A Guilt-free Guilty Pleasure

A Qualitative Study of Consumers' Process of
Coping with the Tension between Health and Hedonism

by

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Abstract

Title: A Guilt-free Guilty Pleasure: A Qualitative Study of Consumers' Process of Coping with the Tension between Health and Hedonism

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Purpose: The purpose of this thesis is to explore the way consumers make sense of guilt-free narratives in the case of hedonic food consumption and how they cope with the tension between healthism-hedonism.

Background: Most relevant studies in the field of food and health focus on psychological motives, and mainly follow a quantitative methodology, which lacks an in-depth analysis of the topic.

Theoretical Framework: The main theories used in this study are Weick's theory of Sensemaking (1995), and Holt's theory of Cultural Branding (2004).

Methodology: Following a qualitative approach, the chosen method for this study was semi-structured interviews. In total, we conducted nine semi-structured interviews, using a non-probability purposive sampling, including participants from Europe (age range: 20-30). The participants were considered as living a healthy lifestyle.

Findings: Three main themes derived from the conducted study; (1) Balancing act: preserving self-consistency and positive self-image, (2) Healthy food myths: bridging the health-hedonic gap, (3) Towards a healthier self: an ongoing and reflexive process.

Conclusions: The sensemaking procedure of guilt-free narratives involves many elements in participants' lifeworlds and the ongoing shifting myths. Participants cope with the tension between health and hedonism by developing the strategy of "the balancing act" in order to maintain their self-consistency and positive self-image. To accomplish this, they utilise healthy food myths which have emerged and spread through lifeworld actors and media. This process also tends to be constantly reflexive, where participants are in a continuing course of relearning, accepting and refusing these myths.

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1. Introduction

The following introductory chapter presents the overall topic of this thesis by describing the concept of guilt-free hedonic food and the relevance of studying this topic in the context of the contemporary consumer culture. We then lay out the problematisation and research question to solidify the purpose of this research. The chapter concludes with the delimitation of this research.

1.1. Background

Hedonic food has gained a reputation for being "vice", a signal of low self-control and a choice that consumers wish to restrain from (Khan, Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2004 cited in Khare & Chowdhury, 2015). Hedonic food is often likened to the concept of "guilty pleasure" as its palatable appeal is simultaneously an indication of unhealthiness (Silchenko & Askegaard, 2020) and posited to trigger the feeling of anticipated guilt in consumers (Kim, 2020; Yu, Chambers & Koppel, 2020). With the rise of healthism as part of the health-consciousness movement (Crawford, 1980) where individuals are increasingly expected and given the responsibility to take control over their own well-being, guilt-free hedonic food is created as a "sensible swap" (Silchenko & Askegaard, 2020, p. 147) to traditional hedonic food, promising a possibility of indulgence without consequences. Here, consumers are provided with an all-encompassing, win-win solution to the moral responsibility to eat healthily (Thompson & Coveney, 2018 cited in Silchenko & Askegaard, 2020) without having to limit their consumption. Guilt-free hedonic food is a fascinating case to investigate the understudied topic of "reconciliation of health-taste conflict" (Silchenko, Askegaard & Cedrola, 2020, p. 566) as this specific food category aims to dismiss the very notion of trade-offs between "(health) utility and (consumption) pleasure" (Silchenko & Askgaard, 2020, p. 147), and resolve the tension between health and hedonism.

This tension between health and hedonism is one of many tensions existing in the postmodern consumer culture. Here, consumers are tasked with being responsible for solving societal issues with their consumption choices through the process termed consumer responsibilisation (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). In this process, several moral duties were given to consumers including

alleviating poverty, saving the planet, and staying healthy and financially responsible through better consumption choices. On the other hand, consumers are constantly bombarded with messages presenting what a good life represents through the process of "aestheticisation of everyday life" (Featherstone, 1991, p. 68-72 cited in Miles, 1998), "whereby standards of 'good style', 'good taste' and 'good design' have come to invade every aspect of our everyday life". In this manner, consumers are encouraged to pursue a better life through the act of consumption. Nonetheless, such consumption patterns at times create tension with the aforementioned responsible consumer position. Some notable spheres where this tension could be observed include fashion, where the need for staying in vogue clashes with the duty to be sustainable; or luxury consumption, where the desire to portray a good life collides with the task to stay financially responsible and perhaps divert such wealth to alleviate poverty. In such spheres, guilt-free narratives such as eco-friendly, sustainable, fairtrade, and ethically sourced emerge in an attempt to alleviate the respective tensions. While our research studies a specific type of tension and guilt-free product, the findings could potentially be applicable to other spheres in consumer culture where similar tensions exist.

Guilt-free hedonic food can be defined as hedonic food where "a guilt-mitigation narrative is packaged into the product itself" (Haynes & Podobsky, 2016, p. 204). Such narratives are posited to be effective in motivating consumption due to their guilt-alleviating effect (Okada 2005; Wansink & Chandon 2006, cited in Belei, Geyskens, Goukens, Ramanathan, & Lemmink, 2012). In particular, this study looks at the category of guilt-free snacks to understand how consumers make sense of the narratives packaged into these hedonic food products and the impact of such narratives on their consumption. Guilt-free narratives in the case of snacks vary from more explicit ones such as the absence or decrease of hedonic attributes (i.e. low-fat, no sugar), the addition of functional attributes (i.e. protein, antioxidants) (Belei et al., 2012); to more implicit ones such as substitution with ingredients deemed as healthier (i.e. sweet potatoes, lentils, oatmeal, nuts, olive oil).

While guilt-free hedonic products could be seen as a solution to increasing consumer trends towards healthy eating (Askew, 2021; Lempert, 2020; Shea, n.d.), Belei et al. (2012) posited that such products also trigger the conflict between health and hedonic goals, rendering its

effectiveness in motivating consumption unclear. The particular topic of health-hedonic conflict reconciliation is still understudied (Silchenko, Askegaard & Cedrola, 2020), and whilst we found two studies - Belei et al. (2012) and Haynes and Podobsky (2016) to be specific on this topic, the results were rather contradictory.

With the ever-evolving trend of healthy eating (Askew, 2021; Lempert, 2020; Shea, n.d.) and the predicted growing market of healthy snacks (Trenda, 2022), it is important in the marketing perspective to gain deeper insights into the effectiveness of such guilt-free narratives, given the current lack of study and conflicting information. It is also essential from a consumer and societal perspective to understand the implication of guilt-free narratives on the consumption of hedonic food. As consumers attempt to quest for a healthy lifestyle while maintaining the pleasure aspect of consumption, the market finds ways to cater to this heightened awareness by offering what is termed a win-win solution (Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021, p. 147), one of which is guilt-free hedonic food. This win-win approach is proposed to be the solution to all stakeholders' goals, namely policy-makers' objective to elevate societal welfare, food businesses' target to raise profits, and consumers' desire to boost their health (Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021). The potential danger of this approach is in consumers' tendency to use heuristics in making food choices, mistakenly allowing naturally calorie-dense food with guilt-free narratives an "implicit license to eat" (Belei et al., 2012, p. 901), resulting in overconsumption. As such, the very win-win approach created to be the all-encompassing solution may end up being counterproductive.

1.2. Problematisation

Guilt-free hedonic food is a win-win solution created as a result of consumers' quest for a healthier lifestyle and the market's attempt to cater to such, while raising profits and responding to policymakers' aspirations to increase overall population well-being (Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021). This win-win approach gained attention in the 2000s - 2010s with the rise of the health and wellness category such as free-from foods or organic produce (Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021), offering a possibility where "any food can be healthified" (p. 147). Despite the perhaps well-intentioned purpose, Anker et al., (2011 cited in Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021) posited that this win-win discourse may result in consumer exploitation, health-related knowledge misrepresentation, and irrational anxiety.

From a broader perspective, the discourse that underlies this topic is healthism, which refers to a transference of health as an individual's responsibility and the association of a healthy lifestyle as a representation of a good life (Crawford, 1980 cited in Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021). Under the healthism discourse, food consumption is one of the primary sites for individuals to practice responsibility by avoiding risks and employing various health-preservation strategies (Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021). With this rise of healthism discourse, in almost all developed countries, health consciousness is often a notion taken for granted (Crawford, 2006 cited in Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021). However, critical literature cited that healthism could potentially heighten anxiety around the topic of health, result in inequalities and redirect medical priorities (Anker et al., 2011, Fitzpatrick, 2001, Kristensen et al., 2016 cited in Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021). It is of great importance to understand how consumers make sense of health-related narratives in the case of food and the impact of such narratives on consumption.

As far as our knowledge, there is limited research that looks at guilt-free hedonic food whilst the current studies in the field produced inconsistent findings. While there are several studies explored the concept of guilt and guilt-mitigating strategies in food consumption, in particular, ones that concern general factors and/or motivations relating to guilt and food choices (Yu, Chambers & Koppel, 2020), the impact of anticipated guilt on consumption (Hur & Jang, 2015), or the specific case of calorie labeling for indulgent food in restaurants (Kim, 2020) as a way to mitigate guilt, only two studies were found to deal with the topic of guilt-free narratives. These are studies by Belei et al. (2012) and Haynes and Podobsky (2016). Nonetheless, these two studies provided rather perplexing results. Belei et al. (2012) asserted that food with narratives emphasising hedonic attributes (i.e. low-fat) leads to higher consumption due to it triggering a lower level of consumer self-regulating mechanism. However, Haynes and Podobsky (2016) found that guilt-free narratives such as fat-free aroused a sense of distrust in consumers due to increasing knowledge of "diet product" and the counterproductive effect of such products. Despite such doubt regarding product claim, consumers continue to purchase food products packaged with guilt-free narratives, which calls to question whether self-regulation is the mechanism behind consumer's motivation to purchase such guilt-free hedonic products, given the sense of distrust that the narrative triggers, or whether there are other constructs that motivate their consumption. Haynes and Podobsky (2016)

instead postulated that the success of guilt-free narratives in motivating consumption lies in their ability to tap into deeply held cultural values, whichever is at the time of the investigation.

Specifically in the case of guilt-free snacks, while the study by Belei et al. (2012) attempted to investigate the impact of health claims on the consumption of hedonic food, the field of guilt-free narrative has evolved ever since, moving beyond simply just a matter of displaying functional attributes (i.e. antioxidants) or reducing hedonic attributes (i.e. sugar, fat), to more implicit claims where "vice" ingredients are replaced with something deemed as healthier (i.e. lentil chips, oatmeal cookies). Moreover, research in the food and health sector generally lacks anthropological and social science theories, while psychological motivation theories are the most predominant (Silchenko, Askegaard & Cedrola, 2020). Most of the studies in this field are also empirical in nature (86.8%) and statistical in scope (72.6%), whereas very few use qualitative and critical informed research methods (10%) (Silchenko, Askegaard & Cedrola, 2020). Research by Belei et al. (2012) is no exception, employing the quantitative research method and focusing on psychological aspects concerning how some attributes trigger self-restraint in participants, affecting participants' preference for hedonic food. While the findings indeed showed that some narratives work better in motivating the consumption of guilt-free hedonic food by activating more hedonic goals instead of health goals, this does not give insight into the new line of guilt-free narratives that are more subtle and implicit and how consumers make sense of such narratives.

Furthermore, as consumption is a social practice that has been found to be reflective of wider cultural values (Holt, 2010 cited in Haynes & Podobsky, 2016), the experimental research design by Belei et al. (2012) may have left out social and cultural forces that shape the consumption pattern when it comes to guilt-free hedonic food. This research was conducted via a quantitative experimental study, measuring consumption levels in a lab environment. Participants were presented with chocolate samples for taste testing and the authors later measured how much they consumed. However, in reality, food consumption is highly contextualised, and experimental conditions eliminate important contextual elements such as the presence of alternatives, the presence of others, and the situation of consumption (Meiselman, 2006).

Haynes and Podobsky (2016) focused on the sociocultural aspect; however, the authors employed the method of a questionnaire, which limited the authors' ability to delve deeper into the constructs and sociocultural forces that formed consumers' perceptions of guilt-free products. Additionally, the study looked at a variety of guilt-free products, not just guilt-free hedonic food, hence producing inadequate insights into this particular product category. While the study laid some foundation for the possible theory behind guilt-free consumption, further research into guilt-free narratives in the case of hedonic food would yield a more in-depth understanding of how consumers make sense of such narratives and their impact on consumption.

1.3. Research Question

Our research aims to employ a qualitative approach in order to examine which constructs motivate the consumption of hedonic food with guilt-free narratives and attempt to understand why one narrative may be more effective in motivating consumption than another, if at all. Specifically, our research aims to answer the following question:

How do consumers make sense of guilt-free hedonic narratives in the case of hedonic food and cope with the tension between health and hedonism?

1.4. Delimitation

This study follows a qualitative approach with small samples. Compared to the majority of studies related to this topic (Silchenko, Askegaard & Cedrola, 2020), and the nature of the studies in the literature review, we decided not to apply a quantitative methodology with a large sample representative of the population, therefore, the results cannot be generalised. Instead, we aim to study the topic in-depth following a qualitative approach, specifically by conducting face-to-face interviews. Additionally, in this study, we focus on a sociocultural perspective, hence, another delimitation is that we do not emphasise in a psychological perspective, as in the majority of the studies conducted in the field of food and health (Silchenko, Askegaard & Cedrola, 2020).

1.5.   Outline of The Thesis

This thesis consists of the following parts: literature review, theoretical lens, methodology, analysis of consumers' process of coping with health-hedonic tension, discussion, conclusion, and study's limitations and recommendations for future research.

In the literature review, we present a thorough overview of the existing literature and studies related to the food and health field, and more specifically, about guilt-free narratives in the context of hedonic food consumption. We also pose a critique to the already existing literature. In the theoretical lens section, we present the theories of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and cultural branding (Gustafsson, 2017; Holt, 2004), which will later be used for analysing the study's findings. In methodology, we present and analyse the chosen method to conduct our study, which is semi-structured interview. Moreover, we refer to the method's features, advantages and disadvantages and elaborate on our research design. In addition, we describe how the data was collected and the data analysis method, and we also refer to the study's trustworthiness and ethical considerations. Then, the findings section is followed where we present the process that consumers undergo in order to cope with the health-hedonism dichotomy; we present and analyse the themes that derived from our research by using the chosen theoretical lens. In the discussion section, we discuss the findings in relation to the prior literature review and our defined research question. Finally, in the conclusion section, we revisit the research aims, as well as outline extensively the study's contribution to the field of food and health research and transferability to the relevant spheres. We also outline the limitations of our study, and propose recommendations for future research in the field.

2. Literature Review

This literature review presents notable existing literature in the field of food and health in general and more specifically guilt-free hedonic food. We first set the context by presenting a macro-perspective of the field of food and health research, including the notion of healthism, health-taste conflict and win-win solution. We then followed by outlining how the concept of guilt and guilt-mitigation strategies are employed in food marketing. Lastly, we dived into the micro-level analysis and critique of existing research on the specific topic of guilt-free hedonic food.

2.1. The Field of Food and Health Research

2.1.1. Healthism as the Underlying Discourse

The food and health topic has generated a large body of research ranging from consumer behaviour and literacy to marketing communications, tactics and strategies (Silchenko, Askegaard & Cedrola, 2020). One underlying discourse that drove these bodies of research is the idea of healthism (Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021) which refers to a fixation on health as an individual's responsibility and as a representation of a good life (Crawford, 1980 cited in Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021). Healthism is a sort of "medicalization of everyday life" (Fitzpatrick, 2001; Lupton, 1995 cited in Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021, p. 134), a cultural discourse that urges people to pursue health by reshaping every aspect of their daily life - food choice is one of them. With this rise of healthism discourse, in almost all developed countries, health consciousness is often a notion taken for granted (Crawford, 2006 cited in Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021) and food consumption is one of the ways in which consumers can exercise their responsibility (Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021).

However, healthism is not without controversies. On the one hand, it is praised as a path to greater consumer empowerment as consumers gain greater awareness and participation in protecting their own health. On the other hand, criticism against healthism includes heightening anxiety around the topic of health, inequalities, and redirecting of medical priorities (Anker et al., 2011, Fitzpatrick, 2001, Kristensen et al., 2016 cited in Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021) and issues

surrounding the topic of consumer responsibilisation (Crawford, 2006 cited in Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021). According to Giesler and Veresiu (2014), consumer responsbilisation is the process where consumers were tasked with the responsibility of solving social issues via their consumption choice. In the case of health, illness such as obesity is reframed as a matter of lifestyle and food choices as opposed to the overall improvement in the healthcare system (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014).

2.1.2. The Dichotomy of Health and Hedonism

Within the field of food and health, the dichotomy of health and taste arose as a result of binary food categorisation of either healthy or unhealthy, "virtue" or "vice" (Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021). In many cases, taste becomes a marker of poor health choices (Thompson & Coveney, 2018 cited in Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021). This dichotomy is further exacerbated in the case of hedonic food which has acquired a reputation for being "impulsive, vices, sinful, low self-control, less healthy, and less thoughtful choices" (Khan et al., 2004 cited in Khare & Chowdhury, 2015, p. 547), precisely because of its very own appeal of being palatable. This, termed "health-hedonic conflict", results in consumers' perception of hedonic food as both appetising and prohibitive (Khare & Chowdhury, 2015).

2.1.3. The Rise of Win-win Solutions

As a solution to the dichotomy of health and hedonism, a win-win solution where a "healthier" version is provided as opposed to the "basic" version was created, promising a sort of superior quality in terms of healthiness (Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021). This win-win solution is cited as a result of an increase in consumers' demand for food that both tastes good while alleviating guilt that comes with consumption (Palmer, 2008 cited in Belei et al., 2012). In addition, this win-win solution attempts to reconcile the interdependent yet often conflicting goals between policy-makers, food businesses and consumers, promising a possibility of simultaneously raise profits for food businesses, benefiting consumers' health and well-being and increasing societal health and welfare (Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021). The win-win solution as such is seen as a hopeful formula for consumers seeking to practise their responsibility, the food industry to overcome the "do not eat" prohibition by offering what's termed "sensible swaps" to consumers, and policymakers in solving societal health-related issues such as obesity (Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021).

Nonetheless, as promising as a win-win solution is presented to be, there have been cautionary tales against such a solution. Anker et al. (2011 cited in Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021) posited that even when food businesses genuinely aspire to provide healthier products to the market, this win-win discourse may result in consumer exploitation, health-related knowledge misrepresentation, and irrational anxiety. For instance, consumers' tendency to engage in heuristics information decision-making process was found to result in an erroneous association between certain nutrition-based attributes and perception of food, such as 'no cholesterol' or 'healthy' snacks equals to low fat (Andrews, Netemeyer & Burton, 1998 cited in Belei et al., 2012), or 'organic' food as having lower calorie (Schuldt & Schwarz, 2010 cited in Belei et al., 2012). This overgeneralisation presents a threat to achieving consumers overall health and well-being as "inherently unhealthful, energy-dense food' packaged with guilt-free narratives may result in an "implicit license to eat" (p. 901), resulting in overconsumption. For example, Wansink and Chandon (2006 cited in Belei et al., 2012) discovered that low-fat claims in snacks resulted in a fifty-percent increase in snack consumption, an unintended consequence that goes against the overall impact that such products promise. This is perhaps also against the societal goal of raising the overall well-being of the population, which was promised to be achieved with the introduction of such win-win solutions.

2.2. Guilt and Guilt-mitigation Strategies in Food Marketing

A particular outcome of such a win-win solution is cited to be the reduction of guilt in consumers when "facing with a moral obligation to limit consumption in the name of health" (Thompson & Coveney, 2018 cited in Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021, p. 147). In this section, we delve deeper into guilt as an emotion utilised in food marketing and the related guilt-alleviating strategy packaged into food marketing.

2.2.1. Guilt in Food Marketing

The notion of guilt is an essential but complex feeling that has an effect on people's eating preferences (Yu, Chambers & Koppel, 2020). In their study, the authors identified 45 factors that cause individuals to feel guilt, and these entail: (1) "intrinsic", and (2) "extrinsic" product

attributes, (3) "situational factors", and (4) "socio-cultural factors" (2020, p. 1), that demonstrate the intricacy and multidimensionality of guilt. Furthermore, guilt was proven to positively affect consumers to search for healthier and sustainable alternatives, benefiting their nutrition and lifestyle.

Guilt has been found to be able to drive people to feel responsible and proceed to corrective conduct (Tangney, Stuewig & Mashek, 2007 cited in Yu, Chambers & Koppel, 2020). Its favorable impact was observed to lessen unhealthy food choices (Mishra & Mishra, 2010 cited in Yu, Chambers & Koppel, 2020). Some insights of the study are that consuming ingredients with high fat, which in other cases are viewed as healthy (i.e. nuts) or foods with high sugar percentage, are some of the practices that may generate guilt in consumers. Furthermore, it is mentioned that people employ several strategies in order to feel better, i.e., drinking plain tea which has fewer calories (Yu, Chambers & Koppel, 2020); this shows again that the healthiness percentage of food/beverage has an effect on people's behavior.

Furthermore, some studies examined the role of guilt yet in the context of restaurants which are still considered places providing food options with an extreme amount of calories and less valuable ingredients for people's nutrition (Burton, Howlett & Tangari, 2009; Chandon & Wansink, 2007; Howlett, Burton, Tangari, & Bui, 2012 cited in Hur & Jang, 2015). Therefore, these restaurants attempted to create a more favourable image by introducing healthier menu versions (Hur & Jang, 2015). Although we do not study the context of restaurants, we believe that these studies provide a broader framework of how discourse around food is presented and what is its impact on people's behavioral food consumption.

More analytically, Hur and Jang (2015) explored how consumers' anticipated feelings affect their food consumption choice, when preferring healthy foods. The authors followed a quantitative approach, specifically applying the method of questionnaire (US consumers). Interestingly, a theoretical advertisement was created which included the presentation of some foods containing health-related information, the total amount of calories of the healthier version compared to the traditional one, and the difference of calories saved.

Concerns around nutrition are intertwined with goal-based motivations and self-restricting actions that exert influence on individuals' cognitive and affective responses when consuming healthy

foods (Kim, Park, Kim & Ryu, 2013 cited in Hur & Jang, 2015). The extent of these concerns has an impact on how individuals assess healthy food marketing techniques. The findings showed that, compared to the group with a high level of nutritious concern, participants with a low level of nutritious concern perceived the food as healthier due to the anticipated pleasure associated with it. In general, the results verified the mediating impact of anticipated pleasure for both groups when it comes to consuming healthy food versions in these types of restaurants and focused on the impact of anticipated pleasure, notably for the group with a low level of nutritious concern (Hur & Jang, 2015).

2.2.2.   Guilt-mitigation Strategies in Food Marketing

One particular food category where the health and taste dichotomy is extremely apparent and often also triggers guilt is hedonic food. Previous studies have highlighted the practice of following strategies that aim to mitigate the notion of guilt in hedonic food marketing and promotion.

A relevant instance is the study of Kim (2020) which presents the "just below calorie labeling (e.g., 199 vs. 200)" (p. 1) influence on people's responses in the context of buying indulgent foods in restaurants. This practice is similar to the one followed in the pricing strategy. Eating indulgent food at a restaurant signifies a more hedonic option instead of functional (Okada, 2005 cited in Kim, 2020), and hence, the level effect of listed calories plays a greater role (Choi & Samper, 2019 cited in Kim, 2020). When it comes to hedonic food consumption, guilt is an expected prevailing feeling (Choi, Li, Rangan, Chatterjee & Singh, 2014; Hur & Jang, 2015; Pounders, Moulard & Babin, 2018 cited in Kim, 2020). Even though hedonic foods are anticipated to develop positive emotions, the feeling of guilt turns it into something less enjoyable, inciting people to avoid it (Hur & Chang, 2015 cited in Kim, 2020). The emotion of guilt is viewed as a "core driver of health motivation, credibility of calorie information and indulgent food consumption intention" (Kim, 2020, p. 2).

Similar to the study of Hur and Jang (2015), Kim designed two different advertisements depicting a hamburger and included the number of calories (399 vs. 400 calories). The findings demonstrated that people living a healthy lifestyle will order indulgent foods with an odd-ending number of calories because they consider them healthier. Additionally, the listed amount of calories resulted in different degrees of anticipated guilt and attitudes towards the food's number of calories without

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considering individuals' level of health-related personal value. Individuals might have already considered an indulgent food as hedonic when they order it, therefore, they gravitate towards indulgent food (odd-ending number of calories), to alleviate expected negative feelings (Hur & Jang, 2015; Tangney & Dearing, 2002 cited in Kim, 2020). Also, consumers under the 400-calorie state tend to feel less deliberate to prefer and buy indulgent foods, without considering health-related values. This is justified mainly by the fact that individuals might already doubt indulgent foods, without taking into account health-related concerns (Kim, 2020).

2.3.   Guilt-free Narratives in Hedonic Food

Apart from the aforementioned guilt-mitigating strategies, to bridge the health-taste conflict, hedonic food packaged with guilt-free narratives is presented as a win-win solution. While it could be expected that such guilt-free narratives encourage higher consumption of hedonic food due to the "implicit license to eat" (Belei et al., 2012, p. 901), the health goal triggered by these guilt-free narratives may, in contrast, reduce consumers' perception of the tastiness of food, hence, reducing their consumption. This health-hedonic conflict reconciliation is one of the areas that remain understudied according to a systematic review of over 190 articles on food and health published between 1988-2015 (Silchenko, Askegaard & Cedrola, 2020). Two particular studies that stood out within this field are by Belei et al. (2012) and Haynes and Podobsky (2016), both aimed to examine the effectiveness of guilt-free narratives in motivating consumption, yet providing rather conflicting findings.

2.3.1.   Product Attributes' Role in Influencing Consumption

Belei et al. (2012) examined how different guilt-free narratives impact the consumption level of hedonic food. Specifically, guilt-free narratives were categorised into two types - one that emphasises the functional attributes (i.e. chocolate fortified with antioxidants) and the other which emphasises the hedonic attributes (i.e. chocolate with low-fat or no cholesterol). The authors conducted three experimental studies with a sample size of 109, 63, and 149 undergraduate students, assigning them to various different conditions, where they are exposed to chocolate with different guilt-free narratives, and measured and compared the consumption of the chocolate samples afterward. Results indicated that the two guilt-free narratives led to differences in the consumption level of hedonic food. Only health claims emphasising in functional benefits (i.e.

addition of antioxidants) were found by Belei et al. (2012) to reduce the amount of food consumed since this line of narrative heightens health-hedonic conflict by increasing health-goal accessibility. On the other hand, guilt-free narratives that emphasise the hedonic aspects (i.e. low-fat) render the hedonic goal more salient and reduce the accessibility to health goals, thus lowering the health-hedonic goal conflict. This in turn triggers higher consumption (Belei et al., 2012).

Haynes and Podobsky (2016), however, presented a slightly confounding finding. The authors conducted a study involving a semi-structured questionnaire of 104 participants aiming to understand consumers' perceptions of guilt-free narratives and the effectiveness of such narratives. While this study did not consider hedonic food consumption per se, some findings regarding consumers' perception of guilt-free narratives provide rather relevant insights. In particular, Haynes and Podobsky (2016) posited that there is a certain level of distrust aroused with food products packaged with diet-related terms, such as fat-free yogurt, even though consumers may not be familiar with how weight loss works. It is therefore rather conflicting that such guilt-free narratives (low-fat) which triggered distrust could increase consumption levels as posited by Belei et al. (2012).

2.3.2. Individual Self-regulation Mechanism vs. Delegation of Responsibility

Self-regulation holds a role in affecting consumption choice when it comes to guilt-free hedonic food in the research by Belei et al. (2012). The authors suggest that the health-hedonic goal conflict was triggered to a higher extent in the case where functional attributes were highlighted, leading to a higher propensity to consume such food. The self-regulating mechanism was assumed to be the underlying mechanism behind such impact under high-conflict situations.

Nonetheless, the self-regulating mechanism was challenged by Haynes and Podobsky (2016), citing that should self-regulation be the underlying mechanism, consumers would avoid such paradoxical consumption altogether. Instead, Haynes and Podobsky (2016) posited that it is not the self-regulatory mechanism or the reduction of guilt that motivates the consumption of such products, but rather what is termed "interpassivity" borrowed from Zizek (1999 cited in Haynes & Podobsky, 2016). Particularly in the case of food with guilt-free narratives, consumers pass on the responsibility of losing weight to the product itself. With this, the idea of dieting or healthy food

consumption becomes easier, where consumers do not need to actively reduce their food intake (i.e., self-regulate) but rather passively engage in the process via consuming guilt-free products (Haynes & Podobsky, 2016).

2.4. Critique of Existing Literature

As illustrated, there have been studies looking at guilt-mitigating strategies that attempt to bridge the health-hedonic gap, yet only two studies have been found to focus specifically on guilt-free narratives in hedonic food consumption. These two studies by Belei et al. (2012) and Haynes and Podobsky (2016), while providing valuable insights, also generated perplexing results where the narratives claimed to promote higher consumption (e.g., low-fat) in one study are found to simultaneously induce a high level of distrust in another. Moreover, both studies employ a rather sterile approach that limits the authors' ability to understand the consumption context and forces in consumers' lifeworld that may influence how they make sense of such narratives. As such, our study will employ a qualitative method and a sociocultural perspective as a way to understand the underlying constructs which consumers use when evaluating guilt-free hedonic food by studying how they make sense of guilt-free narratives in the case of snacks.

In addition, guilt-free hedonic food is a win-win approach that emerged with the rise of healthism as an attempt to resolve the health-taste conflict. While this win-win solution promised mutual benefits for consumers, food businesses, and society as a whole, criticisms of such a solution cited by attaching guilt-free narratives to inherently calorie-dense food may result in over-consumption. This prompts a need to explore the impact of such narratives on consumption by exploring strategies consumers employ to reconcile the tension between health and hedonism and whether such guilt-free narratives eventually impact their consumption.

3.   Theoretical Lens

This chapter presents the theoretical lens which will be used to supplement our analysis. The two main theories we will employ are the sensemaking theory originated by Weick (1995) and the cultural branding theory by Holt (2004). Sensemaking theory was originally selected as the main theoretical lens due to its relevance to the research question concerning how consumers make sense of narratives. However, as we further analysed the empirical materials, myths emerged as a prominent theme, which necessitated the inclusion of cultural branding theory to enrich our analysis.

3.1.   The Sensemaking Theory

In order to understand how consumers make sense of guilt-free narratives, we turn to the sensemaking theory, specifically one developed by Weick (1995). Sensemaking is a relatively recent stream of research that arose in the last few decades, focusing on exploring how people make sense of the unknown (Waterman, 1990 cited in Weick, 1995), "how they construct what they construct, why and with what effects" (Weick, 1995, p. 4). Sensemaking is presented to fill the gap where traditional theories in fields such as psychology, sociology, and information science are insufficient (Turner, Allen, Hawamdeh & Mastanamma, 2023). Underlying sensemaking theory is the assumption that human beings exist in a reality that continues to evolve and change, hence constantly and perpetually "creating, seeking, using and rejecting information and knowledge" to regulate our behaviours (Turner et al., 2023, p. 3). Sensemaking is concerned with the continuous process of constructing meanings that rationalise actions (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005), one that is "ongoing, instrumental, subtle, swift, social, and easily taken for granted" (p. 409).

While sensemaking has been mainly studied in the field of organisational decision-making, Ojha (2005) posited that this process of sensemaking occurs throughout various aspects of everyday life where individuals are faced with uncertain and unfamiliar situations. This necessitates the expansion of such theories into other fields of research. The case of guilt-free narratives in hedonic consumption could be viewed through the lens of sensemaking theory as such narratives are

perplexing in nature, attempting to marry the two often perceived opposite goals - health and hedonism. Guilt-free narratives in hedonic evoke multiple meanings, often contradicting to coexist, which draws attention and provides the occasion for sensemaking to happen (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking theory as such enables more robust insight into how individuals make sense of these puzzling narratives and rationalise their consumption.

3.1.1. The Focus of Sensemaking Theory

Sensemaking is posited to play an essential role in influencing behaviour as it results in the materialisation of meanings that "inform and constrain identity and action" (Mill, 2003, p. 35 cited in Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). Sensemaking focuses on the interplay between individual and their social environment, shifting focus from the view that decision-making is an individual process to understanding how it works in the context of the sociocultural or situation they found themselves in (Snook, 2001 cited in Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). As Snook (2001) posited, such reframing also allows for a rather nuanced understanding of "wrong decision", shifting from "bad ones making poor decisions" to "good people struggling to make sense" (p. 206-207 cited in Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 410). What sensemaking theory does is provide insights into how people can very quickly, and effortlessly ascribe meaning to objects and situations yet potentially form inaccurate opinions and ineffective decisions (Woodside, 2001).

3.1.2. The Seven Characteristics of Sensemaking by Weick

Weick (1995) distilled from the existing literature seven characteristics of sensemaking that distinguish it from other prevailing theories. These seven characteristics relate to one another, although they do not necessarily have to occur in sequential order, in a linear fashion or present in all cases of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). They instead provide a general guideline for exploring the process of sensemaking and are summarised as follows.

Characteristic #1: Identity construction plays a central role in sensemaking which sets it apart from cognitive psychology (Gililand & Day, 2000 cited in Weick, Sutcliffe & Ostfeld, 2005). Weick (1995) posited that the sensemaker is in the process of continuously redefining and deciding which self to adopt, and who we perceive ourselves to be moulds how we decipher situations and meanings and acts. In sensemaking, individuals are preoccupied with constructing and maintaining

identity, and how they make sense of something is simultaneously influenced by their perceived self and influencing it (Weick, 1995).

Characteristic #2: Sensemaking is retrospective, which according to Weick (1995) originated from "Schultz's (1967) analysis of "meaningful lived experience"" (p. 24). In essence, meaning is derived through backward looking into previous experiences. However, due to the elusive nature of memory, anything that influences the current moment when sensemaking occurs will impact the meaning derived from the past experience (Weick, 1995).

Characteristic #3: Sensemaking entails enactment where people are posited to be "a part of their own environment" and participate in producing it (Weick, 1995, p. 31). This enactment manifests in what is termed "cognitive bracketing" where sensemakers engage in categorising actions, situations and objects, which then constrain their responses. However, such categories are often socially constructed and fluid (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005), adding a layer of complexity to sensemaking.

Characteristic #4: Sensemaking is a social process where individuals' action is subject to the action of others, whether they are physically present or not (Weick, 1995). In this sense, sociocultural forces play an essential role in individual sensemaking.

Characteristic #5: Sensemaking is an ongoing process where people continuously revise their previous perceptions and assumptions. Weick (1995) posited that people are always in the middle of "projects" and "what they see in the world are those aspects that bear on their projects". (p. 45).

Characteristic #6: Because sensemaking is swift, studying the sensemaking process requires observing both how people cope with prolonged paradoxes and tricky problems while noticing how they extract cues and elaborate what they extract in an attempt of making sense. The issue of which cues will act as the important point of reference, and how context determines what cue is extracted and how it is interpreted is also explored in sensemaking.

Characteristic #7: Lastly, sensemaking is concerned with plausibility rather than accuracy. Here, Weick (1995) illustrated this point using Fiske's (1992) statement which states that sensemaking "takes a relative approach to truth, predicting that people will believe what can account for sensory experience but what is also interesting, attractive, emotionally appealing, and goal relevant" (p.

879). Because of the complexity and multitude of cues and meanings, and the tendency for sensemaking to be rooted in the reconstruction of the past through the present lens, pursuing accuracy in sensemaking is deemed meaningless (Weick, 1995).

3.1.3. Sensemaking of Guilt-free Narratives in Hedonic Food Consumption

Sensemaking theory provides an opportunity to reconcile the confounding findings from studies by Belei et al. (2012) and Haynes and Podobski (2016) regarding guilt-free narratives. While Belei et al. (2012) focused on how cues such as narratives that highlight functional or hedonic benefit impact consumption, sensemaking theory sheds light on how such cues were picked out in the first place (Weick, 1995), providing a more nuanced understanding of how different guilt-free narratives may be registered by one consumer but not another.

In addition, the sensemaking process involves bracketing of the cues or in this case, the specific guilt-free narratives and hedonic products being examined, and the reworking of the interpretation of such cues through retrospection, ongoing construction of identity project, and sociocultural influence (Weick, 1995). This offers a more robust understanding of how consumers make sense of guilt-free narratives considering various forces that may play a part in such process, and provides perspective into how guilt-free narratives that generate distrust such as fat-free narrative (Haynes & Podobsky, 2016) could still potentially promote higher consumption, as posited by Belei et al. (2012).

Lastly, because sensemaking is posited to be perpetual and ongoing (Weick, 1995), it offers a more holistic framework for examining how consumers make sense of the ever-evolving narratives related to healthism without necessarily only being restricted to the prevailing narratives at the time of this study.

3.2. Cultural Branding

3.2.1. An Overview of Cultural Branding and Myths

The theory of cultural branding developed by Holt concerns "the consumer's own identity creation by using myths" (Gustafsson, 2017, p. 107-108). The theory relies on sociology, and more specifically, Holt built his theory by combining the principles of the following sociologists:

Barthes, Bourdieu, and Simmel (Gustafsson, 2017). One purpose of cultural branding is to resolve cultural inconsistencies in people's lives, through the use of myths; these contradictions reflect on several anxieties or needs. Another practice is that it connects "a subculture with a brand to compete in a 'myth market'" (Gustafsson, 2017, p. 109). The author argues that branding managers should select a subculture that are members of it and acknowledge the established myths of it; then, two principles are valid for cultural branding; (a) there is a 'co-creation' of meaning among individuals, managers, and culture that offer space for iconic brands to develop, and (b) brands when being involved in myth market, is required to be 'cultural assets' in order to turn into and remain iconic (Gustafsson, 2017).

The main argument of Holt (2004 cited in Gustafsson, 2017) is that "iconic brands compete in 'myth markets'" (p. 113); brands convey a pertinent myth that individuals employ to resolve problems in their identity construction (Gustafsson, 2017). To briefly describe Holt's model (Gustafsson, 2017; Holt, 2004), Holt claims that there is a 'cultural contradiction' which signifies the needs and desires of individuals, and this lies between the 'national ideology' (what individuals are expected to do) and 'citizen's identity projects' (what individuals want to do for constructing their identities). 'Populist worlds' are defined as subcultures; ways for excessive identity expressions - it is the place where 'identity myths' are developed to perpetuate 'cultural contradictions' (Gustafsson, 2017).

3.2.2. Myths and Guilt-free Narratives

It is essential to mention that in our case, we do not evaluate whether or not brands are iconic. Instead, we focus on exploring whether, behind these narratives, any myths exist that brands tend to use in order to address any anxieties or needs of individuals. The cultural contradiction or inconsistency in our case is the distinction between health and hedonism. There is an ongoing discussion around healthy nutrition and lifestyle (Askew, 2021; Lempert, 2020; Shea, n.d.), thus, consumers are overburdened with this 'guideline'. Consumers might be caught in between their current identity and the desired identity which may create anxieties to be addressed or needs/ desires to be met. Hence, we aim to explore how consumers, through the use of myths, alleviate their anxiety arising from the tension between health and hedonism.

As it will be presented in the following sections, the chosen participants identify to be living a healthy lifestyle; they follow a healthy diet and tend to exercise frequently. Since the sector of snacks includes this dichotomy between health vs hedonism, they may have been in the position of experiencing the 'contradiction' between what they should do ('national ideology'), and what they would like to do ('identity project'). Brands may use myths, which consumers employ as well to resolve the contradictions and justify their consumption of guilt-free snacks.

4.   Methodology

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In this chapter, we present our ontological and epistemological approach and argue for our chosen qualitative research strategy, in particular, semi-structured interviews. We then follow with a research design subsection, where we present our sampling methodology and interview design. Data collection and analysis methods are outlined in detail. The chapter concludes with an argument for trustworthiness and ethical considerations regarding this research study.

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4.1.   Scientific Method: Ontology & Epistemology

Our research adopts a relativist ontological approach which entails the belief that there exist various versions of truth and "what counts as the truth can vary from place to place and from time to time" (Collins, 1983 cited in Easterby-Smith, Jaspersen, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021, p. 74). Following this ontological approach, we take on a social constructivist perspective which predicates that reality is constructed socially and through the interaction and relationship between various social actors (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This perspective allows us to explore the participants' lifeworld experiences and thought processes that could unveil how they make sense of guilt-free narratives in hedonic food consumption. Moreover, in the field of food and health, the proliferation and constant evolution of health trends as well as the presence of conflicting information render the knowledge and experience of each respondent rather subjective. In so adopting a social constructivist perspective, we believe that each participant's understanding of guilt-free narratives is contingent on their subjective interpretation, understanding and interaction with the sociocultural context and forces surrounding them. This epistemology guides us in our

chosen research methodology and research design, which will be described in detail in the following subsections.

4.2. Research Methodology

In this subsection, we explain and argue about the specific selected qualitative method to conduct, which is semi-structured interviews, its features, its advantages and disadvantages as well as we present a reasoning justifying our choice to conduct interviews compared to other qualitative methods.

4.2.1. The Interview Method - Benefits and Challenges

Overall, a main aim of qualitative research is to discover complicated and in many instances, personal concerns of individuals; asking unambiguous questions that are simply understood and offering a basic and contextual-free meaning is not enough (Alvesson, 2003). Interviews are the most suitable method for exploring meaning about several topics by asking relevant questions to participants (Kendall, 2008). More specifically,

> "The flexibility and ability to probe with follow-up questions along with the dialogic nature of the interview enables the researcher to attempt to see issues from the perspective of the interviewee and to achieve a degree of empathy and understanding with research participants." (Kendall, 2008, p. 134)

For the purpose of this study, we adopt an exploratory qualitative research design that allows for an understanding of how people make sense of guilt-free narratives and how they cope with the health-hedonic conflict in the case of guilt-free hedonic food. The qualitative method also allows for understanding aspects of consumers' lifeworld that may play a role in their consumption.

Concerning the method selection, we believe that interviews are a suitable method for this study. Interviews are to some degree structured, offering openness and flexibility, for interviewees to express their views and feelings that they think are pertinent to the study area (Alvesson, 2003). Specifically, we chose to conduct semi-structured open-ended interviews which allow us, not only to gain a clear view of the topic but also to offer an extent of flexibility in participants' responses

(Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Based on Easterby-Smith et al., (2021), the open-ended questions offer participants the opportunity to freely express their beliefs and viewpoints, which is essential to unfold their understanding and the meanings which they attach to guilt-free narratives and how they manage to cope with the tension between health and hedonism.

As every qualitative method has its advantages and disadvantages, the same applies to interviews as well. According to Opdenakker (2006), one benefit of in-person interviews is the observation of social cues, such as body language, tone of voice, elements that can enhance the data derived from verbal cues. In our case, we tried to observe non-verbal cues, such as body language or alterations in the tone of voice, and although some of the interviews were conducted online, we still managed to notice some. Furthermore, Opdenakker (2006) mentioned another benefit, which is the directness and spontaneity of in-person interviews since there are no delays in asking and answering questions. However, as is also presented by the author, this posed a challenge for us since we conducted semi-structured interviews, thus we had to be concentrated and listen carefully to participants as well as quickly come up with relevant questions if this was needed and/or required. Additionally, if participants agreed to the consent form, interviews will be recorded, a fact that comprises another advantage (Opdenakker, 2006). Moreover, since we were two interviewers, we scheduled one interviewer to carefully keep notes, and the other interviewer to be more concentrated on the discussion with the participant, without excluding the possibility of the first interviewer to also pose questions, whenever this was deemed necessary. Two other benefits, presented by Opdenakker (2006) are that in-person interviews give the opportunity to create a friendly atmosphere and that the interview's finish is relatively easy; elements that are also applied in our research. As it will be mentioned later, we also conducted some synchronous online interviews, which facilitated our process of finding participants that interviewing them face-to-face was not possible (Bampton & Cowton, 2002; Chaney & Dew, 2003 cited in Kendall, 2008).

Regarding the disadvantages, one drawback of in-person interviews is that it is costly and time-consuming (Opdenakker, 2006); however, in our case, we did not face such challenges; both face-to-face and online interviews lasted about the same amount of time, due to its synchronous nature. Most disadvantages come particularly with online interviews compared to in person, and concern the cases where online interviews occur in a text form and the lack of nonverbal cues (Kendall,

2008). We conducted online synchronous interviews in the Zoom platform with the camera function on, both for the interviewers and the participants, allowing a degree of interaction. Hence, both spontaneity and observing nonverbal cues were feasible.

4.2.2. Interviews vs Other Qualitative Methods

A reasonable inquiry could be why interviews were chosen as the selected method. After reviewing the other qualitative methods, we noted their basic features evaluating whether they can serve our research scope and objectives. To begin with, the most basic feature of focus groups, based on Carson, Gilmore, Perry and Gronhaug (2011), is that many participants are part of the focus group session concurrently in order to produce data and insights. This discernible attribute of interaction among participants on a particular topic plays a great role in generating data (Morgan, 1988 cited in Carson et al., 2011). Although, as will be mentioned in the following sections thoroughly, our topic is related to how individuals may be influenced by other sources, still their final purchasing decision is totally dependent on how they make sense of these narratives, which is an individualistic process. Thus, we do not believe that focus groups would be a suitable method for our topic.

Furthermore, another qualitative method is ethnography, which involves the study of social behaviour in physical settings (Fielding, 1993 cited in Elliot & Jankel-Elliot, 2003). In this process, the researcher should extensively be present in the surroundings, and also few but highly knowledgeable participants of the studied topic are included in the sample. Moreover, a variety of qualitative methods are combined in ethnography such as observation, interviews, conversations, and keeping diaries (Elliot & Jankel-Elliot, 2003). Additionally, the qualitative method of netnography concerns the study of several phenomena online; it is characterised as natural and completely unnoticeable but its specific emphasis is restrained only in online communities (Kozinets, 2002).

Even though these two former qualitative methods are considered efficient for generating valuable insights, we believe that they are not suitable for our topic. Our topic is neither necessarily limited only to online community spaces, nor a specific practice occurring in natural surroundings. Most importantly, we are interested in exploring how individuals make sense of these narratives, their

opinions, and emotions about them, which can also be drawn by their experiences, knowledge, and perceptions. Consequently, we believe that in-depth interviews as a method is the most appropriate way of achieving our research objective.

4.3. Research Design

4.3.1. Sampling

For this study, we used a non-probability purposive sampling of European participants between 20 - 30 years old. The selection of participants' nationality is explained by the fact that healthism is an often taken-for-granted notion in developed countries (Silchenko & Askegaard, 2021), and the majority of the countries in Europe are considered developed countries (World Population Review, 2023). Furthermore, the selection of this specific age group is justified by the fact this age group is more familiarised with guilt-free products (Haynes & Podobsky, 2016). Hence, the selection of participants based on nationality and age group helps to ensure that they have probably engaged with guilt-free products and formed some sort of understanding and perceptions that could be explored during the interview.

Additionally, another criterion of selection was to find participants who at least engage in a workout routine. The main reason for this criterion is that by selecting individuals with a relatively healthy lifestyle, there are higher chances that they will be more exposed to these guilt-free products with health-related narratives. Furthermore, these types of products usually target audiences with healthy lifestyles or individuals that have concerns with calorie intake and health issues, or individuals with dietary limitations (Amplify XL, 2022). Therefore, we believe it is a sensible decision to focus on this group of people in our sample.

4.3.2. Interview Design

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online. The online interviews were held through the Zoom platform, while face-to-face interviews were held in a physical setting of Lund University. During the interviews, a selected sample of snacks was presented, giving participants the opportunity to express their thoughts on different types of guilt-free hedonic food. The first plan was to demonstrate real snack samples during the interview, which would offer more interaction and the opportunity to observe participants' body language. As it will be mentioned

later in this section, we eventually decided to show images of snacks to focus the discussion on how participants make sense of the narratives on the snack's packaging.

The snack samples included three product categories, specifically chocolate, chips, and snack bars, some of the most prominent products concerning hedonic packaged food (Mondelēz International, 2021). The variety of snacks included both the traditional version and alternative versions with guilt-free narratives. The selected snacks represented the following types of narratives: (1) the absence or decrease of hedonic attributes (i.e. low-fat, no sugar), (2) the addition of functional attributes (i.e. protein, antioxidants), and (3) the substitution with ingredients deemed as healthier (i.e. dark chocolate, lentils, oats, nuts).

The interview guide was divided into three sections; (1) guilt-free narratives, (2) lifestyle and fitness, and (3) snacking vs. lifestyle. Although we had some pre-fixed questions, since we were following a semi-structured approach, we always had to ask new and different questions to each participant. Almost each interview session had a different focus, for example, if a participant mentioned that chocolate is their favourite snack, many of the following questions were about sweet snacks.

The interviews started with general questions about snacking consumption and frequency, such as whether participants consume snacks or not, what types of snacks they prefer, and on what occasion they snack. The first section concerned the notion of guilt-free narratives. In this section, we showed some images of snacks to participants and specifically asked for their opinions and feelings about them, whether they have tried any of these, and which snack per category would they choose. The selection of snacks was based on the chosen three types of guilt-free narratives that were mentioned before, and are explained in Table 1 below. The snacks were selected with the aim to include both a sweet (i.e., chocolate) and savoury (i.e., chips) type of snacks and also snack bars which are considered quick and filling snacks and it is observed that people tend to eat them in between meals. In terms of flavours, we chose similar ones per category, wherever this was feasible, with the aim to prevent participants from selecting a snack based on their favourite flavour, if giving them, for example, three different flavours per category.

Table 1 - Categorisation of Snacks

	Chocolate	**Chips**	**Snack Bars**
Traditional Versions	Milk Chocolate (Chokladkaka Mjölkchoklad) (brand: Marabou)	Potato Chips with sourcream & onion (brand: Estrella)	Mueslibar with peanut & chocolate (Müslibar BIG Peanut & chocolate) (brand: Corny)
Guilt-free narrative #1: Absence/ decrease of hedonic features	-	Lentil chips with sourcream & onion ● 40% less fat (40% mindre fett) ● 13% protein (brand: Estrella)	Snack bite with peanut butter ● No added sugar! ● Guilt-free ● 7.3g net carbs! ● High in protein! (brand: Pro! Brands)
Guilt-free narrative #2: Addition of functional features	-	Protein Chips with sourcream & onion ● 40% less fat ● 22% protein ● Rich in fibre 	Protein Bar with oats and peanuts ● 100% vegan ● No added refined sugar ● 15g protein ● "Cut the crap. Eat clean." (phrase upon packaging)

		(brand: Pro! Brands)	(brand: Oatlaws)
Guilt-free narrative #3: replacement with ingredients viewed as more healthy	Dark Chocolate 70% cocoa (Chokladkaka Premium 70% kakao Dark) (brand: Marabou)	Lentil chips with sourcream & onion (brand: Estrella)	Protein Bar with oats and peanuts (brand: Oatlaws)

The second part concerned the lifestyle and fitness of participants. In this section, we asked participants to describe their overall lifestyle in terms of their eating habits, nutrition, and exercise routine as well as why they tend to follow such a lifestyle. Additionally, we asked them whether they have sources from which they get inspiration regarding nutrition and fitness. Participants were also asked to describe how they understand the notion of being healthy, and to rate their lifestyle from a scale to 1-10 in terms of healthiness, how they justify the rating, and if and how they plan to level up or maintain their current status. These questions were aimed at exploring their perception and understanding of the concept of healthism, how their knowledge and lifestyle are formed, as well as their self-concept related to the topic of health.

The last section focuses on exploring snack choices vs lifestyle where we posed questions related to the selection of snacks in association with participants' lifestyles. Indicatively, we asked participants if they recall the last time they purchased a healthier version of a snack and why, their purchasing motives, their opinions and understanding of choosing and consuming healthier snacks compared to traditional ones, how they justify their choice of snacking while they tend to follow a

relatively or highly healthy lifestyle, and whether they have observed any kind of communication material regarding healthier versions of snacks (see Appendix A for the interview guide).

In each interview, the laddering-up and laddering-down techniques (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021) were very useful in eliciting insights from the respondents' answers. Multiple times throughout the interviews, we asked "why" questions, such as "Why do you prefer this?", "Why do you think this x snack is healthier?" and so on. In the same vein, on many occasions, we asked them to share or recall any examples. Additionally, as mentioned above, the flow of discussion in each interview was quite different; thus, we tried to elicit insights and spend more time when participants mentioned interesting facts, by asking questions such as "you said x for this product snack, why do you believe this?", "how do you perceive this narrative?".

Before proceeding to the interviews with the participants, we conducted an off-the-record mock interview. The purpose of the mock interview was to review the total duration of time required, the flow of the questions, and whether or not the questions were comprehensible and unambiguous, and if the chosen snacks were appropriate selections for the aim of our study. After conducting the mock interview, its approximate duration was 45 minutes. Overall, the majority of questions were comprehensible and although the flow of them was smooth, we decided to change the order of a few questions. Furthermore, we proceeded to the following corrections; we decided to eventually include snacks in an image form, since the resolution of the image is sufficient, thus there was no need for physical snacks. We also changed one chocolate type of the samples to 70% dark chocolate bar, since the 86% version selected prior may have too high a percentage of dark chocolate, making it too extreme of a choice.

4.4. Data Collection

A total of nine interviews were conducted with participants aged 20 to 29 and from various countries in Europe, namely Iceland, Sweden, Hungary, Germany, Slovakia, The Netherlands, and Greece. While gender was not an important criterion for selection, the sample obtained includes both male and female participants to enhance the richness of data. The demographic information and workout routine of the participants are presented in Table 2 below.

Each interview lasted from 30 - 45 minutes. All interview recordings were transcribed into 108 pages of transcript. It is also noteworthy that no difference in data richness was observed between face-to-face and online interviews since both forms of interview yield relatively similar amounts of text.

Table 2 - Profile of participants

#	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Nationality	Workout Routine
1	Laura	23	Female	Iceland	Every day
2	Vanessa	20	Female	Sweden	4 - 5 times per week
3	Marcus	23	Male	Hungary	Every day
4	Archer	23	Male	Germany	2 - 3 times per week
5	John	29	Male	Slovakia	2 - 3 times per week
6	Nathan	26	Male	Sweden	5 - 6 times per week
7	Michael	26	Male	Greece	3 times per week (walking) // once per month playing paddle
8	Marta	25	Female	The Netherlands	3 - 5 times per week
9	Hannah	29	Female	Greece	2-4 times per week

4.5. Data Analysis

Abductive analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) was chosen as the method of analysing data, which is a method suitable when following an abductive reasoning process. Abductive reasoning takes the starting point from empirical material to formulate logical inferences, yet involves an iterative process of revisiting these inferences when new surprising empirical evidence comes to light (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This process takes on a grounded analysis process, with the addition of "revisiting", "defamiliarising" and "alternative casing" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) to further enhance our analysis.

What sets abductive reasoning apart from the inductive method is the reiterative process between theories and data. We first conducted five interviews and ran through the material to get a sense of whether our pre-existing knowledge and theories are sufficient to account for the phenomenon observed. When surprising observations emerge that could not be explained with existing theories, we look to explore further potential concepts and further conduct more interviews.

Our initial plan was to conduct ten (10) interviews, but once we conducted the ninth interview, and observed that no additional insight was yielded - determined as the saturation point (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021) -, we eventually decided to proceed with nine interviews. Then, we commenced our grounded analysis process. This process started with familiarising with the empirical material, which involves both listening and reading interview transcripts multiple times and reflecting upon what the data may be suggesting (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). As Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) mentioned, the process of spending time with the collected material is required in order for the researchers to familiarise themselves with the data on a bigger picture but to pinpoint details as well. While reviewing the material multiple times, we observed what facts were mentioned but furthermore the way (how) they were mentioned - the 'sorting' process (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Furthermore, we kept notes, made comments, and highlighted important quotes. While reviewing the transcripts, we proceeded into an initial categorisation, to facilitate our process for later. We then proceeded with open coding, which entails summarising noteworthy quotes into phrases that denote what they concern (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This process yielded 182 first-order open quotes.

Next, we continued reviewing the material and the open codes in order to identify potential categories for analysis. Reducing is the stage where the researchers "often choose among categories, but also within a set of categories" (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 107). To draw to categories, we followed two rounds of coding; 'focused' coding, which based on the authors, consists of generating more concrete concepts. These concepts would later be grouped into relevant themes.

In the conceptualisation stage, we compared, contrasted and grouped codes into categories in an attempt to identify potential patterns (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). We then proceeded with

focused re-coding where important and significant codes were identified and analysed more in-depth.

In the linking stage, we conceptualised how the different categories relate to one another (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This was also where we revisited existing theories in an attempt to explain our observations. The first draft of analysis was then produced which includes a preliminary theorisation of data.

Finally, we revisited our empirical material and examined if any phenomenon could not be explained by our preliminary theorisation, thereby necessitating reconfiguration or modification. The focus of this step is not on gathering confirming information as there is little value in doing so (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Instead, picking out cases that may challenge the abductive hypothesis provides an opportunity for cultivating new angles or novel modifications of existing theories.

We analysed 108 pages of transcripts from a total of nine interviews. The grounded analysis process yielded 182 first-order codes, which were then reduced to 70 second-order codes. These codes were grouped into five categories and reduced to three main themes, which will be analysed in the next chapter.

4.6. Trustworthiness

According to Adler (2022), qualitative research tends to be viewed as less trustworthy, compared to quantitative research; therefore, researchers consider trustworthiness as an important aim. One fundamental difference between quantitative and qualitative research, is that the former depends on numerical elements, whereas the latter is interested in discovering and understanding meanings. Consequently, this interest in discovering meaning which is considered more subjective makes qualitative researchers more prone to be denied its status as a scientific methodology (Adler, 2022). Therefore, there is a need for evaluating the quality of qualitative research. Trustworthiness should be assessed by examining "credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 cited in Adler, 2022, p. 599).

Adler argued that one crucial component of trustworthiness is transparency. The author claimed that transparency means that researchers should say explicitly the used techniques but also refer to the epistemological and theoretical framework of the study. To ensure transparency in the usage of the method, we described it in detail in the subsection 4.2. This is recommended by Rose and Johnson (2020 cited in Adler, 2022) to be crucial in ensuring trustworthiness, so researchers should mention everything about the methods and processes they follow. Additionally, to ensure reflexivity, another element mentioned by Dodgson (2019 cited in Adler, 2022), we acknowledge that our own epistemology and sociocultural view guide us in the choice of research design and analysis. However, in order to reduce bias, we phrased our questions with simple and appropriate language and avoided asking biased questions. We avoided the use of the terms such as "guilt-free snacks" or "guilty" which may sound predisposed to the participants. In the first section, regarding opinions on the snack samples, we asked questions such as "*What do you think about these products?*", "*What is your opinion/ How do you feel about this?*", and not asking for example "Which one of these two snacks do you believe is healthier?", since this phrasing would sound leading, implying that one of the two snack options is healthier.

A further element is raw data availability and data tables. Adler (2022) mentions that a big issue of qualitative research is the huge amount of data derived from the selected methods conducted. Ways to ensure trustworthiness are (a) to present raw data to audiences, a way for checking the accuracy, and (b) to present as much data as possible and their analysis in the actual study document (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021 cited in Adler, 2022). In the analysis chapter, we use direct quotes from participants to support our interpretation and enhance the trustworthiness of our study. By presenting both our own interpretations and the quotes by the participants, we allow readers to discern whether such interpretation makes sense, knowing that the interpretation is subjected to our own pre-existing knowledge and beliefs. However, for space reasons, unfortunately, we cannot include the whole transcripts, but these are available for review upon request.

With all the aforementioned practices which highlight transparency, we tried to ensure that our qualitative research is trustworthy.

4.7.   Ethical Considerations

In each interview, an informed consent (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021) was given to each participant, either distributed physically or sent online, depending on the type of the interview (in-person vs. online). The document included information concerning the research topic, the researchers, the use of data provided during interview sessions, the confidentiality of information provided, participants' agreement (or not) towards anonymity and recording process, the choice to refuse participation or withdrawal at any moment during the interview, expected interview duration and contact details of participants.

Furthermore, in each interview session, we mentioned to participants that in case there is any feeling of discomfort with a question, they are free to choose not to answer it. Additionally, we informed them that they are more than welcome to ask questions about our research study at the end of the interview. We were very cautious about mentioning as few as possible regarding our research topic, in order to avoid leading and biased answers, and limiting any predispositions; therefore, we were just mentioning to participants that we are conducting a study about snacking consumption and its associations. When the interview was over, participants were more than welcome to ask us for more details about our research and what we study specifically. With the aforementioned practices, we tried to ensure that we conduct an ethical and transparent research study.

5. Consumers' Process of Coping with the Tension between Health and Hedonism

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In this section, we analyse the transcripts and present our findings regarding how consumers cope with the tension between health and hedonism and make sense of guilt-free narratives in the process. We first discuss the overall strategy adopted by participants in handling the tension between health and hedonism, which involves what is termed "the balancing act" as a way to preserve self-consistency and positive self-image. In order to achieve this balancing act, participants turn to healthy food myths to bridge the health-hedonic gap and alleviate the anxieties arising from the consumption of hedonic food, which threatens their positive self-image. Finally, we explore how such a process of coping with the health-hedonic tension is an ongoing reflexive one where consumers adopt new strategies through both internal evaluation and reflecting on ever-evolving cultural myths.

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Table 3 - Summary of The Main Findings

Consumers' Process of Coping with the Tension between Health and Hedonism				
Balacing Act: Preserving Self-consistency and Positive Self-Image	Healthy Food Myths: Bridging the Health-Hedonic Gap		Towards a Healthier Self: An Ongoing and Reflexive Process	
	The Emergence of Healthy Food Myths	The Utilisation of Healthy Food Myths	Reflexivity in Approach towards Health	Ongoing Process of Learning, Relearning, Accepting and Rejecting Myths

5.1. Balancing Act: Preserving Self-Consistency and Positive Self-Image

The tension between health and hedonism is palpable throughout the interviews where participants attempt to rationalise their consumption of hedonic food while holding on to their identity as healthy consumers. In order to cope with such tension, employing a "balanced" approach emerged as the main strategy for most participants which permits indulgence despite pursuing a healthier self. While most participants identified snacks with a guilt-free narrative as a healthier alternative, not all participants selected these alternatives as a solution to balance the need for health and hedonism. Instead, depending on the overall strategy they employ when it comes to pursuing a healthier lifestyle, this "balancing act" looks different for each participant.

For participants whose lifestyle involves a more stringent routine and diet, snacking on traditional versions of snacks seems to be acceptable. Vanessa who considered herself relatively healthy, for instance, believes in maintaining a balanced approach where snacking is permissible so as to sustain such a lifestyle in the long run.

> Vanessa: "I think it's the most important thing is like balance. It maybe not be like so strict on yourself as well. It's more like everyone has like bad day. Sometimes it's okay to eat. Like, I don't think it's good, either to be like, I'm not eating anything, any snacks or anything as well. I think it's easy to like, but I don't think it's good to eat it everyday either. So I think it's good to just have a balance. And yeah, so it's easy to maintain for a long time or the rest of the life."

In essence, Vanessa permits herself to consume snacks on certain occasions - either when she was having a bad day, or in the broader term of the interview, as a reward or celebration. From her perspective, Vanessa generally adheres to a diet of three self-cooked meals per day and works out four to five times per week. Such a lifestyle allows her to indulge in traditional snacks such as milk chocolate and cheese doodles as a form of reward after "completing something difficult" or on some sort of celebratory occasion. Indicatively, such snacks are viewed as a pleasurable treat to counteract the "bad day", or "difficult task", which when consumed in small amounts, does not seem to disrupt her pursuit of a healthier self. This similar sentiment is echoed by Marcus who

follows a strict diet involving a structured meal plan and workout routine. Consequently, he cited that "if I eat a chocolate, that won't cause any harm in general" and opted for milk chocolate as a form of indulgence without considering the guilt-free version.

However, for participants who aspire to maintain a healthy lifestyle, yet adhere to a less stringent diet and routine, guilt-free solution appears to be the preferred way to cope with the tension between health and hedonism. Laura, for instance, admitted to snacking frequently despite her aspiration to stay healthy. As such, she opted for protein chips as an alternative to snacks while having the impression of being healthy.

> Laura: "I think it's the word Protein Chips that I'm like, okay, I want to have something nice and have chips, but I feel like it's the better and healthier option."

Similarly, Hannah who actively tries to pursue a healthy lifestyle yet often snacks on an evening out would get baked potato chips - an option that offers the perception of being healthier while still allowing her to indulge.

> Hannah: "Sometimes I buy some chips that are not fried but made in the oven. But it's from potatoes as well. But let's say that sometimes I tried to make a more healthy choice while eating chips at the same time."

In both cases, we observe the need to maintain a positive self-image where opting for "better" and "healthier" alternatives negates the inherent "vice" attribute ascribed to hedonic food such as chips. Weick (1995) posited that the sense-making process is a manifestation of an individual's desire to preserve self-consistency and self-esteem. When faced with a situation that threatens their self-concept, individuals seek out strategies to reaffirm it by altering or ascribing meaning to the situation at hand. In this instance, both Laura and Hannah's attempt to make sense of and seek out the guilt-free version of snacks reflects their need to maintain a consistent self-image of being healthy even as they give in to their desire to consume hedonic food.

On a broader scheme, the need to employ the "balancing act" is rooted in participants' ongoing process of constructing their definition of self. All four participants - Laura, Vanessa, Marcus and Hannah rated themselves seven and above out of ten when asked to rate the level of healthiness of their lifestyle. These relatively high ratings signify a strong identification with a positive self-concept of being healthy. As such, when confronted with the question as to why they still consume snacks despite aspiring to maintain a healthy lifestyle, participants once again emphasised the need to maintain a balance.

> Interviewer: "Since you said it's good to be balanced in terms of nutrition, I would ask in terms of snacks, chocolate for example, if it does not have too much nutrition then what does it bring out in terms of balance? What does it contribute to the balanced lifestyle you talk about?"

> Vanessa: "But I would say it's also important to celebrate things and feel like you earn something and stuff like that. And I think it's good in some part to get like fat from chocolate or something like that."

Here, we observe that when encountered a situation that threatened her positive self-concept of being healthy, Vanessa justified by ascribing additional positive attributes to hedonic food, in this case, chocolate, to counteract the vice attribute, effectively maintaining the balance. The need to preserve self-consistency and "maintaining a positive cognitive and affective state about the self" (Erez & Earley, 1993 cited in Weick, 1995, p. 20) appeared to affect the process of sensemaking. Similar to sensemaking in organisation where experiences that threaten an identity present a chance to "repair and reaffirm" (Weick, 1995, p. 21) such identity, when confronted with an occasion where consuming hedonic food threatens their identity of a healthy consumer, an individual's opinion of such hedonic product may be altered to preserve their identity.

5.2.   Healthy Food Myths: Bridging the Health-Hedonic Gap

When individuals attempt to establish the balancing act using guilt-free snacks, we observe the usage of one or several food myths prevalent in society. The findings showed that participants tend to use these myths, both for evaluating guilt-free snacks but also when choosing them, with the

aim to alleviate any anxieties or meet any desires (Gustafsson, 2017; Holt, 2004). Throughout the interviews, it was evident that participants try to maintain their self-consistency but also try to establish a positive self-identity. The contradiction comes with the hedonic food which signifies the "unhealthy" and "vice" elements, that may bring participants away from their desire which is to attain a positive self-identity (being healthy), or sustain their anxiety arising from the choice of options deemed as less healthy, contradicting their desired identity. In an attempt to deal with this contradiction, participants utilise several food myths, which serve as a solution to alleviate their anxieties and guilt feelings when it comes to hedonic food.

One could question how and within which context these myths emerged. Remarkably, influence by the social actors around participants and/or by the media, which delivers several communication materials regarding guilt-free snacking, are some of the sources from which these myths are spreading for consumers to use with the aim to find a balance in their lifestyle and nutrition. The expansion of these myths makes them visible and present to a great extent, resulting in even more individuals utilise and internalise them. More specifically, these myths tend to concern either nutrients, such as protein, or specific ingredients, such as cocoa.

5.2.1. The Emergence of Healthy Food Myths

Society created certain types of myths which are being conveyed via different mediums. One reasonable question would be how individuals acquire and internalise these myths. According to participants, the media and their social surroundings are two of the most prominent sources which tend to shape the so-called "healthy lifestyle discourse". Media includes any influence from communication material in social media or advertisements, whereas social surroundings influence includes advice or recommendations from their social circle, such as family or friends.

Regarding the media influence, Laura mentions that when Snapchat was introduced in her country, many people, by collaborating with several brands, started to promote fitness snacks in order to motivate audiences to try them - shifting in this way, to a healthier culture. This resulted in eating traditional chocolate in public becoming "socially unacceptable". Nathan also shared about which types of fitness accounts he follows on social media for getting inspiration about healthy lifestyle and nutrition, as well as how he discusses and exchanges opinions with his friends.

Laura: "When Snapchat came out, and was a really big hit in Iceland, or like a few years later, people started having fitness accounts there and then people/brands collaborated with them and started to promote all these protein snacks or the energy drinks and it got so popular. I don't know why such a consumer culture that everybody has to try it. And then the other snacks got like, socially unacceptable, and it's like very socially unacceptable to buy. Or I mean people do it but it's still always with some kind of guilt and some kind of like 'Uhhh, I'm just gonna eat this at home'. Nobody is gonna eat a chocolate bar at school. That's really like, considered weird, maybe."

Nathan: "I have that with a few close friends as well, like when we discuss different brands and different foods, different diets and stuff and you know, because we're really interested in, but as far as Internet sources, I would say it's like 99% Instagram accounts that I follow, there are physiotherapists and fitness influencers. A lot of like UFC fighters actually."

From the above quotes, we observe how the context was set for these myths to emerge. As it was mentioned in the above sections, there has been a tremendous boost in the health trend. This health trend is presented to a high extent in media with even more brands and influencers using social media or online platforms to promote relevant products that address the need and desire to be healthy, by delivering several recommendations towards this path. This is how several myths became clear and manifested, with consumers using them to alleviate any feeling of guilt when it comes to hedonic food products.

Guilt-free marketing entails some conditions. Clear guilt narratives are complicated and can provoke opposed or resistant reactions (Cotte, Coulter & Moore, 2005; Bozinoff & Ghingold, 1983 cited in Haynes & Podobsky, 2016). Consumers' reactions rely "on the product, brand, culture or "mythology" that is being marketed" (Coulter & Pinto, 1995; Holt, 2004 cited in Haynes & Podobsky, 2016, p. 204). However, when it comes to products with guilt-free narratives, these narratives aim to solve cultural contradictions or inconsistencies instead of prompting unfavourable or resistant reactions (Holt, 2012 cited in Haynes & Podobsky, 2016). As it is advocated, these products are resolving the contradiction or alleviate any anxieties (in this case,

guilt) of consumers, due to the way in which the narratives are presented on the product (Haynes & Podobsky, 2016). According to Holt (2004 cited in Haynes & Podobsky, 2016, p. 204), "the mitigation of guilt is part of the product itself, intrinsic to its brand mythology".

5.2.2.   The Utilisation of Healthy Food Myths

In the previous subsections, we presented how food myths emerged. Next, we proceed to explain how participants utilise these myths; mainly when they choose or evaluate guilt-free snacks, as a way to alleviate their anxieties caused by the consumption of hedonic food.

Consumers have started to utilise these myths in their attempt to alleviate the anxiety that arises with the consumption of hedonic food. These myths may concern either specific foods or nutrients. Having these myths prevailed over time, individuals tend to acquire certain associations for specific ingredients or nutrients, and as a result, when these are found in foods, they will automatically consider a product (in this case, a snack) to be healthy or not, based on the already established views.

Based on participants, there is an ongoing interest in protein, resulting in an increased number of launched products with protein. There is an established myth around protein, and automatically, products with protein tend to be considered healthier.

> Laura: "When I see the word protein, I'm like, okay. Yeah, protein has been so glorified in our society." … "So everything is really protein driven. Everything has protein in it."

> Marta: "I guess people will look at protein. So you want to have all the amino things, so yeah, I guess that's where most people look at actually, and they think it's healthy."

From the above quotes, we observe that due to the increasing popularity of protein in products, snacks with protein are considered healthier because they serve this specific need. Individuals are in a constant quest for healthier nutrition. Based on Holt (2004), brands, through their products, aim to address individuals' anxieties and needs, which are closely related to their identities.

Indicatively, as Laura expressed, she feels no guilt when she eats protein chips, "because it has protein in it, and it's not only greasy and with a lot of carbs". In this case, we see that Laura, who is exposed to societal expectations of being healthy, reflected in her comment about the strong fitness culture in Iceland - "the gym culture there is very big, and the sports culture is really big. So, I feel like the social aspect has steered me into it as well", and faces anxiety and guilt when consuming hedonic food such as chips. As such, the presence of protein (myth) gives the impression of a healthier product and automatically alleviates her guilt.

Moreover, indicatively, the presence of protein becomes the most salient cue that Laura picked out from the guilt-free narratives of the different chips. However, it is not just the presence of protein per se, but what it signifies simultaneously - the absence or reduction of carbs. When asked why protein chips feel healthier, Laura responded with "I feel like then it wouldn't be only carbs. And sometimes, I tend to be afraid of carbs" whereas "protein has been so glorified in our, like society" and it is deemed as acceptable to eat protein chips compared to the traditional chips.

Another widely held myth echoed by a majority of participants is that dark chocolate is healthier than milk chocolate, with a higher percentage of cocoa seeming to signal a higher level of healthiness. For Laura, eating dark chocolate is permissible for people that are on a diet or that tend to follow a healthier lifestyle, signifying a social impression that it is mainly eaten or preferred by people on a diet.

> Laura: "I feel like when people are maybe dieting, they're allowing themselves to have one dark chocolate."

Consuming chocolate seems to be associated with something one needs to seek permission for, indicatively by Laura's usage of the word "allowing themselves". Here, dark chocolate is presented as the solution to indulge while being on a diet, effectively bridging the dichotomy between aspired healthy identity and the desire to consume hedonic food. One particular reason for such perception is the widely held myth that the higher percentage of cocoa present in dark chocolate signifies a healthier option. John illustrated this in his statement:

John: "I would choose the premium 70%. Because I think that chocolate is healthy for me, but the high percentage of it. So, I usually go about 90 or at least 85."

We observe again that the myth around cocoa, and consequently, dark chocolate sufficiently serves the need for being healthy. Here, the contradiction between the aspired healthy identity and the desire to consume hedonic food, in this case, chocolate, is alleviated by the cocoa myth. Notably, as Marcus mentioned, choosing to eat dark chocolate is characterised as "a conscious choice", by which individuals persuade themselves of how healthy they are.

Moreover, these myths appear to have immense power despite the uncertainty in health claims. For instance, Vanessa talked about lentil chips, declaring that she believes that these are a healthier option, due to the presence of protein, without questioning more.

Vanessa: "That also makes the feeling of it more like healthy. I think. I don't know if it is but it's just the feeling of it. …"

Interviewer: "So it's like the vegetable and then the lentil that makes it healthier and also this 40% [less fat]?"

Vanessa: "Yeah, like the lins. 13% protein."

Consequently, we see that despite her uncertainty whether this product is in fact healthier than other alternatives, Vanessa is prone to consider it as healthier because it contains protein. Here, we observe a sense of uncertainty shown in the usage of phrases such as "the feeling of it" or "I don't know if it is". Nonetheless, Vanessa eventually chose to perceive it as healthy, citing the presence of protein as the reason. A justifiable question would be how these nutrients or ingredients gain such power, so that when being included in products, then these products are viewed automatically as healthier.

As presented in Blaxter's and Garnett's blog post (2022), protein is committed to providing such benefits and advantages related to health, that whenever it is mentioned, it automatically leverages

the selling proposition of a product. Protein offers a lot of health-related benefits. To briefly describe how protein gained such power, it is essential to mention that back in the 19th century, scientists were advocating that protein was responsible for carrying out the body's complicated functions, transforming in this way protein as the most significant nutrient (Mendel, 1923 cited in Blaxter & Garnett, blog post, 2022). Between 1950-1970, emphasis on protein was central in the world hunger issue, turning the discussion towards protein as the solution; however, in 1974, science did not advocate the protein emphasis anymore, not contributing significantly to the issue of world hunger (McLaren, 1974 cited in Blaxter & Garnett, blog post, 2022).

By the aforementioned statements, we observe that there are several food myths about certain ingredients (i.e., cocoa) or nutrients (i.e., protein) that participants are aware of, and which they tend to use in order to alleviate their anxieties and meet their needs, being in their path to construct and find their identity (Gustafsson, 2017; Holt, 2004) in between the healthism and hedonism dichotomy. For participants, guilt alleviation comes from the utilisation of myths by the participants with the purpose to reach a balanced level. Previously, we observed statements, where participants expressed a type of guilt when preferring traditional snacks or a 'feeling better' status when preferring healthier versions of snacks. Hence, balance is achieved with snacks (a key category of hedonic food consumption) accompanied by guilt-free narratives, which entail several myths and give the impression of a not-so-unhealthy choice in an ongoing healthy context.

5.3.   Towards a Healthier Self: An Ongoing and Reflexive Process

While the desired identity of being healthy remains the same, the myths that aim to resolve the anxieties that arise from consuming hedonic food appear to continuously evolve. Individuals as such go through a reflexive and ongoing process of making sense of guilt-free narratives in an attempt to cope with the tension between health and hedonism.

5.3.1.   Reflexivity in Approach towards Health

While individuals look to health myths in the pursuit of a healthier self, this process is not without reflexivity. In essence, participants show active involvement in evaluating whether one approach works or not instead of relying fully on marketing narratives or prevailing myths.

Nathan, for example, tried and tested different approaches towards health over the years, showing a perception rooted more in his own experience:

> Nathan: "I guess I've just come to the point where I don't want to be like, I want to be able to eat whatever I want. I mean, I like being healthy. I want to, like, have a physical appearance that I want to look good. I mean, what's considered like, you know, I want to look strong and lean. But I don't want that at the expense of me not being able to enjoy snacks every now and then. Because I love having snacks. And I mean, I couldn't imagine not eating snacks, just in order to look healthy that I mean, since I've tried it before. I've tried to cut as though when I was 18. I tried to cut everything, like all the unnecessary carbs. And I was just miserable, and it's not worth it. So I think being healthy is about balancing, balancing eating good and enjoying life and enjoying food."

There seems to be a level of reflexivity in the approach towards health as Nathan experiences the result or consequence of the process where he recalled feeling "miserable" at eighteen trying to restrict himself excessively. This reflexivity gives rise to the current notion of balancing instead of going toward the extreme. As a manifestation of such renewed outlook, Nathan relies less on guilt-free snacks, opts to snack as he desires, and consequently chooses milk chocolate over dark chocolate, for instance.

This reflexivity was also observed in the case of other participants who constantly evolve in their strategies to attain a healthier lifestyle, either moving from one form of diet to another, or adjusting their routines, adopting or relaxing rules to accommodate indulgence. In essence, while the need to balance remains central, the approach to achieving such balance continuously transforms as participants test out and reflect upon their lifestyles.

5.3.2. Ongoing Process of Learning, Relearning, Accepting and Rejecting myths

When it comes to the pursuit of a healthier self, this reflexive process more often than not appears to entail an ongoing process of learning and relearning, where health myths constantly get accepted, debunked, rejected and make way for new ones. One's perception of guilt-free narratives

evolves and changes as one attempts to educate themselves and work on their identity projects. Laura, for example, rejected her old belief in counting calories and now subscribes to the notion that "good nutrition" is more important and focuses strongly on the presence of protein as an indicator of healthiness.

> "I am a lot into fitness and CrossFit. So I have to watch my nutrition. And I have to think about when I'm eating that it has good nutrition, not just because once I was a lot thinking about calories, and then it doesn't really matter if it's a 400 calories of sour cream and onion or 400 calories of Protein Chips. But now more thing about like okay, now it has to have a lot of protein, it has to have good fat and it has to have not a lot of carbs because I'm not focusing on that right now."

As illustrated, how Laura makes sense of the protein chips narrative evolved as the health myths she subscribes to transform, which is the result of her ongoing identity project. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991, p. 435 cited in Weick, 1995, p. 27) postulated that "meanings change as current projects and goals change". When calorie counting was the focus, protein narratives would not have been interpreted as a healthier option unless the calories were lower than a traditional version. On the contrary, when Laura is focusing on nutrition, the presence of protein is sufficient for protein chips to be deemed as healthier, regardless of the calories count.

This similar sentiment is echoed by participants such as John, who counted on how his source of knowledge for health myths, in this case, a friend who is a fitness influencer, presented ever-changing information about food myths. So he follows as such:

> John: "He's constantly looking for new information. And sometimes it happens that he's been saying something for 10 years. And then he says, okay, now I got new information. And actually, there is something better than I was saying. And he is trying to do a lot of data-driven things."

Consequently, John continuously learns and relearns the ever-changing food myths to resolve the contradictions between health and hedonism.

This finding demonstrates that while consumers may be in pursuit of a healthier self, the strategy they adopt continues to evolve, either through absorbing new cultural myths from external sources or through a reflexive internal process. As such, the process of evaluating guilt-free narrative is an ongoing one, which is likened to what Weick (1995) posited as one of the characteristics of sensemaking. In this manner, the same guilt-free narrative may be perceived differently as consumers' knowledge changes, or as the widely popularised health myths transform.

6.   Discussion

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In this chapter, we discuss the findings in a broader perspective, connecting them with previous literature and further relating them to the topic of food and health. The chapter begins with a summary of the findings, followed by the insights generated from these findings and how they relate to the previous two studies on guilt-free hedonic food by Belei et al. (2012) and Haynes and Podobsky (2016). We conclude the chapter with the implications of our findings on a consumer and societal perspective as well as a marketing perspective.

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We have analysed how consumers cope with the tension between health and hedonism as well as the process through which they make sense of guilt-free narratives that aim at bridging this gap. The balancing act was explored as a way in which consumers attempt to preserve their positive self-image of being healthy while permitting themselves to indulge in hedonic food that is often viewed as unhealthy or vice. This balancing act, however, looks different for each consumer depending on the overall strategy they deploy to cope with the health-hedonic tension. For consumers whose lifestyle entails a stricter routine and diet, snacking on traditional versions does not threaten their positive self-image, since other aspects of their lifestyle counteract the vice attributes of such hedonic consumption. In fact, the consumption of such hedonic food is even deemed as necessary in maintaining a balanced approach. As a result, while they view guilt-free alternatives as healthier, such products do not seem to be necessary in their consumption choice. On the other hand, consumers who aspire to maintain a positive self-image of being healthy yet

struggle to maintain a stringent lifestyle rely on guilt-free snacks as a way to cope with the health-hedonic tension. These guilt-free versions permit them to give in to their desire to indulge while holding on to their self-image of being healthy.

In order to utilise such guilt-free narratives to cope with the health-hedonic tension, consumers turn to the prevailing healthy food myths. These health myths emerged from the media and/or social actors in the consumers' lifeworld and with this way, each consumer may subscribe to different health myths; each time to the ones that serve better in order to reach the preferred identity quest. We observe here that society in general, as well as the media, what is being communicated and delivered online or through several media, tends to shape the general frame of healthiness, or in other words, of what is considered healthy or unhealthy. Consumers tend to use these myths in order to make sense of guilt-free narratives. For example, some participants find having protein in chips a good thing (Laura), but others think of them as something excessive, artificial or unnecessary (Archer). Furthermore, another reason why consumers tend to use these myths is to alleviate any anxieties or meet any needs and desires they may have in order to approach the healthier aspect of themselves. Based on how they perceive or use the myth, consumers make sense, understand and interpret the same guilt-free narratives differently.

The process of balancing and coping with the health-hedonic tension was found to be both reflexive and ongoing. In essence, while consumers subscribe to prevailing health myths, there appears to be an internal evaluation process where consumers try out different approaches, reflect on its impact on their wellbeing and adjust accordingly. Moreover, as health myths continue to evolve, the strategies deployed by consumers in coping with health-hedonic tension evolve. In this way, how consumers make sense of guilt-free narratives shift as the myths they subscribe to shift. The same guilt-free narrative as such may be perceived differently as consumers' approach to health change or cultural myths transform.

In light of these findings, the sensemaking process of guilt-free narratives in hedonic food entails a plethora of factors in the consumers' lifeworlds and the ever-evolving health myths. This process is not without reflexivity and appears to go beyond simple evaluation of attributes highlighted by

the guilt-free narratives. The next section delves deeper into the insights generated by these findings and how they relate to previous studies on guilt-free hedonic food.

6.1. The Impact of Consumers' Lifeworlds on Guilt-free Hedonic Consumption

From the findings, we observe that factors in consumer lifeworlds such as overall lifestyle and the health myths they subscribe to affect how they make sense of guilt-free narratives and whether they rely on such guilt-free narratives in resolving the health-hedonic tension.

The choice of consumption of guilt-free hedonic food, for instance, differs between individuals depending on their overall strategy to cope with the health-hedonic tension. For participants such as Vanessa whose stringent lifestyle permits her to indulge freely in hedonic food when she chooses to, guilt-free narratives seem to play little role in motivating her consumption of such products. However, such findings may not be possible to obtain in a sterile environment such as a lab environment, as is the case with a large number of studies in the food and health domain (Silchenko, Askegaard & Cedrola, 2020). For instance, while the study by Belei et al. (2012) presented the guilt-free narratives (fat-free) tend to prompt greater consumption of such snacks in the lab environment, our findings show that not all participants choose to consume guilt-free snacks in their day-to-day choices. One particular reason for such difference perhaps lies in the design of the studies. In Belei et al. (2012), participants were assigned randomly to either "functional-attribute condition" where they were presented with chocolate with the "Antioxidants - Health from the cacao bean" narrative, or the "hedonic-attribute condition" with fat-free chocolate, as well as the control condition without any guilt-free narratives. The experiment results indicated that participants exposed to the fat-free chocolate consumed significantly more chocolate than the control condition. While the result may provide evidence that guilt-free narratives (fat-free) offer the permission to consume more hedonic food (chocolate) in the lab environment, this behaviour may not translate into real life consumption choice where consumers adopt a variety of approaches towards justifying their hedonic consumption that reduce the necessity for such guilt-free products.

On the other hand, our findings support that by Haynes and Podobsky (2016) which shows that despite a sense of scepticism towards products with diet-related guilt-free narratives, consumers will opt to purchase them due to what termed as interpassivity. Haynes and Podobsky (2016) posited that by consuming products packed with such narratives, consumers pass the responsibility of being healthy to the product itself, avoiding the need to alter their own consumption. This was observed in the case of participants in our study who rely on guilt-free products to cope with the health-hedonic tension, such as Laura and Hannah who chose baked or protein chips as a way to permit their indulgence. In addition, our research went further to demonstrate that food myths are behind the success of these guilt-free narratives, even as consumers display some level of uncertainty over their effectiveness.

6.2.   The Ever-changing Health Myths Shifting Consumer Focus

A primary notion is that myths tend to change and evolve with the years. This means that what is considered a prevailing fact in a society the *x* period of time might alter some years later and not be considered common anymore. In the previous sections, we saw that mainly society and what is being communicated in the media, either traditional or online, tend to shape the general context for various myths to emerge. The ongoing focus and discussion around these facts popularise them, transforming them in this way as myths.

For instance, in the case of the protein myth, we see that there is a massive discussion around protein. However, in the study of Belei et al., which was conducted in 2012, products with fat-free narratives seem persuasive and hence, consuming such products noted an increase; these narratives are presented and discussed extensively, indicating the focus around calorie intake. In addition to this, based on Howard (2012), some of the main nutrition trends in 2012, were the focus on amount of sugar and calories consumed. Remarkably, as stated by the Calorie Control Council in the US (2012 cited in Howard, 2012), approximately 80% of US consumers preferred to consume food and drinks with no sugar and with fewer calories, having as a clear aim to decrease the amount of calories and sugar they consume. As a result, since then more products or recipes with less calories were being introduced and advertised to audiences (Howard, 2012). Consequently, it is observed how the need of society to consume less calories was handled by the market which launched and advertised products with less fat or fat-free, shaping within this way the context around the fat-

free narratives. It also indicates how people utilised this myth in order to meet their needs or address their anxieties regarding sugar and calorie intake consumption. The ongoing emphasis on calories drove the creation of this type of narratives and its emergence within the society.

As we saw in the findings section, the protein myth was presented and analysed. Proceeding in later years, the focus on protein started to grow around 2016, in the quite same period of time when the trend of fat-free food or with fewer calories started to diminish (Business Wire, 2016). As mentioned in Blaxter's and Garnett's blog post (2022), protein gained its power around the 19th century. The authors claim that several cultural and symbolic meanings are attached to different nutrients. Throughout the years, protein acquired quite a few meanings that developed its power, such as health and strength (Blaxter & Garnett, blog post, 2022). Again, we observe how the discourse around protein shaped the context for a myth to emerge, making all social actors, media and marketers promote protein as the ultimate solution. Nevertheless, as it is presented in Blaxter's and Garnett's blog post (2022) accepting facts without questioning or without being critical demonstrates "how easy it is to fall into the trap of narrow solutions that fail to respond to the full complexity of the problems we face"; or in other words, the desires or the anxieties individuals need to address.

Furthermore, the interest in protein continued to increase due to the pandemic, making consumers believe that it is a powerful nutrient which provides many advantages (Power, director of the Kerry company, cited in Cornall, 2021). Especially, the "high in protein" narrative is one of the most influential and successful ones to use in product claims. Although in the beginning, protein was a nutrient addressing mainly fit and athletic consumers, during the recent years, protein began to appeal to mainstream consumers (Power cited in Cornall, 2021). The constant focus and interest in protein drove the overpresence of launched products including protein, also in the snacking sector. As it is stated, consumers were looking for snacks that are high in protein, the so-called "'better for you' convenient snacks'" (Power cited in Cornall, 2021, n.p.), offering a healthier alternative for snacks.

Once again, we observe how the context around protein cultivated the emergence of this myth. Consumers are in constant search of healthier alternatives in almost every food and beverage

sector, and the presence of protein tends to serve this need. Furthermore, product claims such as "high in protein" and "source of protein" (Power cited in Cornall, 2021, n.p.) prove to be the most effective ones, making consumers to believe and perceive that these types of products are automatically healthier (Power cited in Cornall, 2021). This observation was also evident during our interviews, when some participants associated products with such claims as healthier options compared to the traditional versions. Therefore, we can conclude that myths tend to evolve and change and are based on what is considered as a trend and prevailing in society at a specific period of time. This in turn shifts the focus of consumers, making certain guilt-free narratives more effective at a specific point in time when the related myths are popularised.

6.3. Guilt-free Hedonic Food: Friend or Foe?

In the consumer and societal perspective, one of the criticisms against the win-win solution is that attaching guilt-free narratives to inherently calorie-dense food may result in over-consumption. This criticism assumes consumers simply believe in guilt-free narratives and over-rely on such narratives to permit their indulgence. However, our findings show that consumers observe a more balanced approach towards health and food, and at times a more reflexive approach towards health. In particular, some participants may not opt for guilt-free food at all and choose to maintain an overall healthy lifestyle that permits them occasional indulgence in hedonic consumption. And while participants may utilise guilt-free narratives in alleviating the anxiety arisen from the consumption of hedonic food, none cited the narratives as the implicit license to consume more snacks than they otherwise would have. As such, the problem of whether one over consumes calorie-dense food or not may lie less in the narratives attached to it, and more in their overall approach towards pursuing a healthy self and how they justify their consumption of hedonic food, with or without guilt-free narrative attached.

In the marketing perspective, guilt-free narratives seem to present potential to protect the bottomline for the hedonic product category in the wake of healthy consumption trends. However, our research goes to show that in order for these guilt-free narratives to stay relevant, as the popularised healthy food myths continue to shift, the guilt-free narratives need to shift accordingly. As demonstrated in the section above, what worked previously, for example, no sugar or lower calorie narratives in 2012, may no longer resonate with consumers as a new powerful myth

surfaced, which in this case, the protein myth. This is evident in the case where, despite having multiple narratives on the packaging including "rich in fibre", "40% less fat" and "13% protein", the lentil chips sample was identified as being a healthier option by various participants solely by the fact that it has more protein. In essence, observing shifts in cultural healthy food myths is essential in enabling products to reflect the prevailing popular myths that resonate with consumers, ensuring the effectiveness of these guilt-free narratives.

7. Conclusion

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This chapter addresses our research aims and questions, followed by insights into its contribution to the field of food and health. We then outline the transferability of our research to other related fields in the postmodern consumer culture where similar tensions are present. The chapter concludes with the limitations of our research and suggestions for future study.

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7.1. Research Aims

The purpose of this study was to investigate the way in which consumers make sense of the guilt-free narratives in the case of hedonic food consumption as well as how they cope with the tension between health and hedonism. To answer this question, we conducted a qualitative study, employing the method of semi-structured interviews, striving for finding consumers' perceptions and views on the topic of guilt-free narratives in hedonic food consumption.

We conducted nine semi-structured interviews with participants from Europe, who live a relatively healthy lifestyle and mostly follow a healthy diet. The main theoretical lens we relied on for analysing the findings of this study were the sensemaking theory by Weick (1995), and cultural branding by Holt (2004). The findings demonstrated that in their attempt to cope with the tension between health and hedonism, participants are striving towards a balanced way of maintaining their self-consistency and positive self-image, which highlights the identity they try to pursue. In the attempt to achieve this balance, participants utilise healthy food myths, which aid them in alleviating their guilty feeling provoked by the indulgent snacks, or their anxieties, mainly created

from what is posed by societal norms and their desire to follow a healthy lifestyle and nutrition. These myths emerged in a context set by the lifeworld of participants, such as social actors, media, or society in general. Additionally, this procedure of handling this tension between health and hedonism proves to be constantly reflexive within which participants find new strategies and practices where they learn, accept, or reject elements related to the myths they utilise. Hence, these findings exhibit the answer to the aforementioned posed research question.

7.2.   Theoretical and Practical Implications

7.2.1.   Contribution to The Field of Food and Health Research

This study contributes to the field of health and food research by highlighting the sociocultural influence which plays an important role in how consumers make sense of and perceive these guilt-free narratives. As it was thoroughly presented and analysed in previous sections, through sociocultural actors and means, such as society, media, and consumers' social circle, myths are created and emerged. Several views or opinions might be communicated in these surroundings; their constant reference makes them prevailing, and within this context, myths emerge. Then consumers tend to utilise these myths in order to not only make sense of the narratives but also to evaluate, assess, and judge such products and their claims - categorising products into the healthy-unhealthy dichotomy. Consequently, how consumers make sense of the narratives depends on the existing myths each time which is formed and emerged by what is considered prevailing in the sociocultural context.

As mentioned in the literature review section, we examined the two most relevant studies regarding our research topic; the research by Belei et al. (2012), and the research by Haynes and Podobsky (2016). Both studies discussed guilt-free narratives and the impact on consumption, however, each one resulted in different outcomes. Belei et al. (2012) mentioned that products with guilt-free narratives are considered as a win-win solution, since these types of narratives reduce the degree of guilt of consumers. It was indicated that especially products with low-fat narratives drive consumers to over consume such products (Belei et al., 2012), because as it was claimed previously, a main trend in 2012 was about the calorie intake (Howard, 2012). On the other hand, the study by Haynes and Podobsky (2016) showed that such claims might have generated distrust

among consumers, which calls into question whether they actually purchase these guilt-free products and the reason for such consumption.

Our findings firstly demonstrate that factors in consumers' lifeworld play a role in their sensemaking process of guilt-free hedonic narratives and consequently their choice of consumption. As such, while in the lab environment such as that in the study by Belei et al. (2012), fat-free narrative, for example, may induce higher consumption of hedonic food, this may not translate into real life behaviour. In essence, we observe that balancing remains the overall strategy adopted by consumers in coping with the tension between health and hedonism where regardless of whether one utilised guilt-free snacks or not, there is a level of balance that needs to be maintained. In no case were guilt-free narratives provide the implicit license to overconsume.

In relation to the study by Haynes and Podobsky (2016), our research further expands on the theory that the delegation of responsibility from consumers to products is a plausible explanation of why consumers choose guilt-free products. Our research demonstrates that this is rooted in consumers' aspiration to maintain a positive identity of being healthy, and through the use of myths (i.e., the protein myth), alleviate the anxieties arising from consuming hedonic food. Snacks are one of the most prominent categories of hedonic foods accompanied by such narratives, and in this way, consumers are still reassured that they are towards a 'healthy nutrition'. As such, any guilt feeling is alleviated or any anxiety is addressed. While we did not observe strong distrust towards guilt-free narratives, there is unequivocally a sense of uncertainty among participants about the health claims, yet eventually, the prevailing health myths seem to trump over such uncertainty, effectively providing a justification for the consumption of such guilt-free hedonic food.

Finally, as myths continue to evolve, our research indicates that while studies of specific guilt-free narratives such as fat-free narratives in Belei et al, (2012) may produce one result (in this case, fat-free narratives induce a higher level of consumption of hedonic food), this result may not be relevant later on as another health myth emerges and gains popularity. In this case, we saw how such fat-free narratives became less saleable in 2016 and even generated distrust, as shown in the study by Haynes and Podobsky (2016) - the same time period when protein started to gain popularity. This puts caution on utilising older research findings of any specific guilt-free narrative

and perhaps emphasises the need to observe shifts in cultural myths in formulating guilt-free products.

7.2.2. Transferability to Related Spheres

While our research particularly deals with the health-hedonic tension, the process of maintaining a balancing act, the role of factors in consumers' lifeworld as well as the utilisation of cultural myths in making sense of such narratives could prove useful in studying other types of tension in the postmodern consumption culture. These tensions can be observed in any sphere where the need to maintain a "good life" and demonstrate "good style" clashes with the moral obligations to be "the green consumer, the health-conscious consumer, and the financially literate consumer" (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014, p. 840). Such examples could include but are not limited to fashion, cosmetics, automobile, and luxury goods. Within these spheres, products packaged with guilt-free narratives such as sustainable clothing, eco-friendly cars, ethically sourced goods emerged as a solution to alleviate such tensions. Our research findings could potentially provide a theoretical framework to explore how consumers cope with these tensions and make sense of the respective narratives, through establishing some sort of balancing act, as well as utilising myths, all the while continuously learning, reflecting, rejecting and adopting new ones in the process.

7.3. Limitations and Future Research

While our research attempts to address some of the limitations in food and health research in general and in the domain of guilt-free hedonic consumption in particular, we acknowledge that it contains a number of limitations.

Firstly, since the research was conducted using a qualitative approach, in particular interviews, the findings could not be empirically generalised. Nonetheless, the purpose of this research is to explore the sociocultural factors which necessitate the usage of such methodology. However, future research could consider a quantitative approach to validate the role of healthy food myths on consumers' perception and/or consumption of hedonic food with guilt-free narratives.

Secondly, while our research utilised snack samples as prompt, factors such as brand familiarity and previous experiences with certain snacks' flavours and pricing may influence how participants

make sense of the narrative. Brand familiarity for instance could trump the guilt-free narratives in influencing their preference. Future research could consider removing brands or even snack flavours from the sample to eliminate such influence.

Finally, our sampling criteria resulted in a sample of only participants with an existing healthy lifestyle. While this ensured greater familiarity with guilt-free narratives in the food and health domain, this selection also excludes a portion of consumers whose lifestyle is not as healthy, potentially resulting in greater reliance on guilt-free hedonic food as a way to cope with the health-hedonic tension. As such, it would be of value to study how this group of consumers makes sense of guilt-free narratives and whether their coping mechanism differs from the group studied in this research. Moreover, since our research only includes participants from European countries, future research could consider participants from other geographical locations. Since myths were one central theme of the research, it would be of value to explore whether such myths are universal, or manifested differently in other geographical locations.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Thank you for your time. This interview is being held as part of the qualitative research we are conducting for our master's thesis paper. Our topic is related to snack consumption and its associations and we would like to ask you some questions. There are no right or wrong answers, we value your honesty. In the given consent form, you are free to choose if you want to remain anonymous and whether you agree for this interview to be recorded. The information will only be used for the purpose of this paper. Furthermore, you are free to withdraw from the interview session at any time. In case you feel uncomfortable with any question(s), you are free to not answer them.

Section 1: Guilt-free narratives (20 mins)

1. Do you eat snacks? What's your favourite snacks?
2. Show snack samples. How do you feel about each type of snacks and which one do you prefer? (Note: ask why they think it is healthy/ it is not healthy if they mention)
   a. Chocolate (70% and normal chocolate)
   b. Chips (potato chips, lentil chips + less fat, protein chips + less fat)
   c. Snackbars (protein + no sugar and traditional)
3. Have you tried something like these kinds of snacks before?
4. Why do you eat snacks? Which occasion? How do you feel when you eat snacks (to get an idea of guilty pleasure)
5. Where do you hear about (the healthiness level of these snacks)? Do you think this is true? Why and why not?
6. What about the taste of the snacks?

Section 2: Lifestyle & Fitness (20 mins)

1. General lifestyle (in terms of healthiness, eating habits, nutrition and exercise).
2. Why do you follow such a lifestyle?
3. Where do you get inspiration for ie. food, fitness activities from? (family, friends, general online, influencer?) Why do you follow?

4. What do you understand by being healthy/ balanced? Where did you learn or hear about this?

5. On a scale of 1 - 10, how do you rate your lifestyle in terms of healthiness? Why the number? What is a 10 or what is a 5? Why do you aspire to be a___/or why are you content with the current status?

Section 3: Snacking vs lifestyle (20 mins) - pick a type of snack depending on their preference/ familiarity

1. Can you recall a time where you purchased <guilt-free snacks>? What was the reason why you purchased it?
   a. Eg. guilty - why guilty? Why is this snack not so guilty? *Note: Challenge their assumption (ie. lentil chips still have quite abit of calorie,etc)*
   b. Eg. try something new - do you like it? Will you repurchase it? Why or why not? What's your opinion on it?
   c. If they have not tried, ask if they consider it? Or why did they not try it - especially if they are looking to eat healthier (and they perceive it as a healthier option)
2. Elaborate on the thought process you have when choosing the snacks/ Not choosing the snacks?
3. If you have tried a guilt-free version, ask how do you feel about the taste of the snack? Compare it to the traditional version. Why is it so? Would you then choose the guilt-free version or traditional version?
4. What do you generally know about snacks related to the topic of health? And the guilt-free version of snacks? Have you read anything/ seen any advertisement or heard from someone? Can you recall if something stands out for you?
5. Since you mentioned that you try to be healthy/ balanced, why do you then eat snacks?
   a. Eg. treat myself - what do you mean by this? Why do you need to treat yourself?
   b. Eg. reward myself - what do you mean by this? Reward for what?
   c. Eg. I deserve it - can you elaborate more? Why do you deserve it?

Demographics

- Age:
- Nationality:
- Occupational status: