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DO YOU REALLY NEED IT? A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CONSPICUOUS
CONSUMPTION IN RELATION TO SELF-IDENTITY

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Abstract

Conspicuous consumption has been steadily growing and possess considerable functions in creating and expressing consumers' self-identities. Conspicuous consumption is something that plays a large part in the consumers lives due not only the visible exchanges but also the symbolic value that it brings and creates a reciprocity between consumers self-identity and conspicuous consumption. This study investigates what role conspicuous consumption have on their self-identity what has enabled and aided conspicuous consumption in the way we are seeing today. A qualitative study consisting of twelve semi-structured interviews was conducted where convenience sampling was chosen in order to contact people that could participate in these interviews. The findings show that conspicuous consumption have an impact on self-identity, where it can create something artificial for them in order to achieve their ideal self. Consumers are not as tied to localities and traditions as they were before, resulting in increased purchases of luxury goods. Specifically, this leads to many consumers looking for more refined items that are align with their self-image. Self-identity is reflexive, creating an intense and rapid impulse of change within modern institutions and the structured reflexivity of social life, which means that nothing can be taken for granted on either the level of day to-day life possibilities. Conspicuous consumption works as a tool to make it easier for individuals to develop their self-identities reflexively accordingly to what the societal norms and expectations are of a consumer. In addition, the data suggests that individuals do not passively accept their self-identity but rather make it what it needs to be and constantly reforming it, where modern consumption has gone from the physicality of consumption to the conspicuity of preferences. In the pursuit of self-identity, consumers seek validation from other peers also whilst maintaining their consumption of conspicuous goods. This creates a loop where the respondent feels the need to buy the goods that other people buy to fit in and create a sense of belonging, having an effect on who they perceive themselves to be. Consumers today have been able to see conspicuous consumption be enabled by globalization, technology, mediated experiences, increased symbolic value of a product and the adherence of social groups and this is all due to the need of status seeking. With the status that luxury goods hold and the desire to attain these products in order to affirm their own sense of self, the more likely it will be that they consume in a conspicuous manner.

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1. Introduction

In this opening section, the outline of the research background will be presented, followed by the research questions, the scope and purpose of the study and a disposition for the entire paper.

1.1 Background

More than a 100 years ago, Thorstein Veblen (1899) coined the term conspicuous consumption in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. The focus that Veblen (1899) emphasized was the fact that humans do wasteful and lavish spending to show off and expose wealth. Based on this classic idea, there have been different forms of signaling this. The subject withholds approaches such as household expenditures (Kamakura & Du, 2012), different goods or products (Tsai, 2005; Heffetz, 2011) and conspicuous consumption based on different cultures (Li & Su, 2007; O’Cass & McEwen, 2004). Researchers have mostly put emphasis on the demonstration of wealth, income and status through consumption of visible products. Consequently, conspicuous consumption is rampant and is steadily growing. It is estimated that the worldwide value of luxury goods market has reached \$289 billion (Paton, 2017) and almost all individuals have purchased, or will purchase, at least one luxury product in their lifetime (Taylor, Harrison & Kraus, 2008). With the development of the present day economic meritocracy, those with less money who were previously described as “unfortunate” have become “failures”, and it is the fear of this label that drives people to constantly work towards a higher salary so as to enable themselves to prove their success to the public (De Botton, 2004).

There is a common conception that the more we consume, the better off we are (Belk, 1988). Conspicuous consumption has been used to explain the anticipation of expressing one’s status and/or identity, via symbolic and visible consumption beyond economical or physical benefits of goods (Bagwell & Bernheim, 1996). Social function of consumption is associated with status, wealth and group affiliation where consumption is a way of relating to entities (Ashmore & Jussim, 1997). People are increasingly more educated and are enjoying well-paid occupations, higher income, and stronger spending power (O’Cass & Siahtiri, 2014).

Immaterial experiences over material things have had an increasing importance, where priorities are associated with “feelings” instead of with utility (Trentmann, 2016) or as the rise of the “experience economy” (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). One way an individual can maintain their self-concept is through the consumption of products and thus making it interesting to

examine the relationship between possessions and the self (Podoshen, Andrzejewski & Hunt, 2014). Consequently, self-identity needs to be created and continually rearranged against the backdrop of variable experiences of every-day life. The reflexivity of today's society extends into the core of the self; the self becomes a reflexive project in which the narrative of self-identity is fragile and this mission of creating a distinct identity does bring a burden, along with psychological gains (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

Clearly, a precondition for signaling to others with a product choice is that the product choice is visible to those others, this being the distinction between public and private consumption (Heffetz, 2012). Thus, not only the ostentation of status, income, and wealth becomes important for the consumer but also something symbolic related to the consumer's identity (Wisman, 2009). They want to exude something, not by means of their possessions, but rather by means of what they do or experience in relation to their personality. Individuals are not as restricted as they used to be and this allows the self to accomplish much greater mastery over the social relations and social framework reflexively integrated into the creation of the self than was previously possible (Yang & Mattila, 2017).

Consumers are not merely passive receivers of information and communication anymore (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). It is therefore of importance to take into consideration about the modern thoughts on shopping that also defines luxury buying as expressing an emotional and psychological need and constructing their self-image and building self-concept (Chen, Yeh & Wang, 2008). As the standards of living have increased during the past decades, much of the current consumption does not happen because of its utility (Bauman, 2001). It can encompass a person's uniqueness expressed through one's values, attitudes and opinions (Fleming & Petty, 2000). Self-identity can give them a stability in their choices when talking about conspicuous consumption: when they see themselves as a person with more refined taste, they will aim to consume these items (Kettle & Häubl, 2011). Consumers purchase luxury goods to intrinsically motivate and reward themselves to satisfy psychological needs. (Tatt, 2010). Self-identity is found in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going and has to be routinely created and maintained in the reflexive activities of an individual (Stryker, Owens & White, 2000). The motives that persuade individuals to engage in luxury shopping can be affected by the same motives that help them build their identity in society. Self-identity has often been referred to all of the selves, identities (including social identities), and self-schemas that comprise people's sense of who they are. Many researchers have described and

documented that consumers use possessions and brands to create their self-identities and communicate these selves to others (Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 2002; Gecas & Burke, 1995).

Self-identity is created by the individual through choice (Giddens, 1991). Aspects of one's self-identity can be differentially activated, and that the activation of a particular aspect makes it more likely that one's subsequent responses are congruent with that aspect (Berger & Heath, 2007). In relation to conspicuous consumption, this is highly prominent where consumers lead them to respond more favorable when engaging with people of the same (Shukla, 2010). There is a need of a more granular approach, breaking down the relationship between self-identity and conspicuous consumption to look at the effects on consumer behavior.

1.2 Problematization

Consumption of the product is not of highest importance anymore but rather of what value it contributes with. It becomes a deliberate engagement in symbolic and visible purchase, possession and usage of products and services imbued with scarce economic and cultural capital with the motivation to communicate a distinctive self-image to others (Chaudhuri, Mazumdar & Ghoshal, 2011). Where income and wealth inequality are greater, the amount that must be consumed to create the impression of higher status is greater (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2012). Consequently, people's social image and self-image could be affected by their consumption behavior (Alnawas & Altarifi, 2016). Self-identification becomes a reflexive project of each individual, whereas consumers today have more freedom and impact on their own choices of what to consume. According to Richins & Rudmin (1994), this has created a shift that conspicuous consumption often derives more pleasure from showing the good to other people as opposed to actually using the good. Conspicuous consumption becomes more than just the consumption of a good but is also related to their behavior and perceptions of high degree consumption and services (Trigg, 2001). Therefore, a brand's attributes match the consumer's desired self-image and are used to achieve a sense of fulfillment.

In the wake of Veblen's pioneering contribution, changes in consumer behavior during the twenty-first century have arguably rendered the theory of conspicuous consumption less relevant. It has been argued that for the postmodern consumer and the relationship between social class and consumption has dissipated (Trigg, 2001). Lifestyles have grown of bigger

importance and works as an indicator of social group membership, and these identities, freed from the old restrictions imposed by social class and fixed status groups, were secured by adopting appropriate patterns of consumption (Mason, 1998). A disaggregation of social structures has turned into a lifestyle, with individuals now free to project their own meanings onto commodities and personal image and identity becoming more important than display and competition (Hogg & Michell, 1996). Consumption is now the duty of the individual: it no longer exists as a citizen or worker, but as a consumer.

The individual feels socially connected to other individuals and the larger community through the shared fetishism of the objectified and commodified ideas of democracy, freedom, and independence — all of which construct identities and the superficial social context within which the individual perceives to be situated (Dolfsma, 2004). When the individual feels powerless, commodification provides symbols of power, and how that power is conspicuously displayed (Veblen, 1899). People can thus have a strong emotional attachment as a part of their identity to a place they have never visited. Foroudi et al. (2014) suggests that individuals could also feel an emotional attachment to luxury brands they have never bought or used. It is not about the consumption of the product, but rather about the ostentation of status, power, and possibilities.

Meanwhile, standards of living have increased during the past decades, much of this consumption could be considered “unnecessary”, considering that we usually do not buy luxury goods thanks to their utility (Bauman, 2001). Whereas before, we saw focus being put on different classes and wealth in relation to conspicuous consumption, it is today more relevant to investigate and research about the emotional and social aspects behind this phenomenon. Prior literature often mentions some aspects of the consumer in relation to conspicuous consumption, where studies mainly have been focusing on brands in relation to conspicuous consumption (Podoshen & Andrzejewski, 2012; Paurav, 2008), social identity (Salem & Salem, 2018; Kauppinen-Räisanen et.al, 2018) and studies regarding conspicuous consumption in relation to subcultures (Podoshen, Andrzejewski & Hunt, 2014). The empirical evidence from these studies have been very valuable for the notion conspicuous consumption and showed that consumers generate less regret when they buy something luxurious, that a congruity between the consumer and the brand makes the consumer more willing to spend money along with seeking confirmation from other peers in the society and offering more facilitation of social connections through conspicuous consumption. The usage of luxury goods is more hedonic, and conspicuous consumption is a common way of

experimenting with and expressing individuality or social status (Bauman, 2001; Giddens, 1991; Wattanasuwan, 2005; Rucker & Galinsky, 2009). As mentioned, there have been much research about identity-creating value in regard to subcultures, social identities or brands, where evidence suggesting that the value of this is created from its usefulness or appropriateness. Consumers perception and the focus of this in previous studies have been highly connected to the quality of a product (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014; Trentmann, 2016). Literature on conspicuous consumption have talked about acquiring and conspicuously displaying luxuries is an important part of many modern lifestyles in both affluent Western societies and the developing world (Bian & Forsythe, 2010; Ko & Megehee, 2012; Li, Li, & Kambele, 2012). Consequently, luxury markets are more heterogeneous than the status-driven literature suggests. This notion has important repercussions for scholars and practitioners. Focusing exclusively on the purchase made of a luxury good and the qualities of these related to status as a motivation for conspicuous luxury consumption leaves out a substantial amount of conferring capacity that luxury products have on consumers perception (Woodside, 2012). These are reflective of the variation in buyers' motives and consumption patterns and thus making it highly relevant to look at what kind of perception consumers have of themselves along with how this translates into them purchasing conspicuous goods.

Recent work consists of mostly conceptual or mathematical modeling and focuses on snobbish and conformist patterns in the demand for luxuries, whereas researchers tend to engage and focus mainly on the patterns of a consumer depending on the quantity of a good in the market (Amaldoss & Jain, 2005; Corneo & Jeanne, 1997). However, none of these studies examine individual consumers and their proclivity toward conspicuous consumption. This has guided researchers towards being more focused on collective property attributes in relation to conspicuous consumption (Bronner & De Hoog, 2018; Kamakura & Du, 2012; O'Cass & McEwen, 2004), creating a lack of research in regard to the consumers perceptions and the self when talking about the phenomenon conspicuous consumption. Conversely, the literature regarding consumption generally views luxury consumption as a homogeneous behavior where the key driver is the acquirement of the product. Generally, studies that have focused on identity in relation to conspicuous consumption have thus been more focused on indications to how a person is perceived by others with respect to cultures, communities, and groups (Tatt, 2010). Whilst brand knowledge and social identity when talking about conspicuous consumption is important, this study acknowledges the fact that it is essential to research and be able to explain the underlying reasons from the consumer's perspective to

why they deliberately engage in conspicuous consumption. By doing this, it can become easier to understand consumers reasoning behind the usage of conspicuous goods. With being able to identify this, it can indicate an alignment between the consumer and the item and create new connections when matching a brand with one's identity (Belk, 1988; Ger & Belk, 1999). The phenomenon that is labeled as conspicuous consumption is something that consistent with the presumed goal to explicitly signal one's place in the social hierarchy (Rucker & Galinsky, 2009). By looking at this from the consumers standpoint rather than the marketers, it also creates an interest in not only conspicuous consumption but also to how the self is affirmed, and self-identity related to consuming luxury. Consumers create meanings that shape how people process information and influence many important aspects of their life, including self-regulation, self-esteem, and social perception (Dweek & Molden, 2017). Changes in the dynamics of conspicuousness can clearly be discerned; the previous emphasis on acquisition and exhibition of physical items shifts to experiences and symbolic image in the post-modern phase (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993).

Conspicuous consumption therefore can be interpreted as a materialistic way of communicating the self-concept with others (Mason, 1981). Ostentatious economic display needs to establish that vanity is a secondary drive rather than a primary. Conspicuous consumption can therefore be regarded as an innate trait level, individualistic variable that motivates consumer to engage in visible forms of consumption in order to exhibit their uniqueness, as expressed through product selection and usage (Bian & Forsythe, 2012). Previous literature has thus failed to highlight the fact of how self-identity affects the consumers intention to purchase conspicuous goods, with there still being much to unravel regarding the relationship between self-identity and conspicuous consumption. As mentioned before, there is work on different type of identities (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014) but there needs to be more attention brought to the consumers own identity. Therefore, examining 'conspicuous consumption in relation to self-identity is imperative with consumer translating commodities into well-being relating to their self-identity along with conspicuous consumption working as a materialistic way of communicating the consumers self with others.

1.3 Research aim and research question

The world in which we now live is profoundly distinct from before. Some salient features of the older social world have ceased to exist, others have changed conspicuously, and new ones have emerged. In the society we live in today, life is not a predetermined but is rather full of

possibilities. Based on societal developments and consumers being savvier, we have started to notice a change in the consumers' life. This study wants to enhance the understanding of conspicuous consumption in relation to self-identity. Therefore, the aim of this study is to research about linkage between self-identity and conspicuous consumption along with how it makes consumers engage in conspicuous consumption.

Commodities and especially conspicuous items have a strong control over the process of self-identification because it substitutes the development of a self with the possession of certain goods and is constantly creating new needs that it can fulfil (Heisley & Cours, 2007). This creates a reciprocity between self-identity and conspicuous consumption. In today's world, consumers perceptions, preferences and desires regarding luxury goods and self-identity are interrelated where consumers are the co-creators and use conspicuous consumption for their own identity-creating purpose. It becomes interesting to see how they affect each other, and what relationships exist between them from the consumers' perspectives. There are therefore both new possibilities and new problems that conspicuous consumption brings in alignment with self-identification. Therefore, this research wants to answer the following questions:

- To which extent does consumers' self-identity influence their intention to engage in conspicuous consumption and what is the perceived importance of this?
- What are the antecedents that has enabled conspicuous consumption today from a societal point of view?

1.4 Limitations

In order to conduct the research, the study is aimed towards people who have engaged in conspicuous consumption. The age group that has been chosen is young adults that live in Sweden. Thus, the study will focus the age group between 18-30 years old because they are usually engaged with frequent purchases and has a labeling of influence on consumption, regardless of their household income and thus becoming relevant for the study (EEASC, 2016). With this limitation, it also prevents the study from becoming too time consuming and extensive, when the purpose of the study is to narrow it down so you can conduct the research and answer the research question along with the aim. Also, the people that participate in the study must have been involved in a conspicuous purchase prior to one year, because people and goods change quickly with one purchase becoming obsolete after a short period of time. With different items having different capital and identities, it makes it more relevant to

research recent purchases to determine what effect it has in the modern society. Therefore, by using people that have engaged in conspicuous consumption prior to one year can contribute with a deeper knowledge in order to answer the research question. The study will not have a marketing approach, even though it can be relevant for future researchers in this field. With previous research being mostly based on their work for conspicuous consumption, the study will focus more on an individualistic approach rather than from a marketing standpoint where the consumers perspective becomes relevant than the brands.

1.5 Road map

This study will contain five parts. First, the paper will have an introduction to the topic, and then a problematization will be discussed where it will be more discussed what is necessary to research about and relate it to the subject conspicuous consumption and self-identity. This will be followed up by the aim of the study and a research question that will be a guideline for the study. After this, a method chapter will be presented where the research method, how the study was conducted, and the empirical collection of the material will be discussed along with ethical considerations. In the third part, theories will be presented and clarified which in turn will work as a tool for the analysis that will be conducted. In the fourth part, the literature that has been discussed up to this point will be brought up and interlinked to the empirical material, resulting in the analysis. The fifth part will contain a discussion about the conclusions that have been drawn and then a proposition of future research for the last part.

2. Methods

In this section, the author approach and introduce the methodology that was used in this research. This is followed up by how the data was collected, what sample was used and how the literature was found and applied in this study. After this, an explanation to how the study was able to reach authenticity and the ethical side of this study will be the final remarks for this section.

2.1 Methodology

Qualitative research is crucial in the collection of narratives, observations, and experiences. A qualitative approach is used as a tool to gather data on peoples' needs and behaviors. The

research has been done based on an interpretant point of view. People are social constructs and individuals thus need to use their vision to see the world acting in order to understand humans' actions (Flick, von Kardoff & Stein, 2004). From an ontological point of view, the author decided to take a constructivist approach, as the aim of the research was the study of a phenomenon (self-identity and conspicuous consumption) and meaning of these phenomenon as a continuous action accomplished by the actors. Research has been conducted also based on the belief that our experiences and interpretations can be built by ourselves in order to investigate the phenomenon more thoroughly. May (2011) claims that qualitative research is concerned with discovery and directed towards a more in-depth perspective on the ways people understand and manage their day-to-day situations in particular settings, and therefore seems to be a particularly relevant way of understanding social behaviors. After having reviewed and examined the previous research in relevant fields of consumption and identity, the study took an approach of self-identity and conspicuous consumption. Self-identity and conspicuous consumption weave themselves together into this paper as a means to describe to complex entity of an exploration, from self, through perception and worldly objects. This is done because self-identity differs based on different individuals and can thus contribute to a deep understand of an aspect of the selves that comprises conspicuous consumption.

Wiedmann, Hennings & Siebels (2007) define self-identity as one's internal facet in terms of the way he/she perceives him or herself. In addition, self-congruity theory states that various products and brands are perceived as reflecting the buyer's personality traits (Tatt, 2010). Self-identity is an individual's perception of themselves, constructed from social interaction significant experience and feeling (Mischel & Morf, 2003). Therefore, a person builds their self-identity by choosing brands and products that represent and reveal their traits and personality. Usually, there are three types of self-identities, namely, the material self, the social self and the spiritual self (Brown, 2014; Rucker & Galinsky, 2009). Material self is about the possessions that they purchase and become owner of, the social self is with regards to the recognition by others depends on what social roles it plays (Roberts & Donahue, 1994) and the spiritual self, comprises the intangible belongings of the individual which include the individual's perceived abilities, attitudes, emotions, interests, motives, opinions and desires (Brown, 2014).

Self-identity is created by the individual through choice. It is something that is established and controlled by the person concerned. Conspicuous consumption is something that consumers deliberately engage in, usually to seek affirmance. There are concepts and theories that are

similar to these areas like social identity, self-concept, brand knowledge but the existing research on the connection between these two fields is scarce. Since the research aims to investigate how self-identity is related to and makes consumers engage in conspicuous consumption, it is necessary to get a deeper understanding for the underlying reasons that are behind this in order to get more thorough information regarding the subjects and answer the questions and aim of this paper. Whilst it will not be explicitly referred to these three categories, it became pertinent to conduct the collection of empirical data in the fashion of these three categories to be able to retrieve information that is valuable for the study. This was done in connection to conspicuous consumption, where the qualities include both the expressions the individual uses to describe themselves and the roles in which they see themselves as a consumer. With conspicuous consumption, this becomes even more apparent because the self involves possessions and, more importantly, the experience attached to those possessions (Belk, 1988). The reason that possessions are valued lies in the meanings the owners assign to them and possessions creates a way to actively construct a narrative of self-identity (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993). Subsequently, it was important to talk to respondents about what a luxurious good brings them but also how conspicuous consumption becomes linked to self-identity and the perceived importance of this along with how the affluence of conspicuous consumption has influenced their lives.

2.2 Interviews

An interview is a method to collect data about people's experience, attitude, opinion and feelings (Kozinets, 2006). Considering the different types of interviews in social research, a semi-structural approach was applied and used as a way to gather the data. This kind of method is very flexible because it usually provides with new perspectives on the subject when discussing it (Flick et.al, 2004).

As a researcher, the main point is to investigate and gather more profound knowledge in order to answer the research question. Questions in the interview were focused directly on conspicuous consumption and their experiences with this along with their reasoning behind their usage of the phenomenon in relation to self-identity. Firstly, the respondents were informed about the aim of the study and in general about what is being studied and what will be discussed during the interview with relation to different themes that the interview were divided into. These were developed based on the theories that were chosen and was the foundation for the interviews that were conducted. By looking at theories, the researcher was

able to identify seven categories that was relevant throughout the interview. Consumption became the first theme, where the interviewees were asked about general consumption in order to retrieve information about what role it plays in their lives and then transitioning to conspicuous consumption and talk more specifically about this. After this, the respondents were asked questions about self-identity and expressing yourself through commodities, where more insight could be generated about the connection between self-identity and conspicuous consumption from a consumer's perspective. Materialism is an important topic for conspicuous consumption because it refers to possessions and owning these, thus creating a linkage between this and conspicuous consumption. Consequently, this led to the researcher not solely focusing on the material aspects but also the social side of conspicuous consumption as a theme to get a thorough understanding of how self-identity and conspicuous consumption is interrelated.

The interviews started with an open question where the reasoning behind was to spark a conversation and make them instantly reflect upon consumption. The question that started every interview was:

“ Can you tell me about a purchase that you have regretted instantly after? ”

By applying the theories as a way of guiding the interviews, it became easier for the respondents to follow a structure throughout the interview and could thus work as a way of answering the aim and research questions. With this, it also elicited more thorough answers on the subjects and made the transcribing more apprehending for the interviewer, where manuscripts sometimes can provide with several pages of answers with no way of connecting it to the study being conducted.

After using an open question first, it was followed by predefined open questions where the interviewee could elaborate and reflect in their own way while still being anchored to the topic. By doing this, it was easier to retrieve more in-depth and necessary information about the notions that are relevant for the study. Example of these kind of questions were:

“ Why do you think it is popular to show off wealth on social media today? ”

“ What do you believe is the reason to why conspicuous consumption is such a huge trend? ”

Here, the interviewees could be more open and reflect more about the questions whilst maintaining on-topic. Following this, there were also follow-up questions. These questions differed for each participant as they were intended to pick up details from the interview and

were supposed to make the interviewee elaborate on specific things in more detail. This was deemed necessary because the interviewees could sometimes not give relevant or enough information and needed further elaboration. Using semi-structured interviews worked as a way to investigate and gather deeper knowledge about the subject and was an excellent complement to what the researchers was trying to explore and discover because it gave the possibility to compare answers, as well as map patterns and categories (May, 2011). The interviews were conducted in neutral places that the interviewees suggested because the researchers did not want the interviewee to feel pressured by being in an environment that this person is not comfortable with.

The interviews lasted between 1-1 ½ hours, which according to Ryen (2004) is recommended because it provides you with sufficient information and gathering deep knowledge about the subject. To perform a thorough analysis of the information being provided with in the interviews, all of these were recorded and later on transcribed. Beer & Burrows (2007) claims that recording the interview makes you more aware of what is being said because you don't have to write down the information at the same time and can lead to greater insight. By transcribing the interviews afterwards, it is a way of pointing out the weakness and strengths, which can later on be adjusted for the next interview in order to gain as much valuable information as possible and leave out the redundant statements (Trost, 2010).

According to Flick et.al (2004), people with previous experiences of the phenomenon you choose to investigate is the one that will provide with the most valuable information to the study being conducted and in order to answer the research question that has been created. Therefore, the interviewees had previous experience of conspicuous consumption. An interview protocol was defined in order to maintain the research question in mind. A framework for the interviews can help guide the interviewer throughout the interview (Trost, 2010). Since the interviews are semi-structured, there was a flexibility as mentioned before which meant that the answers provided was in-depth and gave perspective on new things that were valuable insight about the phenomenon in order to thoroughly gather information. Suitable interviewees were contacted, and twelve people were chosen and agreed to participate in the interviews.

2.3 Sampling

To conduct this study, participants were chosen based on the premise of having previous experience with conspicuous consumption is and if they were available. When contacting these people, the interviewer discussed this topic and explained what it meant for the respondent before agreeing to an interview. This was done in order to solidify and ascertain that the people participating in the interview could provide with information that was relevant to the researcher. In order to find the people that could participate, a convenience sampling was applied, which according to (Troost, 2010) means that you contact the people that are available to you and thus not finding them haphazardly. Friends and students were contacted for the purpose of the interview and this was done because the researcher knew that they could provide with valuable insight and information on the topics and the subject.

One downside with qualitative methods and convenience sampling is generalization (Bryman, 2011). It is sometimes hard to generalize the result when using qualitative research strategies. This is the case here because the study is conducted with a small amount of population, which are not randomly selected and thus making it extremely hard to generalize the result to other environments. The reasoning for using convenience sampling is that the study wants to seek understanding about how people reason and think, rather than generalize, which is aligned with what qualitative methods really mean and try to achieve (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018; Troost, 2010). Therefore, convenience sampling is suitable for the study being conducted.

People that are involved in the study are between 18-30 years old and residents in Sweden. This was done in order to reduce the variation between the interviewees due to their demographic, socioeconomic, geographic or cultural differences. Troost (2010), who argues that for qualitative interviewing, it is advised to use a predetermined set of variables such as age for sampling and there after search for heterogeneity within the relatively homogenous group that is to be studied. People around the ages 18-30 years old are usually engaged with frequent purchases and has a labeling of influence on consumption, regardless of their household income and becoming relevant for the study (EEASC, 2016). People that are residents in Sweden were chosen is because it is where the study is being conducted and making geographical proximity a lead factor to the study. There was a good distribution between the respondents, where the ages were almost evenly distributed between, that can be argued of making the study less biased. 5 out of 12 respondents were female, but gender have no relevancy for the study, so it was not of pertinence. Troost (2010) argues that the proper sample size when doing qualitative interviews depends on many different factors, but that, a

small sample size of four up to eight interviews is enough. For this study, the researcher decided to speak with twelve different interviewees in order to reduce any biases that could arise with a smaller sample, while keeping the sample size manageable considering the time and resource restraints of this study. Everybody that was asked participated in the study, which means that no one fell out of the study due to different reasons. The respondents wanted to remain anonymous, which the researcher respectfully inclined to oblige with, and therefore, the names will not be written of the people that participated in the study but rather letters referring to them later in the analysis along with their ages.

All list of all the participants is presented in the table below:

Alias	Gender	Age
A	Female	20
B	Male	21
C	Female	21
D	Male	22
E	Male	23
F	Female	25
G	Male	27
H	Female	30
I	Male	19
X	Female	26

Y	Male	28
Z	Male	24

Figure 1

Collected information about the respondents

**The names are changed into letters for anonymity*

2.4 Analysis and interpretation

Both the analysis and interpretation of the data collected was carried out using a qualitative and abductive approach, looking for variations and patterns that were expressed during the interviews, in accordance with the type of research and questions in this study (Troost, 2010). Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009) claims that many researchers tend to use either inductive or deductive approaches for their work but doing this based on prior research increases the risk of a premature closure on the topics investigated. Therefore, during the structuring and organizing of data, this was analysed using an abductive approach as mentioned, searching for the patterns and themes based on self-identity, self-congruity, conspicuous consumption, materialism and social capital that could later be applied for the analysis. There is a switch between empirical material and the theoretical one, which means that neither of them is given in order to gain more knowledge (Flick et.al, 2004). Using the theoretical framework also worked as a way to create a better understanding when there was a switch between this and the data in order to generate new insight on the topic that could later be applied in the analysis.

As mentioned previously, the interviews were transcribed immediately after the interview had been conducted with the respondent, in order to both preserve all impressions and memories, as well as allowing for a preliminary analysis and coding of the data. This approach also ensured that themes that had been identified for the interviews could be investigated further in the subsequent ones when writing the analysis. After having interviewed all respondents and transcribed the data, the data was sorted into the different preliminary categories that had emerged during the transcription of each interview and were based on what was most pertinent for the study along with what the different common denominators were for each

interview and could thus be identified with the tools provided by the theoretical framework described. Data from the interviews could later be analyzed and categories were used to group common thoughts about conspicuous consumption, self-identity, self-image, materialism and social capital. This generated data and new insights about the research topic that was developed and used in the analytical section.

2.5 Literature research

To collect the literature necessary for the study, the researcher searched for articles and dissertations about the subject conspicuous consumption along with other articles about identity to create some inspiration for this study being conducted. Primary source for the information and literature gathered came from Lund University's own portal, LUBsearch. This was a good way of getting access to necessary literature along with gathering the information that was deemed useful for the study. The information on conspicuous consumption in relation to self-identity is very restricted due to much of the studies having a quantitative measure and a more economic perspective on the issue, which meant that the two subjects had to be tackled separately, in order to understand more and creating a collective standpoint on the subject and how it is related to each other. Even though Lund University and their own portal have information that is broad and complementary, it was still necessary to gather information from other sources such as Scopus, Google Scholar and physical copies of books, due to some of the information not being available on the platforms. By doing this and diverging by looking at it from more than one perspective to collecting information from several standpoints, it created a newfound support for the study in terms of being a good extract of information that provides with a deeper and more profound knowledge about the subject and thus contributing to creating a more thorough analysis and discussion.

2.6 Problems encountered

Some difficulties were encountered during the preparation of the questions for the interview and with the full adherence to the interviews. Since the outbreak of covid-19, it has been much harder to collect data due to all the restrictions imposed by the virus and the hazard that it brings. Upon the analysis of the answers from the interviews, the researcher identified some questions that could have been formulated in a slightly different way that could have made it more comprehensible for the respondents. Apart from this, twelve interviewees were participating in the study and this can create a problem with generalization if that was the

purpose of the study. The researcher did not explain what the purpose of the survey was but rather referred to the notions that are being used in the study and talking about different themes in relation to the interview. Looking back at the order of the questions, these could have been placed in a different sequence, to have a more logical sequence in the specific concern and make it easier for the interviewer to follow through.

2.7 Trustworthiness

To measure the quality in quantitative research, they use two criteria's: reliability and validity (May, 2011). It aims to decide whether the research will get the same result if you repeat it again in order to determine the authenticity and if it is coherent. For qualitative research, there are an alternative measure that can be used to decide and evaluate the research: authenticity (Smith & Dunworth, 2003). This is split into four categories which consist of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. All these categories were something researcher was able to confirm and achieve with explanations being demonstrated below.

2.7.1 Credibility

Credibility means that the social reality should be as credible as possible, and that research has been conducted within the regular framework (Flick et.al, 2004). This will be done by sending the respondents that participated in the interview a finished copy of the study that has been conducted in order to ensure that the result that was received is interpreted in a way that is align with the answers that was received. By doing this, it shows good faith and is a potent source in order to strengthen the credibility by being transparent in the working routine.

2.7.2 Transferability

With qualitative research, it is more desired to investigate deeper into a phenomenon rather than focusing on width of the problem. Since it is a small amount of people participating in the study with similar attributes, it makes it harder to transfer the results to other applicable scenarios. A thorough analysis was applied with the people involved in the study in order to try to balance this out to other scenarios as well. However, the aim is not to transfer the results

of the study but rather investigate underlying reasons behind this and makes this not as relevant for the study being conducted.

2.7.3 Dependability

A reliable research is based on transparency and the fact that the researcher always explains the decisions and choices throughout the process (May, 2011). By thoroughly explaining how the research was conducted in the methods, it gives the reader more insight to how the work was developed and the researcher's thoughts behind the application of different ideas. It creates a consistency and coherence between the reader and what is written in the text.

2.7.4 Confirmability

By confirming, it means that the study is not subject to any bias from the researcher and that it doesn't steer the direction of the work, in order to ensure that the study was conducted in good faith (Smith & Dunworth, 2003). This meant that the study was executed as objectively as possible without letting subjective thoughts influence the study that would mitigate the trustworthiness of the study. All the data collected is of the informant's thoughts and ideas, and this should also create more transparency, which in turn can generate higher objectivity with all the information collected being available to the reader.

2.8 Ethical considerations

Ethics has become a big part of social science and basically means that researchers critically reflect upon their principles of moral behavior (May, 2011). The ethical issues cannot be ignored because they are directly related to the integrity of a piece of research and of the disciplines that they involve (Flick, 2018). According to Flick (2018), there are four criteria's that are usually applied when talking about ethical principles. These are demand of information, demand of consent, demand of confidentiality and demand of the right to use.

Before the interviews, the respondents were informed about the participation and what the information would be used for. Every participant was notified that the agreeing to participate was voluntary and that they were free to abort the interview if they felt uncomfortable or had some other visceral feeling that made them uneasy with the situation. This is made in order to achieve the demand of consent and also the demand of information for ethical principles. In order to fulfill the demand of confidentiality, the interviewees were informed about their right to be anonymous, how the data will be used and kept and to withdraw answering any questions during the interview. That is why the names have been left out due to the researcher

respecting the will and thoughts of the respondents. By doing this, the researcher can also achieve the demand of confidentiality and not jeopardize the study by harming the participants in an unethical manner. Every interviewee allowed the information to be recorded and later on transcribed, which could then be used for the study in order to answer the research question. This meant that the last step of demand of the right to use was also fulfilled and transpired into the study being aligned with what the ethical principles consist of and was carefully taken into consideration when applying different ways of working in the best way possible.

3. Theoretical framework

In this chapter, the theoretical framework will be presented and will be the foundation for the analysis and discussion that will happen. First, an overview of the theory materialism will be introduced. After this, the theories social capital and conspicuous consumption will be explained to conclude the section with self-identity and self-image congruity to talk about how these theories are relevant in relation to each other.

3.1 Materialism

Belk (1985) defines the concept of materialism as “the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions,” where possessions assume a central role in the lives of those seen as highly materialistic and that these possessions provide the greatest sources of life satisfaction. Materialism as a social phenomenon has had a massive expansion with the continuing upgrowth of communication channels globally and therefore became a charming theme for behavioural economy (Richins & Rudmin, 1994). Materialism signifies the understanding, that matter and action is the main elements of existence, while in consumer research it is the main source of consumers' perception of aims and success and relationship with commodities (Ger & Belk, 1990). Belk (1985) claims that there a desire for control and ownership and a preservation of objects by saving them and retaining. It is a way of manifesting the tangibility by trying to control one’s environment. With this, it creates a desire not only to acquire possessions but also for others' possessions, be they objects, experiences, or persons and an

unwillingness to share possessions with others, a reluctance to lend or donate possessions to others.

Materialism is manifested by the symbolic function of acquisitions. In most conceptualizations of materialism, this symbolic function is generally thought of as what can be referred to as signaling others. With this, it makes the correlation between conspicuous consumption and materialism potent and being displayed in different societies (Wattanasuwan, 2005; Podoshen, Li & Zhang, 2011). There is a relationship created that occurs along with ‘the self’. As particular acquisitions may serve different identity motives, and the relative importance of the competing motives may change over time, so too may the processes by which those motives are fulfilled. By buying something expensive, it may not only be signaling others but can also be a self-signal of success and efficacy.

Materialism has indeed become cemented in societies around the world and is even rewarded and reinforced because of the strong cultural mores that have developed over the past few decades about the importance of showing wealth, signaling of power and its assumed societal power (Podoshen & Andrzejewski, 2012). It suggests that the motivated goal pursuit that we engage in at any one time is likely to depend on some explicit evaluation of the trade-off in resources inherent in the acquisition and use context (Kenrick et al., 2010). Frequency with which aspects of self-identity need to be bolstered, the relative number of opportunities available through consumption and nonconsumption means and the importance that others put on these signals are determinants that influence the situation and level of materialism. Therefore, materialism is manifested in the choices that people make in the fulfillment of self-identity goals.

3.2 Bourdieu and different types of capital

Economic theory has allowed to be foisted upon it a definition of the economy of practices which is the historical invention of capitalism; and by reducing the universe of exchanges to mercantile exchange. By doing this, it has been subjectively oriented towards maximization of profits and self-interest, where the other forms of exchanges have been defined as noneconomic. Depending on the field in which it functions, and at the cost of the more or less expensive transformations which are the precondition for its efficacy in the field in question, capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as *economic capital*, which is

immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights; as *cultural capital*, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications; and as *social capital*, made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of a title of nobility (Bourdieu, 1982).

Cultural capital comprises the social assets of a person (education, intellect, style of speech, style of dress, etc.) that promote social mobility in a stratified society. For economic capital, it refers more to possessing economic resources, such as money and properties. These elements can be land, factories, jobs, inherited income, and possessions, such as buildings, pictures, and ceramic (Trigg, 2001). By applying cultural and economic capital in the study as a theory, it would mean that it would take more of an economist perspective with focus on collective property attributes when reflecting on the paper and this is something that has already been done, resulting in only focusing upon social capital.

3.2.1 Social capital

For Bourdieu (1986), social capital is not uniformly available to members of a group or collective but available to those who provide efforts to acquire it by achieving positions of power and status and by developing goodwill. He believed that social capital is attached to class and other forms of stratification which in turn are associated with various forms of benefit or advancement. It is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group - which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

The existence of a network of connections is not a natural given, or even a social given, constituted once and for all by an initial act of institution, represented, in the case of the family group, by the genealogical definition of kinship relations, which is the characteristic of a social formation. The network of relationships is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously, or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term (Bourdieu, 1986).

Postmodern consumerism and the relationship between social class and consumption has

dissipated. Old restrictions imposed by social class and fixed status groups, were secured by adopting appropriate patterns of consumption, whereas lifestyles changed, and individuals attached new meanings onto commodities, with personal image more important than display and competition. There can be a grouping of lifestyle elements through principles that influence the behavior of individuals (Slater, 1997).

Investing in social capital is an increase in access to and utilization of resources within social networks (Lin, 1999). Once a product's utility moves from discrete experience to ongoing lifestyle, a product's price becomes a subscription fee, luring consumers into paying for more than what they objectively receive. Once the consumption's wider social function is acknowledged, there is fewer notions in denying external effects to the wider population. Achieving status through consumption need be no less important for those struggling out of subsistence than those steeped in affluence (Jaramillo et.al, 2003). It has created and driven a reorientation of conspicuous consumption, from the physicality of consumption to the conspicuity of preferences.

3.3 Conspicuous consumption

Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption is based on the evolution of a leisure class whose members are not required to work but appropriate a surplus produced by those who do work, the working class. Once societies start to produce a surplus the relationship between private property and status becomes increasingly important (Veblen, 1899). Status derives from the judgments that other members of society make of an individual's position in society, and for this position to be established, there must be a display of wealth. Lützel & Goldschmidt (1996) posit that the display and the acquirement of status-oriented products play a prominent role in the maintenance of Western-based social structures and that this means that individuals are motivated to maintain status by continuously engaging in the acquisition of conspicuous goods.

Veblen (1899) argued that an individual's conspicuous consumption depends not only on the actual level of spending but also spending compared with that of others. He emphasised on the importance and effects of an individual's reference groups to their consumption patterns. Conspicuous consumption manifests itself in two dimensions. First one is consumption that permits comparison between individuals and is meant to demonstrate one's status to be above those below. On the other side, there is the practice of imitating the consumption standards of those of higher status with the intent of appearing to also possess that status (Memushi, 2013).

Conspicuous consumption has thus incorporated dimensions related to three dimensions in the modern society: *ostentation and signaling, uniqueness and social conformity*.

Ostentation and signaling means that wealth is not the most efficient signal anymore by paying excessive prices for conspicuous goods. Instead, one might prefer to purchase a larger quantity of conspicuous goods at a lower price, or a higher quality of conspicuous good at a higher price. There has been a transformation and conspicuous consumption has become a tool of self-construction via visible consumption and use of symbolic products (Grace & Griffin, 2009).

Uniqueness refers to the fact that consumers acquire brands that are associated with social perception and status, providing a self-image that distinct themselves from others. There is an emphasis on uniqueness because market demand decreases when others are purchasing the same good (Corneo & Jeanne, 1997). Incentives for conspicuous consumption in this sense thus becomes based on social norms and allocating status. It is the desire to avoid social ostracism, rather than the search for prestige that becomes the motive.

Social conformity highlights that items and the meaning of it, and even which items are deemed socially symbolic, often changes. It is inherently dynamic and therefore results in a series of interdependent symbolic statements made through time by individuals within a social system. Products that are accepted by individuals confirm their similar position in the social hierarchy, the underlying motivation being to relate to others by emulating usage of the same products (Burt, 1982).

Due to technological advancements, consumers now have better access to share their purchase and consumption experiences (Kim et.al, 2015). Conspicuous consumption can be looked upon as a way of presenting one's wealth to maintain or acquire social status through publicly consumed products. It becomes a way of engaging in greater intended self-image when doing this because it is something that enhances the attractiveness of the purchase. When highlighting their conspicuous purchases in different ways with seamlessly all the endless possibilities that have become available for the consumer today, it creates a way of constituting identity via possession (Berger & Iyengar, 2013).

3.4 Self-identity

Self-identity is defined as an individual's adoption of groups or traits as part of their self-concept (Fleming & Petty, 2000). It encompasses a person's uniqueness expressed through one's values, attitudes and opinions. Self-identity is not merely the persistence of a self over time, it is not found in the individual's behaviour or the reaction of other people, and it is not given as a result of the continuity of an individual's action-system. Self-identity is found in the capacity to keep a narrative going and must be routinely created and maintained in the reflexive activities of an individual. It is what the individual is conscious of in terms self-consciousness (Giddens, 1991). Because of modern times, self-identity needs to be created and continually rearranged against the backdrop of variable experiences of every-day life and the fragmenting tendencies of modern institutions. According to Giddens (1991), the self becomes a development of internally referential lifespan; the lifespan is separated from extrinsic moral, social, and traditional considerations and the self becomes interpreted in terms of self-determination alone. People consume in ways that are consistent with their sense of self and thus making the phenomenon conspicuous consumption pertinent (Sirgy, 1982).

Self-identity was based upon as well as the traditional ties, families and rituals which determined people's lives in pre-modern societies. This is no longer the case and certain identities being displayed have begun to disappear and new ones have been formulated that gives greater mastery over the social relations and social framework reflexively integrated into the creation of the self than was previously possible (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1991). With conspicuous consumption, this can work in a way to replace some of these identities in order to avoid certain anxieties or crisis regarding identities. Individual choice is not as restricted and this allows the self to accomplish much greater mastery over the social relations and social framework reflexively integrated into the creation of the self than was previously possible (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Self-identity is no longer given like it was in pre-modern settings as a result of traditions, localities, rituals or family. It is today created by the individual through choice. It encompasses signals to others of an external identity and personal preferences. It is used as a vehicle to convey the supremacy of personal uniqueness and social groups through the purchase of products (Mann & Sahni, 2015). Consumers use status products to assimilate the symbolic connotation into their own individuality and use luxury brands to support and improve their self-expression and self-identity (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004; Dittmar, 1994). Purchasing high quality products that correlates with high prices and sufficiently provides positive social effects are revealed as the

target of the desire of those who express themselves strongly for the products they acquire (Amaldoss & Jain, 2005).

3.4.4 Self-image congruency

The self is a collection of different but related self-perceptions. The self includes a multiplicity of images that people are to themselves and to one another. These self-images motivate individuals to patronize brands whose images relate in some meaningful way to their own self-images. Consumption thus becomes about decisions and choices that are guided by self-image and it is suggested that consumers will choose products whose images are congruent with their own (Belk, 1988).

As a way of constructing the self, consumers express themselves by choosing among several product variants (Coleman, 1983). With the different habits of consumption, consumers will be motivated to purchase positively valued products in order to maintain a positive self-image but will also seek out products that have an image similar to their own to maintain this the ideal type of self that they want to convey to others. Consumption choice is motivated by consumers' perceptions, self-image congruence and the consumers' positive association with the symbolic meanings of the products and is then expected to influence attitudes and purchase intentions as a result (Trentmann, 2016).

Individuals consume brands not just to inform others about their self-image but also to boost their own self-esteem, convey social status and affirm their sense of self (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004). Because of this, it enables people to reduce discrepancies between what they want to be and who they actually are and serves to boost their self-esteem as individuals. For conspicuous consumption, it becomes a way of motivating people to behave in ways that are consistent with themselves. People have beliefs about their own identities, values, lifestyles, preferences, and habits. By consuming high-end valued products, it becomes a way of protecting all of these beliefs that they have created and is a way of striving towards their ideal way of looking at themselves, with commodities becoming a center piece in many peoples' lives. Individuals then create barriers and try to protect these beliefs based on major threats stemming from internal and external sources (Mangleburg et.al, 1998).

3.5 Theoretical appliance

Materialism, conspicuous consumption, and social capital can be argued to all be at the same side of a coin. Conspicuous consumption is a phenomenon where consumer preferences are determined by social needs and this is related to Bourdieu (1986) way of looking at reference groups and social capital, largely the feeling of prestige, which is the aspects of materialism that has been defined by Belk (1988) and where an individual displays wealth through a high degree of luxury expenditures on consumption and services (Trigg, 2001). People are generally motivated to construct and maintain individual identities, or subjective concepts of themselves (Swann & Bosson, 2010). Consistent with what Veblen (1899) claims, it becomes a consequence of consumers' desire to signal wealth or status. Many consumers use goods to express their personalities and to establish social relationships (Dittmar, 1992; Dittmar & Pepper, 1994). Objects, products, experiences, and services that individuals consume help to form the fabric of these identities, linking the phenomenon with a variety of identity motives. People seek to fulfill these distinct motives as they construct and maintain their identities. Material goods act as symbolic representations of the image's consumers have of themselves that they want to express to surrounding others in order to attain status. Social capital thus also becomes pertinent because status is a form of social capital that can be achieved from consuming conspicuous. Product satisfaction related to these goods is often derived from audience reaction, as opposed to product use (Wong, 1997). This satisfaction is believed to be vested in the belief that displays of wealth will lead to greater social status (Mullins, 2006). Social life itself becomes subjected to the forces of commodification and consumption, so consumers try to create connections with commodities.

Consumers use possessions and brands to create their self-identities and communicate these selves to others and to themselves (Belk, 1988). Possessions constitute an integral part of a person's identity. Material objects that belong to someone become clues for definition to be used by the person and by others through interaction. By doing this, the consumer creates a loop of elevation in regard to the need of self, satisfaction and status seeking by acquiring more possessions and an absence of this can result in anxiety and making individuals question their identities that have been constructed (Baudrillard, 2016). However, this must be congruent not only to who they are as a person but also the peers amongst them. An individual's identity allows one to understand how they would behave in a social setting and how they are connected to others (Kramer, 2006). Individuals shape their identity through their consumer behavior but are motivated by social group goals rather than individual goals

(Kamakura & Du, 2012) and make the group's characteristics their own personal characteristics and incorporating social motives in their personal identities. Conspicuous consumption is evident to others they wish to impress. It is believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in life, whereas higher self-image congruity will have a positive impact on consumers' attitudes, level of preference and future purchase intentions towards a product and is highly correlated with conspicuous consumption and influences behavior. This makes possessions a central piece of people's lives and enhance their status either individually or socially by consuming goods publicly or possessing visible affluence (Richins & Rudmin, 1994).

By analyzing the answers given from the respondents, the research aims to understand what their perspectives are and how they perceive the phenomenon. With the explanation given previously how the theories can be interdependent of each other, it becomes more apparent that these notions become relevant for the study. Therefore, a model could be created where the notions are separated into two different spaces to clarify for the reader. In one category, there are notions relating to conspicuous consumption, and in the other, there are notions relating to the self of an individual. As the model demonstrates, the study is dependent of these notions, whilst they also interact with each other. The analysis will be conducted based on this and applied in the analysis section along with the empirical material that have been collected.

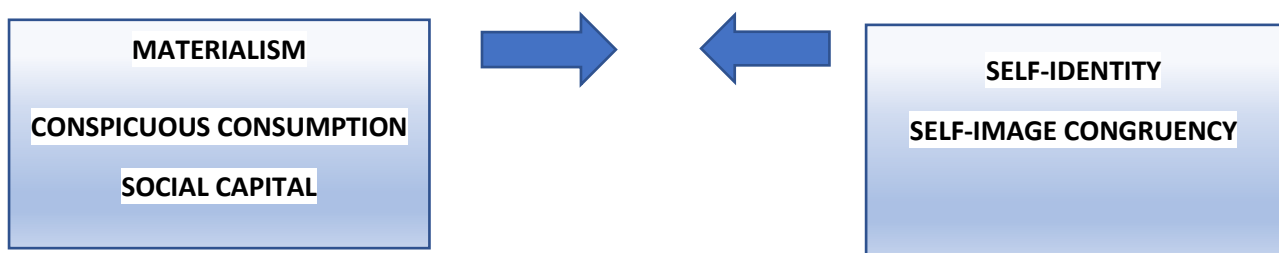


Figure 2

Linkage of the different theories and how they relate to each other

4. Analysis

The empirical material will here be analyzed from the theoretical framework. The answers that were received from the respondents work as a guideline to answer the research questions and the aim of the study. Different categories are presented based on the answers in order to demonstrate how conspicuous consumption and self-identity are correlated. Interesting findings appeared from this, which is beneficial for the results that will be highlighted in this chapter.

4.1 The emergence of an extended self by consuming conspicuously

With the consumption of unnecessary and more luxurious products, it creates a way of feeding into a kind of extended self, whereas before we saw familiarity, protection and stability used to be the hallmark for many identities to achieve. With conspicuous consumption, this is no longer the case and it possible to replace some of the identities in order to avoid certain anxieties or crisis (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Many respondents claim that the commodities and products becoming more accessible to them, have changed their way of living with now making the unnecessary consumption a pattern and trend that we must withhold and follow. Z (24) claims this:

‘‘People acclaim you based on how you are dressed and how you look. If I wear a normal t-shirt and normal outfit, when I enter, let’s say for example the car dealer, and someone else walks into the same store with a suit and trying to close the same deal, he is probably looked upon more positively because they probably believe that he is the one who can afford the car that I also want. Society over time has made us believe in order to be up in the upper echelon, you need to have everything that includes not only money but style, appearance, and the aura that beams success to others.’’

Indeed, as seen from the quote, the informant claims that consuming and especially consuming conspicuously is becoming more globalized and thus transforming our barriers as we knew before. They have become more unified in the sense that it is in many ways a single world with a unitary framework of experience. It creates new opportunities for Z (24) and can shape self-presentation regarding individual and relational context with the usage of possessions. They become anchors through which these contests are waged, and the sense of the coherent core self is maintained (Belk, 1988). It is not about the consumption of the product, but rather about the ostentation of power and possibilities for the respondent. Foroudi et al. (2014) claims that individuals feel an emotional attachment to luxury brands they have

never bought or used. Z (24) mentions that you need to look good and will be more positively looked upon if you adhere to all the requirements that are being demanded. People are gaining more control not only over themselves but also over possessions. The greater the control we exercise, the more closely allied with self the object should become (Giddens, 1991).

Democratisation of consumer goods has opened new barriers for the consumer. Veblen (1899) talked about consumption that permits comparison between individuals and is meant to demonstrate one's status to be above those below. This way of thinking has also become obsolete due to it being more difficult for the rich to distinguish its consumption from the expenditure power with consumers being able to spend more money. Conspicuous consumption and its relationship with other concepts dear to the understanding of consumption plays a central part because it plays a role in the growth of a consumer society (Bagwell & Bernheim, 1996). Conspicuous goods extend the self in a way that provides consumers with contemporary lifestyles to them and becomes an opportunity presented for a consumer to reach the upper echelons of society as F (25) explains: *'I think that consuming conspicuously is something that creates contemporaneity. It becomes easy to spot something different when someone does not own any designers but suddenly have a handbag of a famous brand. It is transparent that people are trying to elevate themselves.* It becomes routines incorporated into the habits of eating, dressing, means of acting and preferred milieu to participate in for the informants. Possessions becomes a central piece due to this in people's lives. People make judgements of others based on their possessions and use possessions to express their identity in terms of who they are or would like to be (Belk, 1988).

The project of the self is transformed into the possession of desired goods and the pursuit of an artificially structured lifestyle. Self-identity is no longer reliant longer of an individual's family or geographical situation, and it is not strictly dependent upon traditions or rituals (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). It has allowed the individual to gain much more control than ever before over social relations and the social framework, within which the framework of the self is integrated (Mason, 1998). Material goods thus acts as symbolic representations of the image's consumers have of themselves that they want to express to surrounding others. This is what F (25) said about this:

' I think a lot of people believe in what they buy and consume makes them reach a higher class in life. It is more of a subconscious thing with people for example going on vacation summer which they barely can afford but it is a way of reflecting the lifestyle want and get

that social affirmation from others. I think a lot of people use it and consume a lot because they want to be seen as someone belonging somewhere else in a social class.’’

As can be seen from the quote, consumers try to reflect a lifestyle that is appealing to others. Bourdieu (1986) claims that relationships are not merely given but an initial act of institution, represented, in the case of the family group, by the genealogical definition of kinship relations. F (25) talks about it becoming a subconscious thing and wanting to attain social affirmation to reach a higher class. However, Giddens (1991) claims that the lifespan and self-identity is separated from extrinsic moral, social, and traditional considerations. F (25) mentions that they want to be someone who they perhaps are not. Based on the answer, social desirability also seems to be one of the key factors in creating their identity. By identifying themselves with other peers using conspicuous consumption as a tool to achieve this, it creates a possibility to view themselves in the same light as the ones they want to be affiliated with. Individuals consume brands not just to inform others about their self-image but also to boost their own self-esteem, convey social status and affirm their sense of self (O’Cass & McEwen, 2004). It has indeed become cemented in societies around the world and is even rewarded and reinforced because of the strong cultural mores that have developed over the past few decades about the importance of showing wealth, signaling of power and its assumed societal power (Podoshen & Andrzejewski, 2012). Individuals in modern societies are more occupied with finding their own self-identity and related to the hedonic desire for luxurious items among the elite reinforces the idea that their lifestyle is obtainable for others also. We can therefore see prestige-seeking behavior amongst the informants where image and identity become visible through their consumption patterns and habits.

The self of an individual is associated with the possessions of the person that portray identity. These possessions are imperative dimensions of self as consumers develop perceptions about the individual ‘self’. This self is related to the preferences of the individual in acquiring these achievements and sustaining the possessions developed from the products and brands, especially luxury. Consumers purchase luxury goods to intrinsically motivate and reward themselves to satisfy psychological needs. (Tatt, 2010). The development of the self is the core of individuals’ development. Using this, it extends to more than just the self and self-determination as Giddens (1991) and Sirgy (1982) claims, but consumers also seeks affirmance with others and consume based on their choices and preferences which permeate their own lifestyle and creates contemporaneity by pursuing what others do when consuming. Endless possibilities and different habits of consumption makes it necessary for the consumer

to consume products that align with themselves in order to maintain a positive self-image and the ideal type of self that they want to convey to others (Chaudhuri, Mazumdar & Ghoshal, 2011). With the projection of a contemporary lifestyle where the informants engage in conspicuous consumption, it becomes a way of evolving the self and thus making person-object association thoroughly transform the individuals acquiring the products and brands. By doing this, it evolves from the importance of possessions like Belk (1988) mentions is the most imperative aspect of consumption to that of the person and the pursuit of an artificially structured lifestyle in order to reduce discrepancies between what they want to be and who they actually are.

4.2 Identity consistent with objects that are more refined

The informants' statements show that the practices of accessing and obtaining luxury items should be with their self-identity and reflect it in a way that aligns with how they view upon themselves. The items that are considered conspicuous will only be used if they feel the objects are consistent or compatible with who they are as a person. Researchers have often only taken the commodity into consideration (Podoshen & Andrzejewski, 2012; Paurav, 2008), differentiating goods and put emphasis on the demonstration of wealth, income and status through consumption of visible products that can later be applied in marketing strategies. This is relevant and has been the foundation for many prominent articles within this field (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004; Amaldoss & Jain, 2005) but conspicuous consumption today goes beyond just looking at brand perspectives and expenditures. It is also about decisions and choices that are guided by self-image and it is suggested that consumers will choose products whose images are congruent with their own (Belk, 1988). Words such as ‘‘complement’’ and ‘‘represent’’ are some recurrent words being used as a way of describing the items in alignment to how they perceive themselves, as the following narratives from A (20) demonstrate:

‘‘When it comes to items like expensive clothing, it enhances my personality. What I mean with that, when I put on these types of garments, I feel good about myself. When I see something that would make me feel good about myself, I don't like to put a price tag on it. It doesn't matter how long I have to save or what I have to spend, items who make me look good and make me feel good complements me as a person and becomes necessary for me to have.’’

These narratives underlie the fact that luxury items and conspicuous consumption should reflect the consumer's identity in a consistent way. This is something that is also being supported in prior literature with how possessions function as a guidance in order for the individual to identify themselves in every stage of life, because individuals learn to construe symbolic cues attached to the objects, as well as products around them, and therefore playing an essential role to how they look upon themselves (Sirgy, 1982). Wanting to feel good when consuming conspicuously is reflected upon, whereas this is valued in high regard, whilst also making comparisons to how it correlates to other aspects of you as a person. Individuals consume brands not just to inform others about their self-image but also to boost their own self-esteem, convey social status and affirm their sense of self (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004). Consumers are more likely to implicitly infer that the use of the item should meet their need for self-esteem. Researchers' views and approaches in literature have had an emphasis on the demonstration of wealth, income and status through consumption of visible products. They have claimed that conspicuous consumption is meant to demonstrate one's status to be above those below (Mullins, 2006; O'Cass & McEwen, 2004; Veblen, 1899). However, we can see from the quote that respondent A (20) talks about conspicuous consumption enhancing his personality and makes him feel good about himself as a person. It shows that conspicuous consumption enables them to reduce discrepancies between what they want to be and who they are and serves to boost their self-esteem as individuals. There is a projection on themselves towards items based on their ideals and who they want to be as a person. Mangleburg et al (1998) talks about the fact that the greater the match between the brand-user image with the consumer's ideal self-image, the more likely that consumers implicitly infer that the use of the brand should be congruent with their ideals. Consequently, by consuming conspicuously, A (20) is subsequently trying to attain own goals and values with the increased opportunities in society, rather than comparing with others due to it not being as pertinent like it was before when aristocracy and different stratifications of the society was prominent and decided people's fate. With the quote that was illustrated previously, it can be deemed as consuming high-end valued products is a way of protecting their beliefs as a consumer and creates a way of striving towards their ideal self in order to reach own goals and vision, with commodities becoming a center piece in his life.

One notable aspect that also seems to be expressed by the majority of the respondents is that the product has to be refined and immaculate. Some informants mentioned the need of looking and feeling good and explains how they deliberately try to make efforts in order to

show progression, break into desired social or business circles, or display their relative affluence. They are trying to match their personal vision that each of them has on luxury, whether it is centered on themselves or on other people as an indicator of social success, as illustrated by following quotes from the respondent D (22):

‘The places you go and the clothes you wear, everything about your appearance becomes important in order to represent you as a person with class. How you dress, how you look, how you talk. It either adds or takes away from your social status. I was dating someone, and we went to a restaurant. He wanted me to appear in a certain outfit because I was going to meet his friends, and I felt it was baffling because how one person looks could have so much meaning to someone. Some rules are spoken, and some are unspoken so you have to know about them in order to be aware how to be and how to act.’

By consuming conspicuously, it allows the participants to feel valued, magnified, and more attractive, but also reach their ideal self-image in terms of self-presentation, whatever the way in which they access the items. In prior literature, this has not been highlighted and focus have been on the display and acquirement of conspicuous goods and status-oriented products and the motive is that consumers are motivated to maintain status by signaling wealth and leading to continuously engaging in conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899; Lützel & Goldschmidt, 1996). With the consumption of more refined items, it allows them to maintain individual identities, or subjective concepts of themselves (Swann & Bosson, 2010).

Analyzing these results, it can be suggested that conspicuous consumption becomes way of bolstering self-esteem and how they look upon themselves. The self is a development of internally referential lifespan; the lifespan is separated from extrinsic moral, social and traditional considerations and the self becomes interpreted in terms of self-determination alone (Giddens, 1991). With the consumption of more refined items, it is a way of creating intrinsic satisfaction and reach their ideal self, whereas conspicuous consumption has become a dominant factor where different possibilities that modernity presents for individuals has profound effects on their self-identification and becomes a reflexive project of the self. They hold more power influence in regard to changes that affect their own life and increased diversity of choices results in more diverse groups of individuals within society. Conspicuous consumption should thus reflect the consumer's identity in a consistent way and refined items are objects that allows them to form the fabric of these identities that they want to achieve.

4.3 Fostering of new identities with conspicuous consumption

Conspicuous consumption has been used to explain the anticipation of expressing one's status and/or identity, via visible consumption beyond economical or physical benefits of goods (Ashmore & Jussim, 1997; Kamakura & Du, 2012; Chaudhuri, Mazumdar & Ghoshal, 2011). In prior literature for conspicuous consumption, this has been the way of conducting research where identity becomes a uniform stimulus and takes shape through the visibility of consumption (Wisman, 2009; Podoshen & Andrzejewski, 2012). Many of the informants claims that owned luxury object plays a role in constructing new identities. Identity is interchangeable and is enabled by conspicuous consumption. This is something that was frequently touched upon by the interviewees and becomes important in the way of expressing themselves and an important piece in the creation of a self. One of the respondents E (23) said this when asked about it:

'' If I attribute certain meanings to companies and the products, and if I can identify myself with these meanings, it will increase my chance of me buying their products because it is a way of making me a new person. For example, if you make a comparison between Nike and Adidas, I just think Adidas is cooler, and more hip appear rather than Nike even though they sell the same things. The attributes become very important to me then because it is a way of creating a scenario where I can become something I desire to be. ''

This suggest that the respondent wants to use items in order to enhance or change who it is as a person, tapping into the ideals and dreams. It becomes a way of evaluating if the items fit with their desired self-identity. Self-identity needs to be created and continually rearranged against the backdrop of variable experiences of every-day life (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). The purpose becomes to convey a certain image or message towards others. Consumption choice thus becomes motivated by consumers' perceptions, self-image congruence and the consumers' positive association with the symbolic meanings of the products and is then expected to influence attitudes and purchase intentions as a result (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014).

Product satisfaction related to conspicuous goods is often derived from audience reaction, as opposed to product use (Wong, 1997). Display and acquirement of conspicuous goods have resulted in individuals being motivated to maintain status and their self-image by continuously engaging and consuming conspicuously. It becomes a process of creating compatible bridges that fit both yourself and the others that you interact with. Informants

expressed the fact and wish of staying unique while being accepted as well. This becomes evident in the underlying quote from Y (28):

‘‘ It is a lot about showing power and that you are doing well. Wearing a watch or a shirt that costs several grand just to flex with it. When they do this you also want to do this because you don’t want to be the odd one in the group. Many people want to stick out, of course but many people also want to be part of the crowd, feel a sense of belonging’’

It can be seen as the informant talks about showing off taste and interest to other people. Rather than trying to follow what everybody else is doing, Y (28) mentions the need to create something new by consuming rare products. Conflicting interests can arise in the work of creating the self in relation to the social surrounding. Nonetheless, for most part it seems like the wish to fit in and become accepted while also staying unique. In prior literature, being unique has been discussed in conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899; Bian & Forsythe, 2012), but has not been highlighted in relation to self-identity. There are norms that are becoming more cemented about consumption and people are starting to openly acknowledge them. Y (28) talks about showing power and that you are doing well. Products that are accepted by individuals confirm their similar position in the social hierarchy, the underlying motivation being to relate to others by emulating usage of the same products (Burt, 1982). Therefore, the images that are being presented in terms of conspicuous consumption from an individual must be echoed and abided in the way that the norms in the society works. By voluntarily not doing this, it creates a way of creating an exclusion of the member and this can lead to anxiety and an identity crisis. Consumers create a loop of elevation in regard to the need of self, satisfaction and status and thus trying to acquire more possessions (Baudrillard, 2016). It becomes a multifaceted act with different roles of fulfilling and adhere to. More or less constant, there is an intense and rapid impulse of change within modern institutions and the structured reflexivity of modern social life. There is a constant struggle to balance the personal style, which is highly influenced by others, with other social norms and the life that you live. A need is created where it becomes essential to find something that is compatible with who you are as a person and with others that you interact with (Amaldoss & Jain, 2005). Possessions becomes a central piece due to this in people’s lives. People make judgements of others based on their possessions and use possessions to express their identity in terms of who they are or would like to be (Belk, 1988). By consuming the product or brand and their social symbolic qualities, consumers can move closer to the ideal self and the ideal of what society expects and wants from a consumer.

With the central importance of possessions and being intertwined with identity, this also becomes of great value to the consumers and thus they will attempt to protect and enhance it (Sirgy, 1982). The symbolic meanings of a product also become important due to the communication of a brand in the process of identity construction and maintenance. What we choose not to consume is also an important factor and an important aspect in identity construction. Some respondents said this in the underlying statements about how their negative attitudes towards some products they want to avoid consuming:

“ If I have a brand and buy it all the time, and then society changes and all drug addicts start loving this brand. Then I would stop buying the product because I don't want to be associated with this kind of people. The stigmatization that arises makes me not want to be a part of this because the society would view me differently otherwise.”

“ I don't want to be associated with a negative group. I think there is a lot of brands also that can produce the same quality with how saturated the market is today. It is more about fitting in with the norms that the society have produced today that we are obliged to follow. We don't want to be breaking these norms usually because then we are considered weird or outsiders”

This negative symbolic consumption explains how individuals reject certain items of symbolic reasons to avoid some unwanted states of being (Yang & Mattila, 2017). The informants want to exude something, not only by means of their possessions, but also by the means of what they do or experience in relation to their personality. Consequently, their social image and self-image are not affected by only what they consume but also what they choose to avoid in regard to consumption (Alnawas & Altarifi, 2016). Therefore, a brand's attributes match the consumer's desired self-image and are used to achieve a sense of fulfillment. With increased choice about their lives and more variety of available possibilities, including more information from all over the world, individuals do not passively accept their self-identity but rather make it what it needs to be and constantly reforming it.

With these results, the consumer can construct new identities against the backdrop of variable experiences of every-day life. A consumer's life is not static and undergoes changes all the time. What is trendy and fashionable can become obsolete the next. This affects the consumer and the purchases that it makes. As mentioned, negative symbolic consumption is something that respondents tend to reject due them wanting to exude something in relation to their personalities and self-identity. They choose to avoid certain items whilst deliberately

engaging in others. By doing this, it creates a sense of acceptance according to societal norms on what is acceptable to consume and not. Consumers try to reflexively form a self-identity and have come to realise that current actions shape the future outcome. People make judgements of others based on their possessions and use possessions to express their identity in terms of who they are or would like to be (Belk, 1988). Therefore, consumers are not passive as Veblen (1899) along with what other researchers claim but rather make their self-identity what it needs to be and constantly reforming it throughout the process of consuming conspicuously.

4.4 Capitalizing on a paradigm shift in society

When talking about conspicuous consumption, much has been focused on the tangible parts of the phenomenon and the visibility has been in focus before in order to display wealth. Veblen's (1899) idea was that conspicuous consumption is based on the evolution of a leisure class whose members are not required to work but appropriate a surplus produced by those who do work. Status derives from the judgments that other members of society make of an individual's position in society, and for this position to be established, and there must be a display of wealth (Trigg, 2001). Informants states that the access of conspicuous goods have become available in a way that wasn't possible before. It has become easier for individuals to consume in a way that is consistent with their self-identity due to globalization, advanced developments of technology and more individualization. Consumers can access and attain items from all over the world to create a greater compatibility between their identity and who they want to identify as. Following narratives by X (26) and A (20) explains and demonstrates that:

“Globalization made it possible for us to get any product we want from anywhere in the world. When you see a famous people on Instagram that advertise a famous product, we can also consume this item. The globalization has increased the need for us to engage in conspicuous consumption in order to keep up with the trends that are created in society.”

“Nowadays, its less about families and traditions. It is easier to go wherever you want and get more impressions, I think that you can easier lose your ties and roots and individuality becomes more centered in different lives.”

Indeed, these narratives suggest that our choices as individuals are becoming more centered in what we desire and want. Changes have drastically been made with the transformations of place and the imposition of distance into locality, along with the centrality of mediated experience. What is appropriate and acceptable behavior today could be seen differently tomorrow, due to new knowledge or changed circumstances (Giddens, 1991). With this bearing in mind, other researchers have thus claimed that conspicuous consumption is about denoting some distinctive capabilities between social classes and taste. What the informant's states is that these classes and capabilities are diminishing the phenomenal world of an individual. By having access and more possibilities, it becomes easier for the respondents to keep up with the intense and rapid impulse of change within modern institutions and the structured reflexivity of modern social life. As the standards of living have increased during the past decades, people are increasingly becoming more educated and are enjoying well-paid occupations, higher income, and stronger spending power (O'Cass & Siahtiri, 2014). Much of this consumption could be considered "unnecessary", considering that we usually do not buy clothes or brands thanks to their utility (Bauman, 2001).

Informants share in their statements the fact that they have been freed from the old restrictions imposed by social class and fixed status groups rather than being tied to them. Consumers have increasing financial resources and with the spending of this, it is a way of stimulating the consumption of goods and services (Taylor, Harrison & Kraus, 2008). The respondents mention and talk about individuality becoming more apparent and losing our roots to what was once considered sacred. They are now engaging in conspicuous consumption because it is a way of being able to conceive the world as something they can control, use and change for their own purposes and put themselves at the center. This creates a difference compared to what prior literature has said about owning possessions. Many authors states that possessions assume a central role in the lives of those seen as highly materialistic and that these possessions provide the greatest sources of life satisfaction. (Belk, 1985; Ger & Belk, 1990). Modern consumption has gone from the physicality of consumption to the conspicuity of preferences. It is no longer solely about the possession, but the symbolic connotation is also something that is of crucial importance and can be derived from self-identity and the desire to obtain status. Pine et.al (1999) claims that we have seen a shift in the emphasizing of exhibits to now trying to seek experiences. It becomes manifested in the choices that people make in the fulfillment of self-identity goals. There is an importance of understanding the motives underlying their goals and behaviors, and not focusing primarily on the behavior itself.

Consumption of goods have expanded, with the ability to appreciate and enjoy have become equally as important with outright possession and ownership. The underlying statement can confirm this from respondent C (21):

‘‘Absolutely, I think all items have some sort of symbolic value, and it’s created through the need of social status. I think the brand itself and what they put out, and that the name associated with the brand holds huge value. Before it was more that you buy something just because you need it and how it looked but now, I feel like I buy something for other values, such as the symbolic value.’’

As seen by this quote, it can be viewed that the informant does not only think of the possession as a way of obtaining status but also takes the symbolic value into consideration. A precondition for conspicuous consumption based on prior literature has been that the product choice is visible to those others and can be mainly the reason for deliberately engaging with this phenomenon (Heffetz, 2011; Foroudi et.al, 2014). Whilst visibility plays a part in conspicuous consumption and many consumers try to be ostentatious with their wealth and status by signaling this to others, the symbolic value is neglected by many authors in prior literature for conspicuous consumption. However, the respondent claims that symbolic value becomes a main reason for buying an item. Increased choices and more available options give people more control over their own lives. This means that C (21) is confronted with a plurality of choices about all aspects of life. The consumer motive is a desire to conform to established usage, to avoid unfavorable comments and to live according to the accepted rules of decency in the quality, quantity and degree of goods consumed, as well as in the worthy employment of their time and effort (O’Cass & McEwen, 2004). All the little decisions about day-to-day life have much greater effect on self-identity now than in traditional settings and everything today is subject to control and correction; nothing is merely given. With all the endless possibilities that have become available for the consumer today, it constitutes an identity via possession and consumers use status products to assimilate the symbolic connotation into their own individuality and use luxury brands to support and improve their self-expression and self-identity (Dittmar, 1994).

It can thus be stated that more opportunities have become available for consumers and with more opportunities presenting itself, which creates more commitment to conspicuous consumption. Changes within modern institutions and the structured reflexivity of modern social life has created mediated experiences which makes it easier for a consumer to keep up with what is considered acceptable behavior when following the trends. Consumers have been

freed from old restrictions where conspicuous consumption becomes a way of being able to conceive the world as something they can control, use and change for their own purposes and put themselves at the center with the reflexivity that we are seeing. Modern consumption has gone from the physicality of consumption to the conspicuity of preferences. Here, symbolic value plays a potent part and have gained stronger influence on consumers. The characteristics of choice becomes apparent whereas consumers decide what information to incorporate and base their actions upon. With many options being available, consumers assimilate the symbolic connotation into their own individuality and use luxury brands to support and improve their self-expression and self-identity (Berger & Iyengar, 2013).

4.5 Peer pressure and conspicuous consumption

Exposure to social networks, susceptibility to reference group influence, and social compliance have been linked to conspicuous consumption (O’Cass & McEwen, 2004).

Luxury is something that many people want but cannot afford. However, people still engage in this kind of behavior of consumption, regardless if they can afford it or not because it is a way to provide a sense of power or control over others because the possession of a brand can be identified by other peers (O’Cass & Siahtiri, 2014). This becomes apparent with consumers of conspicuous goods because luxury products often provide people the attention and status that many crave. Informants claim that they search for products that they consider prestigious in relation to their reference groups and in order to fulfill some type of social requirement.

Bourdieu (1986) talks about social relations and believed that social capital is attached to class and other forms of stratification which in turn are associated with various forms of benefits. Postmodern consumerism and the relationship between social class and consumption has dissipated. Lifestyles have changed, and individuals attach new meanings onto commodities, with personal image more important than display and competition (Slater, 1997). The wish to impress others with their ability to pay for prestigious goods and brands motivates consumers and makes them more aware of social cues related to conspicuous consumption. Individuals use this phenomenon as a way of improving their image and the public image of consumers in the explicit communication of the products that it exhibits in its social group (Heffetz, 2012). Consequently, for many of the consumers today, there is a desire to impress others also rather than only your peers. It creates a motivation to display their behavior to other consumers and a significant portion of their funds are spent on

luxurious items since they can be considered as accommodating a social need. The underlying statement that the informant H (30) provided shows this:

“Peer pressure is definitely something that is real and have enabled many of my purchases. I do feel a bit of pressure because if things don’t come into a trend again, then I would not even consider them. Trends enable this pressure, so I feel obliged to follow these trends and pressured by it if I don’t.”

As we can see from the quote, there is a desire to explicitly display their conspicuous consumption towards others and creates a favorable attitude because ostentation of products is of vital importance in the consumption we are seeing today. The informant tries to emulate the consumption behavior of others and become subject to pressures to engage in conspicuous consumption. With the different habits of consumption, H (30) will be motivated to purchase positively valued products in order to maintain a positive self-image but will also seek out products that have an image similar to their own to maintain this the ideal type of self that they want to convey to others. Achieving status through consumption need be no less important for those struggling out of subsistence than those steeped in affluence (Jaramillo et.al, 2003). Consequently, the desire to impress others, including peers but also others, becomes very significant for H (30). It has the power to change the behavior and care about external influences such as social consumption motivation. Based on this, the respondent is susceptible and vulnerable to other social groups and own peers, thus becoming of heavy influence on their lives. Social capital is derived from community engagement and the trust-bonds that form in that community that can be leveraged for personal and public benefit. It is never completely independent of it because the exchanges instituting mutual acknowledgment presuppose the reacknowledgement of a minimum of objective homogeneity, and because it exerts a multiplier effect on the capital that the person possesses in their own right (Bourdieu, 1982). This creates a loop where the respondent feels the need to buy the goods that other people buy in order to fit in and create a sense of belonging.

Whilst talking about increased individuality, this can also create an increasing paradox where peer pressure can result in a loss of individuality where following the lead blindly. Extreme peer pressure might direct towards following of what the peers feel right irrespective of the true rightness of a situation. They want people to perceive a social image of them greater than the actual. Consumers tend to exceed the planned budget and shop in excess because subconsciously in the mind they are conscious about their image as their shopping shall define and create. It doesn’t matter whether they can afford it because it is about not being less than

anyone else. That means that they will indulge in different activities which can be perceived beneficial for the moment being but is not in the long run for their budget and economy when they excessively spend money on items that they can't really afford. The respondent G (27) talks about this more in the underlying statement:

‘‘When Uber came to my country, it was rare and unique. We don't have a huge income and it was considered as something more prestigious and classier, because it was quite expensive and also not common. When my friends saw me, they were so impressed and astonished that I was riding in a Uber but when it came to middle of the month, I was broke so I had to go with the public transport again and they started laughing at me then in a playful way and teasing me for coming back again.’’

G (27) wanted to follow the trend of Uber that had arrived in the country and knew that this was something more exclusive and was not something that everyone engaged in. Bourdieu (1986) talks about membership in a group, which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity owned capital. The respondent talks about competing with others rather than aiming for collectivity in order to obtain a sense of achievement in relation to others. There is a relative autonomy and freedom from structural constraints which means that the informant has the opportunities to engage in activities that separates himself from other. Whole idea about social capital from Bourdieu (1986) is that it supports homogeneity as a structural feature. With the answer from G (27), this can be argued against and heterogeneity seems to stem from much of the decisions being made regarding consumption. G (27) did not make a choice based on collectivity and homogeneity but instead on the basis of its own possibilities and the fact that the consumer is able to consume in the way is wanted and allow ties to the majority rather than its own peers. For instance, they may use products as props to fit in; however, they may not want to use products in the same way that an individual who is interested in conspicuously consuming that same product may (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004). This provides social capital of different quality. The informant tried to obtain its desires, no matter what the price was rather than blindly following others. This means that the greater the match between the brand-user image with the consumer's ideal self-image, the more likely that consumers implicitly infer that the use of the brand should meet their need for self-esteem. By doing this, it means that will choose products whose images are congruent with their own and affirm their own sense of self (Belk, 1988).

With these results, it can be argued that peer pressure enables conspicuous behavior. Bourdieu (1986) argued that our relationships and networks stemmed from our social classes and

stratifications, but these have dissipated today. Nowadays, peer pressure is evident all over the society and consumers try to fulfill some type of social requirement. Rather than fulfilling these requirements from solely its own peers, consumers look to seek validation from other peers also whilst maintaining their consumption of conspicuous goods (Shukla, 2010). Peer pressure thus becomes a phenomenon in itself and is not something that is genuinely created from family or friends like many authors claim that relationships are built upon but rather from pressure and has the power to change the behavior and care about external influences such as social consumption motivation. It creates a way for consumers to follow the lead blindly. When talking about conspicuous consumption, they follow this lead because it is congruent with their identity. Bourdieu (1986) mentions homogeneity as a structural feature, but many consumers tend to search for heterogeneity instead in order to affirm their own sense of self. This leads to them spending their disposable income on luxurious goods while cutting down on other things in order to fulfill their visions of an ideal self and making this become closer their actual self.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This research has explored conspicuous consumption in relation to self-identity determining to which extent does a consumer's self-identity influence their intentions to engage in conspicuous consumption along with what antecedents that have enabled conspicuous consumption from a societal point of view. By the usage of interviews and analyzing it through the lens of these two notions, it has helped with answering the research questions that was set up earlier.

Research question 1: To which extent does consumers' self-identity influence their intention to engage in conspicuous consumption and what is the perceived importance of this?

Changes in consumer behavior during the 21st century have arguably rendered the theory of conspicuous consumption more obsolete. Many traditional researchers have failed to take into consideration regarding the fact that individuals now are free to project their own meanings onto commodities, with personal image more important than display and competition that arises from the partaking in conspicuous consumption (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004; Tsai, 2005; Kamakura & Du, 2012). The general view has been that people spend money on artifacts of consumption in order to give an indication of their wealth to other members of society

(Heffetz, 2011; Wisman, 2009) and is analyzed based on this assumption but fail to take into consideration why people do this and keep engaging in this behavior.

Consumers are freed from the old restrictions imposed by social class and fixed status groups by adopting appropriate patterns of consumption (Mason, 1998). They are projecting their own meanings onto commodities and personal image and identity becoming more important than display and competition (Trigg, 2001). Conspicuous display has therefore been adapted to changing economic and social circumstances and can still be a significant force today even in those societies which have rejected or suppressed it in its more extreme form (Mason, 1998). As the standards of living have increased during the past decades, much of this consumption could be considered “unnecessary”, considering that we usually do not buy clothes or brands thanks to their utility (Bauman, 2001). Luxury goods and conspicuous consumption have a key role to play. The self of an individual is associated with the possessions of the person that portray identity. The changes in society have been seen in the form of consumers who have democratized luxury based on their preferences and lifestyles (Slater, 1997). These possessions are imperative dimensions of self as consumers develop perceptions about their identities. With the different habits of consumption, consumers will be motivated to purchase positively valued products in order to maintain a positive self-image but will also seek out products that have an image similar to their own to maintain this the ideal type of self that they want to convey to others.

Conspicuous consumption becomes a way for consumer to achieve dreams and hopes that they long desired for. Podoshen and Andrzejewski (2012) claims consumers buy certain goods in the hope of being seen more favorably by others. This leads to the use of conspicuous consumption in an attempt to find greater social status. Luxury is moving to emerging markets where consumers can consume these brands. It creates individual and social motives whereas consumers develop their image when consuming conspicuously along with adjusting and reforming their self-identities. Consumers come from different backgrounds and have different socioeconomical standards. However, luxury goods are no longer only possessed by the rich and the wealthy. An affluence has arisen in the society where consumers aim for the most prestigious items that are congruent with their ideal's self.

In conclusion, aspirations of becoming someone who they desire to be is much closer now than it ever has been before. Possibilities and new realms have opened up for consumers where they now can consume mostly the same products as everybody else and thus also increasing their chances of becoming affiliated with them. This means that the greater the

match between the brand-user image with the consumer's ideal self-image, the more likely that consumers implicitly infer that the use of the brand should meet their need for self-esteem (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2012). There are beliefs about consumers own identities, values, lifestyles, preferences, and habits. By consuming high-end valued products, it becomes a way of protecting all of these beliefs that they have created and is a way of striving towards their ideal way of looking at themselves, with commodities becoming a center piece in many peoples' lives.

Research question 2: What are the antecedents that has enabled conspicuous consumption today from a societal point of view?

New barriers have been opened in different societies where consumers are not tied down to traditions and rituals anymore. Individuality has become more transparent in consumers lives, where they can now freely choose what they wish to consume (Bagwell & Bernheim, 1996). Social control is therefore increasing as consumers biographies are more and more being written by outsiders and our decisions being taken out of our hands. There is an acceptance and norms created of what to consume. It becomes important for the consumers to adhere to this and thus also becoming the ideal consumer. Mangold & Faulds (2009) claims that consumers are not merely passive anymore and that companies have lost the power they once had over them. As social classes lost their importance, individuals were compelled to develop an world where conspicuous consumption becomes a way of being able to conceive the world as something they can control, use and change for their own purposes and put themselves at the center with the reflexivity that we are seeing. With technological advancements, globalization and mediated experiences, this kind of behavior became more potent. This has spurred changes whereas consumers now seek contemporaneity and try to emulate others in order to seek acceptance from their own peers and others also whilst maintaining unique and exclusive (Bourdieu, 1986; Chen, Yeh & Wang, 2008; Ashmore & Jussim, 1997). Conspicuous consumption has been too restrictive to address the multifarious lifestyles that characterize contemporary capitalism. Possessions become something that reform and reshape people's identity (Stryker, Owens & White, 2000). Lifestyles that conspicuous consumption and their goods create are not explicitly considered because it was something that had not been thoroughly investigated before in comparison to conspicuous consumption. Consumers habits have changed in the postmodern era, and individuals attach new meanings onto commodities, with personal image more important than display and competition. There can be

a grouping of lifestyle elements through particular principles that influence the behavior of individuals. An increased importance has been assigned to the representative, the sign, the emblem and creates the whole reality of groups which receive effective social existence only in and through representation (Slater, 1997). Consumers use status products to assimilate the symbolic connotation into their own individuality and use luxury brands to support and improve their self-expression and self-identity (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). There is more than just the physical part of the product, when talking about conspicuous consumption. Consumers thus tend to use more of their disposable income on luxurious goods while cutting down on other things in order to fulfill their visions of an ideal self and making this become closer their actual self.

Summarizing this, different antecedents have enabled conspicuous consumption today in the society, such as globalization, technology, mediated experiences, increased symbolic value of a product along with the adherence of social groups and the common denominator for all of this becomes status seeking. Consumers want to improve their social standing through the conspicuous consumption of consumer products that confer and symbolize status both for the individual and surrounding significant others (Bourdieu, 1982). By consuming luxury goods, it becomes a way of conferring this status, with being able to acquire, own, use, and display them both to present an image of what they are like or want to be like (Sirgy, 1982) and to bring about the kinds of social relationships they desire. The more status something holds, the more influence and the desire to consume conspicuously. Therefore, with the status that luxury goods hold and the desire to attain these products in order to affirm their own sense of self, the more likely it will be that they consume in a conspicuous manner. Conceptually this also means that certain status products are used for image portrayal to provide entry into certain groups (O’Cass & McEwen, 2004). Whilst consumers seek exclusiveness and the need to compete with others in order to achieve a sense of satisfaction, there is still an interpersonal influence. Consuming conspicuously cannot be achieved without the presence of others, the products chosen to inflate their own ego or improve their social standing in preference to the need to adapt and fit in to different situations. Their motivation differs in reference to themselves or others, but consumers want to achieve power and status, and this is achieved with conspicuous consumption and recreates reaffirmance from other reference groups and themselves.

To conclude this, the study has shed light upon self-identity in relation to conspicuous consumption and have thus shown and highlighted how these are interrelated. As a consumer,

we are not tied down to traditions and localities like we were before, which means that the old consumer society have dissipated, creating more freedom and choices for the consumer. Veblen (1899) original thoughts on conspicuous consumption have thus been rendered obsolete due to the fact that there are more focus lifestyles and symbolic value that a product brings, which has become what many consumer today emphasize, rather than just purchasing an item for the physical benefits of it. It also links to the fact that consumers are trying to create a type of utilitarian value when consuming conspicuously, where they do not only have the perception of looking at what value the item can bring them as an individual consumer but also on a more holistic level and how it is applied and matched with their reference groups. The changes in society have been seen in the form of consumers who have democratized luxury based on their preferences and lifestyles (Slater, 1997). As our standards and wages have increased in the society, possessions and especially consuming luxurious goods have become imperative dimensions of self as consumers develop perceptions about their identities. With the different habits of consumption, consumers will be motivated to purchase positively valued products in order to maintain a positive self-image but will also seek out products that have an image similar to their own to maintain this the ideal type of self that they want to convey to others. By consuming luxury goods, it becomes a way of conferring this status, with being able to acquire, own, use, and display them both to present an image of what they are like or want to be like (Sirgy, 1982) and to bring about the kinds of social relationships they desire. Consumers now seek contemporaneity and try to emulate others in order to seek acceptance from their own peers and others also whilst maintaining unique and exclusive (Bourdieu, 1986; Chen, Yeh & Wang, 2008; Ashmore & Jussim, 1997). It can therefore be said that consumers use status products to assimilate the symbolic connotation into their own individuality and use luxury brands to support and improve their self-expression and self-identity (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). With the status that luxury goods hold and the desire to attain these products in order to affirm their own sense self-identity, the more likely it will be that they consume in a conspicuous manner.

6. Theoretical contributions

As a researcher, the intention with this study was to contribute to the existing literature on the conspicuous consumption and how self-identity of a consumer is related to this. Through this study, there is a need to highlight the importance of focusing on not only the material goods but also the social context in which the consumption of a luxurious good happens and the

sociology behind it. By drawing upon literature within self-identity theory, the research aimed to get insights into the contemporary consumer and how they perceive this phenomenon. Inspired by the work of Veblen (1899), this study realized that there was a need to understand the connection between self-identity and conspicuous consumption due to changes in consumer behavior during the twenty-first century have arguably rendered the theory of conspicuous consumption less relevant. Foroudi et al. (2014) talks about that individuals also feel an emotional attachment to luxury brands they have never bought or used. It is not about the consumption of the product, but rather about the ostentation of status, power, and possibilities. Thus, the current study defines an individual's perception of conspicuous consumption as a configuration of their self and how it is related to their identity. It represents how consumers perceive conspicuous consumption and becomes of importance in consumer research, whereas identity is correlated with this.

There is a repositioning from brand personality to the self of a consumer when mentioning conspicuous consumption and the underlying reasons behind this. The current study has re-conceptualized the meaning of self-identity in relation to conspicuous consumption because of it recognizing the fact that there are many more motives that appeal to a consumer, rather than strictly only focusing on the good and the brand associated to the product when purchasing a luxurious item. The existing research on this is very ambiguous and usually revolves around the topic social identity and brand personality, which are two different things compared to self-identity and its relation to conspicuous consumption. Even though they are important for the research about conspicuous consumption, previous literature have been underwhelming in this area and thus not generated enough insight about this topic. By looking at this from the perspective of self-identity and conspicuous consumption, it makes a unique contribution to this field and in order to understand the importance of the self in the context of the consumer and conspicuous consumption. With this study, it enriches the literature on conspicuous consumption – by considering the self-identity of a consumer.

6.1 Methodological strengths and weaknesses

The study of self-identity and normal consumption contained potential risks due to it mostly being quantitatively measured. If the study compared consumer and brand on the basis of image, the measurement items of image were from brand image, rather than the consumer and its self-identity (Alnawas & Altarifi, 2016; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014). Thus, different

measures were extracted for different brands and hypothesis were based on this. It is doubtful whether measurement items from brand image are able to embrace self-identity in relation to conspicuous consumption. This study settled the conceptual issues relating to measurement and validation, with trying to identify underlying reasons and reasoning behind conspicuous consumption and its relation to self-identity. Moreover, the comparison between consumers, self-identity and conspicuous consumption has been brought to a level of theoretical meaningfulness, where straightforward methods have been used to examine the relationship between these two notions by asking the respondents question whether they feel like self-identity and conspicuous consumption are interrelated and how they affect them as a consumer.

One aspect of the study that can be considered a weakness in the aforementioned methods is convenience sampling. There is an awareness of the fact that the availability of respondents very much depends on the time or day that they were contacted – the so-called timing effect (Bell et.al, 2018) and that the researcher are constrained by the respondents and may result in unreliable data. However, since convenience sampling is quick, not complicated and low in cost, it was an excellent choice for this study and resulted in answers that were suitable for the study conducted. Moreover, it works very well when trying to discover and get more insight about peoples underlying reasons with how they act and think and could thus generate sufficient information in the answers given by the respondents that could be used in the analysis. With this said, perhaps a snowball sampling would have been benefitted the dissertation and could work as a good alternative with it eliminating the potential risk of bias when collecting the empirical material.

7. Research contribution and future research

There has been an absence of self-identity in relation to conspicuous consumption in previous research conducted and with this study, it has shed some light on something that has not been thoroughly delved into before. By studying motives, goals and the idea behind the usage of this phenomenon, it has created a better understanding to why consumers deliberately engage in conspicuous consumption and what has enabled it to this extent today. An extensive amount of research has been conducted before, but this has been mostly from a marketer's perspective and how conspicuous consumption relate to brand consciousness and brand knowledge. However, even with this work, there is still a lot of room for potential researchers

to investigate this subject in relation other aspects and thus being able to create a holistic framework for conspicuous consumption in relation to a consumers perspective rather than from a business perspective. This research has mainly focused on how conspicuous consumption is related to self-identity and the antecedents that have enabled it today but there is still room to research about lifestyles (Slater, 1997; Mason, 1998) and how this influence the consumer in relation to conspicuous consumption. Furthermore, social media has had a huge impact on today's society and people use this platform in order to highlight and display their items or destinations. The role of social media seems to change constantly, and research is clearly needed on how this influence other consumers in their decisions of purchase and conduct studies if this enables a more hedonistic behavior in relation to conspicuous consumption.

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Interview guide

Consumption:

- Can you tell me about a purchase that you have regretted instantly after? For what reason/reasons?
- Are you price sensitive/insensitive and why/why not?
- Explain some situations where you have bought impulsively or mimicked a purchase that another one made
- Is there anything you avoid consuming and why?
- Have you seen your consumption habits change during the years?

Conspicuous consumption:

- Does peer pressure enable conspicuous consumption? For example, if someone you know bought something unique and popular, would it enhance your abilities to buy it also or not? Why?
- Is consuming conspicuously a necessity or do you feel it is a trend and you have to follow? Can you explain more thoroughly how you reason?
- Do you believe globalization/availability have enabled conspicuous consumption in a way we didn't see before?
- Have you seen someone consume an item or anything that is considered high-end valued (maybe yourself) in order to show status?
- Why do you think it is popular to show off their wealth on social media today? For example, showing their new commodity or anything that can be contributed to something unnecessary.
- Did you ever get a reaction from people when you bought something conspicuous and how did that feel?
- Have you exceeded your budget at some time because you bought a more expensive item?

Self-identity and expressing yourself through commodities:

- Have you ever displayed an expensive item that you bought to others? Yes/no and elaborate on the answers.
- Would you get the same satisfaction if you bought a counterfeit or something that is similar to the original? Why or why not?
- What has influenced your choices when you consume? Family, friends, mass media?
- Do you feel unique when purchasing a good that costs more than the normal product? Why/why not?

- Do you borrow items/goods in order to look flashier? For example, if you know you are attending an exclusive event and maybe need to look fancier but can't due to you not owning the possession or some other reason
- Do you think the symbolic value of a product has a meaning to you and could that be a main reason for you buying an item?
- Is a high price on a product correlated with high quality and does this appeal you?
- People talked before about traditional ties where the family, rituals and localities decided status. Do you think this has changed today where maybe we can see more individuality and choices being made based on this?

Materialism:

- Do you think factors like age, income and gender impacts your tendencies of materialism?
- Are you a materialistic person? (a person who has aspirations for worldly possessions like a car, TV, computer, clothes etc)
- Do you feel satisfaction by owning possessions? For example, the pair of jeans that you finally desired have become yours or the computer you always wanted
- Have you ever felt jealous when someone had something that you wanted?
- When you owned something, did you sometimes felt a way where you did not want to loan it out or let someone else try your possession when you eventually got it?
- Do you think that materialism and success go hand-in-hand?
- Did you feel like a possession you owned after time changed in importance to you? For example, it did not express the same symbolic meaning anymore or got gradually more important for you
- Do you think materialism is more related to symbolic and psychological values rather than the consumption of the actual commodity nowadays? Why?

Social capital and social world:

- Are you perceptive to the attention and reaction of other individuals and groups? Yes or no, could you elaborate on why/why not?
- Do you consider consuming conspicuously contributes to people's socially defined aspect of self? For example, to obtain favorable social self-image in a relational and network context.
- Do you feel that if a negative group consumes the brand that you are using, would it then effect your way of looking at it? Explain
- Is it a matter of social status to own worldly possessions?
- Do you feel like we are separated into stratifications of different social classes and consuming conspicuously can be a way of advancing in this?
- Is the consumption of luxury items something that fosters new identities or lifestyles and why?
- Do you feel a difference today compared to before on peoples' fixation when talking about consumption? Not just in regards on how consumption might be different but also if there is an increase or decrease in way it is being displayed?
- Have you consumed something conspicuous in order to attain self-esteem or self-confidence, which you thought could lead to new relationships?