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Master's thesis

The Inconspicuous Self

Exploring the Role of Inconspicuous Consumption within Luxury Services

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Abstract

Title: The Inconspicuous Self - Exploring the Role of Inconspicuous Consumption within Luxury Services

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Purpose: The relationship between inconspicuous consumption and consumers' self-identities within luxury hospitality services has been largely overlooked, which calls for further investigation. Consequently, this study aims to explore the understanding of the relationship between the phenomena of inconspicuous luxury consumption of hospitality services and individuals' self-identities.

Methodology: The purpose of the study is achieved with a qualitative method based on an IPA approach, taking on a constructionist ontology and an interpretative epistemological lens. Primary data has been collected through 14 semi-structured interviews. An abductive approach has been used to be able to draw conclusions based on both the empirical material and the presented literature.

Theoretical perspectives: To the greatest extent, the theoretical framework is based on scientific articles. The theoretical framework consists of a concept about customer value types within luxury consumption, and theories about self-identity, including the notion of self-identity, self-congruity theory and cultural capital.

Empirical foundation: The study's empirical data consists of data that has been collected through 14 semi-structured in-depth interviews, which has then been thematized and then analysed on the basis of the theoretical frame of reference. During the interviews, questions

were asked to understand how people make meaning of their inconspicuous consumption of luxury services. More specifically, questions were asked about their consumption behaviour, and about different dimensions of their self related to their consumption behaviour.

Conclusion: Identities of inconspicuous consumers are complex and multifaceted.

Inconspicuous consumption is primarily aligned with luxury consumers' actual selves and actual ideal selves, as it brings the necessary discreteness and subtleness of their consumption of luxury hospitality services. Additionally, they prefer not to align their social selves' with those who use luxury as a means of showing off. Instead, such consumers value the actual experience in the consumption of luxury services, as those aspects contribute to increased and sustained self-consistency. Inconspicuous consumers find value in luxury hospitality services that reflect their sophisticated and authentic personalities, and prefer being surrounded by people who possess the same hedonic means of consumption as themselves.

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1. Introduction

The introduction begins with a background and problematization, which is then followed by the study's purpose and the research question. At the end of the chapter, a presentation of the outline of the thesis is displayed.

1.1 Background

Luxury consumption has been studied for decades, however, in a constantly changing world, societal perception of what luxury is and what people value the most is constantly evolving as well (Atkinson, 2022). Historically, luxury was already of interest in ancient Greece in terms of excess and extravaganza (Adams, 2012). The marketing industry and academia have been paying more and more attention to the growth and potential of the luxury market (Sung, 2015). The overall luxury market, including luxury goods and experiences, is estimated to be 1.5 trillion EUR in 2023 (Bain and Company, 2024). Due to such growth worldwide, the interest among researchers has also increased (Ko, Costello and Taylor, 2019). Wirtz, Holmqvist and Fritz (2020) have underlined that luxury service research has tremendous growth potential, as luxury studies have been primarily focused on goods and significantly less on services. Over the past decade, there has been a noticeable expansion of focus in research from luxury goods to luxury services (Wirtz et al., 2020; Wang, 2022).

Previously, luxury has been mainly associated with expensive material possessions that could potentially bring meaningfulness to life, and where luxury intrinsically means conspicuousness (Cristini, Kauppinen-Räsänen, Barthod-Prothade, and Woodside, 2017). Consumers' engagement in luxury consumption practices, which are characterised by their extravagant appeal and signifying affiliation with a superior class, is commonly known as conspicuous consumption (Patsiaouras and Fitchett, 2012). The literature on marketing and consumer behaviour has thoroughly addressed research exploring the symbolic significance of luxury and status symbols (Belk 1988; Han, Nunes, and Drèze, 2010; Shukla, 2012). Existing research extensively validates the tendency of consumers to develop stronger

attachments to products and services that reflect significant aspects of their self-identity, values, and goals (Aguirre-Rodriguez, Bosnjak, and Sirgy, 2012). Self-congruity theory concerns why and how consumers compare their perception of themselves with the image of a product or service (Sirgy, 1982), and it has been used extensively to understand peoples' choice of consumption, most often associated with conspicuous consumption (Sirgy, 2018).

The prior research has highlighted the diminishing importance of conspicuousness in consumption (Trigg, 2001). However, recent research has displayed an interest in a more subtle and discreet form of spending money on goods and services, whereas consumers engage in less ostentatious forms of luxury consumption (Eckhardt, Belk, and Wilson, 2015; Tanenbaum, 2019). Stemming from models of status and conspicuousness, a current stream of luxury research highlights a shift towards more individualistic consumption behaviours that do not overtly signal wealth or status and give a promise of hedonic experiences and pleasure, and that allows consumers to express themselves quietly and referred to as inconspicuous consumption (Eckhardt et al., 2015; Wang, Li and Wang, 2024).

Marketing practitioners have been discussing the phenomenon of inconspicuous consumption for years, while it drew the attention of marketing researchers only recently (Eastman, Iyer and Babin, 2022). The motivations behind inconspicuous consumption have been presented by Wu, Luo, Schroeder, and Borgerson (2017) in the discussion on what drives inconspicuous luxury consumption. Among the driving forces for engaging in inconspicuousness have been identified as the acquirement of wished-for identities or fantasy lifestyles, appreciation of particular aesthetics, avoiding the provocation of envies or anger from peers or colleagues, and the desire for differentiation of oneself (Wu et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2024). The typology of consumers who prefer the inconspicuous type of behaviour has also been studied by Makkar and Yap (2018). The prevalent characteristic shared among luxury inconspicuous consumers could be described as that the chosen type of consumption gives them hedonic and aesthetic pleasure or even an ability to move upwards in class by accumulating their cultural capital and the inner self (Makkar and Yap, 2018).

1.2 Problematization

Prior studies on luxury have primarily focused on conspicuous consumption, leaving a gap in the understanding of consumers' self-conceptual processes when engaging in less ostentatious, inconspicuous luxury consumption (Lee, Bae and Koo, 2020). Thus, the intersection of identity construction and consumers' inconspicuous behaviour regarding the consumption of luxury services has not been given enough attention (Ho & Wong, 2022). Consumers are no longer passive recipients of information and communication (Holmqvist J., Wirtz J., Issandou A., 2023). People consume luxury for many reasons, such as to motivate and reward themselves and to satisfy their psychological needs inherently (Sirgy, 2018). Viewing this from consumers' perspective rather than marketers sparks curiosity in how luxury consumption affirms the self and relates to self-identity, as meanings and identity are strongly linked to inconspicuous luxury (Makkar & Yap, 2018).

Characteristics of luxury have been extensively examined, focusing on their tangible aspects (Berthon, Parent & Berthon, 2009; Ko et al., 2019). The criteria of what represents luxury goods have been investigated by different authors where the original conceptualisation of luxury focuses on conspicuousness and status (Eastman, Goldsmith, & Flynn, 1999), and when luxury is presented as somewhat expensive, of high quality and something that gives a certain prestige to the owner (Ko et al., 2019). However, due to inherent differences between luxury goods and services, it is not feasible to fully apply the dimensions of one to another (Wirtz et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the globalisation of luxury means that the old and traditional characteristics defining luxury are changing. It has been argued that luxury, in its traditional notion, is losing value for inconspicuous affluent consumers who do not see it as a tool for signalling status to society at large (Eckhardt et al., 2015). Today's mass proliferation of luxury implies that traditional luxury is becoming more accessible to the masses (Wang, 2022). Therefore, academia and practitioners in the service industry seek to comprehend what meanings luxury consumers assign when it comes to the inconspicuous consumption of luxury services. The luxury aspect could be significant in all service sectors of the hospitality industry, such as hotels, restaurants, upscale clubs, luxury spas, and others, as the consumers engage in these types of luxury services for extraordinary, hedonic types of experiences (Holmqvist et al.,

2023).

The gap between the academic focus on conspicuousness and the luxury practitioners pivoting to inconspicuousness suggests a compelling reason for a research direction (Makkar & Yap, 2018). A strong uprising trend for inconspicuous consumption, with its subtleness, fosters more sophisticated consumption options for consumers with a specific cultural capital, background knowledge, and experience (Eckhardt et al., 2015). A driving force identified is that people with high cultural capital choose exclusive practices to assert their identity instead of showing off wealth through materialistic consumption (Trigg, 2001; Eckhardt, Belk and Wilson, 2015) As Giddens (1991) has mentioned, self-identity is created by an individual by choice. Therefore, there is also a need to focus on what consumers value and how they frame their own luxury experiences when it comes to intangible services and hedonic escapes (Thomsen, Holmqvist, Wallpach, Hemetsberger and Belk, 2020).

Thomsen et al. (2020) emphasise that even though luxury experiences are often associated with a certain level of exclusivity, the focus should be on exclusivity-by-practice rather than more common exclusivity-by-price. Given that luxury is an individual perception, it is essential to understand the antecedents and consequences of luxury consumers' choice to opt for inconspicuousness in their luxury consumption (Eastman et al., 2022). As aforementioned, most of the research conducted regarding consumption and theories about the self, such as self-congruity theory, has concentrated on the relationship between conspicuous consumption and materialistic possessions' symbolic meaning within identity creation (Trigg, 2001; Hudders, 2012). In our case, due to the increasing interest of researchers in the notion of inconspicuous consumption, we argue that there is a need to understand how identity relates to personal meanings. Exploring what people seek in inconspicuous consumption regarding their identity makes it possible to create a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay of values, aspirations, and social dynamics (Kolegova, 2020).

To round up, the problematization is based on the research gaps associated with the notion of inconspicuous consumption and the need to understand how affluent consumers engage in luxury services within the shift of consumer behaviour towards the new era of inconspicuousness. This is followed by the need for more profound knowledge about how

inconspicuousness in luxury consumption interconnects with self-identity construction. However, not to be forgotten, this study can be valuable not only for academia but also for marketing practitioners as a service provider is considered to be the “*key actor in traditional luxury services to perform activities to safeguard the prestige of luxury through carefully controlled service practices*” (Dion & Borraz, 2017, cited in Holmqvist et al., 2023, p. 1114).

1.3 Purpose and Research Question

In our fast-moving world, the meanings associated with luxury consumption are constantly evolving. Given the increasing academic focus on the phenomenon of inconspicuous consumption, the research objective for this paper derives from previous literature. As the relationship between inconspicuous luxury consumption and consumers’ self-identities within services has been largely overlooked, this study attempts to address this research gap and to contribute to the field of luxury hospitality services, by investigating how the relation between inconspicuous consumption and individuals’ self-identities can be understood. Therefore, this thesis aims to examine the self identities of inconspicuous luxury consumers. Hence, the following research question is:

How are inconspicuous consumption and consumers’ self-identities related in the realm of luxury hospitality services?

1.4 Outline of the Thesis

Figure 1.1 illustrates the outline of the thesis. The first chapter, the introduction, begins with an introduction to the phenomena being researched, followed by the problematization, the purpose, and research question. The second chapter includes a literature overview on the subject of inconspicuous consumption of luxury services. The third chapter presents the theoretical framework and the theories chosen to answer this paper’s research question. The fourth chapter presents methodological considerations that were taken into account during the

construction of this study. The fifth chapter presents the empirical findings and an analysis of this, where the theoretical framework is applied. The final chapter, the sixth chapter presents the concluding discussion based on the analysis and findings of this study and presents suggestions for future research, potential managerial implications, as well as reviews some of this study's limitations.

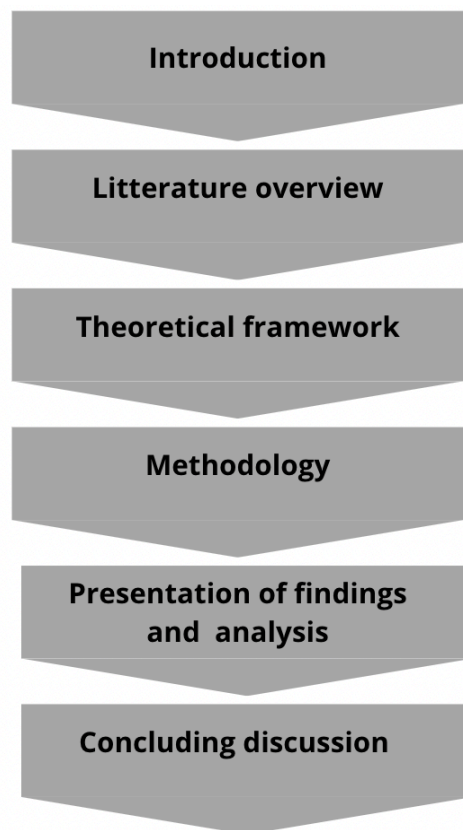


Figure 1.1: Outline of the thesis

2. Literature Overview

The literature overview provides an essential context on the current research on luxury services and inconspicuous consumption. Firstly, the concept of luxury services is presented with its unique distinction apart from either luxury goods or ordinary services, as to a large extent luxury is a socio-cultural construct with benefits beyond just quality and functionality. Secondly, we present the prior findings that have shaped the scholarly discourse regarding the phenomenon of inconspicuous consumption with its subtle and discreet manner of partaking in luxury.

2.1 Overview of Luxury Services

The significant distinction between goods and services, especially within the realm of luxury, has encouraged researchers to advocate for a deeper exploration of the phenomenon of luxury services with its unique nature that represents a brief hedonic break (Wirtz et al., 2020; Hemzo, 2023). Luxury is a relative, individual category that is derived from different peoples' backgrounds, as well as situational and social contexts (Stępień, 2021). Hudders, Vyncke and Pandelaere (2013) suggest that certain traits unite different approaches to luxury, such as exclusivity, uniqueness, scarcity, premium price, excellent quality, and aesthetics. Wirtz et al. (2020) highlight the significant role exclusivity plays in distinguishing luxury services from ordinary ones. They shed light on how exclusivity is essential in crafting distinctive, extraordinary experiences sought after by consumers, in contrast to the mere satisfaction of functional needs typically associated with ordinary services. Luxury hospitality services aim to evoke emotions and create memorable hedonic experiences for consumers and often entail exclusivity compared to ordinary services (Holmqvist, Wirtz and Fritze, 2022).

The most recent definition of luxury services is provided by Wirtz et al. (2020), describing luxury services as *“extraordinary hedonic experiences that are exclusive, whereby exclusivity can be monetary, social and hedonic in nature”* and where *“luxuriousness is jointly*

determined by objective service features and subjective customer perceptions” (Wirtz et al., 2020, p. 682). In prior research on goods, there have been two main approaches to defining luxury. The first represents an object’s inherent features, such as quality, exclusivity, and a high price that make it luxurious (Ko et al., 2019). The second one perceives luxury as something special to an individual and what gives pleasure but goes far beyond a functional necessity. Nowadays, researchers have a much better comprehension of how to construct the framework of what defines luxury goods, while it is becoming more challenging for luxury service experiences due to its intangibility and experiential qualities (Wirtz et al., 2020).

2.1.1 Key Dimensions and Specific Characteristics of Luxury Services

In terms of the phenomenon of luxury consumption, it is necessary to have an understanding of consumers' individual values, as the overall assessment of luxury services derives from personal values. There is a consensus among scholars that the luxury consumption value has specific dimensions, but there always seems to be a struggle to identify their numbers and types (Yang and Mattila, 2015). To fill this gap, Smith and Colgate (2007) presented four types of customer values in a four-factor framework, which represents a multidimensional construct consisting of the following values: functional/ instrumental-, hedonic/experiential-, symbolic/expressive- and cost/sacrifice values (Smith & Colgate, 2007). In our paper, we limit our focus to three of them and refer to them as functional, symbolic, and hedonic. We omit the cost/sacrifice value as its nature, with a focus on transaction costs, does not correspond to the aim of our research. Their framework has also been extensively used or slightly elaborated in a number of luxury studies, for instance, by Shukla (2012) in the study on value perceptions and luxury purchase intentions; Yang and Mattila (2015) in their research on measuring value perceptions of luxury hospitality services; Building upon Smith and Colgate’s framework (2007), Tynan, McKechnie, and Chhuon (2010) conducted a service-oriented study focusing on personalised luxury brand experiences. They underscored that for luxury consumers it is important to see an adequate value in order to compensate for the price. They identified an additional array of characteristics including quality, price, exclusivity, prestige, rarity, and authenticity. From their point of view, luxury services provide symbolic and hedonic values through experiences (Tynan et al., 2010). It becomes evident by

the diverse applications and adaptations of the framework that the landscape of luxury consumption is constantly evolving.

In the discussion on luxury services, it is also important to touch upon the notion of exclusivity, as this aspect is at the core of the distinction between regular and luxury services, and is highly significant for luxury consumers (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). In many cases, luxury consumers value exclusivity much more than they care about the price, as exclusivity is the core of the luxury offering and something that can justify a high price. In luxury goods, exclusivity is mostly connected to price and prestige, but in services, exclusivity could also be social, based on hard or limited access for consumers (Wirtz, 2020). Social exclusivity provides consumers with a feeling of belonging to a certain “exclusive club” and makes participants feel unique (Chapman & Dilmeri, 2022). The hedonic exclusivity, where it is difficult to engage and thoroughly enjoy a specific type of service without background knowledge, could enhance the experience by allowing consumers to understand and appreciate the nuances of the services they consume (Chapman & Dilmeri, 2022).

2.2 Inconspicuous Consumption. Overview and Current Trends.

Traditionally the consumption of luxurious and extravagant products has been characterised by opulent ostentation, and the aspect of conspicuousness has been an essential feature for people for over a century (Woodside, 2012). Thorstein Veblen presented one of the oldest terms of consumer behaviour, namely conspicuous consumption, in the *Theory of the Leisure Class* in 1899 (Veblen, 1899). The term describes the behaviour of acquiring expensive goods to display its owner’s wealth while also boosting and maintaining a higher social status rather than satisfying more functional needs (Ekchard et al., 2015).

The notion of conspicuous consumption has been widely used in studies of luxury brands, and it proposes that social value is the most crucial factor for consumers of luxury goods. For researchers for decades, the primary motivation behind opulent consumption has been a race of status and class, with a hidden envy factor of a greedy desire for goods or services that are better than those of your friends or neighbours (Belk, 1988). However, this is not always the case when it comes to luxury hospitality services due to the consumers’ different

characteristics and motivations (Ekchard et al., 2015). Nowadays, luxury consumers tend to seek more exclusive and subtle ways to satisfy their luxury needs and to differentiate themselves from mainstream consumers (Wu et al., 2017; Eastman et al., 2022).

The phenomenon of inconspicuous consumption has been noted by Postrel (2008) in “The New Theory of Leisure Class” emphasising that the richer your group, the less noticeable you would want to show off your income or wealth. Postrel (2008) argues that at some point in more developed and prosperous economies, luxury becomes a means of private pleasure rather than a tool of public status competition (Postrel, 2008). Berger and Ward (2010), with their study on more subtle signals of consumption, suggests that people with more cultural capital prefer less noticeable signals because that is how they get the differentiation from the masses and facilitate the signals to the others in the know peers, with a focus on “*private meanings attached to an ephemeral experience of luxury in brief moments*” (Thomsen 2020, p.442).

The shift from conspicuous to inconspicuous consumer behaviour happens for various reasons, as some consumers focus on personal satisfaction rather than outward display. In the times when luxury becomes more available to the masses, it dramatically loses its exclusivity (Ekchard et al., 2015, p.810). For the last decade, it’s been noted that overall luxury is not that much of a marker of the social class of its owner but the meaningful objects and precious activities that consumers experience as luxury (Hemetsberger, von Wallpach & Bauer, 2012).

3. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, we delve into the theoretical perspectives, thoroughly examining them to differentiate between theories and prior research findings precisely. This chapter, therefore, describes the central concepts and theories that have been used to understand and answer this thesis's purpose and research question, which later will be set against the empirical material in the analysis. Firstly, the theoretical framework will include a typology of customer value types to be able to create an understanding of how luxury consumers assess luxury. Secondly, theories regarding self-identity will be presented which first includes one part about the notion of self-identity. This is followed by self-congruity theory, a theory explaining the different dimensions of the self and how this relates to consumption choices. Finally, given the emphasis on inconspicuous consumption, the notion of cultural capital is accounted for to enable gained insights into how identity shapes and projects consumption. Also, as mentioned by Eckhardt, Belk, and Wilson (2015), there is a need to conduct empirical research on the complexity of luxury inconspicuousness, especially regarding the nature of cultural capital.

3.1 Customer Value Types

Customer value types (CVT), as previously mentioned (see 2.1.1), refer to various ways in which customers perceive and evaluate the value of products and services. The typology was presented by Holbrook in 1999 (Holbrook, 1999) and extensively refined and adjusted by Smith and Colgate in 2007 for the context of luxury (Smith & Colgate, 2007). By presenting different types of values, taking a stance from Smith and Colgate's (2007) typology, we provide a context for analysing how inconspicuous behaviour interconnects self-identity in the realm of consumption of luxury services.

3.1.1 The Functional Value

First and foremost, the functional dimension of luxury consumption practices refers to quality (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). The functional aspect of luxury consumption practices encompasses characteristics associated with luxury goods and services, such as quality and functionality. Consumers refer to luxury based on their interpretation of the product's or services' capabilities and their usage of luxury in practical contexts. For instance, the perception of luxury as synonymous with superior quality highlights the usability, durability, and practical functionality (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004, Tynan et al., 2010). Additionally, the heritage and legacy of a brand contribute to the perceived functionality of luxury goods, granting them such attributes as expertise, reliability, and authenticity (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). However, it's important to note that, as suggested by different scholars (Berthon et al., 2009), the presence of only functional attributes does not entirely define luxury, as these features can also be found in non-luxury products (Berthon et al., 2009).

3.1.2 The Symbolic Value

The symbolic aspect of luxury consumption ties luxury to self-expression and communication with others, serving as a means for consumers to convey messages through their choice of luxury items (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Through its symbolic meanings, luxury possesses the transformative power to shape consumers' identities (Bauer, Wallpach & Hemetsberger, 2011), reflecting a social inclination to impress others through conspicuous consumption. Therefore, it is essential to highlight that luxury gains symbolic or personal significance through the symbolic dimensions of luxury consumption practices. This entails that consumers also assign symbolic meanings and derive personal experiences from their interactions with luxury items, beyond their functional aspects (Thomsen et al., 2020).

Luxury consumption practices, guided by the principles of conspicuous and status consumption, enable consumers to signal their wealth and status by acquiring, utilising, and displaying luxury possessions. This suggests that luxury serves as a symbolic tool for status

and tangible resources for defining consumers' identities (Belk, 1988). Even over a hundred years ago, Veblen acknowledged that status relies on societal validation, implying a shared understanding among individuals regarding social rankings and evidenced consumption practices (Veblen, 1899).

Luxury consumption practices also hold significance in terms of self-symbolism, often associated with the snob effect (Corneo & Jeanne, 1997). Such a phenomenon entails consumers acquiring and exhibiting luxury possessions to distinguish themselves from others, which emphasises and reflects personal and intrinsic motivations for different types of luxury consumption (Tian, Bearden & Hunter, 2001). Therefore, luxury consumption becomes a means for individuals to express their uniqueness and differentiate themselves within society.

In contemporary society, conspicuous displays of wealth are evolving, with consumers increasingly valuing inconspicuous and pleasurable luxury experiences (Eckhardt et al., 2015). However, it's been noted that due to the intangible nature of luxury services, consumers who need to signal their status would rather choose to purchase luxury goods than services (Yang & Mattila, 2015).

3.1.3 The Hedonic Value

Beyond its symbolic meanings, the hedonic or experiential aspects of luxury play a crucial role in shaping consumer behaviour and preferences: The hedonic value underscores that luxury consumption primarily derives from internal motivations aiming at fulfilling subjective well-being, emotional gratification and pleasure (Sussan, Hall & Laurie, 2012). The hedonic dimension reflects consumers' hedonistic needs and aspirations for self-fulfilment (Bauer et al., 2011). The hedonic aspect is particularly noticeable in hospitality services as their main aim is to create unforgettable experiences to produce pleasure and enjoyment for customers with a focus on hedonic benefits (Yang & Mattila, 2015).

It has been argued that consumers possess a strong inclination towards self-indulgence, extending their luxury consumption practices far beyond utilitarian boundaries. Consequently, luxury consumption practices become reflections of consumers' emotional

responses to such desires for luxury and from luxury usage (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009). Moreover, the experiential nature of luxury often intertwines with emotional pleasure. However, it is essential to note that existing consumer research often focuses solely on the experiential aspects of luxury concerning product characteristics or service experiences, overlooking the consumer's role in luxury experiences (Tynan et al., 2010). Therefore, consumers interpret the meanings of luxury based on their own consumption experiences, which also shape and influence experiences.

3.2 Self-identity

3.2.1 The Notion of Self-identity

The self, for whom the individual is responsible, can be seen as a reflexive project. A common saying is, “*We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves*” (Giddens, 1991, p. 40). According to Giddens (1991), it would be wrong to assume that the self is a blank page without content because there are underlying cognitive mechanisms involved in the construction of the self, as well as the psychological requirements influencing this. The individual's consumption of products, activities, and beliefs not only satisfies a person's needs but also carries out people's self-creation projects (Gergen, 1991).

Slater (1997) contends that consumption is a meaningful activity. As the self encounters “*the looming threat of personal meaninglessness,*” it endeavours to reclaim a sense of existence by actively seeking meaningfulness in life (Giddens, 1991, p. 107). The activities, philosophies, and beliefs we engage in are a reflection of our self-identity. This not only explains to us who we are and whom we identify with but also fosters a sense of purpose in our search for existence through our consumption (Wattanasuwan, 2005). That is, self-identity is based on the stories we tell about ourselves, which we actively maintain through our thoughts and actions, and it encompasses what one is aware of in terms of self-consciousness (Giddens, 1991). The concept of our self is often related to an individual's lifestyle, brand consciousness, and need for self-expression and status signalling, a choice

made by the individual himself- or herself most of the time through consumption (Mann & Sahni, 2015).

3.2.2 Self-congruity Theory

Self-congruity can be seen as a reliable forecaster of consumer behaviour due to the tendency of consumers to view a product or service more positively when they perceive alignment between their self-image and a product's or service's image (Aw, Flynn, & Chong, 2019). Studies suggest that consumers experience a sense of identification with particular groups or brands due to their characteristics (Sirgy, 1982). Self-congruity theory could be explained as a process where consumers preferably choose brands, services, or products which brand user image and brand personality mirror their self-concept the best (Sirgy, 2018). The self-concept contains four dimensions. The actual self refers to how a person perceives him- or herself, the ideal self concerns to a person would like to perceive him- or herself, the social self concerns how a person presents itself to other people, and lastly, the ideal social self concerns what a person wants to be perceived like (Sirgy, 1982).

Furthermore, brand-user image centres around the stereotypical perception of the average user associated with a brand (Sirgy, 1982). Regarding brand personality, Aaker and Fournier (1995) suggested that consumers view brands as possessing personalities characterised by five traits: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Therefore, both brand-user image and brand personality are involved in self-congruity (Sirgy, 2018). Consumption of brands where neither the brand user image nor its personality matches with a person's self-concept tends to cause psychological dissonance and threaten the perceptions of one's self. The greater the match, the more value the consumer will get from the consumption of the brand (Sirgy, 1986).

Taking a stance from the self-concept dimensions Sirgy (1982) identified four self-concept motives: self-consistency, self-esteem, social consistency, and social approval, which resulted in four types of self-congruity: actual-, ideal-, social-, and ideal social-self-congruity. Actual self-congruity is the match between brand user image or brand personality and the consumers' actual image. When the brand user image or brand personality is high in

self-congruity, if the match between the brand user image/ brand personality and the actual self-image is high, the brand, service, or product is high in self-congruity. On the other hand, if the match is low, consumers evaluate products and services unfavourably. The motive to strive for actual self-congruity is the need for self-consistency, which implies that consumers act in ways and choose products or services that are consistent with how they see themselves (Sirgy, 2018). Regarding ideal self-congruity, it concerns that consumers buy and consume goods and services to achieve their desired self-image, thereby enhancing and satisfying their self-esteem. This implies that consumers evaluate products and services favourably if they have a brand user image or brand personality similar to the consumer's ideal self-image (Sirgy, 2018). For instance, people wear clothes that have a brand user image like the ideal image one wants to achieve, people travel to destinations to boost their self-esteem and donate money to organisations that are congruent with their ideal self (Sirgy, 2018)

Regarding social self-congruity, this concept pertains to the alignment between consumers' perceptions of how others view them in relation to the brand-user image or brand personality. Consumers' social self-perception impacts their behaviour due to the drive for social consistency, whereby they are compelled to uphold the image of how they are perceived by others (Sirgy, 1982). People are thereby motivated to behave and make choices that consolidate their social self-image (Sirgy, 2018). Furthermore, ideal social self-congruity is about the alignment between consumers' desired perceptions by others concerning the brand-user image or brand personality. Here, consumer preferences are driven by the social approval motive, meaning that consumers are willing to consume things that make others think highly of them (Sirgy, 2018). From the inspiration of Sirgy (1982, 2018, 2022), a model, as visualised below, was constructed to provide an overview of the different

dimensions of self-congruity.

Illustration of self-congruity theory		
	Consistency motive	Enhancement motive
Private self	<p><u>Actual self-congruity</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Match between the actual self and the brand user image/ brand personality • Self consistency: A need to act in a way that is consistent with how I see myself 	<p><u>Ideal self-congruity</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Match between the ideal self and the brand user image/ brand personality • Self-esteem: A need to act in a way that can help me achieve becoming how I would like to become
Public self	<p><u>Social self-congruity</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Match between the social self and the brand user image/ brand personality • Social consistency: A need to act in a way that is consistent how others perceive me 	<p><u>Ideal social self-congruity</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Match between the ideal social self and the brand user image/ brand personality • Social endorsement: A need to act in a way that gains confirmation from others

Figure 3.1: Self-constructed visualised model with inspiration from Sirgy (1982, 2018, 2022) to create an overview of self-congruity and its different dimensions.

3.2.3 Cultural Capital

The French scholar Pierre Bourdieu's theory from 1984 about cultural capital has been widely used to understand the social pattern behind consumption in different forms (Bourdieu, 1984; Arnould and Thompson, 2015). The theory explains that choices people make are based on our cultural capital that shapes our desires and pleasures toward particular objects and activities (Bourdieu, 1984), such as towards particular categories, genres, or types of cultural objects (Holt, 1998). Therefore, understanding cultural capital and its implications

on consumption is crucial (Holt, 1998). It functions as a method of categorization that sustains symbolic hierarchies through physical engagement (DiMaggio, 1987). Cultural capital pertains to the acquired expertise and knowledge of individuals developed during their early socialisation and upbringing. Various factors contribute to the formation of this capital, such as family, friends, and school, among other institutions and social contexts (Jenkins, 2014). Cultural capital can take shape in three forms: the embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutionalised state (Bourdieu, 2018).

The embodied state refers to knowledge, skills, and cultural habits that individuals internalise through their upbringing and experiences, that is cultivation. Essentially, it is the cultural know-how that individuals carry within themselves, often unconsciously, based on their social background and upbringing. It is created through a process of embodiment, something that takes time, and is an investment that must be personally invested by the investor. This embodied capital, an integral part of a person, cannot be transferred to someone else, nor can it be bought or exchanged. It can be acquired to varying extents, depending on the society, the social class, and the period, often quite unconsciously. The knowledge an individual carries secures material and symbolic profits that one without less cultural capital could not perceive, thereby yielding profits of distinction for its owner (Bourdieu, 2018).

The objectified state refers to and is defined by the relationship between objects and the embodied state. The cultural capital objectified in, for instance, paintings or specific literature is transferable from a materialistic perspective, thereby also in monetary terms. However, what is not transferable regards the possession of the means of “consuming.” One can buy a certain object by using economic capital, but to appropriately use it, defined by its cultural capital scientifically incorporated in it, the consumer must have access to the cultural capital aligned with the object (Bourdieu, 2018).

Furthermore, the institutionalised state of cultural capital refers to how certain cultural knowledge or practices are officially recognized and endorsed by institutions such as educational systems, museums, media, and other cultural institutions. These institutions play a crucial role in shaping and perpetuating dominant cultural norms, values, and tastes (Bourdieu, 1984). Academic qualifications could thereby also be seen as objects since their holders can be compared, and different qualifications can substitute for each other. Moreover,

cultural capital could, therefore, be translated into economic capital since the carriers can be valued in the job market and paid accordingly for their qualifications (Bourdieu, 2018).

One's economic capital, financial assets, could also be converted to social capital. Bourdieu's notion of social capital acknowledges the opportunities stemming from access to specific social networks and connections (Bourdieu, 2018). For instance, having a high economic income can enable people to join a prestigious art academy, where they can expand one's social network. However, as consumers develop skills and knowledge influenced by their family upbringing, education level, professional background, and interactions with consumption items (Holt, 1998), the acquisition, practice, and application of these skills in daily life significantly influence consumers' emotions, thoughts, and behaviours. Therefore, cultural capital rather than economic resources, plays a pivotal role in shaping manners and consumption patterns (Holt, 1998).

People's cultural capital can vary to different extents and take various forms and meanings. Holt (1998) makes a distinction between people with high and low cultural capital. For instance, people categorised as being in the low quintile of cultural capital (LCC) tend, when purchasing something of a higher price buy things that are in the common eye seen as highly luxurious. Here the symbolic value is highly valued (Holt, 1998). Conversely, according to Holt (1998), people with high cultural capital (HCC), will not purchase luxury products for a symbolic purpose, to demonstrate their wealth. The people with HCC will rather focus on personal experiences, whereas purchasing luxury is more about improving their lives rather than the consumption of a certain brand that is economically related to status (Holt, 1998).

4. Methodology

Chapter four provides a discussion of the methodological choices made in this thesis. It covers aspects such as the authors' pre-understandings and the empirical point of departure, the research method and philosophy applied, the research approach, considerations regarding the data collection, the trustworthiness of the study, and finally the ethical considerations that influenced the study.

4.1 Pre-understandings and Empirical Point of Departure

Personal experiences, shaped by diverse backgrounds, constitute integral components of a researcher's pre-understandings. Becoming aware of one's pre-understandings is essential during the process of understanding when conducting research (Maxwell, Ramsayer, Hanlon, McKendrick & Fleming, 2020). Both of us, the authors, have studied different cases within marketing and have also attended several classes in consumer psychology. More importantly, both of us have extensive experience engaging with different types of upscale service businesses. However, as we, the researchers, came from different academic backgrounds, although sharing the last two years at the same academic program, it was not from the very beginning quite easy to cooperate. One had a previous background in business administration within marketing, and the other had a background in human rights and corporate social responsibility. However, as the project exceeded, instead of struggling with our differences, our different backgrounds rather completed each other. As mentioned by Alvesson and Sandberg (2022), regarding its pervasive nature it is imperative to carefully consider how the researchers' pre-understandings affect and can be utilised and mobilised in the advancement of knowledge.

It should be mentioned that although our interest in the field, our pre-understandings within the field are still limited, which can affect how we discern inconspicuous consumption in regards to luxury services, and self-identities. In all research, it is essential to take into account and face one's pre-understandings and remain open throughout the research process, as failing to do so might result in the findings becoming nothing more than a reflection of what is already known (Nyström & Dahlberg, 2001). Nevertheless, despite our limited

pre-understandings, we are aware of and have spent a lot of time discussing this openly and reading an extensive amount of literature within the theoretical field.

Furthermore, partly due to our pre-understandings, and in regards to our participants' pre-understandings, we have chosen upscale bars as an empirical example when collecting the empirical material. First and foremost, we as researchers have extensive experience with upscale bars. However, when conducting an external analysis with people within our circle of acquaintances, discussing different types of luxury hospitality services, we arrived at the point where we discovered that bars stand out as the most commonly experienced and frequently attended establishments among people. Consequently, an assumption was drawn that using luxury and upscale bars as an empirical example would contribute to the most rich and valuable data. Additionally, upscale bars are integrated into various luxury services such as hotels, and restaurants. As mentioned by Chao (2015), bars are becoming more and more important within different service upscale setting concepts, and using bars as an empirical context could therefore also contribute to some managerial insights by creating an increased understanding of the luxury inconspicuous service consumer, which can help businesses to adapt and develop new business concepts.

4.2 Research Method

The phenomenon of consumers' identities has been studied with the use of different methodological approaches (Schwartz, Luyck, & Vignoles, 2011). Qualitative research is a method of social research that aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of social constructions in a thorough manner (Bryman, 2016; Flick, 2018). In qualitative identity research, the focus is most often directed towards understanding individuals' personal and subjective experiences of their identities (Schwartz et. al, 2011). This is conducted in this thesis by applying an IPA approach, which will be discussed more in the next part, the research philosophy. Additionally, as highlighted by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) a qualitative method facilitates the comprehension of individuals' meaning-making processes. On the contrary, quantitative research predominantly centres on exploring the interrelationships and dependencies between different variables within a given context (Bryman, 2016). In identity research, the quantitative approach usually employs a

correlational method (Schwartz et. al, 2011). However, the quantitative method, with its focus on numerical measurements, significantly lacks the capacity to explain the meanings that consumers of luxury hospitality services attach to inconspicuous consumption in the realm of their self-identities.

4.3 Research Philosophy

Philosophy includes both a body of knowledge and analytical skills. It is valued for its practicality across different domains, reflecting an emphasis on usefulness and instrumentalism, and originates from the studies of existence, knowledge, mind, language, and reality. The adoption of a research philosophy shapes the perspective from which the data collection is used and understood (Brinkmann, 2017). The paragraphs of this section will provide the reader with the ontological and epistemological assumptions in this thesis.

The first philosophical assumption that shapes this thesis is ontology. Ontology concerns the nature of social entities, the nature of being. More specifically, it concerns whether or not entities can be seen as having a reality to external actors (Bryman, 2016). There are two ontological assumptions; objectivism and constructionism. Objectivism implies that there is a single reality, that a social phenomenon can be seen as an external fact that is beyond reach or influence (Bryman, 2016). The ontological assumption that this paper is following, constructionism, challenges the suggestions that entities are pre-given. It sees the social world as constructed between a compromise of different meanings and truths, and underscores the role of social interactions, language, and culture in shaping our understanding of reality. Moreover, it contends that knowledge is a social product that arises from individuals' actions (Bryman, 2016). Constructionism is followed since this paper aims to advance the understanding of the relationship between the phenomena of inconspicuous luxury hospitality service consumption and individuals' identities, which deals with investigating the different meanings people attach to their consumption in regards to their selves. As stated by Wattanasuwan (2005) the activities, philosophies, and beliefs we engage in is a reflection of our self-identity. Our research therefore takes a stance from an ontological constructionist perspective based on an understanding of the meanings associated with inconspicuous consumption in relation to peoples' self-identities. Not seeing the world as socially

constructed is therefore undoable in our research, which makes the lens of an ontological constructionist view most appropriate.

Furthermore, the second philosophical assumption, epistemology, concerns the theory of knowledge and prompts the question of what is regarded as acceptable knowledge (Bryman, 2016; Brinkmann, 2017). The assumption pertains to two directions, positivism and interpretivism. Positivism implies applying the methods of natural sciences to the study of social reality, seeing the world from an objective non-biased perspective. Interpretivism, the epistemological lens this paper assumes, opposes positivism and inclines a different logic that reflects the distinctiveness of humans against the natural order, emphasising the world as seen as socially created through different interactions through the subjective meaning of actions, and highlighting the importance of understanding human behaviour (Bryman, 2016).

A common approach within the field of interpretivism is the hermeneutic-phenomenological approach which emphasises understanding how individuals make sense of the world (Bryman, 2016). According to Alase (2017), conducting an interpretative phenomenological analysis, also known as IPA, enables the researcher to comprehend the inner reflections and thoughts of the research participants. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) also mentioned that IPA is an approach that shares the view that humans are sensemaking beings, and is concerned with existential issues, and therefore dedicated to understanding how people make sense of their experiences and the meanings behind them. This paper has chosen to explore the relationship between inconspicuous luxury consumption of hospitality services and self-identity. Applying an IPA approach therefore enables the researchers to create an in-depth understanding of the subjective relationship and its attached values, while asking the respondents about what they seek within luxury experiences. Therefore, and also since considering the study's insights to be objective would be impossible in our case, applying such a philosophical framework would be most suitable for our research.

4.4 Research Approach

The qualitative research method is generally characterised by an inductive approach, which means that the theory is modified and adapted to what is generated from the empirical data

(Bryman, 2016). In our research, an abductive approach has been applied, which is a method both applying an inductive- and deductive approach, best suitable if a researcher does not fully know the phenomena being studied (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2017). As previously mentioned, inconspicuous luxury consumption in regard to self-identity has not been investigated extensively before. According to Bryman (2016), the abductive approach also allows for new insights beyond the theoretical framework. We considered this to be the most suitable approach since our analysis and the process of conducting this research was constituted by a shift between theoretical and empirical reflection. What constitutes luxury is a subjective notion, and varies among individuals, and also the notion of inconspicuousness, and how it relates to people's self-identities. The theoretical framework was primarily at the beginning of the research used to create a framework for collecting empirical data and later used as a tool to understand the data, whereas some theoretical parts were adjusted afterward.

4.5 Data Collection

In a qualitative study, data collection is a critical component that is linked to the overall quality of the research. The quality of data collected significantly impacts the depth of an analysis that can be conducted (Bryman, 2016). In this paper, we employed semi-structured interviews as our data-collection method. This approach provided us with a solid basis for the analysis and subsequent conclusions. This chapter presents a detailed description of the chosen data collection method as well as the nuances of the respondent sampling.

4.5.1 Interviews

The data collecting method that has been used in this thesis is the semi-structured interviews. The interviews aimed to answer the research question *"How are inconspicuous consumption and consumers' self-identities related in the realm of luxury hospitality services?"*. In order to do this, the interviews sought to answer how consumers engage in inconspicuous consumption and how it reflects their identity. This type of question supports the IPA

perspective applied to this thesis, which explores an individual's personal perception or account of an event or state rather than producing an objective record of the event or state itself (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014).

The semi-structured interviews could be described as an interview type where the main goal is to understand how individuals create and deploy meanings in their social life (May, 2011). For the authors of this thesis, such a qualitative approach was considered to be suitable for the aim of this research, as it aims to understand consumers' self-identities and their relation to inconspicuous consumption. Semi-structured interviews could also open new perspectives and bring more insights into the discussed topics (Flick, 2018).

In semi-structured interviews, the questions are mostly pre-determined, but where it's necessary, an interviewer could have a space for some follow-up questions as respondents could speak openly about the subject and that would not be in a standardised type of interview (May, 2011). The follow-up questions are of great importance when an author is aiming to create an in-depth understanding of a certain phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

For the consistency and unity of the semi-structured interviews, the interview guide was created in relation to the topics discussed in the literature review part of this thesis (Boyce & Neale, 2006). The interview guide consisted of three parts and helped the authors of this paper to maintain an organised structure of the interviews and to ensure that all the necessary topics were covered and that the needed data was collected. The authors stayed neutral while conducting the interviews, by following the rules and the interview guide, and gave the respondents an opportunity to elaborate on the discussed themes of the interviews (May, 2011).

While developing the interview guide the authors framed non-directive questions, that could also stimulate a discussion among the respondents. The interview guide questions were formulated and arranged into three groups to cover a wide range of topics. However, even more questions were asked to ensure that all the necessary topics were fully disclosed. Also, the authors focused on "how" and "what" questions to ensure the aim of the research and to avoid defensive responses (Bryman, 2016). The questions were created based on the literature presented in this thesis. As our study applied an abductive approach, we formulated questions, bearing in mind what the theoretical framework told us about customer values and

self-identity. In doing so, we sought to disclose aspects of the relationship between luxury consumption and inconspicuous consumers' self-identities. The interview guide included some questions about the background of the respondents and more specific questions related to the aim and research question of the current study, such as the consumption patterns of luxury services, and how individuals perceived inconspicuousness in regards to their self-identity.

Qualitative interviews as a method of collecting data can have some limitations such as an interviewer's impact on the answers of the respondents (Bryman, 2016). Having this in mind, we used open-ended questions and avoided follow-up questions that might have had a biased influence on the respondents' answers. In regards to this, and since the subject concerned identity, we also took into consideration the fact that some respondents might have answered questions in a biased way, to present themselves more favourably. What is more, as highlighted by Bryman (2016), it is crucial for respondents to refrain from interpreting the meaning of words used in the questions in diverse ways. As previously mentioned, the semi-structured interview enabled us to ask follow-up questions but also helped to ensure that the respondents perceived the intended meaning behind our use of words. Despite these implications, we saw the qualitative semi-structured interviews as being the most suitable way to collect data.

4.5.2 Sampling

Our study revolved around the relationship between inconspicuous consumers of luxury hospitality services and their self-identity, and for us, it was necessary to gather the data from the primary sources. According to Hackley (2003), the sampling for the research is supposed to be theoretically and systematically selected, which in our study implied respondents who frequently engage in the consumption of luxury services in an inconspicuous manner. One of the research gaps reveals that the existing literature on luxury consumption has primarily explored consumers who tend to have an ostentatious manner of behaviour, who seek certain symbolic meanings while consuming luxury, or who prefer to demonstrate their wealth (Ekchard et al., 2015). In turn, the self-identity discussion and investigation of the proponents

of inconspicuous consumption have been neglected. Due to this, the chosen respondents were consumers who preferred to consume luxury in a subtle and discreet manner.

The sampling was conducted in a purposive and a convenience manner. Purposive due to the fact that we searched out consumers who we perceived as consuming luxury in an inconspicuous way, and in a convenience manner due to the limited timeframe for the project. In our study the primary challenge with the convenience sampling laid in the non-random selection of the respondents, limiting the extension of the results to broader contexts. Nonetheless, our study serves as a valuable springboard for further research (Bryman, 2016). Despite such limitations, the authors' choice of convenience sampling relies on their focus on understanding individuals' reasoning and cognition rather than seeking generalisability, aligning with the fundamental goals of qualitative methods (Bryman, 2016).

Fourteen respondents from the authors' network were reached out to conduct semi-structured interviews, a number of respondents within the recommended range of participants when conducting a qualitative IPA study (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014). This was done based on respondents' accessibility and as suggested by Boyce and Neale (2006) on the authors' assumption that the respondents could provide some fruitful insights on the investigated phenomena. By the time of conducting the current research, the respondents were mostly residing in Sweden. However, some of the respondents did come from diverse backgrounds, including those with roots originating outside of Sweden, which might have influenced their interpretations of how they make sense or value different aspects of consumption. As mentioned by Howes (1996), depending on the cultural background, different types of consumption can have different meanings. This was not something we could take into account due to the limited scope of our research. However, our awareness, that we knew our respondents as being inconspicuous consumers, enabled us to choose as representative respondents as possible to be able to effectively meet the objectives and aim of this study. Also, to our knowledge, we knew that the respondents we reached out engaged in different types of luxury services frequently and had a tendency to choose places with upscale settings over other types of hospitality services.

Furthermore, the interviews were held in different settings, in non-crowded public spaces, at one of the authors' homes, or at the houses of a few respondents. Mostly some quiet places were chosen for the interviews in order not to cause any distractions for the respondents. The time length of the interviews was around one hour, and it gave the respondents time and

space to respond and reflect on all the investigated topics. This time frame also allowed both of the authors to ask all the necessary follow-up questions and to probe the opinions of the respondents.

In order to provide an overview of our respondents, we present a table below that illustrates the profiles of the respondents, including their names, ages, occupations as well as the dates of when the interviews took place.

	Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Date of interview
1	Boris	27	DJ and promoter	03-04-2024
2	Pedro	26	Management consultant	04-04-2024
3	Magnus	32	Software engineer	04-04-2024
4	Lisa	27	Restaurant manager	05-04-2024
5	Veronica	29	Marketing strategist	05-04-2024
6	Eva	36	Entrepreneur	06-04-2024
7	Michaela	35	Fashion expert	06-04-2024
8	Alice	31	Sustainability consultant	07-04-2024
9	Filippa	33	Entrepreneur	08-04-2024
10	Kenny	36	CEO	09-04-2024
11	Margot	28	HR specialist	16-04-2024
12	Aldo	28	Management consultant	20-04-2024
13	Andreas	30	Junior broker	21-04-2024
14	Linnea	34	COO	21-04-2024

Table 4.1: Table showing the various respondents with regard to anonymity through pseudonyms. Date of interview, occupation, and age can be read in the table.

4.6 Data Analysis

Initially, when collecting the empirical data, interviews were recorded, as well as notes during the interviews were taken regarding identified topics that could be useful for our research. The interviews were transcribed directly after each interview and the notes were incorporated to avoid potential misunderstandings and to enhance the research's integrity.

In this paper, the analysis process suggested by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) was followed, which consists of three steps; sorting, reducing, and arguing. Additionally, we also applied, as mentioned above, the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework. This approach concerns understanding how people experience and make meaning of things, and how people talk about things. It is a process of interpreting the world as being in the shoes of the respondent, taking into account people in their unique contexts, interpreting and uncovering things the participant him- or herself is less aware of, getting an in-depth understanding of how meanings are constructed (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014).

As mentioned by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), sorting deals with structuring the collected data and begins with getting familiarised with the material. To conduct it in an appropriate manner researchers have to read the material a couple of times (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018), something we did. However, as suggested by Smith and Pietkiewicz (2014), before reading the material we also listened to it a couple of times to immerse in the material to get to know it properly, and to not miss out on important information. To ensure unbiased data it is of utmost importance that the researcher goes through and sorts the data in several different ways (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Using IPA as an approach also helped us to thematize and interpret the empirical material properly, as well as find relationships between the identified themes. After conducting the interviews, transcribing, and listening through them a couple of times we started to discuss different patterns that could be found in the data and started to create different codes which expired into various themes. When establishing themes we also mapped out the relationships between the different themes which could be found in the data.

When the data had been sorted into different themes the process of reducing the themes began. When the sorting has been conducted this often means that the researcher has to reduce the themes, as well as the different categories of the themes, and choose the ones that can help the researcher to as best as possible provide an answer to the stated purpose (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). We began this process by sorting the data, excluding data less relevant for the purpose. When there was too much data with similar content we sorted out the most representative, i.e. quotes, and saved the names of participants with similar perceptions to each other.

As a final step, Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) emphasise arguing to be a crucial part of the data analysis process. The researchers must here decide on how to use their findings in relation to previous research and presented theories. No matter if new concepts could be presented or not, the themes, in regard to previous research and theories, should be presented in an argumentative manner that transforms them into concepts that can prove the point of the study. Due to the abductive approach of this thesis, Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) arguments are being followed, where empirical- and theoretical data are being discussed in relation to each other, to create a further understanding of how inconspicuous consumers' self-identities relate to their consumption of luxury hospitality services. Accordingly, and to follow Rennstam and Wästerfors's (2018) guide for arguing, each empirical finding that has been thematically presented, has been discussed in relation to the theoretical concepts presented in this thesis.

4.7 Trustworthiness of the Study

Researchers have extensively discussed reliability and validity in qualitative research, yet a singular definition remains elusive. For that reason, there are alternative criterias such as credibility, transferability, and confirmability, that can provide an understanding of whether the method used is reliable and valid or not. Credibility is one of the aspects that make up the trustworthiness of the research (Bryman, 2016). The credibility criteria ensures that the researcher has collected the data and conducted the research based on good practice (Bryman, 2016). Also, credibility implies that the researcher presents the findings of a social

phenomenon to the social world to confirm that he or she has fully understood the social phenomenon (Patton, 1999). In our study, we shared the final findings with the participants to verify that the obtained results were aligned with their responses, especially in cases where quotes could be seen as ambiguous.

Furthermore, transferability involves providing what Geertz (1973) terms as a thick description, denoting a comprehensive analysis conducted by the researcher. This approach facilitates the potential transfer of the study to similar contexts or the same context but at a later time. Since in our research we had a small number of people participating in the interviews the transferability might be an issue when transferring results to other contexts. However, the main aim of the study was not to transfer the results, but to explore meanings and opinions, therefore the transferability of the results is not of great importance for this study.

In turn, the confirmability criteria ensures that the authors conducted the study without any bias towards the topics, and kept their personal values and opinions far from the research to make the study as objective as possible (Bryman, 2016). The authors of this thesis collected and presented different viewpoints and opinions on the studied subject to assure the confirmability of the study.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

When collecting the empirical material, several ethical principles, as highlighted by Bryman (2016), were followed. These were as follows; harm to participants (respondents), lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, and whether deception was involved (Bryman, 2016). Firstly, when we contacted the respondents we informed them about the purpose of our study in detail, to ensure them that no deception was present in our collection of empirical data. Informed consent from all of the respondents was obtained in advance. All the respondents partook in the interviews voluntarily and agreed to the recording of the interviews and to use their answers and information given in the interviews within the scope of our research. The respondents were contacted through text, email, and verbally. As part of this outreach effort, missive letters were also sent out which explained in detail the purpose of the study, the

approach of the interview, and the ethical considerations that would be taken into account regarding the empirical material. These were also read out again before the interviews, both to inform the respondents of their rights and again to clarify the purpose of the study, and to ensure the respondents' full consent. To achieve complete confidentiality the respondents' identities were obscured by assigning them pseudonyms instead of using their real name. During the interviews, we also avoided questions that could lead to the respondents sharing private sensitive information about themselves. This was seen as important, especially since the research aimed to investigate self-identity. Additionally, during the interviews, we as interviewers opted not to judge or comment on the respondents' responses with our interpretations. This approach was chosen to ensure respect and to exert as little influence as possible on the respondents' answers.

5. Presentation of Findings and Analysis

In the following chapter, the empirically identified themes that were identified in the interview data will be set against the theoretical framework. Three main themes were identified, and two of them were given subthemes. The themes distinguish different perspectives on how inconspicuous consumers attach meanings to their consumption of luxury hospitality services and the implications this has for their self-identities. The first identified theme was named “Privacy as the new currency: How inconspicuousness contributes to self-consistency”. The second theme that was established was named “Brand personalities and the self” and was broken down into two parts called “Seeking for an enhanced self” and “Sophisticated personalities and symbolic meanings.” The third theme concerned and was titled “Brand user image and self-consciousness” and was also broken down into two parts, namely, “How inconspicuousness counters an unfavourable narrative” and “Sophisticated selves in search for the sophisticated other in the sake of self-consistency”.

5.1 Privacy as the New Currency: How Inconspicuousness Contributes to Self-consistency

Self-congruity can be seen as a reliable forecaster of consumer behaviour due to the tendency of consumers to view a product or service more positively when they perceive alignment between their self-image and a product’s or service’s image (Aw, Flynn & Chong, 2019). All of the respondents emphasised that they enjoy going to luxury bars in a non-ostentatious manner. The congruence between an engagement with this type of luxury, upscale bars in such a manner, and the actual self was apparent in all of the respondents' answers. For our respondents’ self-image, it was important to keep their lifestyle and luxury consumption more private. Eva and Linnea expressed similar viewpoints on their preferences for discrete consumption in luxury services.

“I'd never post where I am, I don't post my travels. I don't post what I'm doing. I actually think the new currency is privacy. I don't want people knowing where I am, what I'm doing and who I'm doing it with. So I actually think social media was this explosion of everyone disclosing what they were doing, and I actually think the reverse is happening. People are not disclosing anymore. I know for myself. I've stopped disclosing.” (Eva)

“It's not luxurious anymore to take a picture from a luxurious place and post it online. It's a new definition of luxury - to be offline. To enjoy it and not to tell anyone.”
(Linnea)

Also, Michaela even emphasised that inconspicuousness in the consumption of luxury is a part of her personality.

“The majority of people don't even know what I'm up to. I've always had that kind of personality. So it's not important for me at all. If other people know where I'm going or not going. I was about to say, that I'll keep it to myself. Because of the envy like we spoke about before or you know I've always been a very discreet person when it comes to that.” (Michaela)

For Michaela, the inconspicuous pattern of behaviour provides her with the preferred subtle consumption of the luxury services that she desires. It is not self-congruent to her to ostentatiously expose the places she goes to and the opulent lifestyle she has, as it doesn't correspond to her social self. As the literature indicates, one of the primary motivations behind consumers' tendency to choose inconspicuousness is their need to avoid drawing attention or appearing ostentatiously (Eastman et al., 2022). Another respondent, Pedro, also mentioned that he prefers to keep his luxury experiences to himself.

“I don't talk, I don't communicate these things with other people. Like it's mine, my own. It's my business. No, it doesn't regard them so I don't share it and I don't feel like I need to share it just to belong in a certain section of the society. I can keep that for myself.” (Pedro)

Pedro also raised an argument about the lack of any inherent value for him in sharing or boasting about his visits to luxury upscale places.

“...you're just in a bar with friends, and you want to focus on hanging out with friends or a girlfriend. So you don't focus on taking pictures or updating your social media of what you're doing because it doesn't matter. It will not give you any value if you do that.” (Pedro)

It also becomes evident that for Pedro, the consumption of luxury aligns with his actual self. However, at the same time, he stays indifferent to the way how others perceive him. From such insight, it could be seen that this type of consumption neither contributes to nor brings any value to his social self, as Pedro and the same-minded respondents simply do not communicate their status or belonging to a certain group while partaking in upscale bars. From the gathered data it could be observed that their behaviour was not driven by a longing for social status, recognition, or the need for comparison. Respondents appeared to be quite confident and self-aware, which might explain the lack of leaning toward seeking validation from others or conforming to their expectations to fit in.

According to Sirgy (2018), ideal social self-congruity is about the alignment between consumers' desired perceptions by others, where the desire for social approval influences preferences. This leads some consumers to select services that enhance their appearance in the eyes of others. Among our respondents, as seen in the quotes from Michaela, Magnus, Kenny, and Eva, there is a noticeable absence of a need to engage in any type of comparison, as it's not self-congruent with their self-perception. As previously mentioned, they demonstrate a high degree of self-awareness. Therefore, they don't believe that visits to those luxury bars could change or modify others' perceptions of them. What is more, some respondents like Magnus choose to consume extraordinary luxury services, upscale bars, in a completely discreet manner, and elaborated on the reasons behind it.

“Usually you want exclusive things you don't want to tell people ever. do or make a lot of money or whatever because it usually doesn't help you. I'm very pragmatic in that way. So it's more about - does this or could it hurt my image or whatever? Not that I think about it. But now when I'm just thinking about how I operate in life in general, it's usually: what do I get? That's why I don't have social media. I wouldn't

post because what do I get out of posting? I can get a lot of enemies because people are jealous. If I don't post I don't have that risk of getting that. And I don't see any benefits in sharing it. Like in those places.” (Magnus)

Magnus mentioned that it is better to keep what he does for himself, because he believed that engaging in conspicuous type of consumption and expressing it in public, could even hurt one's social self rather than actually bring any benefits. Such an insight of the respondent not only reconfirms the motivations behind the inconspicuous consumption that has been identified by Eastman et al. (2022), and in particular a necessity for the avoidance of envy from others, but also expands them by highlighting even a possible harm that showing off could cause. Therefore, Michaela and respondents like Eva, Magnus, Andreas or Kenny could execute the need for opulent luxury services but also exclude themselves from the envy narrative that doesn't align with their social self.

Also, according to Sirgy (1986), when the brand user image nor a brand personality is in match with a person's self-concept this tends to cause psychological dissonance and threaten the perceptions of one's self. The quotes of respondents Magnus and Pedro demonstrate that they don't see any need to expose their experiences. Their preferred choice of discreet consumption is closely linked to their self-concept of individuals who value privacy and personal satisfaction over external validation or social recognition. This aligns with the concept of inconspicuous luxury consumption where the focus lies on personal enjoyment rather than distinctly demonstrating wealth or seeking external validation (Ekchard et al., 2015).

Furthermore, instead of conspicuous needs where, as emphasised by Belk (1988), social value, also implying social self-congruity (Sirgy, 2018), is highest rated, and where an envy factor often is present (Belk, 1988) the respondents seemed to value completely different things while still being proponents of luxury consumption.

“I would say that I felt very much in place where I should be. I felt present. And the atmosphere! Everything just made things seem right, the way they should be. Normally I always keep thinking, analysing and probably overthinking and overanalyzing stuff, and I have a hard time being 'here and now' but that was a fantastic moment of being here and now” (Kenny)

At the same time Kenny also put an emphasis on the lack of the need to share.

“Yeah, and I don't like and I don't feel a need to tell anyone as well. Firstly, I don't like people to feel that I'm showing off, because I think that's completely unnecessary and second of all, I really don't feel a need for myself.” (Kenny)

Kenny talked about his profound interest in engaging with luxury bars. However, to maintain his self-consistency, luxury consumption should still be private, as he also expressed a complete disinterest in either flaunting or sharing his luxury experiences. What is more, for Kenny such a private consumption and visits to upscale venues facilitated a bolstering of his self-congruity by enabling him to leave his overthinking behind and completely immerse himself in the present experience. This stance also refutes Tian et al. (2001) who mentioned that luxury consumption primarily concerns individuals' needs to externally distinguish themselves from others within society.

Analysing the gathered data, it can be suggested that inconspicuous consumption serves as a means for respondents to engage in luxury services in a discreet manner. Inconspicuousness appears to be self-congruent due to the fact that respondents appreciate and see a great value in privacy. Moreover, the subtle nature of consumption allows them to achieve the desired sense of discreteness.

5.2 Brand Personalities and the Self

5.2.1 Seeking for an Enhanced Self

Aaker and Fournier (1995) suggested that consumers view brands as possessing personalities characterised by different traits. The greater the match between the consumer's and the brand's image, the more value the consumer will get from the consumption of the brand (Sirgy, 1986). A few of the respondents tended to choose places that simply mirror their own characteristics. Linnea and Alice, for instance, highlighted their perception of themselves as pretty and good-looking. By saying that, they explained their inclination to places with good-looking and visually appealing interior designs. Their tendency to choose those places

could be explained by the fact that consumers engage with brands that reflect and sustain their actual selves, to increase their self-consistency (Sirgy, 2018). However, other respondents mentioned that they enjoy upscale bars that are aligned with how they privately want to perceive themselves. Margot, for example, expressed how with age, she has experienced a sense of maturity and increased desires to have a more business-oriented lifestyle. Therefore, she tends to choose more solid and well-established upscale places, as these venues and their environments possess characteristics in line with her wished-for self-image.

“I feel a bit more business-like going to those places, then going to more regular bars. Isn't that intriguing? I would say it is!” (Margot)

In a further discussion, Margot confirmed that she also wants to perceive herself as a more business-oriented person. Kenny in a similar way mentioned that he likes his inconspicuous visits to upscale lobby bars of luxury hotels since they provide him in the moment with a trait, “slow and elegance”, a trait that is not achievable for him due to his lifestyle, but that he would like to have more of in his life of. The visits to upscale bars therefore became an opportunity for him to embrace such a trait in a brief moment.

“So I guess this is self-sufficiency. Maybe I don't have enough of it. And therefore I like to project that on myself. By going there I think that maybe it's a kind of slow elegance that I am seeking more of in my life, but with work and other obligations...At those places I allow this, so this is kind of rewarding myself with this slow, elegant pace. Therefore in these places, I would perceive myself as more relaxed and elegant than I actually come through in real everyday life.” (Kenny)

It could be argued that Kenny’s inconspicuous visits to upscale lobby bars of luxury hotels bring him quite an extraordinary combination of hedonic value and a feeling of emotional confidence. Both Margot and Kenny enjoy visiting bars that possess traits that not only could be perceived as being in accordance with how they see themselves, acting accordingly with one’s actual self for actual self-congruity, as mentioned by Sirgy (2018), but more importantly how they would like to perceive themselves. For instance, for Kenny, these visits also boost his self-esteem as being present at those upscale places assists him in his ideal actual self, not in becoming a different person, but to gain some personal traits and the

anticipated self-sufficiency that he might be lacking in his daily life. This could also be likened to what Sirgy (2018) describes as ideal self-congruity, which implies consuming services that aligns with a desired self-image, an act enhancing and satisfying one's self-esteem. For Kenny and Fanny it became evident that they were searching for service providers who exhibit qualities they aspired to embody, traits they could integrate into their self-perception.

5.2.2 Sophisticated Personalities and Symbolic Meanings

According to Bourdieu (2018), one can buy a certain object by using economic capital, but to appropriately use and understand it, defined by its cultural capital scientifically incorporated in it, the consumer must have access to the cultural capital aligned with the object (Bourdieu, 2018). People's cultural capital can take shape in our taste, expressed in our desires towards certain objects, activities, categories, genres, or types of cultural objects (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1998). Cultural capital pertains to the acquired expertise and knowledge of individuals, developed during their early socialisation and upbringing (Jenkins, 2014). Following this reasoning, Eva emphasised the importance of understanding what value is within luxury, which could be set in perspective to a person's knowledge, and consequently what value or meaning, based on what the consumer knows, can be derived from the consumption of a certain service.

“What we perceive as exclusive or premium is to be debated, because I also talk about value. Right? And for me, I have no issue spending the money if I think I'm going to get the value.” (Eva)

The respondents seemed to have varying viewpoints on what they considered valuable while evaluating luxury upscale bars, which seemed to be highly influenced by their backgrounds. While discussing the positive or remarkable visits to upscale places, the respondents with presumed high cultural capital, referred to as HCC consumers according to Holt (1998), put a lot of emphasis on cultural and intangible aspects of those places, in contrast to the opinions of those presumed to have lower cultural capital, referred to as LCC consumers according to Holt (1998). In our case the respondents that could be perceived as HCC consumers were

Lisa, Veronica, and Michaela, as well as Magnus, Filippa, Kenny, Boris, Andreas, Aldo, and Eva, an assumption that was based on the information they shared about their background as well as their refined expressions about the traits a luxury bar should have to become attractive for them. The HCC consumers emphasised their interests in cultural aspects and the cultural influences that had shaped their upbringing. For instance, Michaela had grown up in a theatre environment, and Lisa had grown up with a family of journalists and musicians, and had worked with theatre. Magnus had grown up in a family with an extensive interest in music, food, and wine. Boris came from a family with a big music interest, and with parents working as writers. Additionally, he had during the recent years developed an interest in wines. Eva told us she had interest in arts and had a degree in history of art. Kenny told us he enjoyed art exhibitions, having a special interest in Swedish realism and called himself a luxury consumer of education. Andreas spoke about visiting operas and theatres regularly when growing up. Aldo also emphasised his cultural interests, and mentioned that he had grown up in a family surrounded with music and various cultural influences. In contrast, the others, whom we perceived as being LCC consumers (Alice, Margot, Linnea, and Pedro), did almost not mention any cultural or refined aspects when evaluating upscale bars. Neither their upbringing or interests could be seen as being high of cultural influence, based on our perception. For instance, even in the beginning of his interview, Pedro explicitly emphasised that he barely had any cultural background or interest of such art.

Aaker and Fournier (1995) mentioned sophistication as one of five traits a brand's personality can be characterised by. The HCC respondents expressed a preference for bars which, could be interpreted as more sophisticated choices. Michaela for instance shared her upbringing, mentioning her father's involvement in the theater industry. She recalled how after every premiere he would take her with his colleagues to nice restaurants, an experience that has likely shaped her preferences. She stressed the significance of authenticity when making a choice on where to go, and spoke proudly about what she constitutes as a positive or negative dining or night-out experience.

“I prefer those older traditional restaurants, That were “hyped” already 30 years ago, 20 years ago who still have a stronger DNA than to go to new super high, super expensive places just for the for the case, if you understand what I mean. Because they feel that it's more... How can I put it in the correct word? You will feel it is more fake. The whole environment, you know, but when you go to Operakällaren, for

example, you get the same service that you got 20 years ago, you know. So yeah, if that makes sense.” (Michaela)

Also, Boris who prided himself as a person with an eye for details emphasised his preference for bars that put extra effort into offering for instance their own homemade drink extracts. Similarly, Filippa talked about her fondness for places offering season-based special spirits. She highlighted that they can only be found in more exclusive bars with the right assortment, and emphasised her own proficiency about such refined nuances. Lisa also elaborated on this and emphasised the need for uniqueness when going out to visit a bar. She mentioned seeing herself as a conscious person when it came to knowing what is both trendy and luxurious but with the knowledge to being able to differentiate between what is only trendy and what is actual quality, to be able to determine where the real value in luxury derives, something that she told us makes her feel special about herself. Lisa, having a circle of friends with a shared interest in cocktails and fine dining, expressed that she saw herself as someone possessing a keen awareness of distinctive and unique bars. She derived some kind of pleasure from such knowledge and emphasised her enjoyment in knowing about those places that other people are not aware of.

“So like it doesn't have to be expensive to be like exclusive...it's almost like a secret club of knowing the best places in town.” (Lisa)

As stated by Thomsen et. al., (2020) luxury acquires symbolic and personal significance through the symbolic and experiential dimensions of luxury consumption practices. As stated in the quotes by Lisa and Michaela, the HCC consumers express the importance of their expertise, about what constitutes real luxury, distinguishing themselves from the others, for themselves, who do not know what they know, seen as the mainstream luxury consumers. Michaela emphasised the understanding of quality and spoke about authenticity as an attribute of real luxury, and distinguished herself from everything that has to do with trendy and mainstream luxury. Similarly, Kapferer and Bastien (2012) emphasised that the heritage and legacy of a brand can contribute to granting it such attributes as expertise, reliability, and authenticity.

Furthermore, The HCC respondents seem to consume out of, be driven primarily driven by, and symbolize luxury bar consumption with the hedonic value, which concerns subjective

well-being and emotional gratification, as mentioned by Sussan et al. (2012). This became especially evident when the respondents were asked about what a visit to their favourite upscale bar(s) meant to them, and what it symbolised. Filippa for instance mentioned that she sees it as freedom when she goes out and socialises with friends and Magnus emphasised it as something he does during his leisure time as a part of socialising with friends and enjoying food and wine, and in the same manner Kenny associated it with the sense of freedom.

“For me, it is always like, escape and freedom. I grew up in a very strict family. So for me, like going out to a bar and having fun with my friends staying up late and dancing like it was something like it's a freedom.” (Filippa)

“I mean, food and wine culture, of course, restaurant culture. It symbolizes some kind of social gathering, of course, Nordic culture, going to a bar. It's very common here as of socializing. So it's kind of symbolizing being with friends and then leisure time.”
(Magnus)

“Well, the place where I can meet my friends on my own without family and needs, like a context, where I can meet a friend of mine, just the two of us without his or my family. Maybe that's also associated with this sense of freedom.” (Kenny)

In a similar manner aligning with the opinions of the respondents Holt (1998) highlighted that HCC consumers most of the time do not consume out of symbolic meanings, whereas purchasing luxury is more about personal experiences, rather than consuming brands that are economically related to status. As we can see, consumers are more than willing to engage in luxury services, but as it's been discussed by Wirtz (2020), undoubtedly, they still need to justify the high prices. Deriving from Veblen's effect (1899), for those people who seek to meet their symbolic values and to signal their wealth and status, the high price makes a certain product or service even more desirable, as it could demonstrate their ability to afford some expensive possessions and distinguish them from others. While among our respondents with their ability to partake in luxury services frequently and their perceived HCC, nobody expressed any interest or identified any value or prestige in places that could be seen as infamous for just being expensive. HCC consumers, such as Veronica, when discussing the connection between high prices and preferred upscale venues, do not make their choices on an ultimate desire for expensive luxury services.

When discussing the connection between high prices and preferred upscale venues, HCC consumers, like Veronica, don't primarily base their choices on an ultimate desire for expensive luxury services.

“I won't say that like necessarily, but it goes hand in hand. Of course, sometimes there are very nice exceptions, and it's not like I choose by the prices, you know, like “Oh, if it's a super expensive place, then it must be a great experience”. That's not how I judge! But unfortunately or fortunately, it happens that the good places have quite often high prices.” (Veronica)

Such an opinion deriving from the quote contradicts Veblen's (1899) approach that consumers see value and a certain symbolic meaning in luxury when it is simply expensive in monetary terms. The data indicates that respondents with HCC are willing to engage in expensive luxury places where their expectations about hospitality services are met, and also when the true values are obtained, regardless of the price tags.

Furthermore, respondents like Filippa and Magnus exhibited a fondness for hedonic consumption, as evident from their quotes, and in a similar manner Andreas expressed the need for those places to have a story behind them that he could relate to and immerse into for a brief moment of luxury. Such reasons behind opting for subtle consumption, when the consumers perceive the hedonic value and see a symbolic story in such luxurious experiences, align with the features required to attract inconspicuous luxury consumers, as outlined by Makkar and Yap (2018). In contrast, in case of LCC respondents on the other hand, the meanings were almost the opposite, where, for instance, Pedro and Alice related this type of consumption to economic success. For Pedro, the value he found in visiting luxury and upscale bars came from him seeing himself as being successful in his job, being able to visit these places and that such visits inspired him to work harder to be able to enjoy those places more frequently. Alice and Linnea also emphasised that going to these places was something that they symbolised as financial success.

“I would say they definitely symbolise financial success. Because poor people can't afford it.” (Alice)

“Those places do symbolise wealth. They do symbolise opportunities. They symbolise a dream.” (Linnea)

This implies that this type of consumption takes on a symbolic meaning, indirectly related to status, for the LCC consumers. According to Holt (1998) peoples’ cultural capital can take different forms and meanings, where often the people as counted as being LCC consumers attach a symbolic meaning to luxury, often shared with the majority of the society. In this case the meaning seemed to be financial success, which could be assumed to be the most common one luxury is associated with in society in general. However, as mentioned by Holt (1998) LCC consumers often make these choices to signal status, which relates to Veblen’s effect that a high price makes a certain product or service even more desirable as it could demonstrate their ability to afford some expensive possessions and distinguish them from others (Veblen, 1989). However, this does not seem to be the case for our respondents since they, as seen previously, not tend not to share their consumption with others. For instance, it could be seen as Pedro engages in these services with an enhancement motive on the path to fulfil his actual ideal self. This implies, that he strives for actual ideal self congruity, with, as mentioned by Sirgy (2018), a need to act in a way that can help him in becoming whom he would like to be, where the ability to visit luxury bars works as a symbol and as a reminder of a desired financial success.

Moreover, it becomes apparent that the HCC respondents see themselves as individuals with refined tastes while visiting selected luxury places. In regards to this, and as mentioned by DiMaggio (1987), it could be perceived as their expression of their taste could work as a method of categorization to sustain themselves in a certain symbolic hierarchy, about how they perceive themselves to be. Also, in regards to not expressing conspicuous needs, this type of consumption therefore could be seen as the HCC respondents fulfills their need of self-consistency, which implies that HCC consumers choose services that are consistent with their self-perception (Sirgy, 2018). Consequently, making such a choice enables the HCC consumers to sustain actual self-congruity (Sirgy, 1982, 2018). In contrast, it appears as though the LCC consumers strive for actual ideal self-congruity with the motive of self-enhancement in regard to success or achievements.

5.3 Brand User Image and Self-awareness

5.3.1 How Inconspicuousness Counters an Unfavourable Narrative

Within the conducted interviews we successfully uncovered a joint belief that conspicuousness in consumption is considered to be a foreign or even a barbarian element for the self-concept of all the respondents. The respondents expressed a disconnect between the narrative of conspicuousness and their morals and beliefs, with many expressing a strongly negative attitude toward it. This was evident by nearly explicit condemnation of flaunting luxury experiences.

“I personally tend to enjoy more sincere and genius content of people that correlate with my interests. Since I'm not a “food blogger”, I don't think that it's relevant for my friends or other people out of sudden get the “reviews” on upscale bars in my stories, like if they really want to get this content, they might follow influencers on this. I'm out from this!” (Veronica)

This quote underlines a strong denial and a contempt for excessive bragging. The general tone of the discussion on both bragging about and even just sharing respondents' luxury experiences leads us to a further discussion of an aspect of the actual self. Due to different reasons and circumstances people don't see a need to share or talk a lot about their luxury experiences on social media or even among other people in person. What is more, it is noteworthy that some respondents, such as Kenny or Magnus were devoid of any social media presence. Another quote below emphasises how an embedded pattern of inconspicuousness becomes a permanent and noticeable feature of the actual self.

“I barely tell people where I go. So. What I've learned over time, not telling people where you go and where you've been is really important, because I don't want to bring attention to myself.” (Eva)

Consequently, for the same-minded respondents to Eva, the inconspicuous aspect of luxury consumption becomes an inherent part of behaviour that they have acquired over time. As it's been noted by Postrel (2008), for some people from more prosperous and developed economies the consumption of luxury becomes a means of private pleasure, and it doesn't serve as a tool for public competition anymore. Respondents mention different features of what they associate with a more favourable type of inconspicuous behaviour, either its class, education, monetary aspect or the level of how experienced they are in luxury consumption. Subsequently, the proponents of inconspicuousness in luxury consumption tend to categorically avoid those people who act in an intolerable way for them, in a conspicuous manner. As, according to the respondents, they lack those important features of the educated, sophisticated people, with whom our respondents associate themselves. Different respondents, such as Michaela, argued how they don't even want to go to those wrong types of places with the wrong crowds.

“Those places that are very hyped in social media or that are very hyped generally, over there you will see if we could call it a “new rich” generation, who wants to show off, a generation where it's really important to ‘check in’ at this place to show-off, so I'm actually avoiding going to those places.” (Michaela)

Indeed if some of the respondents anticipate encountering individuals who act in a wrong, conspicuous way around them, they opt not to visit such locations. The need for self consistency for our luxury consumers excludes any associations with the wrong crowds. The people who act conspicuously appear to be somewhat aliens to our respondents' actual selves. A selection of the right individuals in suitable, right places makes respondents align themselves with more refined people, those who have discerning taste and manners, as opposed to what they perceive as so-called “aliens”, the mainstream crowds, lacking in taste or manners. According to Sirgy (2018), when a match between the brand user image and the actual self is low, consumers evaluate products and services unfavourably. Therefore it seems like, inconspicuous consumers tend to avoid those types of places with people with this kind of behaviour while engaging in luxury experiences.

5.3.2 Sophisticated Selves in Search for the Sophisticated Other in the Sake of Self-consistency

Moreover, regarding the inconspicuous consumers with HCC, according to their account, a theme which could be identified to stand out specifically, was the importance of the perceived other, the typical guest, when choosing an upscale bar. This theme may bear resemblance to the concept of brand-user image, which revolves around the stereotypical perception of the typical user linked with a brand (Sirgy, 1982). For example, Magnus, who identifies himself as someone with a huge interest in arts, music, and culture, portrayed the guests at the upscale wine bars he frequently visits as individuals sharing his interests. This perceived shared interest served as one of the reasons he enjoyed visiting such venues.

“The people that I usually meet in the natural wine bar places are artists, not only arty but people that are interested in arts, music and are more like creative, want to experience new stuff... I like getting in a bar where they have this kind of the same culture, like with people with the same mindset of what you want to experience.”

(Magnus)

Kenny, as someone with a profound interest in wine, in the discussion on the people surrounding him at upscale bars also talked about the clientele. He highlighted that an aspect of meeting people with whom they can share their refined interests in wine could be beneficial.

“You can ask and it's quite okay to do so. You can ask what kind of wine they're having, what you think of a correct character of the wine and can engage in some kind of, some kind of discussion around the wine so it's a nice background too for being there.” (Kenny)

Michaela talked about it, the other people surrounding her at a bar, in a similar way.

“Obviously, then you must be aware of where you're going and of the places that you

prefer. So I do think that's why it's all about experience that we spoke about before. I want to have a nice experience while going out. I might go to places where I can relate more to the people and when I feel a little bit more that, it's my kind of crowd, I would say ... It's more of more of a sophisticated, sophisticated. I would think that's a good word, sophisticated places I like for myself, that's everything in life has to be sophisticated and I do think that.” (Michaela)

According to Sirgy (2018) the better the match is between the consumer and the perceived user of a certain product or brand, brand user image, the more value the consumer will gain. It is apparent that Magnus, as well as the rest of the HCC respondents, choose a place depending on they find value in being surrounded by like-minded people around them or not. Magnus also made a distinction between different people at the same time. He emphasised that he likes to be surrounded by people who is genuinely interested in wine, and not by those people who “*hate on all the new modern natural wine stuff...*” or those who behave pretentiously like “*... hipsters that only want to drink something that doesn't taste like anything they tried before...*”. The quotes from Magnus could be perceived as he wants to surround himself with people, not only who share the same interests as him, but also who search for the same or similar value as him within consumption, people who possess a similar meaning as him of what this kind of consumption implies for the self. Based on this it could be assumed that Magnus, and primarily the HCC respondents as him, gain value from interacting with people with the same cultural capital, people as which Bourdieu (2018) calls it, possess the same means of consumption.

Furthermore, Chapman and Dilmeri (2022) emphasised the necessity of social exclusivity in luxury settings, suggesting that by reaching such exclusivity luxury consumers tend to choose places that could provide them a feeling of belonging to a certain “exclusive club”. For many respondents, especially the HCC respondents, the social exclusivity becomes an inherent part of the luxury experiences, as they have certain expectations regarding people at those places.

“When you go to those places, you understand that there will be well behaved, well-mannered people, who will not get drunk and will not scream and I don't know, will not act in some inappropriate manner. You know, those types of things. So, you

just go there again for yourself, for your experience, for just being in a nice atmosphere in total.” (Veronica)

The HCC respondents emphasised the need to be surrounded by people with certain traits as it has a dramatic influence on the overall atmosphere and brings value to the luxury settings as much or even more than some of the functional aspects of the luxury service experiences. Berger and Ward (2010) emphasised that people with more cultural capital prefer less noticeable signals because that’s how they facilitate the signals to the other “in the know” peers. Eckhardt and Bardhi (2020), similarly mentioned that individuals who consume inconspicuously still seek acknowledgment from individuals with cultural sophistication or expertise who can appreciate their use of discreet luxury. However, how the other people who possess the same means of consumption perceive the respondents’ social self, was not something that was mentioned or emphasised by any of the respondents. Kenny, however, described himself as a person belonging to a certain kind of people who do not need to belong.

“I do have an issue with the belonging but maybe yes, maybe. I mean, we're out on thin ice here but maybe it's a kind of belonging to people that do not need to belong.”
(Kenny)

As for Kenny and the other respondents, their social self therefore not directly become prioritised. Instead, the implication of actual self-congruity was emphasised and related to the congruity between the respondents’ actual self and the perceived brand user image when choosing a place to visit. This implies that for an inconspicuous consumer to be attracted to visit a place, the associated average consumer of such a place should share similar means of consumption and consume inconspicuously, as people perceived as mainstream consumers don’t meet their social exclusivity needs and expectations.

6. Concluding Discussion

The sixth and final chapter concludes this study by summarising the key findings in relation to the research question and their contributions to existing literature. Additionally, it proposes potential managerial implications, and reviews some of the study's limitations, as well as propose directions for future research.

6.1 Main Conclusions

This research has explored the phenomenon of inconspicuous consumption within luxury hospitality services and its relationship to people's identities. As an empirical point of departure, the interviewees centred around luxury bars. The data was analysed through the theoretical framework, which helped us to provide an answer to the research question. The research question stated as follows: " *How are inconspicuous consumption and consumers' self-identities related in the realm of luxury hospitality services?*". Drawing upon our findings, it can be stated that identities of inconspicuous consumers are complex and multifaceted. It became apparent that inconspicuous consumption is primarily aligned with inconspicuous luxury consumers' actual selves and actual ideal selves, as it brings the necessary discreteness and subtleness to their consumption. Additionally it can be said that inconspicuous luxury consumers prefer not to align their social selves' with those who use luxury as a means of showing off. Instead, such consumers value the actual experience in consumption of luxury services, as those aspects contribute to increased and sustained self-consistency. Also, inconspicuous consumers find value in luxury hospitality services that reflect and reconfirm their sophisticated and authentic personalities, as well as in being surrounded by people who possess the same hedonic means of consumption as themselves.

As emphasised by Eastman et al. (2022) there is a strong need to understand what fosters luxury consumers' desire for inconspicuousness during their consumption of luxury. For inconspicuous consumers, it is not self-congruent to engage in luxury consumption when it is associated with signalling their wealth and status to the public, since they do not consume

luxury for flaunting purposes, and wish to avoid being associated with conspicuous consumers. As by engaging in conspicuous consumption their social self, would not be true to their actual self. It was observed that inconspicuous consumption assists luxury consumers in avoiding associations with stereotypical social images, such as with tasteless people, and diminishing the possibility of negative judgments due to their opulent consumption habits. As they value privacy and avoid being perceived as individuals who indulge in luxury consumption merely for the sake of flaunting, they consequently utilise it as a tool to differentiate not only their actual selves but also indirectly their social actual selves. Even though they do not express the need for belonging to convey their social self, they certainly know where they do not want to belong and with whom they do not want to be associated.

Furthermore, as mentioned by Thomsen et al. (2020), there's also a need to focus on what inconspicuous consumers value within the contemporary constantly changing context of luxury and how they frame their own luxury experiences. Additionally, as mentioned by Eastman et al. (2022), one of the reasons for the importance of increasing the understanding of inconspicuous luxury consumption lies in the fact that luxury is an individual perception. Based on our findings, inconspicuous consumers seek out luxury services that have a personality that is self-congruent with consumers' actual selves. By that, upscale bars seem to be one of the only places where they can fulfil this need to increase self-consistency. For the inconspicuous consumers, particularly the HCC consumers, it could be stated that they seek out service-providers with sophisticated character traits, aligned with their own perception of themselves as sophisticated individuals. When this alignment occurs, it consequently results in actual self-congruity. This aligns with Eckhardt et al. (2015) previous research, which emphasised that inconspicuous consumers tend to be attracted by more sophisticated offerings. However, our study also underscored the importance of understanding the link between customers' sophisticated actual selves and the significance of cultural capital levels. It appears that consumers with high cultural capital exhibit a greater concern for the sophistication level of brand personality compared to those with LCC. In contrast, for inconspicuous consumers with LCC, luxury consumption of hospitality services is perceived as a symbol of greater accomplishments, linked to actual ideal self-congruity. Engaging in such consumption not only affirms their current success but also serves as motivation to pursue greater achievements. Thus, the inconspicuous consumption of luxury services aligns

with their desired self-image, fostering a sense of congruity with their actual ideal selves.

Furthermore, in the discussion on values and exclusivity in luxury experiences the focus of consumers as it's been suggested by Thomsen et al. (2020) extends from the exclusivity-by-price to the exclusivity-by-practice. In our research, it appeared that HCC inconspicuous consumers emphasise their ability to distinguish where the true value in luxury derives, and such value is not directly related to high prices. Based on their background knowledge, interests and expertise as well as an ability to appreciate a particular luxury offering HCC consumers see the inherent value in the service through the lens of its actual features. It could be argued that consumers' perceived ability to identify true values of luxury makes them feel special, since it confirms their perception of their actual selves, sustaining themselves in a certain hierarchy of sophisticated knowledgeable people. The consumers with HCC take pride in knowing what they know, and it could be seen as they see themselves as belonging to a certain type of people, exclusive people in the know. This implies that inconspicuous consumption serves as a way for luxury hospitality services' consumers to maintain their actual self, reinforcing their self-consistency.

Additionally, for HCC inconspicuous consumers, the brand's user image holds significant importance. These consumers seek out luxury service-providers with like-minded people, refined individuals, and those who possess the same kind of meaning of consuming luxury hospitality services. It was observed that the presence of the right people has a major significance on the overall atmosphere of a place and often surpasses the functional aspects that are typically associated with luxury settings. In contrast to the tangible aspects of luxury products that have been extensively researched (Berthon et al., 2009; Ko et al., 2019), the luxury service experience is a temporary complex construct that encompasses a number of specific demands associated with the right individuals that consumers want to be surrounded by. It can be established that the perception of luxury services among HCC inconspicuous consumers could shift in the blink of an eye because of the audience around them, thereby altering the overall service experience. This highlights the importance of self-congruity between the actual self among HCC inconspicuous consumers and the brand user image of luxury hospitality service settings. Such a point of view adds on a substantive discussion in academia and in particular by Wirtz et al. (2020) on the inherent differences between luxury

goods and services with their complex settings as well as the temporality of such brief hedonic moments.

6.2 Managerial Implications

As previously mentioned, this study can be valuable not only for academia but also for marketing practitioners. Service providers are considered to be one of the main actors in traditional luxury services in order to perform activities for the consumer aiming to secure the prestige of luxury through carefully regulated service operations (Dion & Borraz, 2017, cited in Holmqvist et al., 2023, p. 1114). Based on our findings, inconspicuous, more refined and sophisticated consumers value privacy and do not enjoy the audience of conspicuous consumers due to their ostentatious pattern of behaviour. Instead, inconspicuous consumers seek out hospitality services populated by individuals who share the same meanings and have comparable knowledge of luxury. From a managerial perspective, in today's society, where social media works as a valuable marketing tool, consumers sharing content online related to one's brand could be valuable. Nevertheless, luxury hospitality businesses targeting inconspicuous clientele - individuals characterised by refined tastes and interests- might strategically integrate the regulation or prohibition of using cameras and smartphones in their service environments. By doing so, they aim to satisfy the customers' need for discreteness and also, exclude extensive taking of pictures during a visit, as it could be perceived as inappropriate and conspicuous behaviour. Such a strategy could counteract behaviour of conspicuous guests, contributing to a more favourable brand user image, from the perspective of the inconspicuous consumers.

Also, inconspicuous consumers seem to value authenticity over trendiness since they associate the latter with a lack of taste. It appeared that inconspicuous luxury consumers seek out refined and exclusive establishments to maintain an image that aligns with their actual selves and their sophisticated needs, fostering actual self-congruity. This implies that becoming too trendy or gaining too much of popularity and attention as a service provider can risk its sophisticated, exclusive image of a service place, which potentially puts the retention of the HCC inconspicuous consumers in question.

6.3 Future Research and Limitations

This study considers a few limitations that were taken into account during the process of constructing this thesis. Some of them, mainly of methodological art, have already been accounted for in chapter four, the methodology.

What is more, people's identities are complex constructions shaped and influenced by various aspects, which are impossible to encompass all in one study. After conducting extensive literature research on the subject, we selected the theoretical framework that we considered to be the most suitable one for answering this paper's purpose and research question. During the research process, which employed an abductive method, it was found that the cultural capital had a greater relevance than initially anticipated. Although we aimed for inconspicuous consumers with diverse backgrounds, the majority of the respondents turned out to be culturally enriched. This included a range of different cultural experiences in their childhood, along with active engagement in cultural activities and a notable level of education, which indicates possessing high cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). The assumption of whether respondents belonged to a group either with high or low cultural capital was based on our perception of the respondents, in accordance with the information about their backgrounds and the cultural interests they disclosed. A further quantitative study could measure and more precisely generalise our findings on how different selves with different levels of cultural capital relate to inconspicuous consumption.

Furthermore, as mentioned by Makkar and Yap (2018), it was established that the inconspicuous consumption of luxury hospitality services lead to aesthetic and hedonic pleasure. However, we did not stumble upon that inconspicuous consumers could move upwards in class by accumulating one's cultural capital and inner self, as it has been considered by Makkar and Yap (2018) to be a prevalent characteristic shared among luxury inconspicuous consumers. Many of our respondents seemed to be confident and self-aware within themselves and had no desire to participate in a class excursion. In situations where luxury was equated with financial success, engaging in luxury consumption often served as a stimulus for individual growth rather than solely a means to move upwards in class. Based on that, a suggestion for future research would be to explore how inconspicuous consumption relates to upward movements in social class.

Moreover, in prior research, one of the main driving forces that has been identified for engaging in luxury inconspicuous consumption has been the pursuit of wished-for identities or fantasy lifestyles (Wu et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2024). However, our data collection did not uncover how this aspect relates to consumers' self-identities. Therefore, this warrants consideration for future research endeavours.

Finally, our findings also led to questioning the presence of inherent conspicuousness within the concept of inconspicuous consumption whether inconspicuous consumption could be a form of conspicuous consumption, but carried out in a more subtle manner. The nuanced investigation of such a hidden presence of conspicuousness in the inconspicuous consumption of luxury hospitality services, along with an exploration of the meanings behind it, is something that could be suggested for future research.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1

Missive letter

Hello!

As previously mentioned we are two students from Lund University enrolled in the master's program of Service Management who are currently writing our master's thesis. To begin with, we would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. We are very grateful for this.

The purpose of this thesis is to create an understanding of what people are looking for within luxury hospitality services when consuming luxury services inconspicuously, and how it relates with their self-identity. Conspicuous consumption in easy words concerns that people consume out of symbolic meanings, for instance in regards to the need to boost their status, demonstrate success, or to show off their wealth. Inconspicuous consumption on the other hand concerns that people consume in a more subtle way and for other purposes. As an empirical example within the luxury hospitality industry, we have chosen to study luxury bars. The primary geographical area of the participants for the discussion is Malmö and the Skåne region, but not limited. As the research investigates identity and what people seek for/ value, you will be asked questions about personality traits in regards to self-identity, something which should be mentioned.

The interview will take about 60 minutes, depending on the length of the answers. The interview will be recorded and the recording will be treated confidentially. The material will only be used for research purposes, i.e. not loaned out, used for commercial use or non-scientific purposes. Your participation is voluntary and can be cancelled at any time. If you wish, there is also the possibility to access the transcription of the interview and the final work afterward. Is this okay with you?

Appendix 2

Interview guide

<u>Introduction/ Background/ identity</u>
<p>Tell us a little bit about yourself, what do you do for a living?</p> <p>Do you have any particular interests that you spend a lot of time doing in your leisure time?</p> <p>Art? Music? Movies? Sports?</p>
<p>How old are you and where are you from? Where do you live?</p>
<p>Can you tell me the last time you went to a bar? Can you tell me about the best experience in a bar?</p>
<p>Which are your favorite bars and why?</p>
<u>Inconspicuous luxury consumption</u>

What makes a place exclusive for you when it comes to premium services?

What made it a luxury/ premium experience for you?

Do you think that luxury and exclusiveness are always associated with high prices? Why?

What other aspects of luxury/ premium services make a place exclusive (for you)?

Do you consider visits to those places as a means of escaping from your daily routine?

Some people tend not to share or demonstrate where they go out and how they spend their leisure time. Can you relate to this?

Have you ever experienced someone being envious of you visiting these bars you earlier mentioned?

If it has happened: How did this appear? How do you know this? How did you feel about this?

If it has not happened: How do you feel about the possibility of others feeling envious of your frequent luxurious experiences?

Are there some other things you think are important when you choose a luxury/ premium place (a bar) to spend your leisure time at? (Music? Drink assortment? Aesthetics? And if so why?)

Self-identity

How do you feel when visiting this kind of bar?

How does being at such places like the one you described make you feel about yourself?

What does this place(s) symbolize for you?

Do you go to such luxury/upscale/ premium places for self-indulgence?

Do you feel like this place has meaning to you? If yes, in what way is the place meaningful to you?

Does engaging in this type of place affect your perception of who you perceive yourself to be?

How do you think those places might reflect your personality?

Is it important to you what other people think about where you go and why?

How do you believe other people perceive your frequent visits to those exclusive places?

Do you think that a visit to an exclusive bar help you to express yourself? And how?

Tell us about the people who surround you at those places, what kind of people are visiting these places? Do you see any similarities between these people and yourself?

Do you feel that visiting these bars boosts your feeling of belonging to a certain group of people?

Why do you like to visit a place with this type of people?

Closing question

Thanks for all the answers... Is there something you would like to add?

List of Figures

Figure 1.1: Self-constructed model that visualises the outline of the thesis

Figure 3.1: Self-constructed visualised model to create an overview of self congruity and its different dimensions, with inspiration from Sirgy (1982, 2018, 2022)

List of Tables

Table 4.1: Table showing the various respondents with regard to anonymity through pseudonyms. Date of interview, the respondents' occupation and age can be read out in the table.