who indulged in experiences would repeat the indulgence, confirming the perceived positive valence of indulgences in this category.

### **3.3.5. Dimensions of positive indulgence**

A further objective of our research was to identify the distinguishing factors of perceived positive indulgent behaviours. Positive experiences of indulgence were characterised by distinguishing dimensions, such as the *uniqueness* of the moment, the *permanence over time* and the role of the *self*. Indulgent experiences were perceived to enhance consumers' self-identity. Thus, the role of the self was crucial when consumers narrated positive experiences of indulgence. When consumers recalled positive indulgences, the products or experiences in which they indulged are narrated as something special and out from the ordinary. The uniqueness might characterised the context of the choice or the choice itself. Further, positive indulgences are described as something that does not exhaust in the event, but that lasts over time. Consumers recalled the indulgent experiences with nostalgia after long time, or had desired the object of the indulgence since a long time. As we considered whether the respondents said the indulgence was worth it and why, we coded the elements that made the indulgent experience worthy, in order to better characterise perceived positive indulgence. Respondents mentioned reasons such as the *uniqueness* or *extraordinariness* of the experience, the *timelessness* of the experience, and the role of others (*sharing*).

## Conclusion

The objective of the research was to investigate the potential ambivalent nature of indulgent behaviours. In particular, the qualitative research was aimed at exploring *whether* and *when* consumers perceived indulgent behaviours as positive, through an exploratory analysis of their personal experiences of indulging. More than half of respondents attributed a positive valence to their indulgent behaviours and said would repeat their choice. A further objective of this research was to understand whether consumers associated indulgence with domains other than food and luxury. Two-thirds of respondents associated indulgence with products purchase and consumption, consistently with literature. However, one-third of respondents associated indulgence with pleasurable experiences. In particular, they recalled indulging in restaurant dinners, vacations, and other experiences, such as binge watching, gambling, resting, or a day at the spa. The results, thus, showed that consumers associated indulgence with domains alternative to food and luxury. An interesting finding was that indulgent behaviours were narrated from a positive view across all contexts. In particular, half of respondents who indulged in products and two-thirds of respondents who indulged in experiences attributed a positive valence to their indulgent behaviours. The high positive valence of indulgence in experiences is consistent with literature that proposed a negative view of indulgence, focusing particularly on products purchase and consumption. The ultimate objective of the study was to identify the distinctive factors characterising positive indulgent behaviours. Positive experiences of indulgence were characterised by diverse distinctive dimensions, such as the uniqueness of the moment, the permanence over time and the role of the self. In particular, indulgent experiences were perceived to enhance consumers' self-identity, the products or experiences in which consumers indulged were seen as something special and unique, and the indulgences did not exhaust in the event, but lasted over time.



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