

How Do Consumers Overcome Ambivalence toward Hedonic Purchases?

A Typology of Consumer Strategies

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Purchase decisions for hedonic products and services are often characterized by ambivalence—sensory benefits make them attractive, but consumers may feel guilty about buying them. To overcome this ambivalence, consumers frequently adopt strategies that allow them to enjoy hedonic benefits while limiting their negative feelings. Combining an extensive literature review with an interpretive study, we identify 23 consumer strategies and propose a typology in four groups on the basis of strategy antecedents: two groups of objective strategies (obtaining consumption benefits without purchasing, objectively containing purchasing costs) and two groups of subjective strategies (manipulating the mental accounting of costs and benefits, relinquishing responsibility).

1. I am something of an ascetic; I like Saint Francis of Assisi, a man who scorned luxury. So my attitude towards luxury is a bit ambivalent; I suppose I am a consumer of luxuries to a certain extent, for hotels, even for restaurants, clothes, travel, but at the same time I feel a Judeo-Christian disapproval of luxury and wealth (Thomas, 63).

According to one definition, “ambivalence reflects the co-existence of positive and negative dispositions toward an attitude object” (Ajzen 2001, 39). Although it does not affect all consumers, ambivalence regarding hedonic purchase decisions is frequent. Hedonic consumption is deeply attractive because of the sensory gratification it offers (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982), but spending on hedonic items induces feelings of guilt for financial, moral, or health reasons—whether guilt in front of others or in the consumer’s own eyes (Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda 2003; Kivetz and Simonson 2002a, b). And often, as the hedonic value of a potential purchase increases, so does the strength of negative feelings toward it.

How do consumers handle this ambivalence? Studies from multiple research traditions have identified diverse strategies to overcome ambivalence. Marketing scholars have examined some of them in the contexts of wedding purchases (Otnes, Lowrey, and Shrum 1997), gift giving (Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1993), fashion (Thompson and Haytko 1997), and technological products (Fournier and Mick 1999). Additional strategies have been identified by economists (e.g., Thaler 1985) and psychologists (e.g., Mellers 2000). Classical literary work, such as Homer’s *Odyssey*, has also treated ambivalent feelings toward hedonic consumption and the ways in which people may overcome them. However, each of these investigations has typically focused on just one or a few strategies and offers only a partial view of the phenomenon. Thus, despite the current surge of research interest about hedonic consumption (e.g., Kivetz and Simonson 2002a, b; Okada 2005; Voss, Spangenberg, and

Grohmann 2003), our overriding view of the strategies that consumers use to overcome ambivalence toward hedonic purchases remains somewhat piecemeal.

The purpose of this research is to propose a unified, systematic typology of these strategies. To do so, we combine an interdisciplinary literature review with an interpretive study aimed at bringing to light previously unidentified strategies. We first describe how we position our theoretical approach with respect to prior research and then explain the method used for the interpretive study. We devote four sections to the four main groups of our typology. From a theoretical perspective, our research integrates and extends research on hedonic consumption by showing that prior studies from different research traditions can be organized around a meaningful general typology. Our framework also has practical implications for consumers and managers.

## **THEORETICAL APPROACH**

An important research stream has focused on the concepts of consumer inconsistency and internal conflicts to investigate strategies consumers may use to reduce ambivalence toward hedonic purchases. In a seminal article, Ainslie (1975) builds on a series of experimental results pertaining to delays and reinforcement contingencies among animals. In that setting, a key research question centers on “inconsistencies” over time and choice reversals. A related notion, “specious” rewards are those “that become temporarily preferable to later–larger rewards” (Ainslie 1975, 474) and are analyzed through empirical assessments of reward effectiveness versus delays. This research stream often examines choices between two positively valued items, such as one versus two slices of pizza or small versus large cash rewards (Kirby and Guastello 2001).

An extension of this research considers how hedonic consumption entails an inconsistency between the short-term benefits and the longer-term financial, ethical, or health costs of a decision (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991). The optimal choice based on short-term considerations may be inconsistent with the optimal choice based on longer-term considerations. Thaler and Shefrin (1981, 392) posit that internal conflicts may exist between the multiple selves of the consumer, who can be seen as “both a farsighted pioneer and a myopic doer.” The choice of a hedonic option results from a shortsighted impulse and will lead to subsequent guilt. In line with this reasoning, Wertenbroch (2001, 3) argues that “self-control problems arise from impulsive behavior” and uses as a typical example the impulsive choice of a hedonic chocolate bar (offering a short-term indulgence) over an apple (which would be healthier in the long run).

In this article, we propose a broader perspective on ambivalence about hedonic purchases. Although we certainly agree that several forms of consumer behavior in relation to ambivalent choices can be analyzed in terms of time inconsistency and impulsiveness, in other cases, inconsistency cannot be framed in temporal terms, simply because both costs and benefits occur immediately (e.g., choosing an expensive restaurant rather than a Spartan one). In yet other scenarios, the purchase of a hedonic option, far from being impulsive, is part of a carefully planned optimum (e.g., saving money by staying in cheap hotels during most of a vacation to afford a luxury hotel on the last night). As evidenced herein, consumers often engage in deliberate strategies that enable them to enjoy the benefits of hedonic consumption while limiting their feelings of guilt.

Another important research stream, which follows Ainslie’s (1975) discussion of “private side bets” that people may make with themselves, examines how people establish “personal rules” or commitments, such as diets, to regulate their own behavior toward ambivalent choices. These mechanisms are based on the imperfect recall of past motives and

feelings, as well as the idea that “people see their current choices as predictors of future behavior and [the] awareness of this (purely internal) linkage helps them to overcome temptation” (Bénabou and Tirole 2004, 856). To use Thaler’s (1980, 52) words, “Choices in the future are reduced because the current self doesn’t trust the future self.” Here again, the perspective of our research is more open. We argue that though some consumers rely on such permanent self-binding rules, others systematically plan exceptions to their own rules, such as in the hotel example.

Thus, there appears to be great variety in consumer behavior regarding ambivalent hedonic choices: Some consumers make hedonic purchases when they cannot control their impulses, whereas others carefully plan them; some consumers regulate their behavior to eliminate hedonic choices altogether, whereas others regulate it to make a hedonic choice feasible. This variety represents the motivation for this article. Our objective is to identify systematically the strategies that consumers use to overcome ambivalence toward hedonic purchases and organize them into a unified typology.

Our typology is based on the antecedents of consumer ambivalence. Is ambivalence due to a conflict between hedonic enjoyment and *external* constraints, such as objective economic or health concerns, or to one between hedonic enjoyment and *internal* barriers, such as subjective ethical principles? These two alternatives lead us to compare four situations (table 1). In the upper-left cell of table 1, in the absence of either internal barriers or external constraints, no consumer ambivalence exists, which leads to a complete acceptance of hedonic consumption. Such an epicurean stance involves a positive attitude toward hedonism and allows consumers to enjoy indulging in their consumption fully. In the upper-right cell, the combination of financial or health-related constraints and an absence of ethical barriers leads consumers to objective strategies that enable them to contain their hedonic purchases to an acceptable level. A diet is a relevant example; a person who falls in this cell might

determine to eat cake as a dessert no more than once a week. In contrast, in the lower-left cell, we find the opposite combination, in which ethical barriers exist but no financial or health-related constraints affect the consumer. This scenario leads consumers to subjective strategies in which they manipulate their mental accounting and reduce their personal responsibility for hedonic choices. Such a consumer might justify his or her hedonic consumption by claiming obedience to binding social norms: Drink wine at dinner because guests, who want to drink, are present. The lower-right cell corresponds to the combined effects of external constraints and internal barriers. We propose that the strength of these effects together should lead to an ascetic stance, or total abstention from hedonic purchases.

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Insert table 1 about here

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We use this broad theoretical approach to combine an interpretive study with an interdisciplinary literature review. Our purpose is to review consumer strategies discussed in prior research, identify additional possible strategies, and integrate them into a general typology. The next section details the method used for the interpretive study.

## **METHOD**

For our interpretive study, we adopted a hermeneutical approach following Thompson's (1997) framework. This framework has already generated rich insights about consumption processes with respect to fashion consumption (Murray 2002; Thompson and Haytko 1997), expatriate consumers and their cosmopolitan identity (Thompson and Tambyah 1999), natural health consumption (Thompson and Troester 2002), and gay consumer subcultures (Kates 2002).



## Interviews

We focused our inquiry on luxury purchases because the prevalence of ambivalence with regard to luxuries has a long history. More than 2300 years ago, Aristotle warned against excesses and stood for the mean course between the extremes of human behavior (Aristotle 1998). Throughout the centuries, Christian ethics have often condemned luxury altogether (Holbrook 2001). Luxuries have also been objects of controversy from a legal perspective, from the sumptuary laws of ancient Rome through consumption taxes in the Middle Ages to the modern notions of luxury super-taxes (Berry 1994).

We purposefully chose informants who represented important variations in their demographic and professional profiles to gain a broad range of perspectives on the phenomena under scrutiny (McCracken 1988). A total of 16 people—aged between 17 and 70 years, of whom nine were women—were interviewed at their homes in France (see the Appendix for informant descriptions). Interview times ranged between 90 minutes and two hours. We did not mention the word or the concept of ambivalence during the interviews, nor did we probe respondents directly about how they tried to overcome it. Thus, the interview type was an unstructured, narrative one, aiming to elicit the context and meaning of the various relations of consumers to luxuries, whether goods or services, in the spirit of prior research on other subject matters (e.g., Arnould and Price 1993; Fournier 1998; Fournier and Mick 1999; Stern, Thompson, and Arnould 1998).

We designed the interview guide using a progressive approach, in which we started with specific, recent acquisitions by the informant (in at least two different product categories) and moved to more general considerations regarding luxury. Informants first were asked to remember and describe their last acquisition of a luxury item. The interviewer never mentioned the word “luxury” but rather asked questions about recent purchases in specific

categories such as perfume, couture, jewelry, and so forth. Typical questions included “What was the occasion?,” “Was it for you or for someone else?,” “Where did you buy it?,” “Did you have a precise idea of what you wanted to buy before entering the store?,” and so forth. Informants were then invited to use their imaginations in answering questions such as “Suppose you could have spent a little bit more on this purchase, what would you have done? Suppose now there was no financial barrier at all....” Next, they were asked to describe their views about luxuries in general and the various product/service categories and brands associated with the concept. To conclude, subjects listened to a list of approximately 30 international brand names read aloud and indicated whether they knew them; they also were asked to describe each of the known brands in a few sentences. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed into about 300 pages of 12-point, single-spaced text.

### Interpretive Approach

Following Thompson (1997), we aimed for a commonly negotiated interpretation of the transcripts, which we put into perspective using existing literature relevant to the subject matter. Our interpretive approach comprised two distinct stages. The first stage was an idiographic analysis, following established procedures in interpretative research (Fournier 1998; Thompson, Pollio, and Lockander 1994). Each of the authors carried out an independent initial content analysis of the text, within and across informants (Fournier 1998). In the within-informant analysis, each author read each interview several times, following a part-to-whole logic, with the aim of gaining a holistic understanding of each informant’s narrative. Each author then described each informant’s attitude toward luxury, the ambivalent nature of this attitude, and the strategies the informant used to overcome his or her potential ambivalence. In this respect, an important aspect of our interpretations was the identification of opposing binary themes in the informants’ narratives, such as *utility* versus *futility*, *luxury*

versus *necessity*, *rationality* versus *folly*, or *pleasure* versus *pain* (Thompson 1997). An across-informant analysis of the verbatim transcripts was then conducted by each author, with the aim of spotting different behavioral elements across the 16 informants. Negative examples and exceptions also were identified (Fournier and Mick 1999). Then, our three separate interpretations were confronted, challenged, and synthesized. We held multiple discussion sessions to negotiate a common meaning of the major themes appearing in the text, leading to an initial framework of how consumers overcome their ambivalence toward hedonic purchases (McCracken 1988).

In the second stage of our hermeneutical process, we proceeded to a “dialectical tacking” between our emic interpretations of personal narratives and the etic constructs derived from existing literature (Thompson 1997). We conducted an extensive literature review in marketing, psychology, and economics to identify etic constructs developed in prior research. We also complemented this review with relevant discussions in classical literature. Through a long, iterative process, we then compared our emic interpretations with the etic constructs and alternately revised the initial framework until we agreed on a final framework. The resulting integrative framework comprises three types of strategies that consumers use to overcome ambivalence toward hedonic purchases: those that have been identified in our interviews and prior research; strategies identified in our interviews but not prior research; and those identified in prior research but not our interviews.

## **OVERCOMING AMBIVALENCE TOWARD HEDONIC PURCHASES:**

### **A TYPOLOGY OF STRATEGIES**

As we noted previously, we did not mention the word or concept of ambivalence during the interviews, nor did we ask respondents directly about how they tried to overcome it.

Nevertheless, all of our informants reported at least a few instances of ambivalent attitudes toward luxuries. Some longed for products they declared useless, some were involved in love–hate relationships with brands, and still others condemned altogether their own passion for flashy, expensive products. Sometimes in the same sentence, informants uttered statements that would appear inconsistent, such as the quote at the beginning of the article, or comments such as “I don’t find that tempting but it makes me fantasize a bit” or “I don’t have a luxurious taste ... but it is necessary for my life.” Another informant admitted luxury products had “no hold” on him but at the same time found that these products were “incredibly pleasurable.” These statements are characteristic of attitudinal ambivalence, defined as the presence of both positive and negative attitudes toward the same object (Ajzen 2001; Newby-Clark, McGregor, and Zanna 2002). They are also convergent with cases of consumer ambivalence reported in previous studies (e.g., Fournier and Mick 1999; Otnes et al. 1997; Sherry et al. 1993; Thompson and Haytko 1997).

Combining results from the interpretive study and the literature review, we identify 23 strategies consumers use to overcome ambivalence toward the acquisition of hedonic products and services. We have classified these strategies into two main groups: *objective* strategies, which involve identifiable purchase (or nonpurchase) decisions and behaviors, and *subjective* strategies, which involve individual mental manipulations that are less apparent during the observation of specific purchase decisions and behaviors. Among objective strategies, we distinguish those that obtain consumption benefits without purchasing from those that objectively contain purchase costs. Among subjective strategies, we distinguish those that manipulate the mental accounting of costs and benefits from those in which consumers relinquish responsibility for the purchase. Within each of these groups, we have identified a series of specific strategies, which we review in the following sections.

## OBTAINING CONSUMPTION BENEFITS WITHOUT PURCHASING

Stating that consumption benefits derive from buying may seem somewhat tautological, but luxuries offer a series of interesting examples in which benefits do not necessarily result from purchases. The first family of strategies in our framework builds on the objective separation between these two notions. The common thread is that if consumers can obtain certain hedonic benefits without an actual purchase, they eliminate many of the drawbacks that lead to ambivalent attitudes, which makes hedonic consumption much more acceptable. We have identified seven specific strategies in this group: receiving gifts or inheritance, shadow shopping, indefinite procrastination, reminiscing and anticipating, daydreaming, dreaming, and vicarious consumption (table 2).

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### Receiving Gifts or Inheritance

Some informants use gift receipts as an excuse to justify the use of luxury items, because it removes the negative feelings associated with a costly purchase:

2. For me Château Yquem is the best wine ... this year's bottle costs 200 euros....

I've never bought one, and never will. I've had some because someone gave it to me; I wouldn't pay so much money for a bottle of wine (Barbara, 39)

Gift receiving has long been recognized as a particular form of consumption that involves no direct monetary expense (Schwartz 1967; Sherry 1983). The process of gift giving is characterized by a strong social-symbolic content that depends on the social roles played by the parties involved (Otnes, Lowrey, and Kim 1993). Accordingly, a focal aspect of

gift-receipt experiences is the (re)formulation of social relationships between the giver and the receiver (Ruth, Otnes, and Brunel 1999). Given this high social value, using a hedonic object that has been received as a gift may be more acceptable, in that it is justified by the social-symbolic content associated with the gift and the giver. Wearing her engagement ring is perfectly acceptable even for a very ascetic woman who otherwise rejects luxury. These attractive characteristics thus make luxuries acceptable if consumers receive them as gifts.

Similarly, the consumption of inherited hedonic or luxury goods is acceptable, because this consumption can be seen as an act of remembrance of departed family members:

3. With jewelry, well for me it would be indecent, unless it were a family inheritance ... jewelry that already exists and which someone ... transmits to me, [it's okay if] it's a gift, but not if you spend money on it that could be used for something else (Christine, 53)

### Shadow Shopping

Shadow boxing consists of boxing without an opponent but moving exactly as if that opponent were there. It reduces the risk of being hit to nothing. Building on this analogy, we define *shadow shopping* as the act of behaving as if a person were trying to buy an object or a service, though that person has no intention of making a purchase. This activity may reduce the risk of spending for some consumers. Thus, for example, Patricia described a visit to an expensive couture shop; she knew in advance that she could not afford a purchase, but she nonetheless enjoyed the experience repeatedly:

4. I remember the *Comme des Garçons* boutique, they had these sculptured things that I could never have worn, at least so it seemed to me, plus they were inaccessible, meaning they were too expensive. And if you really think about it, they're more things

that are there to be looked at. By the time I leave the store I'm always in a good mood  
(Patricia, 26)

Informants reported that the benefits of shadow shopping include the opportunity to examine a series of desirable objects closely and at length, to be served by high-quality attendants in a pleasant atmosphere, to get the feeling of belonging to the "happy few," and to be able to sample a variety of products:

5. Often when I go to a perfume store, I try all the perfumes, that too is a short moment of pleasure (Patricia, 26)

There are degrees of shadow shopping, because even a regular buyer of luxury goods can enjoy, from time to time, visiting a shop with no intention to buy, whereas others keep visiting certain shops without ever planning to make a purchase. For these latter consumers, shadow shopping is a means to obtain some side benefits normally associated with actual purchases. An interestingly similar case is provided in classical literature by Rabelais (1552), who describes a tramp eating his bread outside an exquisite restaurant to enjoy the delightful smells emanating from the kitchen. The restaurant owner asks him to pay for the benefit of smelling these scents. In a mock trial, a judge sentences the tramp to compensate the owner by letting him hear the sound of a silver coin hit the counter.

### Indefinite Procrastination

The negative effects of procrastination and strategies to overcome it have been the topic of much recent consumer research (e. g., Ariely and Wertenbroch 2002; Dahl et al. 2003). Some of our informants seemed to use procrastination to relieve the potential attitudinal tension that resulted from being strongly attracted to luxury but feeling negatively about it for economic or moral reasons. In this scenario, setting an imprecisely high goal for

the purchase leads to never reaching that goal. Consider Christine and her quest for the perfect luxury table:

6. For years I've been worried about [buying] a [luxury] table. It's a piece of furniture that has been bugging me for 30 years. I've always wanted tables, every now and again I find a model that I want to buy but I don't do it because it would be an expensive purchase, and then things change ... but I haven't forgotten a piece of paper I once saw, with the model of a table I'd like to buy; I even know where to get it. I can't buy this table model because it would put a dampener on things, the table would force me to make certain decisions that would be hard to take, it would box me in. But there are one or two tables that have always been a point of reference for me, and I'm quite sure that one day I'll finally get around to buying them.... It's an item in which you invest a lot of yourself.... I finally got around to buying a chair after 15 or 20 years, but haven't got that far with a table (Christine, 53)

Thus, procrastination in this case provides some positive benefits in association with the search process. Thomas reported a similar process in his pursuit of the perfect wallet:

7. For about 10 years I have been looking for a wallet.... I don't really have one, I mean I have some plastic thing but its image doesn't correspond to my position in society. It's very convenient, entirely adequate, I think it cost about €2, and I bought it to help Amnesty International but mmm ... I feel like I'm going around without a wallet. I've been around the world three times and still haven't found a wallet I'm happy with. Maybe it doesn't exist. I'm ready to spend a lot on it but haven't found the right one and feel like I'm missing something.... I used to have a Dunhill crocodile leather wallet which seemed ugly to me but it was reassuringly luxurious inasmuch as there was nothing more luxurious—so it was perfect. It ended up by falling apart, and I've never replaced it. Probably the best thing for me to do would be to buy the same



one but seeing that I didn't really like it I can't do that either; it's very difficult  
(Thomas, 63)

Of course, these consumers may end up actually making the purchase, but, for example, Christine has been playing this game for 30 years. Thus, consumers may opt for an endless search for the perfect item, even if they are actually willing to pay a high price. By choosing to procrastinate the purchase indefinitely, they seem to keep some benefits associated with the prepurchase search process.

### Reminiscing and Anticipating

Consumers may also derive pleasure without a current, immediate purchase by reminiscing about past consumption experiences or thinking well in advance about future experiences. They can delight in reliving hedonic experiences again and again, discussing them with family and friends, and looking at photographs and other memorabilia. Because hedonic enjoyment is, by definition, a matter of sensations, moods, or emotions, rather than of rational arguments, it makes sense that strategies that resuscitate these same sensations, moods, or emotions will generate consumer benefits. Such strategies may use reminiscences of recent experiences, but an extreme form is remembrances of things long past:

8. I have memories of exquisite, mysterious hotels, giving the impression of entering a cozy, closed world, and I'm very sensitive to the charm of that kind of hotel. It has that mysterious character.... If we take the Mamounia as an example, I was 15 when I first came into contact there with luxury hotels, the thing that really impressed me was that it was a hotel for Heads of State. This was where Churchill had spent much of his time during the war (Thomas, 63)

This phenomenon is also illustrated by many anecdotes in literary works. In the famous last sentence of *A Sentimental Education*, after reminiscing about a rather ridiculous episode of their youth, the aging characters assert, “that is the best thing we have ever experienced” (Flaubert 1870). Relatedly, many episodes of Proust’s novel *Remembrance of Things Past* (Proust 1913–1927/1987–1989) illustrate a central theme, namely, that remembrances of things past, beyond the sheer resuscitation of deep emotions, offer a fascinating opportunity to deepen our understanding of what occurred in the light of new information and a more profound analysis.

Consumers may also gain satisfaction from thinking about more or less distant future events, including looking at catalogs, pictures of hotel rooms, the detailed descriptions of entrées in the menu of a restaurant, photographs of landscapes to be visited, and so forth. Decision theory suggests a comprehensive framework in the form of a theory of anticipated pleasure (Mellers 2000). Applied to consumer research, this theory holds that, on the basis of presently available cues, consumers can make more or less precise inferences about the pleasure they might obtain from particular decisions (Nowlis, Mandel, and McCabe 2004). If anticipation occurs well in advance of the decision, the cognitive and emotional benefits can be enjoyed over a much longer period than the actual consumption experience. These benefits also can be relatively strong because affective forecasting of future events may be biased. People typically overestimate the pleasure to be gained from future events because they tend to focus their attention on that event (Wilson et al. 2000); in addition, they tend to overestimate the durability of the event (Gilbert et al. 1998). Thus, consumers may think about future hedonic pleasure ahead of time and thereby enjoy preparatory rituals (reading documentation, announcing it to friends) and mental rehearsals (fantasizing about the good times to come). Furthermore, Lieb (2005) shows that preparation may increase the enjoyment of experiences; subjects who are familiar with a film before watching it tend to like it more.

In some sense, this theory is symmetrical with the effect of reexploring the past described by Proust.

Both cases—reminiscing and anticipating—are based on an actual purchase, whether in the past or in the future. But in either case, consumers derive benefits well beyond those that occur at the time of the purchase. In contrast, the next strategy is not based at all on actual purchases.

### Daydreaming

In marketing literature, evidence attests to the pleasure that consumers can obtain when they fantasize about hypothetical consumption experiences. D'Astous and Deschênes (2005) find that indulging in consumption daydreaming is a common activity among most consumers, including looking at a catalog of goods they will never buy, pictures of exclusive hotels they will never visit, descriptions of entrées from an inaccessible restaurant, programs from overexpensive New Year's shows at a prestigious venue, and so forth.

9. Once I went in [to the *Comme des Garçons* boutique] and the person said to me, 'Would you like a catalogue?' And I walked out with a wonderful catalogue, large format, the pictures were really well done, I've kept it for a long time and really enjoy looking at it (Patricia, 26)

Unlike the previously discussed anticipation of an actual future event, daydreaming is not linked to a projected concrete purchase. Rather, it involves goals that would remain almost unreachable unless the consumer came in to a great deal of money. The conscious act of constructing a mental representation of experiences has similar characteristics to a real experience (Dadds et al. 1997; Kosslyn 1994). The strong mental imagery that consumers create through daydreaming may lead to their experience of hedonic benefits without real

consumption. However, in the long run, daydreaming may cause painful consequences through a mental endowment effect (Carmon and Ariely 2000; Carmon, Wertenbroch, and Zeelenberg 2003). The longer consumers fantasize that they own something, the more painful it may become for them to forgo the item. Sometimes, this process results in initially unplanned purchases and possibly even stronger ambivalence.

## Dreaming

It is surprising that marketing literature makes no mention of the possible interpretation of actual dreams; Freud's (1900) major proposition was that dreams represent one way to fulfill repressed desires. When dreaming, a person may experience hedonic benefits without any associated purchasing costs. The only reference we could find to this approach comes from classical Greek literature, in which Plutarch (1992) tells of a young Egyptian man in love with a high-class courtesan named Thonis who could not pay for her favors. Finally, he had an erotic dream in which he was making love to her. Thonis then sued him for having had pleasure in this manner. The judge, similar to that in Rabelais's story, sentenced the man to pay her with the sound of coins. The analysis of dreams suggests a fascinating avenue for consumer research, even if highly problematical, given the lack of observable data about the contents of a person's dreams.

## Vicarious Consumption

Vicarious consumption consists of observing others in their consumption of hedonic products or hearing them speak about their consumption. Unlike the previously described strategies, it is less related to real or imagined personal experience. Rather, it stems from social interaction, during which a listener or viewer can derive benefits from identifying with

others' rich and delightful experiences. Pleasure also derives from discussing the merits of a hedonic product or service in detail. For example, car aficionados tend to enjoy discussing the merits of a specific brand or model at length with other fans, even if they do not plan to buy it (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001).

### **OBJECTIVELY CONTAINING PURCHASING COSTS**

In this second group of strategies, consumers justify their hedonic consumption by containing their purchases at some level that can be described as acceptable. To formulate this strategy in economic terms, we propose the notion of *restriction utility*, a concept somewhat similar to transaction utility. Assume that the utility associated with some form of hedonic consumption increases linearly with the amount consumed. In addition, imagine that there is a nonlinear subjective benefit associated with respecting a self-imposed restriction on the consumption level. This benefit would disappear if the restriction were violated, because guilt would emerge. Therefore, the overall benefit, which is the sum of the consumption utility and the restriction utility, is maximized if the person stays just within the restriction.

Note that restriction utility is not a case of self-signaling or “diagnostic” utility (Bodner and Prelec 2001). In our interpretation of informant narratives, informants did not gather information about themselves on the basis of their behavior; rather, they were already well aware of their ambivalence toward luxury. They knew that they would enjoy luxury consumption but that, simultaneously, they would feel guilty if they were to overindulge in it. They therefore seemed to choose to maximize the overall utility by consuming up to the level allowed by the restriction but no further.

We identify five specific strategies for objective cost reduction: avoiding replacement costs, containing purchase scope, containing purchase amount, other self-command strategies, and common shortcuts to reduce costs (table 3).

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### Avoiding Replacement Costs

Some consumers own a luxury good but avoid using it. They prefer to keep the product on a shelf or in a drawer for fear of damaging or losing it. In this case, the cost reduction refers to the potential replacement costs. An extreme case would be an owner of high-priced jewelry who keeps it in a vault and wears identical copies made with false gems at social occasions. Or the owners of expressionist paintings might keep them in a vault and hang high-quality copies in their apartment. Albeit to a lesser extent, such behavioral tendencies were reported by two informants who owned crystal glasses and a luxury pen but did not use them to avoid having to repurchase them:

10. I love crystal ... every time a 100 euros glass breaks, it pains me somewhat.

They've been put away somewhere and they're all a bit chipped, so unfortunately I've had to forget them. Once upon a time I used to dream about Baccarat. I have 10 Baccarat whisky glasses, they are in a box and aren't used anymore so it's really stupid. It hurts (Edith, 70)

11. I prefer having a ballpoint rather than running the risk of losing a real pen, because I'm always leaving my pens behind when I visit clients (Kevin, 45)

## Containing Purchase Scope

Consumers may limit their budget by concentrating their purchases on one or a few products or services and avoiding other forms of luxury consumption. This self-imposed scope restriction to, in several informants' words, single "personal luxuries" is an efficient way of objectively limiting spending. At the same time, it provides an excellent justification for the remaining single expense, which then can be contrasted with many other potential purchases that were avoided through this strategy. For example, Christine explained how she and her sister limited their luxury purchases to perfume and hairdressers:

12. [Perfume is] the luxury item for me.... Basically it's impossible for me to do without it.... It's the only luxury I have, that and the hairdresser, which actually costs a lot of money. I spend a lot on that. Even if I had less money, I'd live on bread and water, because I can't live without perfume. And there are many ranges of perfumes but I can't change my product range, it just isn't possible. I can't go downmarket.... With perfumes I won't compromise (Christine, 53)

13. I have a sister who is like that, she has been unemployed for a long time.... She can't resist, there are other things she saves money on, a lot of other things, but she'd never get a lower quality perfume. When you have to tighten your belt, it is truly the only thing that is left, that and the hairdresser (Christine, 53)

This means of keeping a personal and permanent link to luxury may be important for a person's self-image but still limit the associated expenses. Restricting him- or herself to a single type of luxury may allow the consumer to avoid compromising on quality, as well as to develop and maintain the high involvement often associated with luxury consumption. Finally, we wonder whether consumers may adapt this argument over time if their preferences change. That is, through the principle of restricting oneself to a short list of acceptable

purchases remains the same, the content of the list may be modified. Observing this possibility would require repeated interviews over time.

#### Containing Purchase Amount

To prevent guilt associated with excessive hedonic consumption, consumers may “employ self-rationing strategies that induce more tangible, localized constraints to control their choices” (Wertenbroch 2001, 2). This suggestion refers to more than simply setting a budget, because it also implies that the budget is smaller than what the expenses could have been, and this distinction makes it acceptable. Such limitations may bear on the total budget allocated to a specific category (Heath and Soll 1996), the amount spent on a specific occasion, or the frequency of purchases or consumption. This approach is less strenuous and more acceptable than a complete ban. Such self-imposed quantitative constraints have been described in research on demand for “vice” goods (e.g., addictive products such as cigarettes and chocolate), for which people may strongly limit their consumption (Wertenbroch 1998).

One such strategy is to set a ceiling on the amount spent on any specific occasion. There are price tiers within luxury markets, and some consumers may decide to restrict themselves to a given price range. Such a price frontier is the expression of a compromise between indulgence in luxuries and maintenance of reasonable behavior control. As one of our informants put it, “I do set limits for myself; otherwise I won’t enjoy it afterwards.” A similar consumption logic appears in the following quotes:

14. I wouldn’t spend 500 or 300 euros on a pair of shoes—I couldn’t let myself do that. It doesn’t bother me to spend 200 on a pair of shoes. I feel comfortable with that, it doesn’t embarrass me (Edith, 70)



15. I wasn't ready to spend 400 euros on a hotel room, but between 100 and 200 [would have been okay]. I turn down several restaurants that are too expensive, because basically you can find some for 50 a head and that can buy you a gourmet dinner. You don't really need to spend 100 (Barbara, 39)

Note that this mechanism is somewhat similar to the compromise effect (Simonson 1989), in which an option becomes more likely to be chosen if another, more extreme option is added to the choice set. In the preceding quote, the €100 restaurant makes the €50 restaurant more acceptable. Its existence provides “reasons” to justify choice, in the terminology introduced by Simonson (1989, 158), who states that the “attraction ... effect tends to be stronger among subjects who expect to justify their decision to others.”

Another form of this strategy is a limitation based on consumption situations:

16. I try to use [perfumes] with moderation. For instance, I think I'd put some perfume on at bedtime. At present I rarely do that.... I put on perfume when I go out, or when I'm with someone, things like that (Christine, 53)

17. I have two or three beautiful shirts that I've put to one side because I won't go to work in them, Yves Saint-Laurent shirts let's say, they're YSL because my wife chose them you see.... I keep them in reserve for going out, weekends, not ordinary weekends but in certain circumstances (Kevin, 45)

Restriction may also bear on the purchase process itself. For example, one of our informants reported purchasing only one case of champagne per year from a small producer and restricting his consumption to that case, prohibiting himself from emergency purchases from a wine store. Similarly, Hoch and Loewenstein (1991, 500) refer to “always consult[ing] [one's] spouse before making a major purchase;” and Rook and Hoch (1985) mention a variety of distancing strategies based on store avoidance. All these strategies lead to limiting the number of instances in which a purchase is feasible.

Wertenbroch, Soman, and Nunes (2002) mention related strategies based on self-imposed payment restrictions (e.g., never use a credit card to pay for luxury goods) or financing conditions (e.g., no long-term loans for luxuries), which offer some interesting similarities to rules suggested by Thaler and Shefrin (1981), such as borrowing only to purchase heavy durables such as houses or automobiles. Hoch and Loewenstein (1991, 500) add substitution to these strategies, that is, “offering oneself a small but immediate reward for successfully resisting a larger impulse” by, for example, purchasing an inexpensive item sold by a luxury brand.

Strategies that enable the consumer to contain the amount they spend present a double advantage. First, they objectively limit the amount spent. Second, we speculate that they create a psychological benefit through the feeling that the consumer has established some control over the potential negative consequences of hedonic consumption, which offers a compromise between hedonic and rational motives (Okada 2005). Finally, as noted by Ainslie (1975, 489), “activities which are highly rewarding in themselves ... [may] become maximally rewarding through the learning of rationing devices.”

#### Other Self-Command Strategies

Schelling (1984) discusses a series of strategies that are based on other external constraints that consumers impose on themselves to avoid indulging in behaviors they later might regret. Strotz (1956) was apparently the first to quote Homer as an example of such a self-command strategy: Odysseus had his crew bind him and instructed them to put wax in their ears so that he would not be able to order them to steer the ship toward the Sirens, while he would be the only one on board enjoying their lavish songs. Such strategies include pre-committing to a non-luxury choice, submitting voluntarily to surveillance and potential

penalties in case of constraint violation, depriving oneself of the actual possibility of making a luxury choice (e.g., avoiding tempting stores or places), carrying no cash or credit cards, avoiding frequency-inducing pricing schemes such as two-part pricing schedules (Lemon and Wertenbroch 2001), or carrying no salient inventory of the hedonic good at home (Chandon and Wansink 2002; Wertenbroch 2001). Although the literature on self-command strategies (Ainslie 1975; Bénabou and Tirole 2004; Thaler 1980) describes them as leading to total abstinence, they also could easily be adapted to limit hedonic consumption to a reasonable amount, provided the consumption is not addictive.

### Common Shortcuts to Reduce Costs

Because luxury products normally are sold with a very high margin, consumers have developed many solutions to shortcut the usual retail channels and obtain products at discounted prices. Informants used a variety of classic strategies to pay less for the same (or similarly perceived) quality, including traditional end-of-season sales; factory outlets; discount stores; duty-free shopping; direct purchases from the manufacturer; personal, family, or friendly connections with employees of the luxury manufacturer; and relying on gray markets. They also sometimes buy second-hand, discounted, or less well-known brands:

18. Rather than getting a well-known name in champagne, whenever I can I try to find a small grower who makes good quality champagne (Edith, 70)

19. One day I bought myself a Jaguar, it was a second-hand Jaguar plus it was a really low price (Thomas, 63)

20. It's a [discount] shop that carries big names for shirts and jackets and suits, but which buys them and sells them at reasonable prices (Barbara, 39)

21. The only thing that I ever bought at Yves Saint-Laurent were shoes and boots; they were on sale so they were affordable (Barbara, 39)

## **MANIPULATING THE MENTAL ACCOUNTING OF COSTS AND BENEFITS**

The first two groups of strategies (obtaining consumption benefits without purchasing and objectively containing purchasing costs) are objective, in that they involve objective purchasing (or nonpurchasing) patterns easily observed by third parties. In contrast, the remaining two families of coping strategies are subjective (table 1), whereby consumers apparently acquire luxuries in a regular way. What is less apparent for an outside observer is that while doing so, consumers rely on their subjective mental processes to reduce the guilt generated by their ambivalent attitudes.

The first such process is to manipulate one's own mental accounting by improving the apparent balance between perceived costs and benefits. In contrast to previous strategies, the perceived change in balance here is only subjective. We have identified seven specific ways of manipulating mental accounting: spreading the costs; spending on special accounts linked to a windfall, a "right to indulge," preliminary savings, or charities; adding spurious benefits; and adding information value (table 4).

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Insert table 4 about here

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Spreading the Costs

To reduce perceived costs, a common strategy for durable luxury products is to assert that, because of their better quality, they will last longer and thus be less expensive per time unit. In a long-term view, this strategy amounts to deferring most of the cost from present to past and future, as illustrated by Catherine's experiences:

22. There can be luxury goods for your home, which are going to last longer, so I find it somewhat less shocking—an extravagant price, I divide it by the number of years I'll be able to use it and it seems less over the top (Catherine, 46)

23. The right balance between pleasure and shame is to tell myself that I am going to be paying more for an article of clothing than if I were to buy it at Prisunic [inexpensive retailer], but it's a good quality item that I'm going to be wearing for several years, so in the end it's not a useless purchase, or something extravagant (Catherine, 46)

### Spending on a Special Accounts

*Windfalls.* Thaler (1985) has shown that consumers set aside separate mental accounts that correspond to specific expenses or resources. When a luxury item is received as a prize in a promotion or is financed by windfall gains (Arkes et al. 1994; Henderson and Peterson 1992; Kivetz and Simonson 2002a; Kivetz and Zheng 2005; O'Curry and Strahilevitz 2001), consumers may create a specific mental account and perceive no or little associated cost, even if alternate nonluxury prizes or gifts are available. Consumers thus neglect the opportunity costs associated with not choosing the alternate nonluxury items. Similarly, O'Curry and Strahilevitz (2001) show that hedonic (vs. utilitarian) options may appear more popular as a prize than as a purchase. As Khan, Dhar, and Wertenbroch (2005, 6) summarize, "passively receiving rewards does not require the same justification as actively purchasing does."

*Earning a “right to indulge.”* Consumers may feel they have earned the right to indulge through hard work (Kivetz and Simonson 2002a; Kivetz and Zheng 2005; Weber 1930/2001). On an anecdotal note, a former chairman of Porsche reported a female professional tennis player who justified her purchase by claiming she deserved it for her good performances. This strategy reflects a typical case of “entitlement” (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991) and can be associated with the concept of Puritanical reward self-gifts, or self-gifts justified by efforts (Mick and DeMoss 1990). Note, however, that self-gifts may also be used after a failed achievement, to ensure mood repair (Mick and Faure 1998; Atalay and Meloy 2005).

*Preliminary savings.* The right to indulge can also be earned through a previously virtuous, money-saving behavior. For example, Frank justified a night in a luxury hotel with a series of nights in cheap ones:

24. Except in exceptional circumstances, meaning if I’m traveling in the Third World. In certain Third World countries, there are some absolutely fabulous hotels, which in general are not very expensive compared with French hotels. In that case I try to offer myself one or two nights in a hotel like that, just for the enjoyment. And it’s really a major luxury; the rest of the time I’m in the grottiest hotel possible, the cheapest, because it’s also while I’m on holiday and I’m less demanding. As an exception I offer myself a palace for two nights. It’s not 200 euros a night, in general it’s around 50 or 60. But it’s a luxury that I offer myself from time to time, and it’s a pretty enjoyable one (Frank, 53).

One such extreme case is described by Atherton (2003): An Englishman with limited resources saved for 20 years to afford attending a cricket Test match overseas.<sup>1</sup> In the context of frequency programs, Kivetz and Simonson (2002a, b) show that consumers may feel they

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<sup>1</sup> Ironically, that Test match, in Jamaica, was abandoned after a short period of play because the ill-prepared pitch was dangerous.

have earned the right to indulge through a series of preconsumption efforts. They propose that “higher required effort shifts consumer preferences from necessity to luxury rewards, because higher efforts reduce the guilt that is often associated with choosing luxuries over necessities” (Kivetz and Simonson 2002a, 155) and find that the effect is stronger for consumers who tend to feel guilty when spending money on luxuries.

Relatedly, Fishbach and Dhar (2005) demonstrate through a series of experiments that perceived progress, or even anticipated progress, toward a virtuous goal (e.g., losing weight) may lead subjects to indulge in an inconsistent behavior (e.g., eating a chocolate bar). Khan (2005) shows that framing a choice between a relative vice and a relative virtue as part of a forthcoming series of similar choices leads consumers to indulge more in the relative vice; they feel less guilty, because they optimistically believe they will be able to compensate for this vice by being more virtuous in the future.

*Rewarding charity and altruistic behavior.* Similarly, Strahilevitz and Myers (1998) indicate how a hedonic choice becomes more acceptable if it is linked to a charitable donation through a charity card system; Khan, Dhar, and Wertenbroch (2005) show that preference for a hedonic good may increase after a charitable act that has allowed the consumer to build some personal “credit” to be spent on a nonnecessity. Similarly, Khan and Dhar (2005) demonstrate that such an effect can be created by a mere commitment to perform an altruistic act, which helps subjects establish an altruistic self-concept and “licenses” them to choose a relative luxury. This mechanism is often used to organize luxury events (balls, dinners, opera galas) for the benefit of a charitable cause.

#### Adding Spurious Benefits

Shafir, Simonson, and Tversky (1993, 11) argue that “when faced with the need to choose, decision makers often seek and construct reasons in order to resolve the conflict and justify their choice, to themselves and to others.” Accordingly, we observed in our interviews that informants sometimes seemed to manipulate the perceived global utility of a luxury good or service by bringing into the picture additional benefits that normally would not be considered when evaluating such a good. In such cases, the additional benefit improved the perceived cost balance and provided a convenient reason for the choice. Informants mentioned, for example, the historical interest of a hotel that had hosted important events or visitors, the artistic value of a luxury product, and the pleasant atmosphere of a luxury boutique that adds utility to the purchase experience, including even the quality of the bag provided to carry the purchases away:

25. It's not the category of the object or its price which matters most, it's the work that was involved and the person who designed it, meaning its artistic side. There is art and non-art, yet it's all leatherwork. There is an artist behind the product or else there isn't one ... and it's only acceptable for me when they are the expression of a form of art (Christine, 53)

26. All in all, it is nicer to enter a comfortable and well-decorated boutique, with salespersons who are at your disposal and who can give you some information and advice. I'm willing to pay a bit more for something like that ... it's true that I really enjoy things like that (Catherine, 46)

Another benefit used to justify purchasing a luxury item is the affective value it has acquired by being associated with some positively remembered personal event:

27. Chanel No. 5 was the perfume I used when [my son] was born. And now I am reminded of that every time I put it on. Even if I did not like the smell at first, memories got attached to it (Audrey, 29).



## Adding Information Value

Occasionally, consumers may consider as an additional benefit the information value attached to discovering what it is like to use a specific hedonic product or service. They put themselves in the position of a naïve reporter, explorer, or scientist analyzing the experience with some detachment. In addition, because consumers frame the event as one not to be repeated, an unreasonable regular cost may become acceptable as a one-shot event:

28. For me luxury is taking the Concorde to New York, because it takes half the time. Plus it's interesting to travel like that just to see what it's like. I mean, if I could afford it, it would really be just once so as to see what it's like, and then the next time unless I was under real time pressure, there wouldn't be any reason to travel by Concorde. At the same time, it would be a lot of fun (Daniel, 49)

By describing a consumption experience as unique (for them), consumers elevate its status to that of an extraordinary event in their life, making it a powerful source of personal value. Such an exploratory stance toward a unique experience is likely to occur for luxury services that maximize the distance between the envisioned experience and the routine aspects of daily life.

## **RELINQUISHING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PURCHASE**

Sometimes, consumers are happy to believe that the responsibility for choosing a hedonic product is beyond their control. We have identified four such strategies: invoking technical constraints or health concerns, attributing responsibility to another person, invoking a social norm, and acknowledging a breakdown of willpower (table 5). These strategies aim at

relinquishing responsibility for the purchase and thereby reduce ambivalence related to the purchase.

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Insert table 5 about here

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### Invoking Technical Constraints or Health Concerns

Choosing a hedonic good or service becomes acceptable when situational constraints are such that it is the only available alternative. For example, flying to New York from Europe by Concorde became acceptable for one of our informants if it was the only way to be at a meeting in Paris in the afternoon and at another meeting in New York the next morning. Similarly, Okada (2005, 33) describes how “when a hedonic alternative and a utilitarian alternative ... are each presented singly for evaluation, the hedonic alternative tends to elicit a higher rating. However, when the two are presented side-by-side, the utilitarian alternative is more likely to be chosen.” In other words, a convenient way to justify a luxury choice is to frame it precisely as a no-choice situation.

Informants also alluded to norms related to personal security and well-being. Because they supposedly provide a guarantee of quality, luxury goods are reportedly chosen for health or safety reasons (e.g., a luxury hotel in a developing country), as illustrated by the following quotes:

29. I like wine.... I figured out a long time ago that cheap wines are bad for me.... My idea is that they are all mixed up with a bunch of things that give me a hangover, headaches (Frank, 53)
30. Any necklace that is not in gold gives me a skin allergy; my skin can't stand anything but gold (Corinne, 55)

## Attributing Responsibility to Another Person

Prior research has documented that blaming an act on others is an effective strategy for reducing guilt associated with certain consumption activities (Dahl et al. 2003; Thaler 1985). We already mentioned gift receiving, in which case the donor makes an independent, personal choice of what to give. Here, we consider instead those scenarios in which the recipient of a gift had previously given to the donor precise indications about what the gift could be (Thaler 1985). Families offer considerable opportunities for members to hint at unreasonably expensive objects they would enjoy receiving as gifts but cannot reasonably purchase themselves.

A related case is that of a collective purchase, such as a dinner among friends at a restaurant where each pays for his or her own meal. If another friend has chosen the restaurant, the consumer can exonerate him- or herself from the decision and pretend that he or she would not have chosen the place if alone. This trend is evidenced experimentally by Okada (2005): Faced with choice between a utilitarian \$50 grocery certificate and a hedonic \$50 dinner certificate, most respondents pick the grocery certificate when they choose for themselves, but when a friend is in charge of choosing for them, they hope their friend will pick the dinner certificate.

Similarly, a professional environment may provide opportunities for persons to enjoy luxury consumption while putting the responsibility on the unidentified colleague or organization that has chosen the hotel or restaurant. Thus, the people benefiting from a luxury venue can argue that they have played no role in its choice. Academic conferences are sometimes held in luxury hotels, and participants can tell their respective deans they had no part in choosing the place, because it was arranged by the conference organizer. Note that this

strategy is the opposite of the self-command strategy mentioned by Schelling (1984), in which people put someone else in charge of choosing for them because that person will not choose a luxury product. In contrast, this strategy puts someone in charge because if that person chooses a luxury product, the consumer is exonerated from the responsibility for the choice.

### Invoking a Social Norm

Social norms provide a variety of convenient and socially acceptable excuses for hedonic consumption. Because they are prevalent in many consumption activities (Cialdini and Trost 1998), they can serve as an effective excuse for denying personal responsibility for a purchase. Several informants described a social obligation to indulge in situation-specific luxuries, such as weddings, birthdays, holidays, or entertaining guests. They concluded that they could not be held responsible for the choice and thereby consumed the luxury without guilt. For example, renting a famous, large, expensive site in Paris became legitimate for a wedding:

31. In July, my son got married at the Deligny swimming pool where he organised something really luxurious. He's a bit extravagant and it was an extravagant wedding, the pool was booked for the whole evening, 300 people came, it was total pomp and ceremony (Thomas, 63)

Another situation is entertaining knowledgeable friends:

32. We have a couple of good bottles at home but it's only when we have connoisseur friends over who we really want to show respect to. When it's just the family we don't bring out our best wine (Edith, 70)

Similar excuses also can be evoked in the converse scenario, when the respondent is a visitor and brings in a luxury component of the meal or flowers:

33. If it is someone you're not sure about, and you go to their house, and you said you would bring the starter, and you want to show them respect because you don't know them well ... you buy something from Fauchon or Caspia [gourmet food stores], because you know that your host will see that it comes from Fauchon or Caspia.... I could have bought it elsewhere and maybe even something which is better quality, but it wouldn't have come from an upmarket store and my host may not have appreciated it as much (Cedric, 50)

Finally, a related strategy occurs when a social norm leads a consumer to buy a luxury good for someone else, which provides a good excuse for buying something for him- or herself at the same time:

34. Otherwise in terms of chocolate makers, we go to a boutique near the rue Saint-Honoré in Paris, the rue Bayard.... At certain times of the year, we go out of our way to stop by there. Generally, our excuse is that we're getting someone a present, but in fact we are buying things for ourselves too (Justine, 25).

#### Acknowledging a Breakdown of Willpower

Finally, consumers may excuse themselves by claiming that, on some specific occasion, they lost their normal self-discipline in a breakdown of willpower; they behaved impulsively (Rook 1987; Rook and Fisher 1995), they lost self-control (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991), they were in a compulsive state, they had "purchasing fever," or they experienced "love at first sight" for an object (Hirschman 1992; O'Guinn and Faber 1989). Some informants abandoned any attempt to explain their behavior in rational terms; engaging in some sort of rational evaluation of its costs and benefits would deny the admittedly irrational nature of that behavior:

35. [Jewelry], it has to be love at first sight, and then you buy it ... if, well I also buy things for myself when I fall in love with them, when I want to give myself a present, when it gets under your skin, when you really want it, it's all a bit unreasonable, it's a desire. It is more of a compulsion than a deliberate act.... If I walk past something that I find really very beautiful I'll buy it.... I buy it because it seduced me, no more, no less. I fell head over heels for a piece of jewelry that I liked so I bought it. You often choose things in that way, without really thinking about it; I saw it and then suddenly ... suddenly it was the one I liked. The others, next to it, seemed boring. It's simple but I think it's very pretty. First of all, I actually fall in love with the jewelry, and later I get worried about how much it's going to cost ... there's no point buying jewelry without falling in love with it (Cedric, 50)

In another type of case, the informant recounted that she had been in an abnormal mood, which led her to make impulsive purchases that normally would not have occurred:

36. I walk in front of a shop window and see something I like, I go inside and have to buy that one article of clothing but since on that particular day I'm up for a *shopping spree* I have a look around and may end up buying something else (Catherine, 46)

In these cases, consumers acknowledge their "time-inconsistent preferences" (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991) but feel they were "not able to control [their] own behavior" (O'Guinn and Faber 1989, 155). This type of excuse can be used to explain why the purchase was made, but it may not prevent the informant from feeling guilty later, after the brief "feeling of love" period is over:

37. [Those moments when luxury becomes my priority] may be those times when I'm feeling particularly relaxed, not thinking about anything, disconnected, I let things happen to me, even if I regret [it] afterwards (Catherine, 46).

By definition, impulse buying<sup>2</sup> is not planned and can occur anywhere and anytime. The absence of an external justification makes it possible for consumers to use this “double personality” excuse whenever they want, independent of any particular context or situation. Used with subtlety, it can become a very practical and useful justification mechanism. However, because the impulse, though clearly not part of the rational side of the self, still emanates from the person, consumers may have more difficulty fully accepting what has happened than if a social norm had provided them with an excuse. Although at the time of an impulsive luxury purchase, benefits are highlighted and costs hidden, the ensuing consumption may degenerate into guilt feelings, as implied in the end of the last quote.

## DISCUSSION

Ambivalent attitudes toward hedonic purchases are common, and consumers use a variety of strategies to overcome this ambivalence. Our framework classifies these strategies into two families of objective strategies (obtaining consumption benefits without purchasing and objectively containing purchase costs) and two families of subjective strategies (manipulating the mental accounting of costs and benefits and relinquishing responsibility for the purchase). Objective strategies answer external constraints (typically, economic or health-related) by containing hedonic purchases to an acceptable level or suppressing them altogether, whereas subjective strategies answer internal barriers (typically, ethical) by providing acceptable justifications for such purchases. In this discussion, we justify the eclecticism of our framework, propose directions for further research, and describe practical implications for consumers and managers.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that, in contrast to Ainslie (1975, 463), we use “impulsive” to denote a behavior that is unpremeditated rather than “the poorer, smaller, or more disastrous of two alternative rewards even when [organisms, particularly human beings] seem to be entirely familiar with the alternatives.”

## The Need for Eclecticism

Some readers may criticize our approach as eclectic, but we believe it must be, because there is a great variety in the 23 strategies we classify:

- Some strategies are based on planning over some time horizon (e.g., self-command, earning the right to indulge) and involve the past and/or future, whereas others occur in the sole setting of the current situation (e.g., receiving a gift, invoking a social norm).
- For some strategies, consumers assume they are always in full control of themselves, whereas for others, they assume they can behave impulsively and therefore should be controlled by other persons, external constraints, or self-imposed rules. This distinction contrasts willpower with lack of willpower, self-control with the need for self-command, and a conflicting with a single self.
- Some strategies are based on a good memory of the past, whereas others assume that consumers will not remember the reasons for their prior choices.
- Some strategies assume that consumers can forecast their own behavior well, whereas others assume that they rely on their current choices as predictors of future behavior.
- In some strategies, having been repeatedly committed to a virtuous, nonhedonic behavior with no exceptions leads to further commitment in the future; in other strategies, this commitment provides an excuse for an occasional lapse.
- Some strategies can be applied by a solitary person, whereas others require the participation of one or several other persons.
- Justifications that may be used for a person's own perception may be weak if he or she needs to provide reasons in front of others.



As we discussed previously, perceived, or even anticipated, progress toward a virtuous, nonhedonic goal (e.g., losing weight) may lead consumers into two opposite behaviors. If they consider their progress as evidence of heading in the right direction, they may feel entitled to indulge in an inconsistent behavior (e.g., eating a chocolate bar). In contrast, if they consider it evidence of commitment to the virtuous goal, their behavior may remain consistent (Fishbach and Dhar 2005). These contrasting consequences may be due to differences in individual traits but also to whether the hedonic behavior of interest is addictive. Some strategies are well adapted to cases of addictive consumption (e.g., submitting to a surveillance and punishment system), whereas others can work only for nonaddictive consumption (e.g., accumulating the right to indulge through a charitable act). Clearly, former smokers who do not want to relapse cannot allow themselves a cigarette every time they give money to a charity.

#### Further Research

We have presented a general typology of consumer strategies to reduce ambivalence toward hedonic purchases. On the basis of prior research and our interpretive study, we propose internal and external constraints as the antecedents of these consumer strategies (table 1). These propositions may serve as guidelines for future empirical inquiry. Specifically, it would be interesting to manipulate the external constraints of a consumer (in terms of financial and health concerns) systematically and study how this manipulation affects the choice of specific objective strategies. For example, how might this manipulation determine whether the consumer would prefer a strategy that eliminates hedonic purchases to one that contains hedonic purchases to a reasonable level? With respect to internal constraints, we believe they can be more appropriately studied using individual difference measures rather

than experiments. For example, an interesting area of investigation is how the level of consumer identification with material values (Richins 2004) affects choices in terms of mental accounting strategies.

Further research also might examine the links between our typology and situational factors (e.g., mood, time available to make a choice, public or private consumption), demographic variables (e.g., age, religion, education, income), and psychological variables (e.g., social compliance, social desirability, self-monitoring). Such research would lead to a more complete understanding of the dynamics of a person's ambivalent attitude toward hedonic purchases and its effect on consumer behavior.

#### Practical Implications for Consumers and Managers

Both potential consumers of hedonic goods/services and companies that market them can take advantage of the strategies featured in our typology. We demonstrate this briefly with illustrations for each of the four groups of strategies.

*Obtaining Consumption Benefits Without Purchasing.* Many consumers enjoy Internet sites created by companies to offer rich, motivating information and visual displays about the brand. These sites offer consumers material for anticipation, daydreaming, and vicarious consumption, as in the hedonic product examples of BMW with its James Bond-like advertising movies, Kellogg's with its handsome training coaches who promote Special K, and many couture Web sites. Consumers can obtain hedonic benefits from these experiences without actually having to purchase the brand's products. At the same time, this type of consumer behavior can reinforce involvement with the brand and consumer expertise, generate word-of-mouth and viral marketing, and is likely to encourage future consumption. For example, it was in the best interest of the restaurant owner staged by Rabelais (1552) to

let people eat their bread while smelling the delicious odors of his kitchen, because it potentially motivated them to actually buy a meal from time to time.

*Objectively Containing Purchasing Costs.* Consumers enjoy the opportunity to purchase hedonic goods at an acceptable cost. Luxury brands have long implemented this approach through the introduction of accessories and other reasonably priced items. Paradoxically, this containment of purchasing costs can be profitable for companies: These decision strategies provide consumers with good arguments to justify their purchases of a luxury brand, and they attract more clients than an offer limited to full-scale, expensive options. The phenomenal 100-fold increase in sales of Louis Vuitton under the chairmanship of Henry Racamier can be partly attributed to such a strategy.

*Manipulating the Mental Accounting of Costs and Benefits.* Many consumers commit themselves to virtuous weekly savings schemes to make end-of-year purchases of costly hedonic goods. Consumers of luxury goods or services, such as five-star hotels, must be very sensitive to spurious benefits based on artistic value, tradition, historical interest, or an association with famous people, judging by the frequency of advertising campaigns relying on such arguments. Luxury watch manufacturers organize auctions of ancient models to popularize the idea that, thanks to extreme quality and robustness, higher purchase costs can be spread over many years of usage. The same idea has been perpetuated by a recent Patek Philippe ad campaign, featuring the slogan “Begin your own tradition.” Furthermore, some jewelry companies have advertised the idea that good professional performance by the consumer creates a right to indulge in their products.

*Relinquishing Responsibility for the Purchase.* Consumers seem to accept readily the development of new social norms that may justify the purchase of luxury products. On a traditional holiday like Christmas, consumers follow the suggestion by perfume manufacturers that a normal perfume would be too cheap a gift and that an expensive “limited

edition” constitutes a more appropriate Christmas gift. Consumers also endorse new holidays associated with gift giving. In France, Father's Day was established in the 1950s through the initiative of the person in charge of marketing luxury cigarette lighters, which were then seen as an appropriate gift on such a day. More recently, St. Valentine’s Day (which had never been a part of French tradition), after being successfully hyped in the 1990s by jewelry and perfume manufacturers, has gradually become part of the regular holiday calendar.

## **APPENDIX**

### **RESPONDENT PROFILES**

- Catherine, 46, project study manager in a metal construction company, married to a CPA, two children.
- Cedric, 50, administrative director of an exclusive men's club, married to an engineer, two children.
- Thomas, 63, restaurant owner and merchant, married to a factory manager, three children.
- Edith, 70, married to a high-level civil servant, two children.
- Christine, 53, civil servant at the Ministry of Culture.
- Audrey, 29, music teacher, lives with a professor of economics, one child.
- Patricia, 26, primary school teacher, unemployed, spent a great part of her life in different countries due to her father's profession.
- Paul and Corinne, 55, Paul is a public relations manager in an industrial company; Corinne works at home, no children.
- Jennifer, 17, last year of high school, both parents are senior managers.
- Frank, 53, well-known foreign journalist, divorced, two children, has lived in Paris for four years.
- Justine, 25, and Jerome, 27; Justine is an architecture student; Jerome an advertising manager and son of a Parisian banker, two children.
- Daniel, 49, computer scientist, married to a foreign language teacher, two children.
- Kevin, 45, typewriter repairman and office furniture seller, married to a middle-level executive, two children.
- Barbara, 39, bookseller specializing in ancient books, lives with a jewel designer, no children.

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TABLE 1  
 ANTECEDENTS OF AMBIVALENCE TOWARD HEDONIC PURCHASES  
 AND CORRESPONDING CONSUMER STRATEGIES

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

TABLE 2  
FIRST GROUP OF STRATEGIES:

OBTAINING CONSUMPTION BENEFITS WITHOUT PURCHASING

Strategy	Rationale	Relevant Quotes and References
Receiving gifts or inheritance	Gifts and inheritance are acquired for free; affective and social values provide further justification for consumption	Quotes 2 and 3; Otnes et al. 1993; Ruth et al. 1999; Schwartz 1967; Sherry 1983
Shadow shopping	Shopping without intending to purchase provides enjoyable experience at no cost	Quotes 4 and 5; Rabelais 1552
Indefinite procrastination	Endless prepurchase process provides enjoyable experience at no cost	Quotes 6 and 7; Ariely and Wertenbroch 2002; Dahl et al. 2003
Reminiscing and anticipating	Reliving past consumption experiences or anticipating future ones provides hedonic benefits	Quote 8; Flaubert 1870; Gilbert et al. 1998; Lieb 2005; Mellers 2000; Nowlis et al. 2004; Proust 1913-1927; Schindler and Holbrook 2003; Wilson et al. 2000
Daydreaming	Fantasizing about hypothetical purchases provides hedonic benefits	Quote 9; Carmon and Ariely 2000; Carmon et al. 2003; Dadds et al. 1997; d'Astous and Deschênes 2005; Kosslyn 1994
Dreaming	Actual dreams done when asleep are one way to fulfill repressed desires	Freud 2000; Plutarch 1992
Vicarious consumption	Listening to others' consumption narratives provides hedonic benefits	Muniz and O'Guinn 2001

TABLE 3  
SECOND GROUP OF STRATEGIES:  
OBJECTIVELY CONTAINING PURCHASE COSTS

Strategy	Rationale	Relevant Quotes and References
Avoiding replacement costs	Avoiding usage of owned goods limits replacement costs	Quotes 10 and 11
Containing purchase scope	Limiting hedonic consumption to a few categories limits total costs	Quotes 12 and 13
Containing purchase amount	Setting a ceiling on the amount or frequency of hedonic purchases, or restricting purchase opportunities to limit total expenditures	Quotes 14 to 17; Ainslie 1975; Heath and Soll 1996; Hoch and Loewenstein 1991; Huber, Payne, and Puto 1982; Okada 2005; Rook and Hoch 1985; Simonson 1989; Thaler and Shefrin 1981; Wertenbroch 1998, 2001; Wertenbroch et al. 2002
Other self-command strategies	Imposing external constraints on oneself limits total expenditures	Ainslie 1975; Bénabou and Tirole 2004; Chandon and Wansink 2002; Homer; Lemon and Wertenbroch 2001; Schelling 1984; Strotz 1956; Thaler 1980; Wertenbroch 2001
Common shortcuts to reduce costs	Buying on sale, in factory stores, from acquaintances, etc., reduces expenditures	Quotes 18–21



TABLE 4  
THIRD GROUP OF STRATEGIES:  
MANIPULATING THE MENTAL ACCOUNTING OF COSTS AND BENEFITS

Strategy	Rationale	Relevant Quotes and References
Spreading the costs	Mentally allocating expenditures over multiple periods reduces perceived costs	Quotes 22 and 23
Spending on a special account: Windfalls	Spending money from a windfall is not perceived as normal cost	Arkes et al. 1994; Henderson and Peterson 1992; Khan et al. 2005; Kivetz and Simonson 2002a; Kivetz and Zheng 2005; O'Curry and Strahilevitz 2001; Thaler 1985
Spending on a special account: Earning a "right to indulge"	Having worked hard opens a credit for hedonic purchases	Atalay and Meloy 2005; Hoch and Loewenstein 1991; Kivetz and Simonson 2002b; Kivetz and Zheng 2005; Mick and DeMoss 1990; Mick and Faure 1998; Weber 1930/2001
Spending on a special account: Preliminary savings	Preliminary savings justify final hedonic purchase	Quote 24; Atherton 2003; Fishbach and Dhar 2005; Khan 2005; Kivetz and Simonson 2002a, b
Spending on a special account: Rewarding charity and altruistic behavior	Giving to charity, behaving altruistically justifies hedonic purchase	Khan and Dhar 2005; Khan et al. 2005; Strahilevitz and Myers 1998
Adding spurious benefits	Justifying hedonic purchase on the basis of an additional spurious benefit.	Quotes 25 to 27; Shafir, Simonson and Tversky 1993
Adding information value	Discovering what the hedonic product/service is has an information value, and justifies purchase	Quote 28

TABLE 5  
FOURTH GROUP OF STRATEGIES:  
RELINQUISHING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PURCHASE

Strategy	Rationale	Relevant Quotes and References
Invoking technical constraints or health concerns	Technical constraints or health concerns made the hedonic choice mandatory	Quotes 29 and 30; Okada 2005
Attributing responsibility to another person	Someone else made the hedonic choice	Dahl et al. 2003; Okada 2005; Schelling 1984; Thaler 1985
Invoking a social norm	Social norm made purchase of hedonic product mandatory	Quotes 31–34; Cialdini and Trost 1998
Acknowledging a breakdown of willpower.	Consumer was temporarily no longer in control of her-/himself	Quotes 35–37; Hirschman 1992; Hoch and Loewenstein 1991; O’Guinn and Faber 1989; Rook 1987; Rook and Fisher 1995