

# Indulgent consumption: Exploring its role on consumers' regret and well-being

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## INTRODUCTION

In light of the evolving context of consumption we decided to develop the research project around the construct of “indulgent consumption”, considering also indulgence influence on consumers’ physiological and psychological well-being. Indulgent consumption is defined as “allowing oneself to select and enjoy the pleasure from an option that is considered a treat compared with the alternative option(s)” (Cavanaugh, 2014). The exploration and comprehension of indulgent consumption is increasingly valuable today, also for marketers, in a context characterized by conscious consumption, with consumers shifting their spending from indulgences to necessities and paying more attention to their choices’ consequences on well-being . However, despite this evident relevance, existing academic literature around the construct has addressed a wide variety of research questions based on various theories. This diversity makes it difficult to grasp the core themes and findings, and makes it hard to see which gaps remain in the current knowledge base. Based on all this, we decided to design the research project with the aim of offering a comprehensive conceptualization and systematization of the indulgence construct.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to underline how indulgent consumption is theoretically different from hedonic consumption that, based on Hirschman & Holbrook (1982), consists in “those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects of one's experience with products”. Indeed, indulgent consumption explicitly refers to dimension of self-licensing toward a more pleasurable option. Indeed, with the term “allowing” the definition of Cavanaugh (2014) assumes a trade-off for the consumer toward the more pleasurable option (this might be in terms of premium price, healthiness etc.). Differently, hedonic consumption generally refers to those consumers’ choices beyond functionality goals, being associated to multidimensional aspects in the experience of consumption that do not imply a trade-off. Moreover, the concept of indulgent consumption refers, and has being operationalized by the literature, in choices to indulge (vs. not) (e.g., vacation, luxury item) or in preferences for a choice that is perceived as a “treat”

compared to another (e.g., premium product vs. mass-market product, tasty food vs. healthy food). Differently, consumer research conceptualized and operationalized hedonic consumption mainly through a product-based approach distinguishing between utilitarian and hedonic products (e.g., Alba & Williams, 2013; Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998); and from a goal-oriented perspective (e.g., coffee may be consumed to enjoy time with friends or to have energy before a work-day) (e.g., Kamvar, 2012; Linden, 2011). Thus, it emerges clearly the different meaning attributed theoretically and practically among indulgent vs. hedonic consumption. Referring to indulgent consumption we assume that consumer's choice implies a personal evaluation, that may be not connected to multisensory experience or have utilitarian purposes. Conversely, a consumer hedonic choice may not imply self-licensing and a choice considered a treat, and may not refer to premium versions compared to others or unhealthy choices. However, both constructs have in common the closeness with the dimension of pleasure (Alba & Williams, 2013).

The research project has been developed through a triangulation of methods and sources adopting a mix-method approach, this in order to gain a comprehensive construct understanding and for letting emerge unexplored patterns and insights. Indeed, the project followed two major phases: a first one with a qualitative approach to comprehend better the phenomenon and letting emerge concepts and insights, then a second experimental phase to investigate causal relations focusing on concepts and research opportunities emerged from the first phase of exploration. The remainder of the project is organized on three papers as follows: the first paper consists in an in-depth scoping literature review, the second is a qualitative analysis exploring consumers and media actual perspectives, and the third is an experimental paper designed on five studies.

The first paper consists in an in-depth systematic literature review developed on all scientific papers investigating indulgent consumption, published in the last decade, on selected most prominent marketing and psychology scientific journals. After data collection, we analyzed papers' content following qualitative rigor (Gioia et al., 2013): first we analyzed each paper singularly through a within-case approach (Charmaz, 2011), then contents were codified on a systematic

review template, verified and compared (Yin, 2013). From our exploration several insights emerged all underlying the need for further exploration of the construct. To illustrate it emerged: indulgence ambivalence in terms of identified consequences on consumers (negative vs. positive), the undifferentiated approach of literature toward this ambivalence assuming almost exclusively the negative perspective, the lack of a comprehensive definition of the construct, an inconsistent operationalization of indulgence also in opposite choices in terms of consumers' consequences, an over representation of food domain, and a clear inconsistency among consumers' expectations and actual experiences. It is necessary to underlie how the negative valence attributed to indulgent consumption emerges clearly from our scoping review. Indeed, based on our analysis, the vast majority of studies assume indulgence negative consequences (e.g., assuming mechanisms such as licensing). While, just few studies identified and considered also positive consequences arising from indulgent consumption. We argue that the valence of indulgence in terms of consequences on consumers' well-being is context dependent, indeed we are interested in exploring further which factors may influence the valence of consequences attributed to indulgent consumption.

Based on all this we systematized papers to explore the positive and negative facets of indulgent consumption. Thus, we codified each paper based on the valence of their demonstrated consequences to design two frameworks representing the main elements of each kind of indulgence and grasp main differences and commonalities. From our frameworks representation emerged clearly how the vast majority of papers on indulgence were quantitative (90%), adopted an experimental approach in the food domain, were based and on consumers' intentions, and assumed indulgence negative valence in investigating the construct. Based on those patterns it emerged clearly the necessity to comprehend indulgent consumption exploring also perceptions of consumers and media, this to conceptualize the construct in a more representative way of actual behaviors taking place in the market.

Thus, in our second paper we designed two qualitative studies to explore how indulgence was narrated by consumers and media, without referring to specific domains and investigating actual

consumers' experiences of indulgence. More specifically, based on patterns emerged in the first study, we focused our investigation on emotional consequences arising from indulgent consumption and on the existence of a potential construct ambivalence also from consumers and media perspectives. We first conducted a thematic analysis to systematize papers investigating indulgence antecedents vs. consequences, from which it was confirmed an over representation of papers assuming a negative perspective and investigating the food domain. Moreover, it was confirmed an inconsistency among consequences expected from consumers and actual consequences experienced after indulging. All this underlined the necessity to explore consumers and media. Indeed, we first collected 122 consumers' narratives to listen how consumers experienced indulgence, then we collected also 100 media articles to observe how the press narrated the construct. First, we hand-coded each narrative separately and codified variables of interest through a within case approach. Secondly, all narratives were classified based on emerged discriminant dimensions, verified and compared through textual analysis. Third, we developed also cross-analysis considering our variables of interest to observe possible patterns. Very valuable insights and concepts emerged underlying a generalized inconsistency among how indulgence is perceived by consumers and media, and how it is represented by academic literature. To illustrate: also from consumers and media perspective it has been confirmed an ambivalence of the indulgence construct in terms of consequences on well-being, more interestingly the vast majority of consumers (82%) and media (90%) narrate about indulgence exclusively in positive terms, this revealed how the positive view is the predominant perspective in the market, that however remains under investigated by scholars. Then, just few consumers (7,8%) associated indulgent consumption to the context of food, compared to luxury and experiences. Moreover, from consumers perspective food resulted the only domain in which indulgence was perceived negatively. All this underlies how existing literature might somehow be misleading in representing indulgent consumption, focusing on the only domain actually perceived negatively by consumers. Then, our exploration of emotional states revealed a completely different nature of emotional processes characterizing negative and positive indulgence.

Positive indulgence has been described as followed by an emotional state of equilibrium and satisfaction, then perceived by consumers as characterized by certain emerged dimensions: self-focus, uniqueness, permanence over time. Another interesting aspect that emerged was how experiences are among the domains most associated to indulgence by consumers and media, and particularly they resulted associated exclusively to positive consequences and as particularly worthy. Interestingly, consumers seem to associate the avoidance of indulging in experiences to feelings of missing out, and one of the main driver of this type of indulgence seems the need to escape from a stressful routine. Those concepts, largely recalled by consumers and media, should be explored also by further literature. Indeed, many concepts that emerged from our qualitative studies as predominant for consumers underlie interesting areas of investigation that remain still unexplored. To illustrate, the described absence of regret and expected enjoyment following positive indulgence, or feelings of missing out that might arise avoiding positive indulgence. Based also on those emerged concepts, that seem somehow to influence the valence attributed to indulgence, we designed our third paper.

The third paper was developed through five experimental studies, comprehending also a field study. Based on previous results our experiments were conducted also in domains different from food, and focused on the “regret of inaction” driven by feelings of missing out, the type of regret considering a positive perspective on indulgence, and less investigated by scholars (vs. regret of indulging). In the paper we investigate handmade production, an unexplored element that might influence consumers’ tendency to indulge, and move their perception from a negative to a positive view. Based on our argument handmade production may activate a virtuous cycle beneficial also for societal well-being. We designed our research idea observing current context of consumption characterized by increasing conscious consumption (Pwc 2021), with consumers shifting spending from indulgences to necessities and preferring options that are sustainable. The remainder of the paper was organized on five studies as follows: The first study is a field experiment through which we demonstrated how presenting a product as handmade (vs. machine-made, vs. unspecified

production) significantly increases consumers' tendency to select the indulgent option (vs. other options). The second experimental study, conducted in the domains of premium furniture products, demonstrated how presenting an indulgent product as handmade (vs. machine-made) increases significantly consumers' anticipated regret of inaction. The third study reveals that presenting an indulgent product as handmade increases significantly the regret of inaction, leading to a higher expected enjoyment from consumption. The fourth paper generalizes the process to the food domain, and it supported a model of triple mediation, showing how presenting an indulgent product as handmade (vs. machine-made) increases the love perceived in the product, which then activates feelings of missing out, which in turn increases anticipated regret of inaction leading to a higher expected enjoyment from consumption. Finally, thanks to our fifth study we were able to identify a boundary condition for the handmade effect, indeed we demonstrated how promoting an indulgent product as aesthetically perfect (that is, without imperfections) would dilute the positive effect of handmade production on consumers' willingness to purchase the product.

Our research project findings contribute to important streams of marketing research, and identify areas for further research particularly relevant considering evidences emerged from consumers and media. Considering literature on self-control and indulgent consumption we are the first, to the best of our knowledge, to conceptualize the two facets of indulgence and systematize the many demonstrated factors influencing indulgent consumption. Moreover, with handmade we identified an unexplored factor influencing consumers tendency to indulge. More specifically handmade, to the best of our knowledge, is the first identified factor related to the product and manageable by marketers that may influence the type of regret anticipated by consumers, thus we contribute also to self-control regrets literature. Then, we contribute to literature on psychological contagion demonstrating how a specific trait – encapsulated in the idea of 'handmade' – may become relevant in the particularly complex domain of indulgent consumption.

In addition, the implications arising from this study may be extremely valuable for consumers, institutions and practitioners. Indeed, our conceptualization may encourage institutions



to foster, through the right levers, individuals' tendency to engage in indulgences that have positive consequences for psychological and physiological well-being. Similarly, our study might support practitioners in identifying and communicating the positive traits and consequences of their indulgent offerings, rather than focusing efforts in activating justification mechanisms in consumers' minds. Then, our conceptualization may also help consumers to become more conscious about their choices and ultimately make more appropriate and beneficial decisions. Considering practitioners our results offer valuable insights in a context in which consumers are increasingly cost-conscious and prefer sustainable brands. More specifically, we indicate how and when maintaining and enhancing human presence in the production process might become highly valuable for both consumers and brands, despite the conveniences offered by today's technological solutions replacing human labor. Moreover, this study advanced our understanding about how the communication of certain product traits (e.g., the absence of aesthetic imperfections) might dilute the marketing benefits arising from the handmade effect. We hope that our investigation will improve practitioners' awareness of the special appreciation that consumers have for the human and societal factor. Marketing strategies focused on handmade production might even help to drive a virtuous cycle that benefits consumers, marketers and the welfare of society.

# Marketing research on indulgent consumption: Exploring its faces and role on well-being

## Introduction and background of the study

*“Indulge yourself in pleasures only in so far as they are necessary for the preservation of health”*

Spinoza

Nowadays the cited quote associating indulgence to health seems contradictory, because indulgent consumption generally is considered to impact negatively society and consumers' well-being (e.g., Ramanathan & Williams, 2007). Indeed, the vast majority of marketing literature assumes that indulgent consumption leads to harmful, long-term consequences, such as overspending, addiction, materialism and unhealthiness (see Salerno et al., 2014). The negative valence attributed to indulgent consumption emerges clearly considering the number of studies that assume construct negative consequences (e.g., investigating mechanisms such as licensing). However, a minor research stream, composed by few studies, adopted a different perspective on indulgence, in line with Spinoza quote, thus recognizing that indulgence can be beneficial for people's well-being (e.g., Atalay & Meloy, 2011; Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015; Luchs & Mick, 2018) or referring to indulgences as “life enriching choices” (Haws & Poynor, 2008) improving consumers' happiness and life satisfaction (e.g., Kivetz & Keinen, 2006). We argue that the valence attributed to indulgence may be context dependent, thus we want to explore this aspect further.

The important influence of indulgent consumption on consumers' daily lives and societal well-being has been widely recognized, even by the popular press (e.g., Laran & Janiszewski, 2011; Wilcox, Kramer, & Sen, 2011). However, the consequences of indulgent consumption are not clearly generalizable and predictable. And, to compound the issue, the literature refers to the construct with an interchangeable conceptualization to indicate consumption choices that are of a

completely different nature, with opposite consequences on consumers' well-being and emotional state.

Moreover, this ambiguity around indulgent consumption becomes even more salient and relevant in light of current societal issues. This construct ambiguity is exacerbated by several of today's large issues surrounding both psychological and physiological well-being. To illustrate: In the OECD area, 50% of people have an unhealthy diet, with obesity causing increasingly negative effects on health and life expectancy (OECD, 2019). In this case, indulgent consumption—reflecting a sense of poor self-control—might be an underlying driver of the issue. However, in the case of new psychological syndromes that have awful negative consequences for health (Forbes, 2019), such as burnout (increasingly common in 1 out of 4 U.S. workers and today recognized as a medical condition; OMS, 2019), a more indulgent lifestyle might be beneficial serving as a counterbalance. Even reflecting on periods of uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 Pandemic, consumers tend to shift spending from indulgent consumption to basic goods (McKinsey, 2020). However, other evidences show how consumers might also tend to spend more on indulgences during a crisis to treat and reassure themselves (e.g., Hill, Rodeheffer, Griskevicius, Durante, & White, 2012; Netchaeva & Rees, 2016). Indeed, phenomenon such as revenge shopping (Bloomberg, 2020) and lipstick effect (Elliott, 2008; Nelson, 2001) underscore the ambivalence that permeating consumers' attitude and perceptions toward indulgence even in periods of crisis. That said, the existing consumer behavior literature approaches all kinds of indulgent consumption as interchangeable, which ignores the nuanced impact of this issue on consumers' lives.

All of the above indicates that indulgent consumption is a complex phenomenon that strongly influences consumers' well-being, thus it represents a valuable and relevant area of research for society. Nonetheless, the literature has approached the construct indifferently, which

raises the need for a more systematic approach and stronger empirical evidence. The literature around indulgent consumption has addressed a wide variety of research questions based on various theories, using a wide set of research methods, in a very diverse range of settings. This diversity, however, makes it difficult to grasp the core themes and findings, and makes it hard to see what gaps remain in the current knowledge base.

The goal of this article is to offer a scoping review of research on indulgence in the marketing literature systematizing existing literature. More specifically, the purpose of this research is to comprehend and clarify the influence of indulgent consumption on consumers' well-being, systematizing existing literature to comprehend when and how indulgence may assume a different valence for consumers: being harmful or beneficial for their well-being. This exploration will support practitioners, scholars and consumers highlighting how indulgent consumption may have two facets. Indeed, our conceptualization will guide consumers in applying appropriate licensing mechanisms, thus anticipating the right consequences of indulgent choices on their well-being. Then, our study will support practitioners in comprehending: how to communicate effectively indulgent offering underlying specific cues that foster positive indulgence, and how to promote indulgent goods or services that might be beneficial for well-being. More specifically, our study supports practitioners in understanding which processes it might be useful to foster to influence consumers' perspective toward a positive valence to indulgence (vs. a negative one). Moreover, this manuscript would guide practitioners in understanding which indulgent consumption categories and mechanisms are involved in the positive indulgence (vs. negative), toward an effective communication of their offering traits. Finally, our manuscript will guide scholars systematizing existing literature through the conceptualization of both construct valences, and highlighting future streams of research that might be relevant for consumers and practitioners in promoting a positive indulgence, beneficial for well-being.

Based on all this, it appears necessary to disentangle and conceptualize the ambivalence of indulgent consumption clarifying if, when and how indulgent consumption assumes various forms that are harmful or beneficial for well-being. Indeed, we try to disentangle this contradiction by outlining existing controversies and then delineating a comprehensive and implementable conceptualization of the construct. Furthermore, we focus on identifying interesting streams for future research by shedding light on topics extremely relevant for the society but that have been under-investigated by academic literature, such as identifying how to improve consumers' lives through indulgence and to position indulgent products in consumers' minds. In short, we want to provide a comprehensive understanding of a construct that is highly relevant for institutions, consumers and practitioners. We also want to contribute to important streams of the consumer behavior literature like self-control, regulatory behavior, goal theory, licensing effect, emotions, hedonic consumption, and well-being.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify the distinction among indulgent consumption, defined by Cavanaugh (2014) as "allowing oneself to select and enjoy the pleasure from an option that is considered a treat compared with the alternative option(s)"; and hedonic consumption that consists in "those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects of one's experience with products" (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Indeed, as clarified by these definitions, indulgent consumption is associated to mechanisms of self-control and licensing, with the term "allowing" that implies a certain trade-off toward the more pleasurable choice (e.g., premium price, healthiness etc.). Differently, hedonic consumption generally refers consumers' choices that are beyond functionality, and associated to multidimensional consumption experiences. Moreover, indulgent consumption has being mainly conceptualized in choices to indulge vs. not (e.g., spending in a vacation vs. not, luxury purchase etc.), or as the preference for a choice that is perceived as a "treat" compared to another (e.g.,

premium product vs. mass product, tasty food vs. healthy food, vacation or not). Differently, hedonic consumption has being mainly conceptualized and operationalized by consumer research through a product-based approach ang goal oriented approach: distinguishing between hedonic vs. utilitarian products, or hedonic vs. utilitarian goals (e.g., Alba & Williams, 2013).

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: We first present the methodology applied to develop our scoping literature review (Pham et al., 2014). Second, we introduce the two frameworks that visually represent the two facets of indulgence, as investigated by the academic literature. Third, we identify highly potential and relevant areas for future research. Finally, we conclude our work with a general discussion of our major findings.

### **Procedure and methodology**

Considering our scope of exploring the construct of indulgent consumption comprehensively, we conducted an in-depth scoping literature review searching leading marketing journals and analyzed all identified studies examining indulgent consumption. Our qualitative approach, based on the codification of papers, followed qualitative rigor (Gioia et al., 2013), enabling us to see the phenomenon from different perspectives, observe and clarify the construct's patterns, and highlight unexplored topics for future research.

To exploit the exploratory power of the literature review qualitative analysis, we codified studies published in the most influential journals in the fields of marketing and psychology, until reaching theoretical saturation (e.g., Saunders et al., 2018), detailed procedure will follow. Our selected methodology was inspired by the criteria adopted by Leonidou and Leonidou (2011): relevancy, time horizon and linguistic constraints. All considered articles were academic articles, book chapters and monographs were not included, and moreover we considered exclusively articles written in English. We collected all articles through digital databases, including ISI Web of Science

and Google Scholar. Following our exploratory objective, we searched for articles containing the word root of “indulg\*” in order to identify all articles that mentioned concepts related to indulgence. We then narrowed the sample by focusing on articles published in the following prominent Journals: Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Marketing, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, Psychological Science, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, and Journal of Experimental Social Psychology. In order to select those journals we considered exclusively marketing journals rated as “A” on the AIDEA database (updated on the 2021), and with the highest impact factor in the marketing field. Moreover, we excluded all journals that were industry specific, while prioritizing those coherent with the topic of investigation related to indulgent consumption behavior.

The article collection followed two phases: In the first phase, we considered all articles published in the last 12 years (from 2008 until 2020) in the selected journals. In the second phase, we collected also articles resulting as most cited on the ISI Web of Science platform, without time constraints, until reaching theoretical saturation. We considered theoretical saturation reached once that we observed redundancy and dimensions associated to the same valence of the construct repeated. Thus, once that new patterns were not occurring and new data not leading to new emergent categories (e.g., Saunders et al., 2018). Indeed, the repeating of categories during the coding phase was adopted as a criterion for additional data collection. Following data collection we excluded articles that did not relate to the topic, thus the final sample included 72 papers that were distributed over a timeframe of 18 years (from 2002 to 2020).

Then, we approached papers’ analysis and the interpretation of data based through a general framework (Yin, 2013). Following the data collection we first established coding guideline and then constructed a review template to collect all papers codified on a common framework identifying key dimensions for data analysis. More specifically. In the 1<sup>st</sup> phase of our data analysis,

we analyzed in depth each paper singularly through a within-case approach (Charmaz, 2011). In this first phase we codified articles on a template based on certain dimensions: Research gap, Research question, Theoretical framework, Hypotheses (if present), Design and method, Relevant Independent variables/ Moderators/ Dependent variables, Findings, Contributions, Gaps to be addressed by further research. Secondly, papers were verified and compared (Yin, 2013) following a coding system. More specifically, we developed a thematic analysis of the papers discriminating among papers investigating indulgence as a consequence (dependent variable) vs. papers investigating indulgent behavior as an antecedent (independent variable). Among papers assuming indulgence as a dependent variable we codified: factors investigated influencing indulgence systematizing them in higher order categories, the involved mechanisms, the domain of the operationalization of the indulgence construct (e.g., food, luxury), potential moderators influencing the effect, the valence of the indulgence described in terms of consumers well-being (positive vs. negative). We developed the same codification for studies assuming indulgence as antecedent and independent variable.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of our data analysis procedure, considering our aim of disentangling indulgence ambivalence, we established a coding system of three stages (Gioia et al., 2013). First, through a 1<sup>st</sup> order analysis, we attributed each paper among two groups based on the recognized valence of indulgence on well-being. Then, through a 2<sup>nd</sup> order analysis, we aggregated papers' key dimensions and mechanisms into higher order dimensions that might be represented and summarized visually. Finally, we attributed to each paper to be represented in the framework a reference number and reported visually its dimensions and mechanism in the framework. When a dimension was repeated in different papers all relative reference numbers were reported.

Positive indulgence is represented on the one hand, and negative indulgence on the other hand, we present them in 2 different tables: Table 1 for negative indulgence and Table 2 for



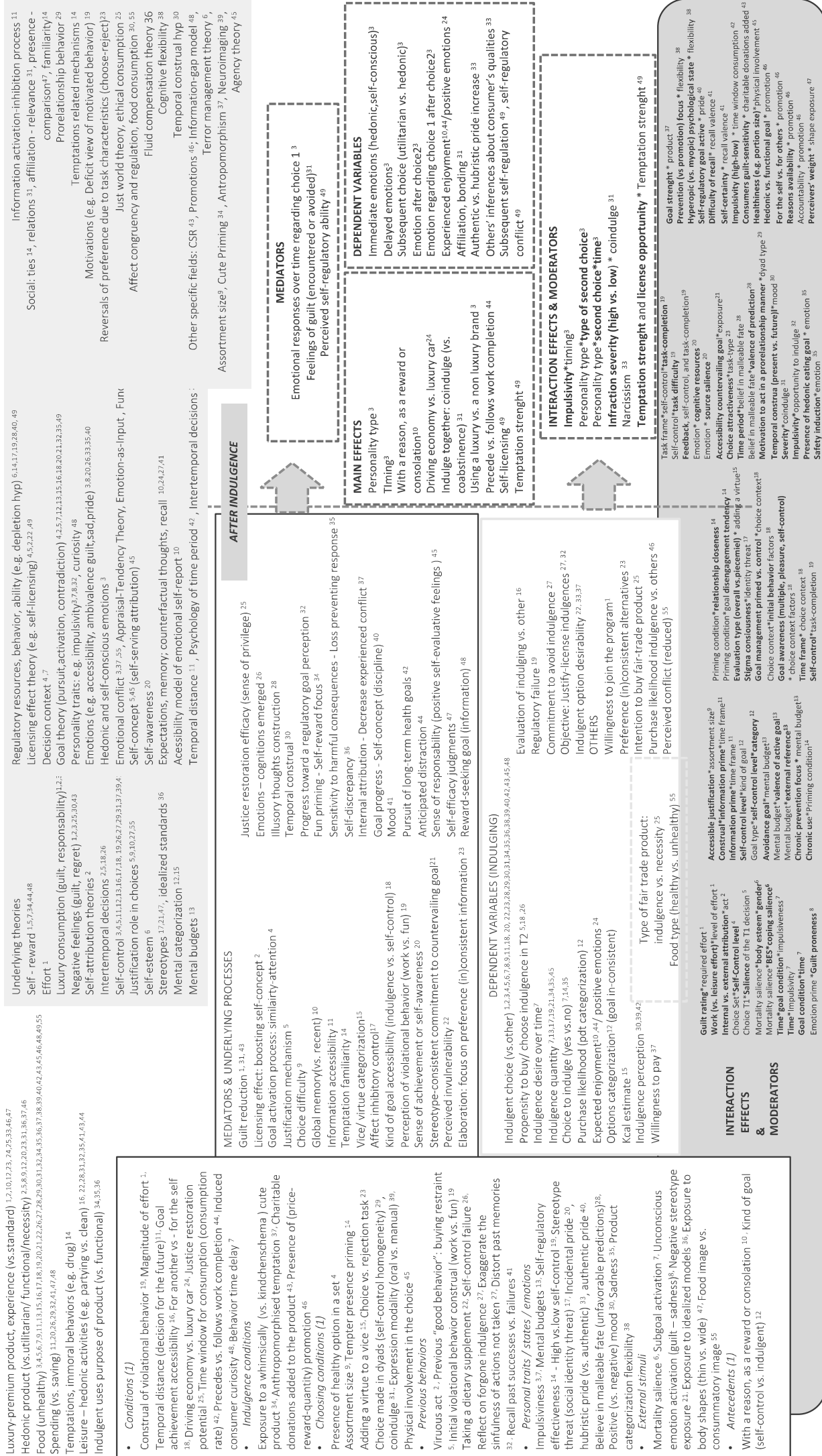
positive indulgence. (positive vs. negative), then we visually represented those studies research design in two different frameworks which we will introduce in the following sections, conceptualizing the *positive* and *negative indulgence*. This analysis enabled us to identify systematic commonalities and differences between positive vs. negative indulgences, as well as existing gaps in the literature. Finally, we synthesize the managerial implications across studies. This synthesis allows us to point out where there is overlap and replication, and where there is disagreement and controversy, which, in turn, opens up avenues for further research. The collected papers reflected an extreme variety of existing theoretical research that made it difficult to discern core themes and findings; hence the need for a construct systematization. In summary, the in-depth scoping literature review produced important preliminary insights about the construct and its patterns, that support the need for future research and a construct conceptualization.

### **Review of prior research: Positive and negative indulgence frameworks**

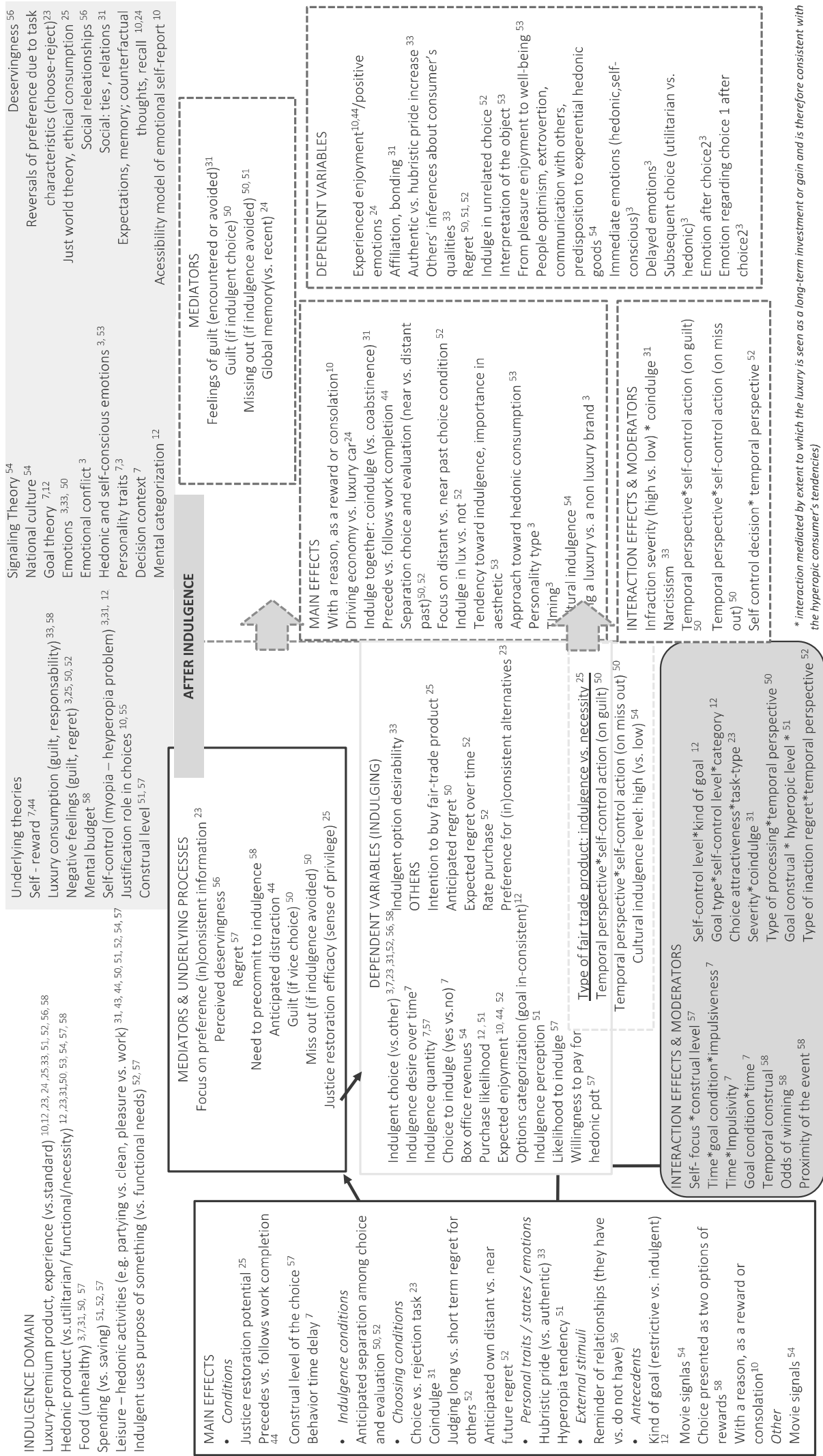
In light of the exploratory results and the above conflicts, we sought to systematize the wide extant of literature in order to conceptualize the two facets of indulgence. Indeed, as anticipated, we codified papers constructing two frameworks enabling to compare and conceptualize the two sides of indulgence. Indeed, Figure 1 offers a visual overview of the research design of papers recognizing negative consequences to indulgence, conversely Figure 2 represent the research design of papers attributing positive consequences to indulgence. More specifically, papers were categorized to one (or both) frameworks based on the identified valence of indulgent consumption consequences on well-being. This analysis enabled us to identify systematic commonalities and differences between the positive and negative side of indulgence, as recognized by the literature. Thus, this approach enabled us to comprehend, compare and visualize processes and elements that reflected each side of indulgence, including: domains involved, theories discussed, factors impacting indulgence,

possible mediators or moderators, variables in which indulgence has been operationalized, and all elements emerged after the indulgence event. Regarding the identified factors impacting indulgence we categorized them through a thematic analysis, grouping them in the conceptualized categories. Next, we represented differently such elements (e.g., factors influencing indulgent consumption) when *preceding* the indulgence event, or as determining its consequences when *following* the indulgent event. We attributed a reference number (Table 1) to every paper from the literature review in order to identify them in an effective way and facilitate an appropriate comparison among the positive and negative side of indulgent consumption. In the Table following the frameworks representation it is better specified the nature of each paper illustrated (see Table 1).

**Figure 1. Negative framework: Overview of studies attributing negative valence to indulgence**



**Figure 2. Positive framework: Overview of studies attributing positive valence to indulgence**



**Table 1. Detailed nature of papers represented in the frameworks**

| Ref. Number | Paper   | Methodology   | Research Question  |
|-------------|---|---|--|
| 1           | Kivetz, R., & Simonson, I. (2002). Earning the right to indulge: Effort as a determinant of customer preferences toward frequency program rewards. <i>Journal of Marketing Research</i> , 39(2), 155-170.                                 | Experimental (Luxury)   | How does the level of effort participants invest to obtain the reward influence the types of rewards they prefer   |
| 2           | Khan, U., & Dhar, R. (2006). Licensing effect in consumer choice. <i>Journal of marketing research</i> , 43(2), 259-266.  | Experimental (Luxury)   | How does the expression of an altruistic intent influence the tendency to indulge  |
| 3           | Ramanathan, S., & Williams, P. (2007). Immediate and delayed emotional consequences of indulgence: The moderating influence of personality type on mixed emotions. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 34(2), 212-223.                  | Experimental (Food, Hedonic pdts, e.g. CD player) - <i>Time dimension</i>     | How does indulgence outcome vary over time   |
| 4           | Wilcox, K., Vallen, B., Block, L., & Fitzsimons, G. J. (2009). Vicarious goal fulfillment: When the mere presence of a healthy option leads to an ironically indulgent decision. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 36(3), 380-393.    | Experimental (Food)   | How consumers' food choices differ when healthy items are included in a choice set compared with when they are not available   |
| 5           | Mukhopadhyay, A., & Johar, G. V. (2009). Indulgence as self-reward for prior shopping restraint: A justification-based mechanism. <i>Journal of Consumer Psychology</i> , 19(3), 334-345.   | Experimental (Premium pdts, food)   | How refraining from a purchase temptation influence subsequent decisions to purchase a different tempting product  |
| 6           | Ferraro, R., Shiv, B., & Bettman, J. R. (2005). Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die: Effects of mortality salience and self-esteem on self-regulation in consumer choice. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 32(1), 65-75. | Experimental (Food)   | How making mortality salient affects consumer choices  |
| 7           | Ramanathan, S., & Menon, G. (2006). Time-varying effects of chronic hedonic goals on impulsive behavior. <i>Journal of Marketing Research</i> , 43(4), 628-641. *   | Experimental (Food)   | How does the chronic accessibility of goals to seek pleasure in various domains influence impulsive behavior   |
| 8           | Zemack-Rugar, Y., Bettman, J. R., & Fitzsimons, G. J. (2007). The effects of nonconsciously priming emotion concepts on behavior. <i>Journal of personality and social psychology</i> , 93(6), 927.                                       | Experimental (Food, spending and cheating)                                    | How being exposed to guilt and sadness concept primes influences levels of indulgence  |
| 9           | Sela, A., Berger, J., & Liu, W. (2008). Variety, vice, and virtue: How assortment size influences option choice. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 35(6), 941-951.  | Experimental (Food, gift purpose activities)                                  | Does the number of alternative options influence the process by which people choose and, consequently, what they select?   |
| 10          | Xu, J., & Schwarz, N. (2009). Do we really need a reason to indulge? <i>Journal of Marketing Research</i> , 46(1), 25-36.   | Consumers' predictions and episodic reports (words association) + experiments | Do consumers actually experience more guilt and/or less enjoyment when they consume hedonic items without a good reason than when they consume such products with a good reason? |
| 11          | Laran, J. (2009). Choosing your future: Temporal distance and the balance between self-control and indulgence. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 36(6), 1002-1015.  | Experimental (Food, saving) - <i>Sequential choices</i>                       | What are the differences in exerting self-control in sequential choices when consumers choose for others (family or friends) rather than for themselves?                         |
| 12          | Poynor, C., & Haws, K. L. (2008). Lines in the sand: The role of motivated categorization in the pursuit of self-control goals. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 35(5), 772-787. *   | Experimental (Luxury)   | How individuals use categories of goal-consistent and goal-inconsistent options to guide behavior  |
| 13          | Krishnamurthy, P., & Prokopec, S. (2009). Resisting that triple-chocolate cake: Mental budgets and self-control. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 37(1), 68-79.  | Experimental (Food)   | Whether mental budgets, defined as self-specified allowances for behaviors, can help with self-control   |
| 14          | Pontus Leander, N., Shah, J. Y., & Chartrand, T. L. (2009). Moments of weakness: The implicit context dependencies of temptations. <i>Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin</i> , 35(7), 853-866.                                    | Questionnaire (Activities: drink, sex, drug)                                  | Could the implicit appeal of temptations—and thus their automatic influence varies by their immediacy and self-regulatory relevance?   |
| 15          | Chernev, A., & Gal, D. (2010). Categorization effects in value judgments: Averaging bias in evaluating combinations of vices and virtues. <i>Journal of Marketing Research</i> , 47(4), 738-  | Experimental (Food)   | How do consumers evaluate combinations of items representing conflicting goals?  |

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|    | 747.   |   |   |
| 16 | Fishbach, A., Zhang, Y., & Trope, Y. (2010). Counteractive evaluation: Asymmetric shifts in the implicit value of conflicting motivations. <i>Journal of Experimental Social Psychology</i> , 46(1), 29-38.                                | Experimental (Food, pursuit of academic excellence vs. leisure)                                 | How self-control processes change the value individuals assign to activities that pertain to goals and temptations.   |
| 17 | Inzlicht, M., & Kang, S. K. (2010). Stereotype threat spillover: how coping with threats to social identity affects aggression, eating, decision making, and attention. <i>Journal of personality and social psychology</i> , 99(3), 467.  | Experimental (Food)   | Our does a stereotype threat impact self-control in a diverse array of nonstereotyped domains?  |
| 18 | Laran, J. (2010). Goal management in sequential choices: Consumer choices for others are more indulgent than personal choices. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 37(2), 304-314.   | Experimental (Food)   | What are the differences in exerting self-control in sequential choices when consumers choose for others (family or friends) rather than for themselves?        |
| 19 | Laran, J., & Janiszewski, C. (2010). Work or fun? How task construal and completion influence regulatory behavior. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 37(6), 967-983.   | Experimental (Activity, food)   | How the experience of authentic pride influences regulatory behavior?   |
| 20 | Wilcox, K., Kramer, T., & Sen, S. (2010). Indulgence or self-control: A dual process model of the effect of incidental pride on indulgent choice. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 38(1), 151-163.                                    | Experimental (Gift card purpose, health and spending) – <i>Writing stimuli for participants</i> | How the experience of incidental pride affects decisions in self-control dilemmas   |
| 21 | Campbell, M. C., & Mohr, G. S. (2011). Seeing is eating: How and when activation of a negative stereotype increases stereotype-conducive behavior. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 38(3), 431-444.                                   | Experimental (Food)   | What is the effect of activation of a negative stereotype on behaviors that are perceived to increase the chance of becoming a member of the stereotyped group? |
| 22 | Chiou, W. B., Yang, C. C., & Wan, C. S. (2011). Ironic effects of dietary supplementation: illusory invulnerability created by taking dietary supplements licenses health-risk behaviors. <i>Psychological Science</i> , 22(8), 1081-1086. | Experimental (Food)   | What is the effect of taking a dietary supplement on following behaviors?   |
| 23 | Laran, J., & Wilcox, K. (2011). Choice, rejection, and elaboration on preference-inconsistent alternatives. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 38(2), 229-241. *  | Experimental (Spending, premium pdts e.g., kind of apartment)                                   | What is the mechanism underlying preference reversal from rejecting product alternatives?   |
| 24 | Schwarz, N., & Xu, J. (2011). Why don't we learn from poor choices? The consistency of expectation, choice, and memory clouds the lessons of experience. <i>Journal of Consumer Psychology</i> , 21(2), 142-145. *                         | Episodic reporting (Luxury vs. economic car driving)  | Why do consumers need advice on how to spend their money to improve their enjoyment of life?  |
| 25 | White, K., MacDonnell, R., & Ellard, J. H. (2012). Belief in a just world: Consumer intentions and behaviors toward ethical products. <i>Journal of Marketing</i> , 76(1), 103-118. *  | Experimental (Food, luxury)   | How do fair-trade products influence the tendency to indulge  |
| 26 | Zemack-Rugar, Y., Corus, C., & Brinberg, D. (2012). The "response-to-failure" scale: Predicting behavior following initial self-control failure. <i>Journal of Marketing Research</i> , 49(6), 996-1014.                                   | New scale development (Food, spending and cheating)   | How an initial self-control failure influences subsequent behavior?   |
| 27 | Effron, D. A., Monin, B., & Miller, D. T. (2013). The unhealthy road not taken: Licensing indulgence by exaggerating counterfactual sins. <i>Journal of Experimental Social Psychology</i> , 49(3), 573-578.                               | Longitudinal and experimental (Food)  | Could individuals even when they lack salient past virtues still justify indulgence by pointing to foregone sins?   |
| 28 | Kim, H., Kulow, K., & Kramer, T. (2013). The interactive effect of beliefs in malleable fate and fateful predictions on choice. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 40(6), 1139-1148.  | Experimental (Activity: party vs. cleaning, food)   | How fateful predictions in consumers' lives impact subsequent choices?  |
| 29 | Dzhogleva, H., & Lambertson, C. P. (2014). Should birds of a feather flock together? Understanding self-control decisions in dyads. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 41(2), 361-380.  | Experimental (Food, saving, vacation)   | Can we rely on our high self-control friends to help us make better joint spending and diet decisions?  |
| 30 | Gardner, M. P., Wansink, B., Kim, J., & Park, S. B. (2014). Better moods for better eating? How mood influences food choice. <i>Journal of Consumer Psychology</i> , 24(3), 320-335.   | Experimental (Food)   | How do moods influence one's preference for foods?  |
| 31 | Lowe, M. L., & Haws, K. L. (2014). (Im) moral support: the social outcomes of parallel self-control decisions. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 41(2), 489-505. *   | Experimental (Shopping, food)   | What is the result of "parallel" self-control decisions or the resulting social consequences?   |

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| 32 | May, F., & Irmak, C. (2014). Licensing indulgence in the present by distorting memories of past behavior. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 41(3), 624-641. *  | Experimental (Food, spending, and studying)   | Could consumers distort memories of past behavior when incurring in opportunities to indulge?         |
| 33 | McFerran, B., Aquino, K., & Tracy, J. L. (2014). Evidence for two facets of pride in consumption: Findings from luxury brands. <i>Journal of Consumer Psychology</i> , 24(4), 455-471 *  | Experimental (Luxury)   | Does pride influence consumers' tendency to indulge?  |
| 34 | Nenkov, G. Y., & Scott, M. L. (2014). "So cute I could eat it up": Priming effects of cute products on indulgent consumption. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 41(2), 326-341   | Experimental (Indulgent purposes, e.g., highbrow or lowbrow movies, food)             | Do consumers engage in more indulgent consumption when they are exposed to whimsically cute products? |
| 35 | Salerno, A., Laran, J., & Janiszewski, C. (2014). Hedonic eating goals and emotion: When sadness decreases the desire to indulge. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 41(1), 135-151. *  | Experimental (Vices vs. virtues, food) - <i>with writing tasks</i>                    | How the experience of authentic pride influences regulatory behavior?                                 |
| 36 | Sobol, K., & Darke, P. R. (2014). "I'd like to be that attractive, but at least I'm smart": How exposure to ideal advertising models motivates improved decision-making. <i>Journal of Consumer Psychology</i> , 24(4), 533-540.                             | Experimental (Optimal choice, e.g., calculator vs. movie) - <i>with writing tasks</i> | Whether exposure to idealized advertising models would lead to improved decision-making               |
| 37 | Hur, J. D., Koo, M., & Hofmann, W. (2015). When temptations come alive: How anthropomorphism undermines self-control. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 42(2), 340-358.  | Experimental (Food)   | How anthropomorphizing a temptation impacts consumer self-control?                                    |
| 38 | Khare, A., & Chowdhury, T. G. (2015). Food categorization flexibility increases the preference for indulgent foods. <i>Journal of Consumer Psychology</i> , 25(4), 546-560   | Experimental (Food)   | Does Categorization flexibility have an impact on consumers' preferences?                             |
| 39 | Klesse, A. K., Levav, J., & Goukens, C. (2015). The effect of preference expression modality on self-control. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 42(4), 535-550.  | Experimental (Food)   | Does expression modalities have an effect on consumer choices?  |
| 40 | Salerno, A., Laran, J., & Janiszewski, C. (2015). Pride and regulatory behavior: The influence of appraisal information and self-regulatory goals. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 42(3), 499-514.   | Experimental (Vices vs. virtues, food)  | How the experience of authentic pride influences regulatory behavior?                                 |
| 41 | Nikolova, H., Lamberton, C., & Haws, K. L. (2016). Haunts or helps from the past: Understanding the effect of recall on current self-control. <i>Journal of Consumer Psychology</i> , 26(2), 245-256.  | Experimental (Spending, savings, time management)                                     | Does remembering our past successes or failures help better decisions in the present                  |
| 42 | Siddiqui, R. A., May, F., & Monga, A. (2016). Time window as a self-control denominator: Shorter windows shift preference toward virtues and longer windows toward vices. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 43(6), 932-949.                              | Experimental (Food, vice vs. virtue e.g., naming frame)                               | Does time windows have asymmetric consequences for virtues versus vices ?                             |
| 43 | Zemack-Rugar, Y., Rabino, R., Cavanaugh, L. A., & Fitzsimons, G. J. (2016). When donating is liberating: The role of product and consumer characteristics in the appeal of cause-related products. <i>Journal of Consumer Psychology</i> , 26(2), 213-230. * | Hedonic choice  | What is the impact of adding charitable donations to products?  |
| 44 | O'Brien, E., & Roney, E. (2017). Worth the Wait? Leisure Can Be Just as Enjoyable With Work Left Undone. <i>Psychological science</i> , 28(7), 1000-1015. *  | Experimental (Food, massage)  | Is leisure actually less enjoyable when it precedes, rather than follows, the completion of work?     |
| 45 | Hagen, L., Krishna, A., & McFerran, B. (2017). Rejecting responsibility: Low physical involvement in obtaining food promotes unhealthy eating. <i>Journal of Marketing Research</i> , 54(4), 589-604.  | Experimental (Food)   | Does physical involvement impact both the incidence and the quantity of unhealthy eating?             |
| 46 | Kivetz, R., & Zheng, Y. (2017). The effects of promotions on hedonic versus utilitarian purchases. <i>Journal of Consumer Psychology</i> , 27(1), 59-68. *   | Experimental (Food, magazine subscription, consumption goal)                          | Do consumers respond differently to promotions for hedonic purchases versus utilitarian purchases?    |
| 47 | Romero, M., & Craig, A. W. (2017). Costly Curves: How Human-Like Shapes Can Increase Spending. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 44(1), 80-98.   | Experimental (Financing, life-style scenarios)  | Can exposure to body shapes affect spending preferences?  |
| 48 | Wang, C., & Huang, Y. (2017). "I Want to Know the Answer! Give Me Fish'n'Chips!": The Impact of Curiosity on Indulgent   | Experimental (Food, financing)  | How incidentally induced consumer curiosity influences subsequent indulgent decisions                 |

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|    | Choice. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 44(5), 1052-1067  |   |  |
| 49 | Prinsen, S., Evers, C., Wijngaards, L., van Vliet, R., & de Ridder, D. (2018). Does Self-Licensing Benefit Self-Regulation Over Time? An Ecological Momentary Assessment Study of Food Temptations. <i>Personality and Individual Differences</i> , 131, 105-112. | Experimental (Food) - <i>Intertemporal study</i>  | Whether resolution of goal conflict benefits or harms perceived self-regulatory ability and the handling of subsequent temptations |
| 50 | Kivetz, R., & Keinan, A. (2006). Repenting hyperopia: An analysis of self-control regrets. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 33(2), 273-282.  | Experimental (Spending)   | How does greater temporal separation between a choice and its assessment influence the regret of virtuous decisions                |
| 51 | Haws, K. L., & Poynor, C. (2008). Seize the day! Encouraging indulgence for the hyperopic consumer. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 35(4), 680-691.   | Experimental (Luxury)<br><br>Scale development (Discriminant validity)                        | Understanding the nature, prevalence, and moderators of hyperopic tendencies   |
| 52 | Keinan, A., & Kivetz, R. (2008). Remedying hyperopia: The effects of self-control regret on consumer behavior. <i>Journal of Marketing Research</i> , 45(6), 676-689.   | Experimental (Leisure vs. work, different aims)   | Examine whether consumers can foresee that prudent behavior will evoke increasing regret   |
| 53 | Alba, J. W., & Williams, E. F. (2013). Pleasure principles: A review of research on hedonic consumption. <i>Journal of Consumer Psychology</i> , 23(1), 2-18. <i>JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY</i> Volume: 80                                      | Literature review   | Investigate existing literature on hedonic consumption   |
| 54 | Akdeniz, M. B., & Talay, M. B. (2013). Cultural variations in the use of marketing signals: A multilevel analysis of the motion picture industry. <i>Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science</i> , 41(5), 601-624.  | Multilevel model and analysis (movie industry) – <i>hierarchical linear modeling analysis</i> | How a country's cultural fabric moderates the impact of movie-related signals on the opening weekend box office performance        |
| 55 | Poor, M., Duhachek, A., & Krishnan, H. S. (2013). How images of other consumers influence subsequent taste perceptions. <i>Journal of Marketing</i> , 77(6), 124-139.   | Experimental (Food)   | Explore the relationship between image exposure and taste perception   |
| 56 | Cavanaugh, L. A. (2014). Because I (don't) deserve it: How relationship reminders and deservingness influence consumer indulgence. <i>Journal of Marketing Research</i> , 51(2), 218-232.   | Experimental (Premium products)   | How reminding consumers of the valued relationships they do versus do not have affects their perceived deservingness               |
| 57 | Mehta, R., Zhu, R., & Meyers-Levy, J. (2014). When does a higher construal level increase or decrease indulgence? Resolving the myopia versus hyperopia puzzle. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 41(2), 475-488.   | Experimental (Food, party, top restaurant, luxury)  | How consumers' use of a high versus low construal level influence indulgent behavior   |
| 58 | Kivetz, R., & Simonson, I. (2002). Self-control for the righteous: Toward a theory of precommitment to indulgence. <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 29(2), 199-217.  | Experimental (Luxury) - <i>analysis of consumer explanations</i>                              | Which kind of reward consumers prefer among hedonic vs. cash   |

## Major literature review patterns: need for a construct systematization

From the literature review, despite the diversity of settings, dependent variables, moderators and mediators, a number of general patterns emerge underlying clearly the need for construct systematization. This systematization is relevant to clarify existing inconsistencies in consumers' choices and, by extension, practitioners' marketing efforts. These major patterns emerged are described in the following sections.

First, the main pattern emerged, also driving our methodological approach, is the one related to indulgence construct **ambivalence**. Indeed, while the main literature stream associates



indulgence with negative consequences, there is another stream of research that recognizes indulgence positive consequences on well-being. The clarification of these two sides of indulgence is important for scholars, consumers and practitioners, however existing literature approached these two sides of indulgence indifferently; thus, there is a need for a clearer, more systematic understanding of this construct.

As demonstrated clearly by the number of papers identified in each framework, the vast majority of literature related to indulgence, stemming from consumer behavior and psychology, treats indulgent behavior as a failure of self-control (e.g., Elfhag & Morey, 2008; Sullivan et al., 2019) that leads to negative consequences on consumers' well-being (see Salerno et al., 2014). On the contrary, self-control maintenance is considered to produce positive outcomes on consumers' lives in the form of better jobs, healthier relations, and better psychological and physiological well-being (e.g., Dzhogleva & Lamberton, 2014; de Ridder et al., 2012; Tangney et al., 2004). In summary, the traditional view construes indulgence as something irresponsible and immoral (i.e., vices) that evokes negative feelings, such as guilt (e.g., Baumeister, 2002; Giner-Sorolla, 2001; Kivetz & Simonson 2002a, 2006; Saintives & Lunardo, 2016), regret (e.g., Baumeister, 2002; Read, Loewenstein, & Kalyanaraman, 1999), shame, and embarrassment (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1982). Following this logic, the literature has investigated indulgence in relation to certain psychological 'licensing' mechanisms that consumers use to justify their choices, such as: self-licensing, goal conflict (e.g., May & Irmak, 2014), and justification mechanisms (e.g., Sela, Berger, & Liu, 2008). In this vein, scholars have identified factors that can activate licensing mechanisms toward indulgent consumption, such as the presence of: promotions (Kivetz & Zheng, 2017), ethical attributes (e.g., Zemack-Rugar, Rabino, Cavanaugh & Fitzsimons, 2016), anthropomorphized products (Hur, Koo, & Hofmann, 2015), effort implied in a task (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002), and many others that we will discuss in the following sections.

However, differently from the traditional view, an opposing stream of research has emerged that recognizes the positive impact of indulgence on consumers' well-being (e.g., Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015; Luchs & Mick, 2018). In contrast to the traditional notion of myopia (i.e., poor self-control maintenance), this stream focuses on the opposite phenomenon of "hyperopia" (i.e., a marked aversion toward indulging) (Kivetz & Keinan, 2006; Kivetz & Simonson, 2002). The discourse around hyperopia contends that the tendency to avoid indulgence might actually have negative consequences on well-being, producing feelings of missing out on life's pleasures and ultimately regrets (Kivetz & Keinan, 2006; Keinan & Kivetz, 2008; Kivetz & Simonson, 2002). Meanwhile, these scholars recognize that indulgence can have several positive consequences on well-being (e.g., Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015; Luchs & Mick, 2018), such as higher life satisfaction and personal happiness (Kivetz & Keinan, 2006). Even more traditional papers in our review hinted at the possible positive consequences of indulgent consumption, such as consumers bonding with one other when indulging together (Lowe & Haws, 2014), and using indulgence to alleviate a bad mood (Atalay & Meloy, 2011). Indeed, several studies have identified complex emotional responses following indulgence, which can give rise to positive emotions depending on personal impulsivity (e.g., Ramanathan & Williams, 2007). This "positive" perspective on indulgence might become increasingly relevant in today's world, where people may avoid indulgences that seem to contrast with their life goals, but in doing so, risk missing out on choices that make life more meaningful and valuable (Mehta, Zhu, & Meyers-Levy, 2014; Haws & Poynor, 2008). In line with this, previous studies support the idea that consumers, despite having the means, do not spend enough on items that they perceive as indulgences, instead overemphasizing utilitarian necessities at the expense of indulgent items while only trying to indulge when the behavior is justifiable (Heath & Soll, 1996). From this perspective, the concept of successful self-control is not about indulgence avoidance, as is common in the traditional view, but about people

who can balance short- and long-term goals to avoid negative feelings such as life dissatisfaction regarding past decisions (Haws & Poynor, 2008; Tangney et al., 2004).

Moreover, scholars also recognized that there could be different kind of goals beyond the well-known restriction goal, but also a goal focused on indulgence or hedonism with consumers actively and strategically deciding to indulge, that is less widely studied (Kivetz & Keinan 2006; Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009; Ramanathan & Menon, 2006; Ramanathan & Williams, 2007). Research supported how conflicts could emerge also when indulgence is then not pursued, whenever an indulgent goal is active (Haws & Poynor, 2008). The literature also highlights the possible goal of incorporating indulgence into one's life (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002) through active and strategic decision-making, which can result in successful self-regulation (Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009). This new perspective deviates from the bulk of previous work and could offer important insights for understanding consumer well-being. In fact, we argue that disentangling this ambivalence is crucial for developing a new conceptualization of indulgence that can support societal welfare, thus this drives our methodological approach representing visually the two sides of indulgence.

Secondly, another pattern emerged from the literature is the *lack of a comprehensive construct definition*. Our literature review made clear that several scholars have defined and described indulgence, but none has devised a clear and comprehensive definition of indulgent behavior in the consumer behavior literature. To illustrate, Cavanaugh (2014) defines indulgence as: "allowing oneself to select and enjoy the pleasure from an option that is considered a treat compared with the alternative option(s)", thus referring to a "treat" limits this definition to one valence of indulgent consumption. Moreover, the academic literature is rich with definitions of indulgence, but they are almost always negatively framed (i.e., as the opposite of something else) and often applied inconsistently. To illustrate, Berry (1994) described indulgences as the opposite

of necessities, possessing an “unnecessary quality or delight”. Other scholars have described indulgences as the opposite of: utilitarian choices (e.g., Mehta, Zhu, & Meyers-Levy, 2014), instrumental goals (e.g., Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Mano & Oliver, 1993; Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998), a frugal lifestyle (e.g., Romero & Craig, 2017), saving (Laran & Wilcox, 2011), long-term goals (e.g. Baumeister, 2002; Khan, Dhar, & Wertenbroch, 2005; Kim, Kulow, & Kramer, 2014) and luxury choices (Mehta, Zhu, & Meyers-Levy, 2014).

Third, also observing research design it is possible to note how there is *inconsistent operationalization*

of the construct. Indeed, the literature review revealed that existing research, especially in experimental studies, has operationalized indulgence through very different – and sometimes opposing – choices with differing consequences for consumers’ well-being. To illustrate: In the food domain, indulgence sometimes refers to unhealthy choices (like junk food), but in other studies, it represents premium and healthier food options. These contradictions even emerge within the same studies (e.g., Mehta, Zhu, & Meyers-Levy, 2014; Nenkov & Scott, 2014). In the luxury domain, indulgence is mainly operationalized as premium choices (e.g., Khan & Dhar, 2006), but other scholars (e.g., Zemack-Rugar et al., 2016) have described it as the *opposite* of luxury—on the grounds that indulgent purchases are fairly common, while luxury is rarely purchased and used to signal identity.

Fourthly, focusing on the domains in which indulgent choices are operationalized it is evident an over *representation of the food domain*. More specifically, scholars use indulgence to refer to several domains, but mainly food and luxury consumption (e.g., Biswas & Szocs, 2019; Liu & Haws, 2020; Salerno, Laran, & Janiszewski, 2014; Wilcox, Kramer, & Sen, 2011). Scholars have represented indulgent consumption through several choices such as unhealthy food intake (e.g., de Witt Huberts, Evers, & de Ridder, 2012), unhealthy food products (e.g., Weibel, Messner, &

Brügger, 2014; Wilcox, Kramer, & Sen, 2011), the preference for luxurious and higher-end versions over necessity goods (e.g., Khan & Dhar, 2006; Kivetz & Zheng, 2006) or immoral behavior (e.g., Mazar & Zhong, 2010; Monin & Miller, 2001). Another largely discussed domain is the one concerned with spending preferences and time management (Lowe & Haws, 2014). In short, indulgent consumption is typically mentioned in contexts related to self-control decisions, such as school and work performance, financial management, addictive behavior, affect regulation, deviant behavior, interpersonal functioning, planning and decision-making (Baumeister et al., 1998; de Ridder et al., 2012; Dzhogleva & Lambertson, 2014; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000; Tangney et al., 2004). On this basis, the construct might be associated with everything that could be perceived as a treat (Cavanaugh, 2014)—including food, travel, clothing, personal care and so on—as well as the use of better ingredients and personal care materials. Furthermore, these indulgences do not need to be large or expensive. While consumers certainly indulge by purchasing expensive items or experiences, such as cars or vacations, they also frequently indulge in relatively smaller but more common ways, such as buying a branded product, selecting a higher-end item or model, ordering a specialty coffee drink or cocktail, or eating something tasty.

That said, almost 40% of the studies in our sample involve the food domain, which carries the risk of producing a misleading and non-comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of indulgent consumption. Future research should identify and concentrate on other domains in order to clarify whether insights from the food domain are actually generalizable to all kinds of indulgent consumption.

Finally, thanks to the comparison we made between studies investigating indulgent choice before and after the indulgent event it is possible to notice how there is *inconsistency among consumers' expectations and actual experiences*. Another interesting inconsistency that emerged from the analyzed literature involves the consequences that consumers expect when deciding to

indulge vs. the consequences they actually experience after indulging. This finding reinforces certain scholars' prediction that consumers are unable to predict their feelings about hedonic experiences (e.g., Schwarz & Xu, 2011). To illustrate, consumers expect higher enjoyment from indulging when a justification is available (Xu & Schwarz, 2009) or after completing work (O'Brien & Roney, 2017). However, when they actually indulge, the experienced enjoyment does not vary depending on the conditions. This insight further highlights the importance of disentangling the construct's ambivalence in order to support consumers' pursuit of positive well-being.

These key evidences emerged from the literature review shed light on the need for the systematization of the construct that might resolve emerged inconsistencies through a comprehensive conceptualization of the phenomenon.

### **Literature review: comparing the positive and negative sides of indulgence**

In this section, thanks to our visual representation of papers that we codified in the negative (Figure 1) and positive frameworks (Figure 2), it is possible to identify systematic commonalities and differences among the two sides of indulgence, as investigated by the literature.

The first revelation is of a completely different state of research development between the negative versus positive perspective on indulgent consumption. Indeed, the vast majority of studies (80% in our sample) assume the traditional perspective to investigate main effects on indulging, thus attributing a negative valence to the construct in terms of well-being consequences. Therefore, the positive perspective remains minimally explored and represents an interesting opportunity for future research. Interestingly, studies adopting the positive framework have predominantly focused on what happens after the indulgence event, while those in the negative framework have isolated factors that enable and license indulgence. Meanwhile, the frameworks reflect a sizable number of theories, but the concentrations are considerably

different. The most cited theory in both frameworks is that of self-control. In the negative framework, the main theories considered are: Regulatory resources and licensing effect theory, and Goal theory (which is prevalent in the case of negative indulgence, but absent from positive discussions). Meanwhile, the positive framework almost exclusively cites the theories of Construal level and National Culture.

In the following sections we compare and distinguish various aspects of the papers research design, starting from the domains in which the indulgent behavior has been investigated, and from how indulgence has been operationalized. Next, we discuss the focal main effects and antecedents, mechanisms, interaction effects identified by the literature. Finally, we illustrate the dimensions investigated after the indulgence event.

### *Domains*

Another interesting evidence emerges comparing the domains of indulgence investigated by the two different perspectives. Food is the major domain for both (accounting for 40% of our sample), but other domains include luxury, hedonic products, spending, immoral behaviors, hedonic activities, and purpose of use. More specifically, negative indulgence shows an extremely high concentration in the food domain (48% of articles), while the representation of all other domains is much lower (the second one is hedonic products with 12%). Meanwhile, in studies exploring positive indulgence, the distribution of domains is much more diversified: Food represents just a small portion of the investigated contexts (16%), while the most mentioned domains are luxury (27%), hedonic products (22%) and hedonic activities (22%). This insight confirms that the food domain is over-represented in existing research; this is probably driven by research convenience, but it ultimately paints a misleading picture about the whole phenomenon of indulgent consumption. Indeed, based on this food over-representation is possible to infer that

this might take to a misleading generalization of the patterns characterizing the traditional negative perspective on indulgence.

Moreover, since the valence of indulgence in terms of consumers' well-being depends on the kind of indulgence (i.e., the domain), it might be possible to conceptualize positive (vs. negative) indulgence based on the object involved (e.g., licensing mechanisms might be relevant to food consumption, but should not be the assumed process when speaking about experiences). In short, there is value in analyzing these different domains in more nuanced ways.

### *Operationalization of indulgent choices*

Generally speaking, the most considered dependent variable when investigating indulgent consumption is operationalized as the choice to indulge (vs. other choices). This operationalization is especially prominent when speaking about negative indulgence (48% of considered DVs vs. 26% for positive indulgence). Indulgence quantity, represented as the choice to indulge (yes vs. no), is another prominent operationalization in the domain of negative indulgence (but less represented in positive indulgence).

Moreover, there are operationalization of the dependent variable that are exclusively present in the case of negative indulgence, as the propensity to choose indulgence in T2, kcal estimate (supporting our argument of associations between negative indulgence and food consumption), or perceived conflict. Conversely, discussions of positive indulgence feature some unique operationalizations of the construct, such as: indulgence desire over time, likelihood of indulging, anticipated regret, expected regret over time, and rate purchase. Generally speaking even sector-specific dependent variables are present in both frameworks of existing studies, as in the case of joining of a program or fair-trade products.



### *Main effects and antecedents*

As a next step, we compared the two frameworks in terms of the type of factors most investigated as influencing indulgent behavior. The most common are those related to the decision contextual factors (as discussed in the introduction), which represent 72% (vs. 38%) of the factors investigated for positive (vs. negative) indulgence. Beyond those characteristics, the most investigated factors for the negative framework are personality traits (24%) and antecedent behaviors (15%). Conversely, the positive framework mostly focuses on decision contextual factors (72%), while characteristics of the choice and personality traits (11%), external stimuli (6%), and factors related to antecedent behaviors are not considered at all (probably because those are related to licensing mechanisms).

### *Mediators and mechanisms involved in indulgent consumption*

In their investigations of negative indulgence, scholars identified a much higher number of mediators and processes, likely due to the outsized emphasis on licensing and justification mechanisms. Many of the identified mediators are related to the perceived conditions of the choice that shape the tendency to indulge. Thus, the negative framework is characterized by many mediators, although the most common one relates to feelings of guilt. Such mediators are completely absent in the positive framework since those studies do not focus on licensing and justification mechanisms.

Conversely, studies in the positive framework have identified mediators that are absent from the negative one, including: deservingness, warm glow, the need to pre-commit to indulging, feelings of missing out, justice restoration, and regret. From our analysis, it seems that those mechanisms and mediators are more related to personal goals, while those from the negative framework are more related to evaluations of the choice. Thus, there is space for future research to understand how those processes and mechanisms that characterize positive indulgence, which

are under-investigated in the existing literature, might be impactful on consumers' well-being.

### *Interaction effects*

Studies on negative indulgence commonly consider elements that potentially interact with other factors, likely because of the emphasis on licensing mechanisms. That said, some interesting elements have exclusively emerged from analyses of positive indulgence, including: self-focus, goal construal, type of processing, and type of inaction regret.

### *After the indulgence event*

Scholars of positive indulgence have dedicated the most focus to the effects that follow an indulgent consumption event, likely due to an interest in how especially in the case of positive indulgence, this might posit the doubt that again indulgence takes on a more positive valence when experienced vs. when evaluated ex ante. In summary, the positive framework mainly concentrates on the following conditions: how indulgence takes place (e.g., as a reward, with someone else, before work completion), how indulgence is operationalized in luxury vs. non-luxury, and personal traits (e.g., approach toward indulgence, importance of the aesthetic, personality type). In terms of DVs, such studies have mainly investigated the subsequent expected enjoyment and positive emotions of indulgence at different times and with positive consequences (e.g., affiliation, regret, well-being, positive predisposition), or in terms of positive predispositions to other hedonic goods. Then in the negative framework moving to dynamics after the indulgence event fewer main effects correspond to those in the positive one, apart from self-licensing and temptation strength. Furthermore, studies on positive indulgence focus on mediators related to guilt, missing out and memory. The negative framework also considers guilt as a mediator, but emphasizes emotional responses over time and self-regulatory ability. In terms of moderators, the

positive framework focuses on dimensions like narcissism and the temporal perspective, while negative indulgence emphasizes dimensions like impulsivity, licensing and temptation strength. The latter mechanisms are usually taken for granted because of the large emphasis on negative indulgence. Thus, there is still space for future research to address those factors that are assumed to be the most present, but may actually appear less when considering a real indulgent event.

In sum, the thematic analysis of the literature review and the development of the two frameworks collectively illustrate how indulgent consumption has been investigated until today. By outlining the gaps in our understanding, we can identify new streams of research.

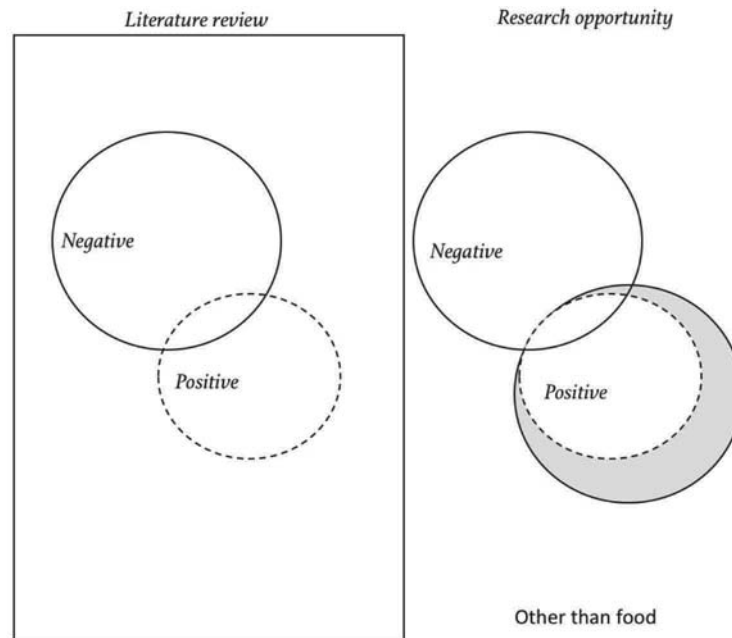
### **Future research directions**

Based on our comprehensive analysis of the construct, we can highlight important directions for future research development that are relevant for consumers, scholars, and marketers.

#### *Positive indulgence*

The phenomenon of positive indulgence is highly relevant in today's world, but has received much less attention by the literature and is thus a prime target for future scholars. In this regard, it would be valuable to identify the related processes and relations of causality that underlie positive indulgence, and use that to bolster consumers' awareness about its benefits. To address this gap, scholars should begin with an exploratory approach that can first identify traits and patterns, and from there, move on to more causal relations. Moreover, as part of this process, it will be necessary to properly define and conceptualize the two sides of indulgent consumption, positive and negative, in their own distinct terms, rather than defining indulgence as the "opposite" of something else (i.e., a solely negative framework).

**Figure 3. Literature gap on positive indulgence**



### *Domains*

Our study also underlined the need to investigate inherently different kinds of indulgence. The bulk of the existing literature has concentrated on the food domain, likely due to experimental convenience, but this is not representative of the diverse domains that involve indulgence.

On this point, our analysis makes evident that the processes and mechanisms of negative indulgence seem better suited to the food domain, while the positive side of indulgence seems to be described better by other industries (e.g., luxury). Consequently, research focused on food may lead to misleading and limiting conclusions; by extension, the traditional negative view may not be truly generalizable to all kinds of indulgent consumption. Thus, scholars have an interesting opportunity to investigate relevant, yet largely ignored contexts like indulgent experiences, luxury, and time management.

As a final point about domains, the field need a more specific approach for systematizing

objects of indulgence based on the two sides of the phenomenon. After all, parts of the same domain might have opposite consequences on consumers' well-being (e.g., indulgent foods can be framed as the unhealthy choice or the premium choice) and should thus be approached differently.

### *Main effects and antecedents*

The vast majority of academic research on indulgent consumption has focused on identifying factors that influence consumers' tendency toward indulgence. We categorized these factors as: antecedent behaviors, decision contextual factors, personality traits, external stimuli, and characteristics of the choice. Because the negative perspective is prevalent, most of the identified factors revolve around related mechanisms such as feelings of guilt, licensing, self-control conflict, and justification. However, when considering the positive side of indulgence, it becomes clear that the panorama of relevant factors might be much broader (including, e.g., feelings of missing out and regret of inaction). Thus, future scholars need to focus on those minimally explored dimensions.

For instance, researchers can go beyond licensing mechanisms and identify those factors that can shift an indulgence from one valence to the other. To illustrate: We know that certain factors are able to shift the kind of anticipated regret from indulgent consumption, with experiences (vs. material possessions) assuming a higher anticipated regret of inaction in response to feelings of missing out (vs. regret of action in response to feelings of guilt) (e.g., Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012).

Finally, there may be additional research paths that arise from the limitations of our study. We concentrated our investigation on the most recent time frame and on prominent journals, with the intent of grasping core themes and perspectives. Nonetheless, future studies should also

consider other studies that did not meet our criteria. Additionally, our study drew conclusions exclusively from the academic literature. Future studies should make arguments built around consumers' and/or marketers' perspectives on indulgent consumption.

### *Research approach*

Existing studies have almost exclusively applied an experimental approach. Understandably, an emphasis on the traditional mechanisms of negative indulgence (e.g., licensing, justifying) encourages a search for casual relations. Nonetheless, future research should focus on a more exploratory and qualitative approach in order to grasp concepts and traits related to positive indulgence that may not clearly emerge in an experimental setting. On this note, future research should also explore how indulgent consumption is actually perceived in the real world by consumers and media, which could illuminate the valence that the construct assumes in different domains and among different consumers.

Furthermore, future research should conduct studies *ex post* (after the indulgence event) rather than *ex ante* (which only captures consumers' anticipatory evaluations of consumption). Our review revealed important differences between consumers' expectations for indulgence and the actual consequences of indulging. A better understanding of what consumers assume and expect can support marketers in communicating the benefits of indulgence.

### **General discussion and conclusions**

Our comprehensive exploration of the indulgent consumption phenomenon, based on the existing literature, offers important evidence about the construct's relevance, existing limits, controversies, and potential future research directions. Given the direct influence of indulgent consumption on modern physiological and psychological issues, there is clear value in

understanding how consumers license “good” indulgences in their mind, as well as disentangling the effects of different indulgences on consumers’ well-being.

The major insight that emerged is the scholarly ambivalence about the construct’s consequences on consumers’ well-being: The traditional and widely explored negative perspective associates indulgence with negative consequences on well-being, but a minor stream attributes a positive valence to indulgence. Based on this, we conceptualized two different kinds of indulgence: negative and positive. Next, we tried to systematize and compare those two perspectives in terms of their different logics, characteristics and patterns, hoping to underscore how scholars should approach them in distinct ways. Interestingly, the positive facet of indulgence has been less explored and thus represents an extremely valuable space for future research. It is important to clarify how the negative valence attributed to indulgent consumption emerges clearly from our scoping analysis: the vast majority of studies assume its negative consequences (e.g., investigating mechanisms such as licensing). While, just few studies identified and considered also positive consequences arising from indulgent consumption.

Another clear insight is the inconsistency between how indulgent consumption has been investigated and which contexts it actually manifests itself. The food domain, with a logic rooted in the traditional negative view, is overrepresented in the literature; yet, in everyday contexts, the term indulgence is associated with various sectors and food consumption is only a small part of that discourse.

By systematizing the widely developed stream of literature around indulgence, we identified five factors that influence the tendency to indulge: antecedent behaviors, decision contextual factors, personality traits, external stimuli and characteristics of the choice. Furthermore, our research project aims at offering important theoretical and managerial contributions. From a theoretical perspective, we contribute to many important fields of research in psychology and

consumer behavior, such as self-control, regulatory behavior, goal theory, licensing effect, emotions, hedonic consumption, well-being and goal theory. Meanwhile, the implications arising from this study may be extremely valuable for consumers, institutions and practitioners. Indeed, our conceptualization may encourage institutions to foster, through the right levers, individuals' attitudes toward and tendency to engage in indulgences that are positive, which could have positive consequences for psychological and physiological well-being. Similarly, our study might support practitioners in identifying and communicating the positive traits and consequences of their indulgent offerings, rather than simply focusing on activating justification mechanisms. In other words, practitioners might focus on those factors that can orient consumers away from the negative view of indulgence and more toward the positive. Finally, our conceptualization may also help consumers become more conscious about their choices and ultimately make more appropriate and beneficial decisions.



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**Indulgence in everyday lives:  
Exploring how consumers and media narrate about indulgent consumption**

**INTRODUCTION**

Indulgent consumption, described as “allowing oneself to enjoy the pleasure of” (Oxford Dictionary), has a crucial role in influencing the well-being of consumers, being present in every day choices. Moreover, its relevance became even more salient in light of current societal issues (e.g., Laran & Janiszewski, 2010; Wilcox, Kramer & Sen, 2010). However, despite its relevance consumers’ perceptions evidences and existing literature reveal a certain construct ambivalence in terms of attributed consequences on well-being, that are not clearly generalizable and predictable. To illustrate: During periods of uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 Pandemic, consumers tend to shift spending from indulgent to basic goods (McKinsey, 2020). However, there are also evidences demonstrating that during crisis consumers might conversely spend more on indulgences to treat and reassure themselves (e.g., Hill, Rodeheffer, Griskevicius, Durante, & White, 2012; Netchaeva & Rees, 2016), as demonstrated through phenomena such as “revenge shopping” (Bloomberg, 2020) and the “lipstick effect” (Elliott, 2008; Nelson, 2001). Moreover, the cited indulgence ambiguity is exacerbated by several current issues related to psychological and physiological well-being. To illustrate, indulgent behavior might affect well-being negatively (e.g., when considered as poor self-control in food consumption or unhealthy behaviors) or positively (e.g., avoiding stress syndromes as burnout with their negative influence on health) (e.g., Elfhag & Morey, 2008; Forbes, 2019; OMS, 2019; OECD, 2019).

Nonetheless, previous literature has approached the construct ambivalence indifferently, assuming mainly a negative perspective on indulgence and this calls for a more comprehensive approach to explore how today consumers actually perceive the construct, being also subject to such a relevant influence of indulgence on their well-being. Indeed, the over investigation of the negative side of indulgence represents a relevant research problem, while the positive side of

indulgence representing a new area that should be explored first through an exploratory approach. Moreover, another research problem is that, as confirmed also by our exploratory phase of our study, the vast majority of studies investigating indulgence adopted a quantitative and experimental approach, indeed focusing on consumers' intentions and mainly considering the most manageable stimuli of food domain. However, it would be necessary to consider broader domains and consumers' actual experiences that might be more representative of the actual behavior. Based on all this, it emerges clearly the necessity to investigate indulgence through an exploratory qualitative approach to comprehend consumers and media perspective, without assuming pre-existing theories and literature. Indeed, this would highlight areas of research actually representative of the phenomenon, and relevant for future literature, to be investigated through the traditional approach. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore how consumers and media actually perceive indulgent consumption, without assuming the perspective of existing literature that shows certain relevant research problems.

The significance of this study is evident to guide future research development in investigating indulgence phenomenon focusing on how indulgent consumption is actually perceived in every day consumption; thus focusing on most relevant aspects for society and consumers, and not on exclusively on previous literature perspective. Moreover, society changes may influence how indulgent consumption is actually perceived; thus our approach based on narratives let the emergence of new insights and concepts on areas of indulgence that are actually relevant nowadays in the current socio-economic context.

This for letting emerge current consumers' and media real perceptions, exploring also sides and contexts of indulgence under investigated by existing marketing literature but widely experienced by consumers in their consumption behaviors. Indeed, a representative conceptualization and systematization of the construct should be based, beyond existing literature and consumers'

intentions, on the exploration of consumers real life experiences of indulgence. Thus, through our approach we aim at answering to our research question to explore *if, when and how indulgent consumption may present different facets, and which are indulgent consumption consequences on consumers' well-being, from consumer and media perspective*. More specifically, the objective of this research is to clarify and conceptualize indulgent consumption facets through listening and observing how consumers and media narrate about the indulgent consumption phenomenon.

Considering our aim we conducted our exploration based on a triangulation of methods. First, the development of a thematic analysis based on existing literature to systematize how indulgent consumption has been investigated by scholars. Second, the collection and analysis of consumers' narratives to comprehend how indulgent consumption is perceived today by consumers. Third, the analysis of media articles to observe how indulgent consumption is narrated also by media discourses. The comparison of these three perspectives – scholars, consumers and media - allows the emergence of inconsistencies and gaps in how indulgent consumption is represented by existing literature compared to how it is actually perceived and experienced in every day choices of consumption.

This study brings out interesting insights on the phenomenon emerged transversally from different data sources, and shed light on new streams for future research areas emerged as extremely relevant nowadays but under investigated by academic literature. Our conclusions are surprising and extremely valuable to improve consumers' well-being and marketers' practices through a better understanding of indulgence consequences, revealing certain major patterns. First, surprisingly consumers and media narrate about indulgence attributing almost exclusively a positive valence to this consumption experience. Second, consumers and media associate in the vast majority of cases indulgent consumption to domains different from food (experiences and premium products), revealing an inconsistency in how the construct is represented by literature.

Third, going more in depth in exploring those inconsistencies new concepts, insights and patterns that are under investigated emerged as determining in how indulgent consumption is perceived.

Our study supports the comprehension of a construct extremely valuable for institutions, consumers, practitioners and societal well-being. Theoretically it contributes to important streams of consumer behavior literature, as those of self-control, emotions and consumers' well-being. Indeed, to the best of our knowledge, it is the first study to explore and integrate consumers and media perspectives on indulgent consumption through an exploratory approach, focusing mainly on investigating the two facets of indulgence in terms of consumers emotional consequences.

The structure of the article is articulated in different sections describing the methodology adopted to analyze each source of data – thematic analysis to represent scholars' perspective, narratives to represent consumers' perspective, articles to represent media discourses' perspectives -, followed by the illustration of major insights that emerged from each different perspective. Finally, we compared and described the main evidences emerged from the triangulation of methods and highlight relevant areas for future research.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

As anticipated the main approach adopted by existing academic literature assumed indulgence negative implications for consumers and society (Ramanathan & Williams, 2007). Indeed, indulging has been mainly construed as something negative revealed in the consumption of vices and associated to feelings of guilt (e.g., Giner-Sorolla, 2001; Kivetz & Simonson, 2002, Kivetz & Keinan, 2006; Saintives & Lunardo, 2016), regret (e.g., Read, Loewenstein & Kalyanaraman, 1999), shame, and embarrassment (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1982). Scholars demonstrated also multiple long term negative consequences as over-spending, addiction, materialism and unhealthiness (see Salerno et al., 2014). From this perspective scholars presented indulgent

consumption mainly as the opposite of self-control maintenance, conversely leading to positive outcomes such as better job, healthier relations and well-being improvements (e.g. Dzhogleva & Lamberton, 2014; de Ridder et al., 2012; Tangney et al., 2004).

However, a minor stream of research demonstrated positive indulgence consequences on consumers, such as personal happiness and life satisfaction (e.g., Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015; Luchs & Mick, 2018), considering indulgences as “life enriching choices” (Haws & Poynor, 2008). From this alternative perspective indulgence avoidance might take profound negative consequences on well-being and life satisfaction, such as feelings of missing out pleasures and regrets (Kivetz & Keinan, 2006; Keinan & Kivetz, 2008; Kivetz & Simonson, 2002). Indeed, consistently certain scholars demonstrated also positive consequences arising from indulging, such as bonding when indulging together (Lowe & Haws, 2014) or adding indulgence to one’s life (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002). Following this alternative view consumers might actively decide to indulge (e.g., Kivetz & Keinan 2006; Ramanathan & Menon 2006; Ramanathan & Williams, 2007), and being successful in self-control does not consist in avoiding indulgence, but in actively and strategically decide to indulge (Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009), thus consumers high in self-control are considered those able to balance short- and long-term goals, avoiding negative feelings such as life dissatisfaction regarding past decisions (Haws & Poynor, 2008; Tangney et al. 2004).

However, based on the assumed predominant negative view, vast majority of studies investigating indulgence focused on identifying factors licensing indulgence in consumers’ minds, leading to justification mechanisms and lowering feelings of guilt (e.g. May & Irmak, 2014, Sela, Berger, & Liu, 2008). Factors identified as enablers of indulgent consumption are several and not systematized, such as the level of effort implied in a task (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002), anthropomorphized shapes (Hur, Koo & Hofmann, 2015), the presence of ethical attributes (e.g., Zemack-Rugar & Fitzsimons, 2016) and promotions (Kivetz & Zheng, 2017).

Summarizing, considering existing academic literature, the predominant view assumes a negative perspective on indulgence, thus focusing on identifying several licensing factors and consumers' intentions. However it emerges a possible ambivalence of indulgent consumption on well-being. This pattern calls for future research to: systematize the many factors influencing indulgence, explore how ambivalence manifests from consumers' perspective and observe actual consumers' experiences compared to intentions. Based on all this we designed our approach to explore how indulgent consumption consequences are perceived by consumers and media based on their actual experiences and adopting a wider approach in terms of domains compared to existing literature.

### **PROCEDURE**

Considering the objective of exploring indulgent consumption in a comprehensive and representative way we conducted our research based on a triangulation of sources and methods; this allows to conceptualize the construct based on different perspectives, and to highlight areas for future research relevant today but still unexplored.

We develop this study in two major phases of analysis: a first one in which we systematize existing literature developing a thematic analysis, and a second one in which we explore how indulgent consumption is actually perceived by consumers and media discourses. Summarizing, considering our scope of comparing how the construct of indulgence has been narrated by existing literature, consumers and media we conducted three qualitative analysis following an exploratory approach for letting emerge construct patterns.

More specifically the first analysis consists in the first systematization, to the best of our knowledge, of the many factors identified by literature as influencing indulgence, categorizing them in two major groups "antecedents of indulgent consumption" and "consequences of indulgent consumption". The second analysis consists in a qualitative exploration of consumers' narratives to

comprehend how indulgent consumption is actually perceived in terms of consequences considering the ambivalence underlined by literature. The third analysis consists in a codification of published press articles around the construct, through the tool of Factiva, to comprehend how indulgent consumption is narrated by media. Afterwards, we compared and integrated insights emerged transversally from this triangulation of sources to identify construct's patterns, similarities and inconsistencies between different perspectives.

Moreover, comparing how the construct is investigated by literature and how it is currently perceived by consumers and media, we aim at identifying potential unexplored areas for future research particularly relevant today. In the following section each analysis is described in details.

### **THEMATIC ANALYSIS**

Our first exploration, even in light of the cited observed inconsistencies, aims at systematizing the perspective of academic literature on indulgent consumption. Specifically, we decided to systematize the wide extant literature through a thematic analysis, classifying papers in two major groups: one made by papers investigating the antecedents of indulgence; the other, its consequences. More specifically, for the first time to the best of our knowledge, we categorized identified antecedents of indulgence in major categories to systematize the vast extent of literature investigating those factors.

We selected academic articles published in a time span from 2008 until 2020 , identified through the digital database ISI Web of Science and containing the word root "indulg\*", selecting those with contents consistent with our research aim, until reaching theoretical saturation (e.g., Saunders et al., 2018). We considered exclusively articles published in a selected pool of marketing Journals: Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Marketing, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, Psychological Science,

Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, and Journal of Experimental Social Psychology.

To develop our thematic analysis we codified papers following qualitative rigor (Gioia et al., 2013). First, we analyzed each paper singularly through a within-case approach (Charmaz, 2011). Then, we adopted a coding system (Gioia et al., 2013) of two stages: In the first stage, we coded papers and attributed them to two different groups, depending if indulgence was investigated as an antecedent or consequence. In the second stage, we developed a 2<sup>nd</sup>-order analysis through the codification of indulgence antecedents developing new concepts. Then, we aggregated key antecedents' themes into newly developed dimensions: *Antecedent behaviors*, *Decision contextual factors*, *Personality traits*, *External stimuli* and *Characteristics of the choice*.

### **Indulgence antecedents**

As anticipated, we found that studies investigating indulgent consumption focused mainly on identifying those factors that might impact consumers' tendency to indulge. This group of studies represents the vast majority of the developed literature.

After analyzing papers we categorized the factors identified in five major categories: antecedent behaviors, decision contextual factors, personality traits, external stimuli and characteristics of the choice (see Appendix). The first category solely covers studies that explored the impact of a behavior on a following decision to indulge or not. The second category covers studies that identified decision contextual factors that influence the choice (e.g., physical involvement, expression modality). The third category comprises studies that investigated consumers' personal traits, like psychological states and emotions (e.g., pride, curiosity, mood). The fourth group contains studies that identified factors external to the choice that have been proven to influence indulgent behavior, such as exposure to certain stereotypes (Campbell & Mohr, 2011; Sobol & Darke, 2014). The last category includes all studies that investigated the



particular characteristics of the choice itself (e.g., anthropomorphism, charity products). In the following section, we describe each category in detail.

### ***Antecedent behaviors***

Studies focused on how certain behaviors impact the subsequent choice to indulge represent 13% of the first category of studies investigating antecedents. The first major finding among these studies is that behaviors following indulgence are binded by compensatory mechanisms. To illustrate, Prinsen et al. (2018) found that if consumers impose a restraint on a certain occasion, they will tend to indulge more in the following one, through a different perceived own self-regulatory ability. A similar mechanism has been identified in luxury consumption: Consumers who conduct a virtuous act will tend to indulge more in the following occasion, through a self-licensing mechanism (Khan & Dhar, 2006); the same happens after consuming cause-related marketing products (Chang & Chu, 2020). These processes seem to take place at a psychological level: Indeed, simply recalling a past failure in maintaining self-control has proven to have a negative impact on subsequent attempts to maintain self-control, depending on the ease of retrieving that information (Nikolova, Lambertson, & Haws, 2016). Likewise, in the food domain, taking a dietary supplement has been shown to foster indulgence in the following eating occasion, based on a process of justification (Chiou, Yang, & Wan, 2011). The same happens in the shopping domain, whereby the exercise of a restraint on a certain occasion—for example, avoiding premium or luxury product consumption—has the effect of facilitating indulgence on a later occasion (Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009). Moreover, consumers seem to actively apply these psychological mechanisms in order to reach their intentions: Indeed, one interesting study underlined how they can distort their memory regarding past behavior in order to feel allowed to indulge in the present, deceiving their perception of progress toward a regulatory goal (May & Irmak, 2014).

They can also exaggerate past foregone indulgences in order to indulge in their present choice (Effron, Monin, & Miller, 2013). The study by Zemack-Rugar, Corus, and Brinberg (2012) specifically developed the Response-to-Failure scale in order to capture emotional responses to an initial self-control failure.

### ***Decision contextual factors***

This category encompasses studies that investigated the characteristics of the actual act of making an indulgent choice. This group represent 20% of studies in the five identified categories. The act of choosing might be characterized by certain particular modalities of expression: To illustrate, consumers' physical involvement in the choice decreases the probability of making an indulgent choice, based on the fact that physical involvement increases the saliency around one's sense of responsibility (Hagen, Krishna, & McFerran, 2017). Another interesting finding concerns the language used to conduct the choice: Consumers who make the choice orally and in their native language (vs. a foreign language) tend to choose more indulgent options (Klesse, Levav, & Goukens, 2015). Even the modality through which consumers make their choice can have an important impact: If they adopt a modality of rejecting alternatives (vs. choosing alternatives), they will tend to choose preference-inconsistent (vs. preference-consistent) alternatives, resulting in a higher tendency toward indulgence (Laran & Wilcox, 2011). Beyond expression modalities, a choice can be influenced if it is made by two or more people, in which case the dyad's structure will shape the effect. For instance, if both members are high in self-control ability, the tendency will be to indulge less; conversely, if members are both low in self-control or mismatched, they will tend to indulge more than if the decision had been conducted alone (Dzhogleva & Lamberton, 2014). Similarly, the study by Cummings and Tomiyama (2019) demonstrated that consumers tend to indulge more with close friends as a way to enhance their closeness. Another interesting finding

is related to the participation of other actors in the choice. For instance, when consumers make a decision on behalf of someone else and not for themselves, they tend to experience a decrease in self-control conflict and make a more indulgent choice (Laran, 2010). Moreover, when consumers buy a product for someone else, they tend to choose a product that is inconsistent with the buyer's goal (Bryksina, 2020).

The temporal characteristics of the decision can also influence consumers' behavior: For instance, the temporal distance between the choice and the actual behavior can be negatively related to the tendency to indulge (Laran, 2009). At the same time, a wider gap between the decision and the enactment might lower perceived guilt and foster indulgence (Duke & Amir, 2019). It is equally important to consider the presentation of the possible choices: In the food domain, consumers will tend to indulge more than if the choice set only offers indulgent choices, rather than presents a combination of indulgent and healthy options (Chernev & Gal, 2010). Similarly, the introduction of an indulgent (vs. disciplined) food in a choice set might foster indulgence (Sullivan et al., 2019). In the same vein, even the construal level on which violational behaviors are framed might have an impact on consumers' perceptions, that is moderated by consumers self-control (Laran & Janiszewski, 2010).

### ***Personality traits***

Studies investigating the personal factors (emotions and traits) that influence the tendency to indulge represent 28% of studies on antecedents. Some emotions can be triggered externally, as in the case of elicited curiosity, which activates a reward-seeking goal and thereby fosters indulgence (Wang & Huang, 2017). However, there are several influential emotions that arise from the inner self, such as impulsiveness (Ramanathan & Williams, 2007; Ramanathan & Menon, 2006), authentic pride (which stimulates a sense of deservingness that positively impacts consumers'

tendency toward indulgence; Salerno, Laran, & Janiszewski, 2014; McFerran, Aquino, & Tracy, 2014), or a holistic way of thinking (which is typical of eastern culture and facilitates indulgence; Hildebrand, Harding, & Hadi, 2019). Differently, the effect of incidental pride depends on the mechanism that it activates: The effect is positive when it summons a sense of achievement, but negative when it activates self-awareness (Wilcox, Kramer, & Sen, 2011).

Mood is another important personal aspect that influences indulgent behavior (Gardner, Wansink, Kim, & Park, 2014). Consider sadness, which has a positive impact on indulgence in the case of hedonic goal activation, but a negative impact in the case of goal absence (Salerno, Laran, & Janiszewski, 2014). Conversely, a better mood seems to be negatively related to indulgent choices (Gardner, Wansink, Kim, & Park, 2014). In line with this, the salience of certain emotions like sadness will foster indulgence, but the salience of guilt will dampen the inclination (Zemack-Rugar, Bettman, & Fitzsimons, 2007).

Consumers' personal traits are also impactful: To illustrate, individual categorization flexibility—described as the flexibility to attribute a product to different categories—seems to positively influence the tendency to indulge (Khare & Chowdhury, 2015). Meanwhile, consumers with a busy mindset tend to indulge less thanks to a higher perceived self-importance (Kim, Wadhwa, & Chattopadhyay, 2019). Likewise, having a mindset oriented around dietary restraint might induce consumers to prefer certain food product labelled in a certain way (e.g., as lower calorie) (Liu & Haws, 2020). In this vein, consumers' self-certainty seems to bolster their self-control when pursuing goals (Light, Rios, & DeMarree, 2018). The literature has also found that a personal hyperopic tendency—expressing a marked aversion to indulgence (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002)—discourages indulgent behavior by inclining consumers to perceive certain options as even more indulgent or luxurious (Haws & Poynor, 2008; Keinan & Kivetz, 2008). On a similar tact, the personal trait of having mental budgets can impact the tendency of indulging, depending on the

possibility of monitoring one's choices relatively to the budget (Krishnamurthy & Prokopec, 2009). The literature has even addressed peculiar traits like the belief in fate, which has a positive impact on the tendency to indulge (Kim, Kulow, & Kramer, 2014). Personal characteristics might be represented also by the fact of having certain chronic goals, for example having hedonic chronic goals has a positive influence on the willingness to indulge (Ramanathan & Menon, 2006).

### ***External stimuli***

This category—which reflects the influence of environmental stimuli on the likelihood of indulgent consumption—is as prevalent as the first two grouping 16% of the antecedent-related studies. External stimuli can take several forms, such as one's exposure to stereotypes. For instance, exposure to a thin body shape might have a positive impact on the tendency to indulge in food consumption, depending on consumers' personal weight (Romero & Craig, 2017). Similarly, the exposure to idealized advertising models can discourage indulgent behavior by activating self-discrepancies and promoting self-control (Sobol & Darke, 2014). Conversely, exposure to models who are involved in indulgent behavior (such as eating food) can have the opposite effect, attenuating the conflict perceived in the choice and fostering more indulgent behavior (Poor, Duhachek, & Krishnan, 2013). Meanwhile, being exposed to negative stereotypes appears to boost self-control and goal commitment, thereby reducing indulgent behavior (Campbell & Mohr, 2011). In a similar vein, conditions such as stereotype threat and identity threat have been proven to foster indulgent behavior (Inzlicht & Kang, 2010). Moreover, environmental stimuli can activate a sense of deservingness: As one study found, an example is the case in which it is present a stimulus recalling a certain kind of personal relation (e.g., romantic engagement), and depending on the fact that the consumer has (or does not have) that relation, tends to indulge more (or less) in premium products consumption (Cavanaugh, 2014). Similarly, stimuli related to social aspects—

like social context, social appeals, social ties and familiarity—have an important influence on the tendency to engage in indulgent activities (Pontus Leander, Shah, & Chartrand, 2009).

Interestingly, it seems that making mortality salient fosters indulgent behaviors and choices, especially if the domain is not an important source of self-esteem for participants (Ferraro, Shiv, & Bettman, 2005). Likewise, stimulating curiosity can elicit indulgence, even in domains unrelated to the source of curiosity (Wiggin, Reimann, & Jain, 2019). Finally, sensorial stimuli, such as food-related ambient scents, might support or inhibit indulgence depending on their permanence over time (Biswas & Szocs, 2019).

### ***Characteristics of the choice***

This category refers to all those indulgence-supporting or -inhibiting traits that are related to the object being chosen. The studies present in this category represent 23% of studies investigating the antecedents of indulgent behavior.

There are several product-related elements that have been proven to increase the tendency to indulge, including the presence of a promotion (e.g., Corus & Brinberg, 2012; Kivetz & Zheng, 2017), or the addition of charitable donations, which diminish guilt perceptions (Zemack-Rugar et al., 2016). Other features have the opposite result: For instance, being exposed to cause-related products (Chang & Chu, 2020), such as health claims on food, seems to reduce the tendency to indulge in food consumption (Belei, Geyskens, Goukens, Ramanathan, & Lemmink, 2012). One example is packaging communicating with the label “just below” (vs. round ending) calories amount (Choi, Jessica & Samper, 2019). Likewise, the mere presentation of possible choices can influence consumers’ approach toward indulgence: In one surprising example, consumers who saw both indulgent and healthier options on a restaurant menu tended to indulge more (Wilcox, Vallen, Block, & Fitzsimons, 2009). Another presentation-related factor is assortment size: A large

assortment size represents a more difficult choice than a small assortment, which then facilitates the selection of a more indulgent choice (Sela, Berger, & Liu, 2008). Construal level is also an important presentation variable: When the construal level is high and there is (vs. is not) a self-focus activation, the tendency to indulge decreases (vs. increases) (Mehta, Zhu, & Meyers-Levy, 2014). In the food domain, at least, the time window available for consumption is another impactful characteristic: A greater time window is associated with a higher probability of selecting an indulgent choice, although this effect is moderated by personal impulsivity (Siddiqui & Monga, 2016). Certain choices can exert different influence depending on their context: for example, consumers who win prizes tend to prefer indulgent options, like luxury products, rather than cash. This is especially true if the decision's consequences are perceived as farther in the future, because the probability of winning the reward is perceived as low and consumers mentally anticipate how they will use each possible award in the future (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002). The amount of effort is also relevant: A higher amount of effort in reaching indulgence possibility triggers a compensatory mechanism that reduces perceived guilt and thereby increases the tendency to indulge in luxury (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002). Anthropomorphized product presentations seem to trigger a similar effect (Hur, Koo, & Hofmann, 2015), with the cuteness factor priming ideas of 'fun' that increase the temptation to indulge (Nenkov & Scott, 2014). Lastly, framing a product as "rare" increases non-impulsive consumers' tendency to indulge (May & Irmak, 2018). Lastly, ethical and fair-trade products seem to bolster the tendency to indulge in both the food and luxury domains, mainly through a compensatory mechanism involving a sense of justice restoration (White, MacDonnell, & Ellard, 2012).

### **Indulgence consequences**

After the thematic analysis revealed the first macro-group concerning the antecedents of

indulgence, we identified a second macro-group comprising studies that investigated the consequences of indulgent consumption. We codified these studies into two main categories: the first exploring the consequences on consumers, and the second identifying specific conditions of indulgence and their impact on the valence attributed to indulgence.

### ***Indulgent behavior consequences on consumers***

The inconsistency that marked the first group of studies about indulgence antecedents seems to apply also for those focused on emotional consequences. As described before, consumers tend to associate indulgence with negative feelings such as guilt and personal conflict, which leads to a concentration on licensing factors. However, as anticipated, studies focused on the consequences of indulgent behaviors have found support for a mixture of positive and negative emotions, depending on individual impulsivity (Ramanathan & Williams, 2007). It appears that the gap between decision-making and enactment might increase indulgent consumption and decrease post-behavior atonement (Duke & Amir, 2019). Studies have found that indulgent behavior can have a positive impact on consumers' emotions and well-being: As Kivetz and Keinan (2006) found, the choice to avoid indulgence can lead to life dissatisfaction and future regret. Also thinking about hedonic consumption its effect can be extremely positive in consumers' life, this can also depend on the individual approach, indeed approaching indulgences at a sensory level can take simple enjoyment, but experience them through a more comprehensive approach can take to an overall sense of well-being (Alba & Williams, 2013). Moreover, indulging alongside someone else can serve as a bonding experience, and thereby mitigate a sense of guilt (Cummings & Tomiyama, 2019; Lowe & Haws, 2014). Meanwhile, the level of accessibility and implicit value of goals and temptations can shape the activation of psychological mechanisms, thereby altering the evaluation and pursuit of alternatives (Fishbach, Zhang, & Trope, 2010).



### ***Indulgence conditions' effect on enjoyment***

This group of studies reflects the evidence for a clear mismatch between what consumers expect and what they actually experience when indulging. To illustrate, consumers imagine that indulging after completing work might be more enjoyable than indulging before; surprisingly, however, studies find that the actual enjoyment experience does not change depending on work completion (or lack thereof) (O'Brien & Roney, 2017). Following a similar logic, consumers expect that indulging in luxury consumption becomes more enjoyable if they have a justification for doing so, however studies have found that the presence or absence of a reason does not change the actual enjoyment (Schwarz & Xu, 2011). This runs contrary to the traditional argument that perceptions of an indulgence as a reward will produce higher enjoyment (Xu & Schwarz, 2009). Also of note is consumers' inability to predict the actual enjoyment of certain hedonic experiences. To illustrate, in a qualitative study, participants driving a luxury car vs. a standard car expected more enjoyment from the luxury one, but ultimately they experienced no difference in the subsequent evaluation of enjoyment among different cars (Schwarz & Xu, 2011).

### **Major insights: need for further exploration**

From the thematic analysis it emerged clearly how the vast majority of studies has adopted a quantitative and experimental methodology in investigate indulgent behavior, considering mainly the domain of food in investigating the construct, probably considered its convenience to conduct experimental studies. From one side this might represent an advantage in terms of generalizability of results, however often a quantitative approach does not permit the emergence of unexplored patterns and concepts that help in clarifying the cognitive process behind the phenomenon of indulgence.

It emerged clearly how a major domain investigated is the one of consumers' emotions while

indulging, thus we need to focus on this aspect also in our further exploration. Another major insight emerged from the thematic analysis is indulgence ambivalence, and it is interesting to focus on the inconsistency between consequences expected by consumers that are mainly negative, versus these actually experienced when indulging. This evidence reinforces the prediction made by certain scholars that consumers are unable to predict their feelings in the context of hedonic experiences (e.g. Schwarz & Xu, 2011). Thus, through the analysis of narratives on experiences actually recalled by consumer and without assuming a construct valence and a specific domain we aim to better represent the construct. Moreover, it is fundamental to explore the construct also through a qualitative approach to letting emerge actual patterns of indulgence. A qualitative approach might also support the identification of new antecedents to be explored further. In summary from our literature review important evidences emerged highlighting the necessity for a qualitative approach exploring indulgence experiences from the perspective of consumers and media.

### **CONSUMERS' NARRATIVES**

Based on all this, and on major insights emerged from the thematic analysis, we decided to conduct an exploratory qualitative analysis to investigate how indulgent consumption is actually perceived by consumers. This with the aim of comparing their perceptions with the perspective offered by existing literature and identify relevant new streams of research.

First, we created a questionnaire (see Appendix) to collect consumers' narratives describing their personal experiences of indulging (e.g., Bonsu & Belk, 2003, Joy & Sherry, 2000, Peñaloza, 2001, Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Previously to data collection we submitted a pre-test of the questionnaire to verify the correct setting of the questions and its efficacy, mainly in terms of comprehensibility and objectivity. We designed the pretest on Qualtrics and submitted it to 6

respondents representative in terms of gender (50% female) and age range. After having established the design efficacy we submitted the final version created through the Qualtrics software. Then the questionnaire (see Appendix) has been distributed online through different channels (e.g., Mechanical Turk, email, social networks) in change for small credit, specifying that collected responses would remain anonymous.

We collected narratives until reaching theoretical saturation (e.g., Saunders et al., 2018). The collected sample was made of 122 narratives, then we selected exclusively these narratives relevant for our research purposes arriving to a final selected sample of 115 respondents ( $M_{age}=39$ , 63% female). To exploit the exploratory power of the qualitative analysis, we selected a purposive sampling maximizing variation of respondents to capture solid patterns (Bryman & Bell, 2015) capturing all perspectives (Piekkari et al., 2010).

Through the questionnaire respondent have been presented with a first open question focusing on experienced emotions, the question form was particularly broad to allow the emergence of new patterns (see Reissman, 1993): *“Please narrate a personal experience of indulgence that you can remember. Try to describe in detail the experience and your sensations while indulging”*, to do not influence answers we did not describe in details indulgence. Then, respondents were asked with more specific questions, investigating various aspects of indulgence phenomenon in line with our research question, and finally with socio-demographic information. To illustrate: evaluations made before indulging, description of indulgence, drivers of the choice, emotions experienced before and after indulging and associated to its memory, willingness to repeat the experience, indulging frequency, main reasons behind the choice, whether indulgence was worth it and why.

After data collection was completed we proceeded with data analysis and codification following three phases of analysis. First, we hand-coded each narrative separately through a within-case approach (Charmaz, 2011), from this first phase we codified variables of interest for each

narrative. Second, all narratives were classified based on emerged discriminant dimensions, verified and compared (Yin, 2013), this to identify systematic commonalities and differences among different kinds of indulgence through textual analysis (see Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Third, we developed also cross-analysis considering our variables of interest to observe distributions of frequencies across categories. From our textual codification multiple variables emerged, however we identified those variables for which most interesting patterns emerged. To illustrate: indulgence antecedents, tendency to repeat the experience, worthiness, planning of the choice, category of indulgence, valence attributed to indulgence. More specifically, with the category “planning of the choice” we categorized a narrative as “planned” if consumers already planned to indulge since before vs. “impulsive” in the case in which they have been aware of the choice just before and were driven by impulsivity. With the category “domains of indulgence” we codified narratives at various level (e.g., “experience” vs. “product”, “food” vs. “non food”, “luxury”, “experience”, “other”). With the variable “valence” we considered described consequences: when emotions described after indulgence were *positive* (e.g., happiness, satisfaction, joy) we classified indulgence as positive, when emotions were *negative* (e.g., delusion, guilt, frustration) or when contrasting feelings as joy and sadness emerged together we categorized indulgence as negative.

## **Main findings**

Major patterns emerged from our analysis of narratives show clear inconsistencies between how indulgent consumption is actually perceived and how it is represented by literature. In the following sections we summarize main patterns emerged from the codification of narratives

### ***Domains of indulgence***

When respondents were asked to recall a personal experience of indulging they recalled

experiences in many different contexts. Surprisingly food represented just a minor part of the domains recalled (almost 7,8%), while conversely most recalled contexts were those of luxury and experiences, not widely explored by the literature. More specifically 47% were part of the category “other”, 22,6% of luxury and premium price, and 22,6% of experiences.

Thus, the first major insight emerged thanks to our analysis is that literature widely over represented studies in the domain of food, while it is the domain less recalled by consumers. Thus, investigate the construct in the domains of luxury and experiences might be more representative of the behavior. Based on this relevant insight emerged we wanted to go more in depth in its exploration investigating specific contexts of indulgence recalled by consumers and attributed to these categories. To illustrate, data showed that in the food domain the most frequent kind of consumption recalled was unhealthy food (with 55,6%), in the category of experiences the vast majority was travels (46,2%), followed by beauty treatments (15,4%), restaurants (11,5%), concerts (11,5%), and others. Differently the domain of luxury and premium-price was represented by technologies (34,6%), fashion accessories (23%), apparel (19,2%), and others. Then, in the last domain represented by “others” main categories were cosmetics (27,8%), parfumes (22,2%) fashion accessories (18,5%), and home accessories (14,8%).

### ***Valence of indulgence***

Another important evidence is that most of the time respondents attribute exclusively a positive valence to their experiences of indulgence, resulting in positive consequences for 82% of respondents. Moreover, the vast majority of respondents narrated about an indulgence that is “worth it” and declare that, having the chance, they would repeat the same choice of indulging again. This offers a first important insight underlying how existing literature considers indulgence assuming a completely opposite perspective compared to consumers’ perceptions. Considered the

relevance of this aspect we wanted to go more in depth in exploring this insight, to observe the distribution of valence attributed to each identified domain of indulgence, and to identify possible patterns and associations.

*“After a few seconds, going out from the store with my GUCCI basket, I started to perceive a feeling of regret: did I really need that? Would it be better to invest money in the next travel or for something I really needed? Was the price justified by the quality of this wallet compared to others? For a moment I just wanted to go back to the store and give back the product, but then right after my pride took control” (G 29, ITA)*

*“There are moments in which I am stressed or I need to relax so I buy alcohol. And when I start buying it I cannot stop. The same happens with unhealthy food” (A 45, ITA)*

*“My experience was to buy a watch. It was since a long time that I saw that product and I was desiring it, but I never had the chance to buy it. One day, I was waiting for my boyfriend, while I was waiting I had a route around stores in the area, one of those store was a jewelry that had that watch. I saw the watch, it was exactly how I was desiring it. Without thinking a lot about it I bought it and I felt immediately happy! It was a small treat I was worth it after a long time! Since that day my swatch is always with me!” (V 33, USA)*

### **Domains of indulgence and valence**

We developed a cross analysis between the “domain of indulgence” category and the “valence” category, on a sample of 112 respondents (3 respondents described indifference related to the experience), it emerged how the only category with majority of respondents attributing a negative valence to their experiences was food (33% attributed a positive valence to indulgence). Conversely in all other domains indulgence was transversally narrated mainly through positive lenses across all contexts (by 96% of respondents narrating a luxury indulgence, by 96,3% of respondents narrating experiences and by 74,5% of respondents in other domains) (see Figure 1). This pattern confirms our argument stating that the negative valence of indulgence seems to characterize especially in the domain of food, while when the phenomenon is observed in other domains the prevailing perspective seems the positive one. This reveals how developed literature focusing on the food domain might be misleading in representing indulgent consumption in a comprehensive way, and that among the food domain and other categories indulgent

consumption might present different logics, to be further explored. Observing how experiences represents the category for which the vast majority of respondents perceive positively indulgence we made an exploration at a higher level, thus grouping domains in “products” vs. “experiences” and then developing a cross analysis between new categories and valence. Results confirmed how for the product category 78% of respondents attribute positive valence to indulgence, while for experiences almost all, the 96,3% on the category total, narrated indulgence positively.

FIGURE 1  
Domains of indulgence and its valence

|                       | POSITIVE    |       | NEGATIVE    |       |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------|-------------|-------|
|                       | Respondents | %     | Respondents | %     |
| <b>FOOD</b>           | 3           | 33,3% | 6           | 66,6% |
| <b>LUXURY-PREMIUM</b> | 24          | 96%   | 1           | 4%    |
| <b>EXPERIENCE</b>     | 26          | 96,3% | 1           | 3,7%  |
| <b>OTHER</b>          | 39          | 74,5% | 12          | 24,5% |

NOTE.— Distributions of indulgence domains and attributed valence recalled by consumers’ narratives

We decided to explore if this perspective was confirmed also investigating the variable “*intention to repeat the choice*” and domains of indulgence. Crossing on 115 narratives categories “product/experiences” with “intention to repeat” results confirmed how in the case of experiences 96,2% of respondents declared their willingness to repeat the choice (while 85,4% of respondents in products’ category). This result is coherent with the pattern emerged considering valence where only 22% of respondents attribute a negative valence. All this shows how somehow indulging in experiences seems to be characterized by particularly positive perceptions and consequences for consumers.

Another aspect we tried to cross with the variable valence was the “non-durability” of the indulgence object. We were able to categorize the object durability for 86 respondents, and it emerged how in the case of non-durable products 55,6% of respondents attribute a positive valence to indulgence (vs. 88% in the case of durable products), also this aspect might be explored further by the literature.

### ***Emerged dimensions for positive indulgence***

From the textual analysis of narratives we were able to conceptualize three dimensions that emerged in common when attributing positive valence and consequences to indulgence, we conceptualized them in the following aspects:

**Self-focus:** The relevance of the self in describing these experiences emerged as a characterizing trait. This is manifested in different ways (e.g., the self as a driver toward the indulgent experience, the role of the indulgent experience in transforming or communicating self-identity). Thus, transversally to many positive indulgences narrated the dimension of the self emerged as crucial. To illustrate:

*“I bought myself a pair of designer shoes when I got my annual bonus. I felt like I deserved it and it improved my confidence whenever I wore it. This purchase means a lot to me, because it reminds me about the effort I put in my work and all my life journey, I can just desire to repeat such purchases for myself driven by this reason. I love to have an apparel product as this one because it is able to foster confidence in myself” (F 33, USA)*

*“It was a symbol of my independence. I don’t know if in that moment I was conscious about the fact that this will be more than an object to me, something that was communicating my identity to others and how I was able to make such a purchase with my forces, and that I have the personality to be independent and distinguish myself from others” (G 24, USA)*

*“I bought myself a new great quality bicycle. It made me feel like a boss. It happens often when I buy something special or premium that the reason behind is how it makes me feel” (I 26, USA)*

*“I decided to spend in this product because it was something exclusively mine. Like a present for me and a moment dedicated exclusively to myself. This is really important to maintain my equilibrium. I felt like I was doing something good for myself” (M 23, USA)*

*“It communicates my passion to others, and one of most important things in life to me. It is always good*



*to invest in something related to what you love, and that is able to communicate to others how you are feeling, who you are and what makes you happy” (M 25, ITA)*

*“The painting represents my closeness with the artist, my contribute to its effort and my support for its art. I am particularly proud about this purchase because it is able to signal how I am engaged in art and who I really am compared to other objects that you can buy” (F 50, ITA)*

**Uniqueness:** Another interesting dimension emerged across experiences of positive indulgence is the one of uniqueness, indeed positive indulgence events or objects are transversally narrated as something special, out from the ordinary. This uniqueness might be manifested in the context of the choice or even in the choice itself. To illustrate:

*“I am still very happy and satisfied with this purchase, and I love to see it in my staff. It reminds me about a very special period of my life. I'm able to appreciate it more because it doesn't happen often” (G 27, USA)*

*“I am always on a diet, I care a lot about my physical appearance and I am training on a daily basis. I enjoyed the cake and had no regret. I only do it once a year” (T 60, USA)*

*“We has this special dinner in very famous starred restaurants, I cannot specify the price because it was really beyond what it is possible to imagine. It was a very special experience. I only experience this luxury on vacation” (C 53, USA)*

*“The experience I am illustrating is from last year, when I decided to buy those incredible sneakers from a urban artist. The price was incredible high, it was really luxury. However I am completely fulfilled and satisfied with that purchase. This because sneakers were unique, different from others... it is a special and unique design irreplaceable. I am even more happy because I know it was a limited edition, hand-made, just few pieces” (M 22, ITA)*

*“But I think that my satisfaction regarding that purchase completely out from the blue is also driven by the type of present that I decided to buy. Generally I have a preference for experiences that are unique, as travels” (F 65, ITA)*

**Permanence over time.** Another aspect that emerged as characterizing positive indulgence is that it is often described as something that does not exhaust in the event, but that lasts somehow over time for several reasons (e.g., it was desired since a long time, or it may remain in memory). This has been confirmed also from the insight emerged from our first cross analysis considering the categories of durables vs. non-durable objects. To illustrate:

*“My experience is about a luxury product I saw from a friend of mine. Considering its price I had to be sure before buying it and this maybe made it one of the best purchase choices of my self. I felt the anticipation of finally getting it. I had been planning on buying it for about a month”(A 42, USA)*

*"I bought this piece of furniture for my home, it is from a very famous designer and an iconic piece. The item I purchased was timeless and, looking back on it, the years of enjoyment I have received from it made it worth it." (S 40, USA)*

*"We decided to invest in this incredible travel... It was an experience I will not soon forget. Then, it was wonderful to experience it together. It is a memory we both will treasure." (S 50, USA)*

*"At that moment I was not realizing the real value of that purchase. Today I say that fortunately I took that choice because it reminds me about moments I passed with a girl...It will make me happy sometimes in the future... lasting in time", (F 33, ITA)*

*"I have to say I am completely happy and satisfied with this choice, it is enough to know that this object was a desire I had since I was a child" (M 23, ITA)*

Another interesting insight emerged from our codification is that often indulging is described by consumers as something transformative, that "enriches somehow their life" without diminishing their resources, conversely to how it is conceptualized by the literature. To illustrate:

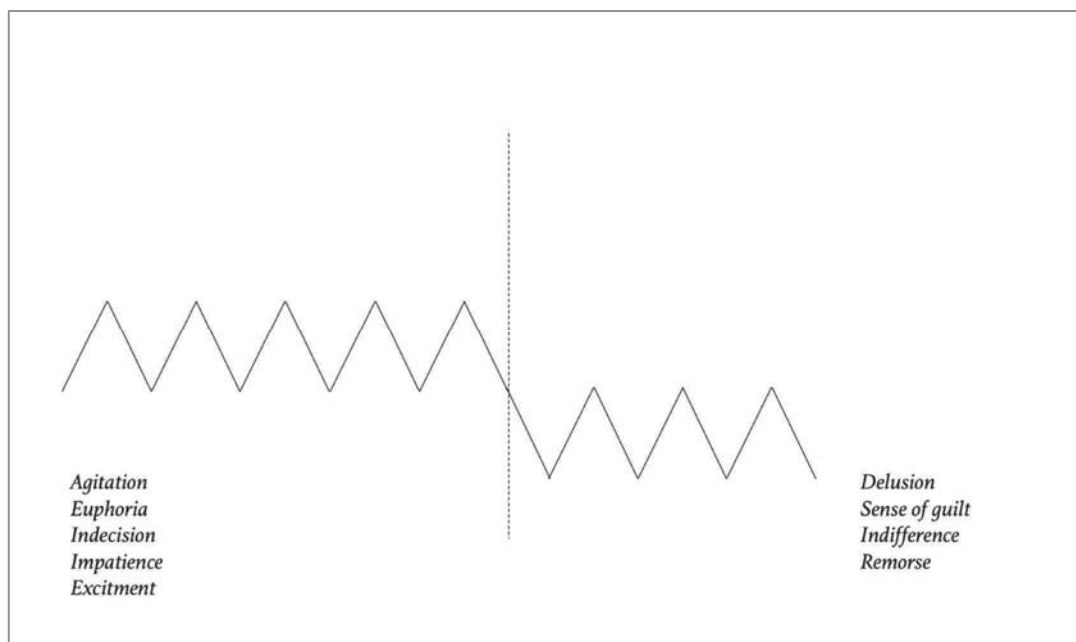
*"I feel very excited and fulfilled when I decide to indulge in experiences... In that specific case indulging permitted me to know better myself, I felt grown... It permitted me to become more self-confident, making me feel today more free and happy" (D 29, ITA)*

### ***Emotional processes of indulgence***

An important area of investigation considering our research aim is the exploration of consumers' emotions associated to indulgent behavior. Based on the emerged ambivalence of indulgence we developed a textual analysis of emotions expressed in narratives, focusing particularly on the process characterizing the choice in terms of emotional state experienced before and after the indulgence event. From our analysis each kind of indulgence (positive or negative) resulted characterized by a specific phases of emotional states. Indeed, indulgence experiences to which it is attributed a negative valence are transversally characterized by a first phase of high tension between contrasting emotions (e.g., anxiety, excitement), and after the indulging event by a worsening of the emotional state (e.g., feelings of guilt and regret) (see Figure 2). Conversely indulgences characterized by a positive valence are united by a first state of tension among various conflicting emotions and, after the indulgence event, by a phase of emotional

fulfillment and equilibrium (e.g., feelings of satisfaction, gratification, contentment, inner peace, relief) (see Figure 3). Thus, we found evidence that consequences arising from indulgences with opposite valence do not reveal opposite effects on consumers' emotional state as expected, but however impact completely different kinds on consumers' emotional states. Moreover, those insights confirm our argument that feelings expected before indulging are often completely different than actual feelings experienced after indulging, this is confirmed also in the positive representation of indulgence.

FIGURE 2  
Negative indulgence emotional processes



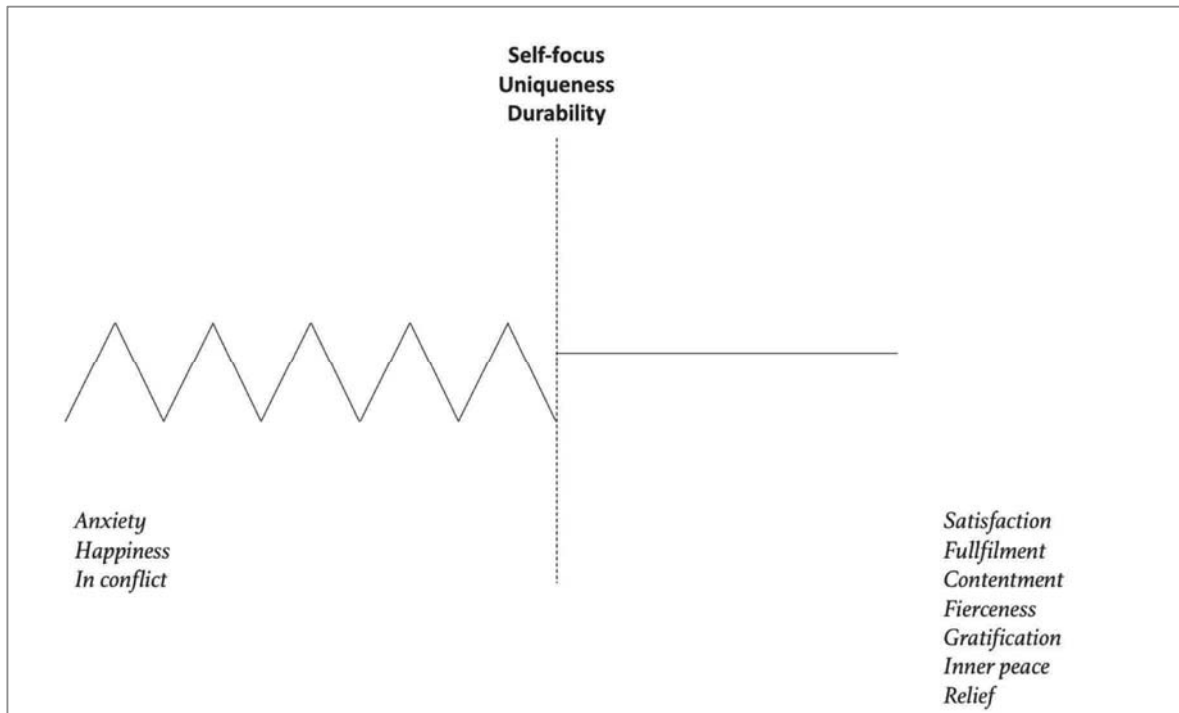
NOTE.— Emotional state described in consumers' narratives before and after the indulgence event when attributing a negative valence to indulgence

*"I don't know if having the chance to go back in time I would repeat the same choice, I don't think so. Probably I am too impulsive. I felt very excited and anxious on the possibilities of what I could buy with the money I had. Right after the indulgence I felt nervous."* (M 50, USA)

*"I felt excited and conflicted before the indulgence. Afterwards, I hated myself, reflected on how much I spent and swore to never do that again. Now I never wear it because it reminds me about how much I was influenced by that moment and by other factors."* (A 28, USA)

*"I felt excited, and I was definitely hungry. But I also felt like I probably should stop eating. Right after, I felt guilty and dissatisfied. I was not completely satisfied and that emotion and experience last too short, however sometimes I am still tempted."* (G 21, USA)

FIGURE 3  
Positive indulgence emotional processes



NOTE.— Emotional state described in consumers' narratives before and after the indulgence event when attributing a positive valence to indulgence

*"I was worried that I would have feelings of remorse for spending so much on that bag, but then I felt satisfied and happy. I didn't feel any remorse. Sometimes we think too much about spending on something that we really like, I am always with my bag today and probably is the item I use the most and it looks great" (F 60, USA)*

*"I was stressed and worried and I did not think the expense would be worth it. Then, I felt relaxed. It is always good to spend for something that makes us feel better and that is a treat, from that moment I understood how much it is important" (F 30, USA)*

*"There was a little bit of anxiety beforehand because of the money, but I felt excited about something new. Then, I felt relaxed after. I did not have to spend still energy in deciding what to do considering plus and cons of that choice, finally I was able to completely enjoy it" (F 40, USA)*

### **Planning of the choice**

Only 84 respondents gave us information about this aspect, however the interesting result has revealed how in the case of a previous desire of the indulgence the 100% of respondents attributed a positive valence to indulgence. While in situations driven by impulsivity the 66,2% attributed a positive valence. Also considering the variable "willingness to repeat the experience" it emerged that in the case of previously planned indulgences 100% of respondents would repeat

the choice (vs. 78% in the case of impulsive choice). This supports a possible argument underlying how if there is a certain previous planning of the indulgent behavior or a previous desire most consumers would tend to associate a positive valence to indulgence and would like to repeat the experience. More specifically, it is interesting to notice how in the case of positive planned indulgent experience respondents, when asked to recall the emotion associated to the memory of the experience, described extremely positive terms (e.g., satisfaction, happiness, proudness), even with 2% of respondents expressing feelings of nostalgia.

### ***Worthiness***

We explored in depth if consumers considered their indulgence worth it and why, as expected from the analysis emerged certain concepts in common with characteristics of positive indulgence. We coded expression and also in this case emerged common elements making indulgence worthy: uniqueness or extraordinariness of the experience, timelessness and permanence over time, sharing.

### **Uniqueness or extraordinariness**

*“The fact that is not an every-day experience made it worth indulging! We don’t know whenever we will have this chance again” (F 64, USA)*

*“It is not every day that I get to enjoy such a fine meal, and for this reason alone it is worth it. We live once so we have to experience everything possible and learn in this way” (M 42, USA)*

*“After a long time we were back again together, we needed to enjoy that moment without problems just at its best. It was a time to celebrate. I think special occasions call for a bit of indulgence” (F 32, USA)*

### **Timelessness and permanence over time**

*“I am sure that it is something will be with me for a long time. It will last years so it was worth it” (F 33 USA)*

*“I had a great time with my friends. It is an experience I won’t forget. And what is more precious other than our memories” (M 38 USA)*

### **Sharing**

*“Sharing the experience with a partner made it worth indulging. You know that you are not alone and that this will somehow be something in common that will bond people even stronger” (B 50, USA)*

*“Spending time with family and share a nice moment made it worth it. Sometimes that are things that are more important and you just need to enjoy life with people you love and make them happy” (M 20 USA)*

Exploring more in detail the concept of worthiness we tried to compare consumers responses with categories of indulgence (products vs. experiences). When asked which elements made the indulgence “worth it” cited elements resulted polarized depending on the indulgence nature: when speaking about products main recalled dimensions were *pleasure* and *well-being* (17%), differently when speaking about experiences main recalled elements are *pleasure, sharing, extraordinariness, reward and escape*. Then we decided to investigate also the other side of the coin, specifically which are averted consequences if a particular indulgence was avoided, and again recalled consequences resulted polarized on indulgence nature. To illustrate, when indulging in products is averted the most cited consequence is *not having pleasure* (40%), while when indulging in experiences is averted the most cited consequence is *missing out* (44%). Indeed, surprisingly more intuitive consequences (e.g., not spending) have been less cited. Thus, we found confirmation that indulging in experiences (vs. products) seems exclusively associated to positive kinds of indulgence, taking to positive outcomes and “higher order” positive consequences on consumers’ life that should be explored further, this is another unexpected pattern emerged considering the traditional view of literature.

## **MEDIA DISCOURSES**

### **Methodology**

Based on the major insights emerged from thematic analysis and consumers’ narratives we decided to explore the perspective of media on indulgence to offer a completely comprehensive framework of the construct. More specifically, based on emerged insights we decided to focus on media discourses related to non-food indulgent consumption that, as underlined by narratives,

represents contexts of consumption perceived the most by consumers but under investigated by the literature.

We developed our analysis of media discourses on the Factiva database – a tool for commercial research founded in 1999 and owned by Dow Jones & Company that aggregates all articles from authorized sources considering mainly business oriented media, and delivering to organizations research functionalities and other information -. We searched for all articles published utilizing the keywords “indulgence, indulgent or indulge”, associated to keywords focusing to the area of indulgent consumption (e.g., consumers) in order to direct the search toward our area of investigation. Then, we also selected in our sample articles based on their pertinence with our area of investigation after analyzing their contents. The article collection started with articles published on September 2019 going back in time until reaching theoretical saturation, also to avoid media discourses published with the arrive of the Pandemic period that might be misleading. The final sample was composed by 100 articles collected until reaching theoretical saturation (see Saunders et al., 2018). The qualitative analysis on the collected database was developed through textual analysis and coding following qualitative rigor (Gioia et al., 2013). First, codifying the content for each article and then identifying common patterns emerged from the articles and classifying the content on selected variables. Also from this complementary perspective interesting patterns emerged coherent to our core analysis.

### **Major insights**

A first important evidence to highlight is that the indulgence construct increasing relevance was confirmed even by media discourses, indeed it is possible to notice a sharp increase in the number of articles citing the construct over time (from 50.000 results/year in 2010 to 70.000/year in 2018), underlying the increasing relevance of the construct. Furthermore searching for articles containing

the construct associated to positive (vs. negative) concepts it is evident how the increasing trend of diffusion characterizes more indulgence when presented as positive (vs. negative), until reaching the number of 15.000 articles/year, conversely to the construct associated to negative terms resulting always lower than 1.500/year.

Then, if we focus on the ambivalence of indulgence also from the perspective of media our argument is again confirmed with the vast majority of articles speaking about indulgent consumption in positive terms (90% of articles). Furthermore, most cited indulging consequences are improvements in well-being and self-treatment. More specifically, when articles refer to a product almost 80% attribute a positive valence to the construct through its positive consequences, indeed the only case in which it is attributed mainly a negative valence, is in the case of so called “addictive products”. This pattern seems again coherent with our preliminary observation about how, in the academic literature we may have an over representation of the negative perspective on indulgent consumption, versus how the phenomenon is actually perceived in reality by consumers and media.

### ***Domains of indulgence***

To compare our sources of data we went more in depth in codifying how articles described indulgence in terms of domains of material products vs. experiences. We noticed that in the 53% of articles indulgence is narrated as an experience (vs. product), confirming again our first evidence from consumers’ narratives of a misleading representation of contexts by the existing literature focusing on food. More specifically, other than in food indulgent consumption is narrated by media in several different contexts that we categorized as: Experiences (Hospitality, Travel, Wellness), Experiential products (Personal care, Retail), Products considered as a treat (Personal care, Pet car, retail) and Addictive products (Gaming, Retail). Other interesting aspects



emerged through media discourses as the main drivers towards indulgence, such as: self-treatment, premiumness, sensory experience, well-being and escape from a stressful lifestyle, those might represent interesting new areas of research to be investigated further.

### ***Indulging in experiences***

This category comprehends all cases in which articles describe consumers indulging in services/experiences offered by companies. The main identified drivers for indulging in experiences are search of well-being and self-treatment (75%), sensory experiences, escape from a stressful lifestyle (60%), search for premiumness (57%), convenience (49%) and fun/pleasure (40%). In this case 98% of articles describe indulgence consequences on consumers exclusively with positive terms. To illustrate: feeling “self-treated”, reaching a state of “well-being” and “comfort”, feelings of “pleasure” and “happiness” and finally “enjoy life” (see Figure 5). Interestingly in 57% of articles emerged the theme of sharing the experience, the so called “co-indulgence” from the literature. Moreover, among experiences the most cited industries are Travel, Hospitality and Wellness (e.g. beauty treatments, spa). These categories seem to have in common a main driver emerged that is permitting consumers to “escape from their stressful routine”, and interestingly this emerged as a need more than a desire to reach a psychological and physical well-being. Other aspects emerged as important are “self-treatment” and “entertainment”, all this seems coherent with the hyperopic perspective of literature.

### ***Indulging in products***

Based on articles codification it was possible to identify two main kinds of indulgence in product consumption: indulging in experiential products and in products considered a treat. Considering articles describing indulgence in product consumption almost 80% of articles

attributes a positive valence in terms of consumers' consequences. Moreover, in the majority of articles with a positive valence the product described was an "experiential product".

In the case of so called experiential products the most involved industry is "*Personal care*" (50%), and described consequences of consumption are all positive (e.g., self-treatment, pleasure, well-being, comfort) (see Figure 4). Indeed, described consequences seem to go beyond being related to a general state of well-being. It seems interesting how from media new concepts emerge like "playful indulgence" to describe the importance for consumers of the purchasing experience. In the context of experiential products the second most recalled industry is the one related to companies operating in the "*Retail*" industry, confirming similar predominant drivers (premiumness, sensory experience, innovation, convenience, fun/pleasure, escape from stressful lifestyle). It is interesting to notice how in this domain most considered products are those for home taking very beneficial consequences for consumers and permitting to escape from stressful routine. Main consequences emerged in this domain are well-being, pleasure and comfort (50%), while negative consequences are not cited (see Figure 4). Then, investigating articles related to products as "traits", intended as the intention to take care about the person, main cited drivers are escape from a stressful lifestyle, desire of self-treatment and search for premiumness (e.g., concept of me-time), indeed all drivers have the goal to reach a state of well-being (see Figure 4).

Finally, we focused on articles adopting a negative view on indulgence and describing the construct in negative terms (9% of our sample). Those articles recall often consequences of "sadness" and mechanisms related to "self-control" and "addiction" following consumers myopic behaviors. In this case most represented industries are Gaming and Retail. This shows how in a certain way those consumptions are not negative per se but depending on the quantity of consumption, however it is surprising how exclusively in this cases indulgence is perceived negatively by media (see Figure 4).

**FIGURE 4**  
Domains of indulgence emerged from media discourses

|                             | <b>% Articles</b> | <b>Main drivers (&gt;50%)</b>   | <b>Valence</b> | <b>Main industries</b>              |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|---|----------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>Experience</b>           | 53%               | -Well-being<br>-Self-treatment<br>-Sensory experience<br>-Escape from stressful lifestyle<br>-Premiumness | 100% Positive  | Hospitality<br>Travel<br>Wellness   |
| <b>Experiential product</b> | 24%               | -Premiumness<br>-Self-treatment<br>-Sensory experience<br>-Innovation<br>-Convenience                     | 100% Positive  | Personal care<br>Retail             |
| <b>Product as a treat</b>   | 14%               | -Self-treatment<br>-Escape from stressful lifestyle<br>-Premiumness                                       | 93% Positive   | Personal care<br>Pet Care<br>Retail |
| <b>Product as addiction</b> | 9%                | -Miopia   | 100% Negative  | Gaming<br>Retail                    |

NOTE.— Distributions of indulgence domains and their attributed valence, drivers, and industries as recalled by media discourses

### GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon brought to light interesting insights and offered important evidences on how further research should be directed toward relevant and unexplored areas of indulgent consumption.

The major insight emerged transversally from our sources is the existence of a construct ambivalence: a widely explored negative perspective associating indulgence with negative consequences on well-being and a positive one taking positive implications for well-being, each one characterized by specific traits, emotional processes and characteristics. It emerged transversally how existing research focused mainly on the negative perspective of indulgence and assumed its logic for understanding the phenomenon, while consumers and media seem to perceive indulgent consumption mainly with a positive valence. Thus, the existence of a positive indulgence with positive implications seems to represent the primary way in which indulgent

consumption is perceived nowadays by the market, and it should be explored further, representing an extremely valuable space for future research.

Another evidence emerged transversally from our triangulation of methods is the inconsistency between domains in which indulgent consumption has been investigated and contexts in which actually it manifests itself. Indeed in existing literature we noticed an over representation of studies investigating the food domain, while our exploratory analysis reveals how consumers and media associate indulgent consumption mainly to consumption in other contexts, and just to a very small extent to food consumption. Furthermore, again transversally from all of our sources, it is mainly attributed a positive valence to indulgent consumption transversally to all contexts of indulgence, with the exception of food consumption. All this may reinforce our reflection that the development of previous research focused especially on food may take to misleading and limiting conclusions, supporting a generalization of the traditional negative view on the construct for all kind of indulgent consumption. In other words this evidence may also represent a risk in terms of existing research representativeness, highlighting interesting space for future research under investigated but particularly relevant in the actual context. Summarizing key insights emerged from our sources we identified preliminary differentiating traits for each kind of indulgence (see Figure 5):

FIGURE 5  
Elements emerged as differentiating the two kinds of indulgence

|                               | Negative indulgence   | Positive indulgence  |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Emotional state before</b> | Tension among contrasting emotions                            | Tension among contrasting emotions                           |
| <b>Emotional state after</b>  | Worsening in the emotional state, marked by negative feelings | Improvement of the emotional state, reaching equilibrium     |
| <b>Major domains involved</b> |   | Others than food (experiences, luxury, premium products ...) |
| <b>Differentiating traits</b> |   | Self-focus<br>Uniqueness<br>Durability                       |

NOTE.— Summary of characterizing traits of negative vs. positive indulgence

Our research presents also several limitations that should be addressed by future studies, as in the case of narratives where respondents' provenience is limited to US and Italy, thus further studies should be able to generalize our first evidences considering also respondents from different cultures. Moreover, it would be interesting for further studies to control pattern emerged from consumers' narratives for socio-demographic characteristics of respondents. Indeed, the personal characteristics of respondents may somehow interestingly influence the main themes emerged from our exploratory study.

Also considering media discourses, because of exploratory constraints, our analysis has been limited to a limited time span, thus future studies may expand the time span considered and also integrate research conducted on another media databases, this may result interesting also in identifying possible evolutionary patterns. More specifically, also integrating on a wider range future articles published after the Pandemic to identify possible evolutions and patterns.

Furthermore, our research project aims at offering important theoretical and managerial contributions. Theoretically contributing to many important fields of research in psychology and consumer behavior, such as those of self-control, regulatory behavior, goal theory, licensing

effect, emotions, hedonic consumption, well-being and goal theory. Implications arising from our study may be extremely valuable for consumers, institutions and practitioners. To illustrate, our conceptualization may encourage institutions in fostering, through the right levers, individuals tendency to indulge in a positive way with positive consequences for society psychological and physiological well-being. Then, our conceptualization may also help consumers making them more aware about their choices' consequences and able to discriminate between what may be good or bad for them to take more appropriate and punctual decisions.

Managerially, our study supports practitioners in understanding on which products/ traits they should focus their strategy and communication, to shift consumers' perspective on indulgence consequence from a negative valence toward a positive one. Coherently, this study might also indicate to practitioners which dimensions of the offering may increase consumers' tendency to repeat the purchase and make it perceive as "worthy" (e.g., self-focus, uniqueness, permanence over time). Moreover, this manuscript would guide in understanding which indulgence categories may actually be perceived positively vs. negatively and in which way. Indeed, this would support practitioners in their differentiation strategies and in communicating in the most effective way depending on the product, even underlying positive indulgence consequences, conversely to focusing on licensing mechanisms indifferently, as suggested by existing literature. Finally, practitioners would be supported in approaching better consumers based on a better comprehension of consumers' emotional processes taking place before and after indulging, and underlying also potential subsequent fulfillment arising from indulgence. Finally, our manuscript may guide managers in fostering those consumers' conditions that make consumers perceive indulgence as worthy (e.g., planning in advance, sharing the indulging experience), to increase their willingness to indulge.

#### **STREAMS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The increasing relevance of indulgent consumption has been confirmed transversally from our sources of data, to illustrate also from media discourses it is possible to notice a sharp increase over years of articles citing indulgent consumption. From our comprehensive analysis we highlight relevant areas for future research development to direct the exploration of indulgence to a route representative of market actual consumption. Indeed, we identified gaps in existing literature in representing actual behaviors and consumers' perceptions. Moreover through our exploratory approach interesting unexplored concepts emerged that should drive future construct investigation, in the following section we summarize main patterns emerged.

### **The ambivalence of indulgence**

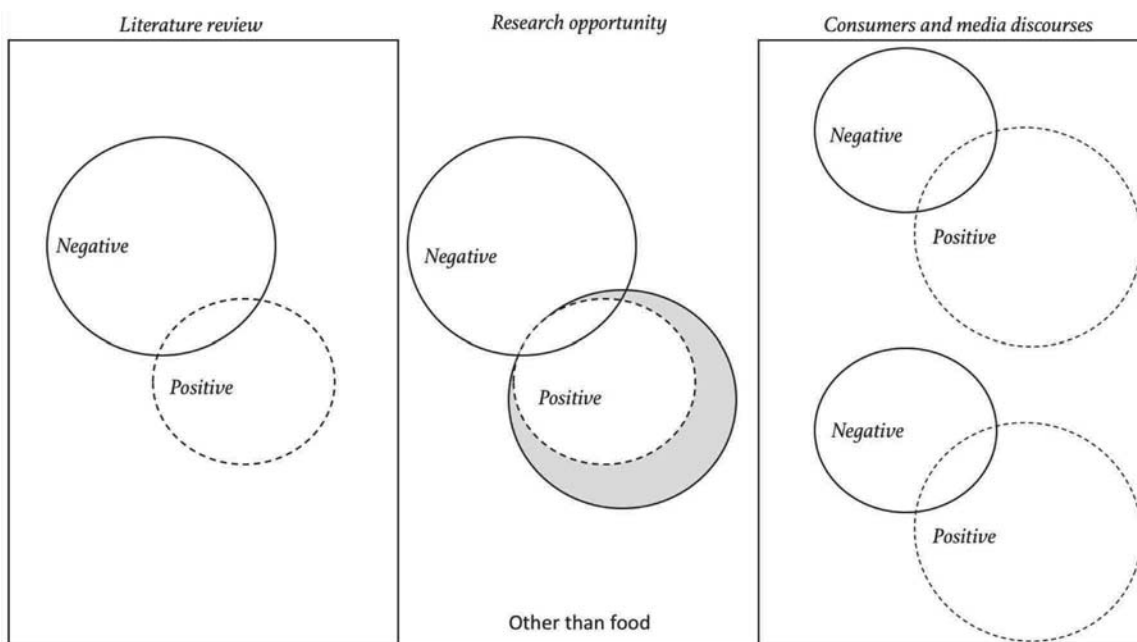
Through our thematic analysis it has been confirmed an existing ambivalence of indulgence in terms of its consequences on consumers' well-being. More specifically, this emerged clearly observing how there is a certain inconsistency among which consequences consumers expect from indulging vs. actual experienced consequences. However, as anticipated, the vast majority of literature focused on investigating indulgent consumption assuming negative perspective and associated mechanisms such as licensing and self-control. All this underlines a clear inconsistency in how indulgence is revealed in actual consumption vs. how the construct is represented in the literature. This ambivalence has been confirmed from our qualitative exploration of consumers and media perspectives and we will focus more on this in the following sections.

### **Exploring positive indulgence**

Focusing our analysis of narratives and media discourses on identifying the cited ambivalence it emerged surprisingly how from their perspective indulgent consumption is associated in the vast majority of cases to positive consequences. To illustrate, from consumers' narratives experiences

of indulgence have been narrated in the vast majority of cases (82%) as positive, this is reinforced by the diffused intention to repeat the experience. This has been confirmed also by media discourses speaking about indulgence in the vast majority of cases in positive terms (90%), describing positive consequences such as well-being and self-treatment. This major insight is extremely relevant showing how future literature should not assume a negative valence as in the past and focus in exploring the positive side of indulgence with related patterns (see Figure 6).

FIGURE 6  
Opportunity to explore the positive side of indulgence for further research



NOTE.— It is identified previous literature gap in investigating indulgent consumption compared to how it is perceived by consumers and media as emerged from our study, the existing gap is visually underlined

### Domains of indulgence: food and experiences

Even from our thematic analysis it emerged how existing literature investigated indulgence mainly through a quantitative/exploratory approach considering choices in the domain of Food. However, from consumers' narratives it emerged how they associated indulgence minimally to the consumption of Food (7,8%), but mainly to the less explored categories of luxuries and



experiences, this pattern was confirmed also from the analysis of media discourses. All this underlines how future research should conduct studies in domains different from food, and this inconsistency is particularly relevant in the understanding of indulgent consumption and the main reason is that we identified how the only domain associated predominantly to negative indulgence by consumers is the one of Food consumption. This means that considering existing studies conducted mainly in this domain might take to misleading results and representation of the construct, thus further studies should diversify the investigated domains to be more representative of the actual consumers' consumption. We argue that this might be one of the main driver leading to a negative perspective on indulgence. This urgent pattern has been confirmed also from media discourses that are associated to negative indulgence exclusively for 10%, and represented in those categories of consumption related to "addiction" (e.g., Gaming, Retail). Conversely, in the case of experiences indulging seems always perceived from a positive perspective as underlined from narratives (96,3%) and media (98%). From the analysis of media we identified also the consumption of so called "experiential products" driving positive consequences on well-being. All this underlies how future research should explore indulgence focusing on experiences, this would allow the emergence of new patterns and concepts, thus diversifying existing literature from food consumption aiming at a more representative conceptualization of the actual phenomenon.

### **New dimensions**

Based on consumers' narratives three main concepts emerged as particularly important for consumers and characterizing positive indulgence nature, that should be of interest for research to establish also potential casual relations: self- focus, uniqueness and permanence over time. Moreover, still analyzing consumers' narratives, we wanted to go more in depth in exploring which

elements make indulgent consumption “worthy”, and concepts emerged were somehow confirmed: uniqueness, extraordinariness, permanence over time, sharing. Interestingly going more in depth on the worthiness aspect, in the case of experiences, a driver of worthiness is the desire to escape from consumers’ stressful routines. Interestingly, in the case of avoiding indulgence for product most cited consequence “no pleasure”, while for experiences feelings of “missing out”. It is interesting to see how, conversely from how the behavior is represented by literature, consumers do not cite the diminishing of resources when indulging that should driver licensing mechanisms (e.g., spending, health). Another interesting pattern emerged from consumers narratives is the different emotional process anticipating and following indulgent consumption, that emerged completely different from how it is assumed by literature. More specifically, a state of tension before indulging is common to both kind of indulgence, however while tension and a worst emotional state follows negative indulgence, in the case of positive indulgence after consumption it is described a state of emotional fulfillment and equilibrium. Then, further research should explore other concepts emerged as influencing the valence of indulgent consumption such as the durability of products, the planning of the choice and the need to escape, underlined widely by consumers and media and still not investigated by literature.

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## APPENDIX

### 1. Questionnaire protocol

We kindly ask you to describe in detail a consumption experience (in products, services, activities etc.) in which you decided to INDULGE. Please describe a consumption experience in which you let your desires guide you. Please try to describe the experience and what you felt.

1. Do you remember how you felt before taking the choice? Particularly, which kind of emotions you perceived and which kind of thoughts you made
2. Do you remember if you made particular evaluations before taking your choice? If yes, which?
3. Could you describe the object of your experience from your perspective (e.g., object, experience, activity)? Please describe it in detail
4. Do you remember how you felt right after the experience?
5. Do you think that your choice had consequences (negative or positive) in your life or on your decisions in the long term? Please describe in detail
6. Are you able to remember which was the main driver toward your choice? Please describe in detail
7. Would you repeat today the same choice you made? Why?
8. Which emotions and feelings do you perceive today remembering that experience? Please describe in detail
9. How frequently do you indulge? What is the main reason behind it?
10. Please write any additional consideration
11. Please indicate your gender (M/F)
12. Please write your age
13. Please indicate your level of education
14. Please indicate your occupation

## 2. Example of thematic analysis representation

| Factors  | DV (operationalization)                              | References  |
|--|--|---|
| <b>Antecedent behaviors</b>  |  |   |
| Previous self-licensing  | Food   | Prinsen et al. (2018)                                 |
| Remembering past failures in self-control (vs. successes)  | Spending, savings, time management                   | Nikolova, Lamberton & Haws (2016)                     |
| Memory distortion of past behavior   | Food, spending, and studying                         | May and Irmak (2014)                                  |
| Reflecting and exaggerate past foregone indulgences  | Food   | Effron, Manin & Miller (2013)                         |
| Initial self-control failure   | Food, spending and cheating                          | Zemack-Rugar, Corus & Brinberg (2012)                 |
| Taking a dietary supplement  | Food, health activities                              | Chiou, Yang & Wan (2011)                              |
| Previous shopping restraint  | Premium pdts, food                                   | Mukhopadhyay & Johar (2009)                           |
| Virtuous act in a preceding choice   | Luxury   | Khan & Dhar (2006)                                    |
| <b>Characteristics of the decision</b>   |  |   |
| Physical involvement   | Food   | Hagen et al. (2017)                                   |
| Expression modality: oral (vs. other), native language (vs. foreign)   | Food   | Klesse, Levav & Goukens (2015)                        |
| Decision in dyads: homogeneous high self-control (vs. homogeneous low and mixed self-control dyads)            | Food, saving, and spending, vacation                 | Dzhogleva & Lamberton (2014)                          |
| Rejecting alternatives (vs. choosing alternatives)   | Spending, premium pdts (kind of apartment)           | Laran & Wilcox (2011)                                 |
| Task construal of volitional behaviors: as "work" (extrinsically motivated) or "fun" (intrinsically motivated) | Activity, food                                       | Laran & Janiszewski (2010)                            |
| Initial volitional behavior perceived as complete  | Laran & Janiszewski (2010)                           | Laran & Janiszewski (2010)                            |
| Initial effortful behavior is framed as an obligation to work  | Laran & Janiszewski (2010)                           | Laran & Janiszewski (2010)                            |
| Initial effortful behavior is framed as an opportunity to have fun   | Laran & Janiszewski (2010)                           | Laran & Janiszewski (2010)                            |
| Choose for others (no for themselves)  | Food   | Laran (2010)  |
| Combinations of healthy (virtue) and indulgent (vice) options  | Food   | Chernev & Gal (2010)                                  |
| Temporal distance (choice - behavior)  | Food, saving   | Laran (2009)  |
| <b>Personality traits</b>  |  |   |
| Curiosity (elicited)   | Food, financing                                      | Wang and Huang (2017)                                 |
| Authentic pride  | Vices vs. virtues, food                              | Salerno, Laran & Janiszewski (2015)                   |
| Categorization flexibility   | Food   | Khare, A., & Chowdhury, T. G. (2015)                  |
| Kind of pride: authentic (vs. hubristic) pride   | Luxury   | McFerran, Aquino & Tracy (2014)                       |
| Better mood  | Food   | Gardner, Wansink, Kim & Park (2014)                   |
| Sadness: with presence of active goal (vs. no active goal)   | Food, gift card                                      | Salerno, Laran & Janiszewski (2014)                   |
| Belief in fate   | Activity: party vs. cleaning, food                   | Kim, Kulow & Kramer (2013)                            |
| Incidental pride   | Gift card purpose, health and spending               | Wilcox, Kramer & Sen (2010)                           |
| Mental budgets   | Food   | Krishnamurthy & Prokopac (2009)                       |
| Hyperopia tendency   | Luxury   | Haws & Poynar (2008)                                  |
| Thinking about: long-term regret (vs. short term) + judged the long-term (vs. short-term) regrets of others    | Leisure vs. work, different aims                     | Keinan & Kivetz (2008)                                |
| Priming guilty emotion (vs. sad emotions)  | Gift CD/DVD vs. school-supply                        | Zemack-Rugar, Bettman & Fitzsimons (2007)             |
| Activation of chronic hedonic goals to seek pleasure in various domains + contextual cues                      | Food   | Ramanathan & Menon (2006)                             |
| <b>External stimuli</b>  |  |   |
| Human-like shapes: thin  | Financing, life-style scenarios                      | Romero and Craig (2017)                               |
| Idealized advertising models exposition  | Optimal choice (e.g. calculator vs. movie)           | Sobal & Darke (2014)                                  |
| Exposure to consummatory images (vs. just food)  | Food   | Poor, M., Duhachek, A., & Krishnan, H. S. (2013)      |
| Valued relationship reminder (they do not have)  | Premium products                                     | Cavanaugh (2014)                                      |
| Negative stereotype activation   | Food   | Campbell & Mohr (2011)                                |
| Stereotype threat and social identity threat   | Food, choices  | Inzlicht & Kang (2010)                                |
| Context (immediacy and self-regulatory relevance): social appeals, familiarity, bind of social ties            | Activities: drink, sex, drug                         | Pontus Leander, Shah & Chartrand (2009)               |
| Mortality salience   | Food, socially conscious consumer behaviors          | Ferraro Shiv, & Bettman (2005)                        |
| <b>Characteristics of the choice</b>   |  |   |
| Time window for consumption  | Food, vice vs. virtue (naming frame)                 | Siddiqui & Monga (2016)                               |
| Promotions   | Food, magazine subscription, consumption goal        | Kivetz and Zheng (2017)                               |
| Adding charitable donations at hedonic pdts (vs. utilitarian)  | Hedonic choice                                       | Zemack-Rugar et al. (2016)                            |
| Antropomorphism (of the temptation)  | Food   | Hur, Koo & Hofmann (2015)                             |
| Cuteness (of the product)  | Indulgent purposes (e.g. highbrow or lowbrow movies) | Neukov & Scott (2014)                                 |
| Construal level: high + no self-focus (vs. high + self-focus)  | Food, party, top restaurant, luxury                  | Mehta, Zhu & Meyers-Levy (2014).                      |
| Health claims attached to the indulgence   | Food   | Belei, Geyskens, Goukens, Ramanathan & Lemmink (2012) |
| Ethical indulgent products (fair-trade)  | Food, luxury   | White, MacDonnell & Ellard (2012)                     |
| Adding healthy options (e.g. Menu)   | Food   | Wilcox, Vallen, Black & Fitzsimons (2009)             |
| Large assortment size  | Food, gift purpose activities (prime vs. mp3)        | Sela, Berger & Liu (2008)                             |
| Level of effort in frequency program   | Luxury   | Kivetz & Simonson (2002)                              |
| Hedonic luxury vs. cash  | Luxury   | Kivetz & Simonson (2002)                              |

# How Handmade Production Increases Indulgent Consumption: An Analysis of the Underlying Role of Regret Feelings

## ABSTRACT

Indulgent goods offer consumers pleasure and enjoyment, but also trigger negative emotions such as anticipated feelings of regret associated with the purchase of such discretionary products, which might be particularly salient in the Covid-19 pandemic era. This manuscript tackles the issue of how to increase consumers' intention to buy indulgent goods while affecting consumers' regret feelings. We propose that offering consumers an indulgent product made by human labor (i.e., a handmade product) rather than made by machines may increase intention to consume it via an increase in consumers' feelings of anticipated regret of inaction, defined as the regret driven by feelings of missing out that leads to indulgent behaviors. In brief, results of our five experimental studies, including a field study, reveal that promoting an indulgent product as handmade (vs. machine-made, vs. unspecified production) increases consumers' anticipated regret of inaction and that anticipated regret of inaction increases consumers' tendency to indulge and expected enjoyment from consumption. Our findings contribute to the literature on factors that might offer consumers a justification for indulgent consumption by unveiling the role of handmade production, and extend the literature on the positive effect of handmade production on consumers' responses by testing its effect on regret.

Keywords: *indulgent consumption, handmade, regret, self-control, food, luxury*

## INTRODUCTION

Consumers are increasingly looking for products that are handmade (Accenture 2020; Deloitte 2020; McKinsey 2020a; McKinsey 2020b; Waytz 2019). With handmade products we refer to goods presented to consumers as being made by hand or involving human labor in the production process, rather than being exclusively made by a machine (see Fuchs, Schreier, and Van Osselaer 2015). Food retailers, for example, frequently use open kitchens to show their guests how cook prepare dishes. Also luxury companies often highlight that their products have an essential artisanal origin. To illustrate, with its “#D&GFatto in casa” digital communication campaign related to the COVID-19 Pandemic, Dolce & Gabbana emphasized that its products are handmade, and the premium fashion brand Suitsupply usually places artisans at work in front of store visitors.

As underlined in a recent study by Granulo, Fuchs, and Puntoni (2021), handmade products have social value that drives demand-side incentives for companies to employ human labor, despite the advancements in automation and artificial intelligence that enable brands to easily replace human labor. Scholars have underlined handmade products’ ability to elicit positive associations in consumers’ minds, such as uniqueness, embedded love and emotional attachment (Abouab and Gomez 2015; Buell and Norton 2011; Fuchs et al. 2015; Job et al. 2017; Newman and Bloom 2012; Schroll, Schnurr, and Grewal 2018; van Osselaer et al. 2020). These associations lead consumers to prefer handmade over machine-made products, especially when such products have high symbolic value (Granulo et al. 2021).

The present research adds to extant knowledge on consumers’ positive responses to handmade products by investigating one novel type of emotional reaction: feelings of regret associated with the consumption of handmade versus machine-made products. More specifically, we investigate the role of production mode (i.e., whether a product is made by hand or machines) in the context of indulgent consumption. Indulgent products have been defined as “options that

are considered a treat compared with alternative option(s)” (Cavanaugh 2014, 220). Given increasing consumers’ tendency to be cost-conscious (Accenture 2020), there seems to be value in studying regret, which is defined as “a more or less painful cognitive/affective state of feeling sorry for losses, transgressions, shortcoming, or mistakes” (Landman 1993, 36). Moreover, as demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic (McKinsey 2020a), in times of uncertainty consumers tend to decrease their overall spending (e.g., Bohlen, Carlotti, and Miha 2010; Griskevicius et al. 2013)— especially for indulgent goods. Thus, marketers are called to identify new ways of justifying the consumption of indulgences. The premise of this research is that experiencing a decrease in the feelings of regret associated with an indulgent decision is a key condition for consumers justifying said decision (e.g., Baumeister 2002; Kivetz and Keinan 2006; Ramanathan and Williams 2007; Read, Loewenstein, and Kalyanaraman 1999).

Our research goal is to comprehend if products’ production characteristics —whether the product is handmade or machine-made- represents one way to decrease consumers’ regret feeling and, in turn, foster the consumption of indulgent goods. In current times, characterized by uncertainty and increasing conscious consumption, our research aim is extremely relevant for practitioners to license the consumption of their offering in consumers’ minds. Moreover, our research goal goes beyond, investigating if the production process of an indulgent good may influence the valence of its consumption consequences, that are anticipated by consumers.

More specifically, we look at anticipated regret, defined as “the main psychological effect of the various worries that beset a decision maker before any losses actually materialize” (Janis and Mann 1977, 222), which represents a key determinant of consumers’ choices and enjoyment (e.g., Kivetz and Keinan 2006), especially for indulgent goods. A wide stream of literature has focused on identifying factors that can reduce anticipated regret and thereby encourage consumption (e.g., Hur, Koo, and Hofmann 2015; Kivetz and Zheng 2017; May and Irmak 2014; Nikolova, Lambertson,

and Haws 2016; Prinsen et al. 2018; Romero and Craig 2017; Wang and Huang 2018). We add to this literature by arguing that a characteristic of the production process—whether the product is handmade versus machine-made—might influence consumers' anticipated regret and, therefore, increase their indulgent consumption.

Scholars have identified two possible types of anticipated regret among consumers: the regret of indulging (i.e., the regret driven by a sense of guilt that leads to righteous behaviors) and the regret of inaction (i.e., the regret driven by feelings of missing out that leads to indulgent behaviors) (Keinan and Kivetz 2008). More specifically, our investigation focuses on the regret of inaction, which seems to have received less attention in previous empirical studies. We argue that knowing that a product is handmade (vs. machine-made) increases consumers' anticipated regret of inaction, thereby increasing consumers' willingness to indulge. Across four online experiments and one field study, we provide empirical support for our core thesis in different indulgent consumption settings.

Theoretically, the current study offers two main contributions. The first lies in advancing the literature on factors that might offer consumers a justification for indulgent consumption (e.g., May and Irmak 2014; Nikolova, Lambertson, and Haws 2016; Prinsen et al. 2018; Romero and Craig 2017; Wang and Huang 2018). More specifically, scholars demonstrated that some characteristics of indulgent good may facilitate the licensing of indulgent consumption, such as when indulgent goods have anthropomorphized shapes (Hur et al. 2015), when they are accompanied by sales promotion (Kivetz and Zheng 2017) or when some ethical attributes they might have are made salient to consumers (White, MacDonnell, and Ellard 2012). We add to this literature by proposing production mode (i.e., whether an indulgent product is made by human labor or machines) as a novel factor that might influence indulgent consumption. The second contribution lies in advancing the literature on the handmade effect on consumers' responses. In particular, we add

to studies that have demonstrated consumers' positive responses to handmade (e.g., Fuchs et al. 2015; Granulo et al. 2021) by proposing that handmade production may trigger feelings of regret in consumers, thereby increasing their willingness to indulge. Managerially, the current research offers marketers of indulgent products actionable insights into how to reduce regret-based emotional barriers to the consumption of indulgent goods.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Indulgent goods and feelings of regret**

Indulgence is closely related to both luxury and hedonics, as such items are typically considered hedonic rather than utilitarian in nature (Kivetz and Simonson 2002). Looking at the individual needs' hierarchy, indulgences have always been considered less important than necessities (e.g., Maslow 1970; Weber 1998). In other words, the consumption of necessities has an inherent justification that indulgent goods do not. This is why the existing literature largely argues that indulgence evokes feelings of regret (e.g., Baumeister 2002; Kivetz and Keinan 2006; Kivetz and Simonson 2002; Ramanathan and Williams 2007; Read, Loewenstein, and Kalyanaraman 1999). In particular, previous works have amply demonstrated that anticipated regret represents an important barrier to indulgent consumption (Ainslie 1975; Baumeister 2002; Greenleaf 2004; Hetts et al. 2000; Keinan and Kivetz 2008; Kivetz and Keinan 2006; Mehta, Zhu, and Meyers-Levy 2014; Schelling 1984; Simonson 1992), as it may induce consumers to behave in line with their virtues and thus avoid indulgences (e.g., Parker, Stradling, and Manstead 1996; Richard, Van der Pligt, and De Vries 1996; Schelling 1984; Thaler and Shefrin 1981).

Previous work has also suggested that two types of regret might exist: the regret of action and the regret of inaction (Gilovich, Kumar, and Jampol 2015; Gilovich and Kumar 2015; Gilovich and Medvec 1995; Kahneman and Tversky 1982; Zeelenberg et al. 2002). Specifically, the regret of



action (also called myopia or indulgence) is driven by a sense of guilt and is evoked when we have done something that we wish we had not; thus, it might be related to the idea of remorse. Regret of action has been shown to affect the experience of consumption: Because experiences involve a lower regret of action than material goods, they tend to activate a more enduring satisfaction (Gilovich, Kumar, and Jampol 2015). Conversely, the regret of inaction (also called hyperopia or righteousness) is driven by feelings of missing out; thus, it might be related to the idea of missed opportunity. According to the myopic perspective, indulgent consumption is associated with the regret of action (and thus it is also known as *regret of indulging*), while according to the hyperopic perspective, avoiding indulgence may evoke the *regret of inaction* (e.g., Kivetz and Keinan 2006). Regarding the behavioral consequences of these two types of regret, Keinan and Kivetz (2008) demonstrated that the regret of inaction tends to result in corrective indulgence (e.g., the relaxing of self-control efforts), while the regret of action induces corrective righteousness (e.g., focusing on utilitarian choices and necessities). Moreover, consumers' choices are even temporally affected by the regret of action and inaction: Thinking about long-term regrets leads consumers to select indulgent goods; conversely, thinking about short-term regrets fosters more virtuous choices (Keinan and Kivetz 2008). Certain factors have the power to reverse the type of regret that consumers perceive (e.g., from action to inaction and vice versa). To illustrate, Rosenzweig and Gilovich (2012) demonstrated that consumers are less likely to experience regret of action when their consumptions are framed experientially (vs. materially). Another factor is the time horizon: A greater temporal separation between a choice and its assessment seems to enhance the regret of inaction (vs. action), driven by a decline in perceived guilt and an accumulation of feelings of missing out (Keinan and Kivetz 2008). Scholars have also identified other elements that can shift the type of regret, such as construal level and self-focus (e.g., Mehta et al. 2014).

While it is well established that indulgent goods consumption leads to feelings of anticipated regret, scholars have investigated factors that can increase consumers' tendency to engage in indulgent consumption (e.g., Kivetz and Zheng 2017; May and Irmak 2014; Nikolova, Lamberton, and Haws 2016; Prinsen et al. 2018; Romero and Craig 2017; Wang and Huang 2018). Such factors include consumers' traits, external factors, or characteristics of the choice process. To illustrate, certain elements related to the choice behavior—such as the presence of product promotions (Kivetz and Zheng 2017), the presence of ethical elements on the products (White, MacDonnell, and Ellard 2012) or the use of anthropomorphized product shapes (Hur et al. 2015)—may trigger positive associations that promote consumers' tendency to indulge, as well as increase the quantity consumed and the enjoyment that consumers experience. Overall, such factors play a pivotal role in consumers' well-being; thus, their investigation represents a highly relevant area of research for both scholars and managers (e.g., Wilcox, Kramer, and Sen 2011). The present study extends this stream of literature by investigating if and how handmade (vs. machine-made) production, through its known positive associations, might increase the tendency to consume indulgent goods via an increase in anticipated regret of inaction. In the next section we elaborate on this idea.

### **Handmade products**

Human contact can imbue an object with human essence (Newman, Diesendruck, and Bloom 2011). In particular, involving humans in production can elicit positive feelings in consumers that are associated with the outcome of the production (i.e., the product). To illustrate, Norton, Mochon, and Ariely (2012) demonstrated that consumers become emotionally attached to objects they make themselves by hand, while Newman and Bloom (2012) suggested that consumers perceive high authenticity in products that have human touch. Consequently, consumers may

have pleasant experiences when using or consuming handmade products. For instance, consumers enjoy ordered food more when they see it being prepared due to perceiving more effort in the production (Buell and Norton 2011). Fuchs et al. (2015) showed that handmade products are perceived as being imbued with positive feelings through psychological and symbolic contagion. The authors specifically showed that handmade products are particularly attractive to consumers because of the “artisanal love” that they perceive as embedded in and conveyed by those handmade products. In other words, Fuchs et al. (2015) found that artisans’ emotional attachment to the product and its production (see also Carroll and Ahuvia 2006) becomes symbolically embedded in the product as a sense of love that customers perceive. Consistent with this argument, subsequent studies have shown that goods that have a certain degree of “human touch” increase consumers’ emotional attachment to the product in terms of affection, passion, and connection (e.g., Schroll et al. 2018). Because of these positive associations, consumers assign higher value to products that signal human involvement (Job et al. 2017) and are thus willing to pay more for products presented as handmade (Fuchs et al. 2015). We extend the literature on positive consumer reactions to handmade products by exploring its emotional consequences. In particular, we introduce the idea that handmade products may influence consumers’ feelings of anticipated regret and, as a consequence, improve consumers’ attitudes.

We argue that promoting indulgent products as handmade underlies their social value (Granulo et al. 2021), as it highlights the “artisanal love” imbued in products (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Fuchs et al. 2015), and, as a consequence, it may elicit anticipated regret of inaction in consumers. Indeed, if consumers avoid consuming indulgent products presented as handmade they might perceive a relatively high feeling of missing out (Fuchs et al. 2015), which might compensate traditional feelings evoked by indulgence (e.g., regret of indulging), ultimately justifying indulgent consumption.

In summary, we anticipate that when consumers are exposed to handmade (vs. machine-made) indulgent products, they might experience a heightened anticipated regret of inaction that leads to a more favorable attitude toward indulgent consumption. Through the central mediating role of perceived regret, the perception of human presence embedded in handmade products may counterbalance the negative feelings traditionally associated with indulgent consumption. Formally, we hypothesize that:

**H1:** *Presenting a product as handmade increases consumers' tendency to select the indulgent option compared to presenting a product as machine-made.*

**H2:** *Presenting an indulgent product as handmade increases the regret of inaction compared to presenting the same product as machine-made or without information about the production mode.*

**H3a:** *Presenting an indulgent product as handmade increases the regret of inaction, leading to a higher expected enjoyment from consumption.*

**H3b:** *Presenting an indulgent product as handmade (vs. machine-made) increases the love perceived in the product, which in turn increases anticipated regret of inaction leading to a higher expected enjoyment from consumption.*

We also acknowledge that there could be boundary conditions for our proposed effect of production modality on consumers' responses. In particular, based on studies demonstrating that consumers frequently rely on products' appearance for choosing products (e.g., Reimann et al. 2010), we believe that certain aesthetic characteristics of the indulgent product might dilute the demonstrated positive effects of handmade production. While the predominant marketing view suggests that consumers tend to evaluate better products that are good-looking aesthetically (e.g., Nenkov and Scott 2014), some scholars have demonstrated that product uniformity (which is an aspect of products' good aesthetic appearance) may be associated to mass production and

machine manufacturing (Moisio, Arnould, and Price 2004; Paxson 2013), whereas human-produced goods often contain non-uniformities that result from the variability that inherently characterizes manual production (Arnould and Price 2006). In other words, imperfections may serve as cues of human presence (Suher, Szocs, and van Ittersum 2021), conveying sensitivity, warmth, and contact (Grewal et al. 2020; Schroll et al. 2018) and evoking a certain level of human care in production (Morse et al. 1990), which ultimately leads to positive product evaluations (Abouab and Gomez 2015; Fuchs et al. 2015; Schroll et al. 2018). Indeed, a recent study by Suher, Szocs, and van Ittersum (2021) demonstrated that, in the case of processed food, imperfections positively influence consumers' evaluations; this is due to consumers perceiving a higher human care involved in producing foods that are aesthetically imperfect. These aesthetic imperfections are perceived as signals of human presence and, more specifically, of care in food production.

Building on this evidence, we predict that the perfection of a product – intended as the absence of aesthetical imperfections – through its influence on the perceived human care in production, might diminish the positive effect of handmade production on the willingness to purchase the indulgent product. Formally, we hypothesize that:

*H4: Promoting an indulgent product as aesthetically perfect (that is, without imperfections) would dilute the positive effect of handmade production on consumers' willingness to purchase the product.*

## **OVERVIEW OF EXPERIMENTS**

We tested our predictions across five experiments. In Study 1, we imbue our argument with external validity and marketing implications: Through a field study, we test H1 in the context of food consumption by examining if the presentation of products as handmade (vs. machine-made) increases consumers' tendency to select an indulgent option. In Study 2, we test H2 in the context of premium furniture products, thus investigating whether promoting an indulgent product as

handmade (vs. machine-made, vs. unspecified production) increases consumers' anticipated regret of inaction. In Study 3, we test H3a by investigating if a handmade (vs. machine-made) indulgent product increases the expected enjoyment of consumption and if this effect is mediated by the increase in consumers' anticipated regret of inaction. In Study 4, we test H3b investigating the presence of a triple mediation model in an indulgent food context, assessing if handmade products are perceived as containing love, which then activates feelings of missing out in consumers' minds, which then leads to a higher anticipated regret of inaction and a higher expected enjoyment from consumption. In Study 5, we test H4 through a moderation model in order to investigate a possible boundary condition of the handmade effect. Specifically, we tested if promoting an indulgent product as lacking imperfections dilutes the positive effect of handmade production on product attractiveness.

While our research treats "handmade" as shorthand for significant human involvement in the production process, we acknowledge the difficulty of actually categorizing products as completely handmade or machine-made (Barber 2013). However, this ambiguity offers practitioners a certain degree of freedom to define their communication strategies. Furthermore, we recognize that the handmade effect on indulgent consumption might not be exclusively driven by core explanatory factors, which is why we controlled for other potential co-determinants (such as products' perceived quality and healthiness) in order to isolate the regret-based process.

## **STUDY 1**

Our first study is a field experiment, designed to bolster the external validity and marketing consequences of our proposed framework. In a real context, we tested our prediction that presenting products as handmade (vs. machine-made) increases consumers' tendency to select the indulgent option. Operationally, we presented actual restaurant diners with the opportunity to

directly choose their dessert among a buffet assortment where we had manipulated the production modality. The dessert assortment included one particularly indulgent cake and two healthier options. We expected that merely altering the description of the production mode would influence participants' likelihood of choosing the most indulgent option.

## Method

We conducted this study in a restaurant located in a well-known European tourist mountain destination, which allowed us to recruit guests of various nationalities. The study took place on evenings (across two weeks from Monday to Sunday) during the dinner service (from 7.30 AM to 10 PM). The desserts were presented as handmade during the first week and machine-made during the second week. Different guests visited the restaurant every evening, which enabled sample randomization. A confederate, posing as a waitress at the restaurant, positioned herself beside the dessert's buffet to serve those guests who already finished their previous dinner courses. After guests ( $n = 419$ ;  $M_{\text{age}} = 47$ , 202 men) made their choice at the buffet, she took notes about the number of slices of cake chosen. Note that the cost of dessert was already factored into the dinner price, although diners could also choose to avoid taking a dessert. All evening guests walking to the buffet were exposed to the same assortment of three desserts (the indulgent cake, a fruit salad and a local yogurt). Depending on the condition that guests had been randomly assigned to (handmade condition:  $n = 203$ ; machine-made conditions:  $n = 216$ ), they saw a label translated in both Italian and English, considered guests' internationality. The label featured a text (accompanied by an image) that described the desserts' production mode as either "*HANDMADE CAKE - Handmade by our chef in our kitchen*" or "*CAKE - Realized by our machinery in our kitchen*" (see figure 1). After making their choice, participants were debriefed regarding the purpose of the study and asked to complete a follow-up demographic questionnaire. Each participant was specifically asked to refrain from mentioning the study to his or her table mates until the entire table had completed the dessert choice.

## Results

The results confirmed our hypothesis: When exposed to desserts described as handmade (vs. machine-made), restaurant guests were more likely to select the most indulgent choice (74% vs. 62%,  $\chi^2(1) = 6.24$ ,  $p = .012$ ).

FIGURE 1  
Field experiment stimulus exposure



NOTE. — Example of the stimulus exposure in the field study

## STUDY 2

In Study 2, we investigated whether the presentation of indulgent products as handmade increases the anticipated regret of inaction. To perform this test, we developed a 3 (production mode: handmade vs. machine-made vs. unspecified production) x 1 (premium dish) mixed model design in which our key factor was manipulated between participants. Unlike Study 1, Study 2 focused on premium products and luxury consumption.

## Method



We recruited 295 participants ( $M_{age}=38.55$  years,  $SD=12.38$ , 48% female) from the Amazon Mechanical Turk (hereafter, MTurk) platform in exchange for a small monetary credit. MTurk has proven itself to be one of the most reliable Internet-based platforms for conducting experimental studies based on communication stimuli (e.g., Lu and Sinha 2019). In line with previous studies that assessed the quality of data collected from MTurk (e.g., Goodman and Paolacci 2017; Paolacci, Chandler and Ipeirotis 2010), we only recruited U.S. participants with 95% or greater Human Intelligence TASK (i.e., HIT) approval rates.

Participants in this study were randomly assigned to one of the three production mode conditions. In all conditions, participants were asked to imagine entering a store and seeing a very expensive dish. Respondents were then presented with the indulgent stimuli, representing the same image of several exposed dishes. The manipulation consisted of a label displayed above the dish that described the modality of production (see figure 2): In each condition, the label showed different descriptions and images narrating the production process. In the handmade condition, the picture showed the hands of an artisan and the description was titled "*HANDMADE*" followed by this text: "You see that the dish is realized by an artisan with his hands in an artisanal way". In the machine-made condition, the picture showed a machine while the description was titled "*MACHINE-MADE*" followed by this text: "You see that the dish is realized by a machine in an automatized way". In the unspecified condition, there was no related picture and the description read "*UNSPECIFIED PRODUCTION*" followed by the following text: "It is unknown how this dish is realized".

After being exposed to the product and its label, all participants were asked to rate if they would regret more the choice of buying or not buying the dish: "You would regret more the choice of" (1 = Buying the dish; 7 = NOT buying the dish) – on a 7-point scale using the measure drawn from Rosenzweig and Gilovich (2012).

To control for other potential confounding factors, similar to previous studies (see Fuchs et al. 2015), the survey also asked respondents: “Please indicate how often you buy the kind of product presented” (1= Almost never; 7= Very often), “Please rate how good you are at resisting temptations” (1= Not at all; 7= Very much=7). Moreover, we assessed the efficacy of the experimental manipulation through the following question: “Please rate the extent to which you believe that the product presented is handmade” (1 = Not at all; 7=Very much).

FIGURE 2  
Image of handmade condition Study 2



## Results and Discussion

We first conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA), with production mode as a between-subjects factor. The ANOVA revealed that the anticipated regret did not significantly change between the two control conditions (machine-made vs. unspecified) ( $M_{\text{machine-made}} = 3.84$ ,  $M_{\text{unspecified}} = 3.92$ ;  $F(1, 202) = .09$ ,  $p = .76$ ). This first result offers preliminary evidence that presenting a product as machine-made does not increase consumers' anticipated regret of indulging relative to the baseline condition (i.e., no information about the production mode).

Based on this result, we collapsed the data across the two control conditions and proceeded to verify the hypothesized effect of handmade production on regret (see also Fuchs et al. 2015).

Please note that, because of the different number of observations in our conditions, we used the Levene's test to determine the homogeneity of variances. Since this was respected, we proceeded with our analysis. For the sake of completeness, we also contrasted the anticipated regret scores in the handmade versus those in each of the two control conditions. More specifically, the anticipated regret of inaction was higher in the handmade condition than in the machine-made condition ( $M_{\text{handmade}} = 4.49$ ,  $SD = 1.96$  vs.  $M_{\text{machine-made}} = 3.84$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ,  $F(1, 187) = 5.39$ ,  $p = .02$ ) and in the unspecified condition ( $M_{\text{handmade}} = 4.49$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ , vs.  $M_{\text{unspecified}} = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ;  $F(1, 195) = 4.68$ ,  $p = .03$ ).

Clearly, when we collapsed data from the machine-made and unspecified conditions, we found similar evidence for a significant handmade effect, with respondents reporting a significantly higher score of anticipated regret of inaction in relation to the handmade dish compared to the control condition ( $M_{\text{handmade}} = 4.49$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ,  $M_{\text{control}} = 3.88$ ;  $SD = 1.86$ ,  $F(1, 293) = 6.69$ ,  $p = .01$ ), thus supporting H2. Even when controlling for the potential confounding variables, the handmade effect remained significant.

In supporting H2, this finding serves as initial evidence about the existence of a handmade effect on consumers' perceived regret in the context of indulgent consumption—specifically by showing that presenting an indulgent product as handmade (vs. other conditions) may increase consumers' anticipated regret of inaction associated with the possibility of consuming indulgent goods. Moreover, because the two control conditions (machine-made and unspecified) did not exert a significantly different effect on regret, we focused on the machine-made production condition only for the following studies (in line with Fuchs et al. 2015).

### STUDY 3

After identifying the handmade effect on regret, we sought to identify its underlying process and consequences in terms of consumers' attitudes toward consumption. Study 3 thus seeks to test the process illustrated in H3a: We expected that a product presented as handmade will increase the anticipated regret of inaction, which should compel higher expected enjoyment from consumption.

## Method

We ran a two-cell (handmade vs. machine-made production mode), between-subjects experiment with 162 participants ( $M_{age} = 38.28$ ,  $SD = 12.73$ , 59.3% female) who were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions. Participants were recruited from the MTurk platform in exchange for a small monetary credit.

Participants were asked to imagine being in a store where they were positively impressed by a luxury dish that they very much liked but that was particularly expensive; they were then exposed to an image representing said dish. The scenario was described in a way that rendered self-control conflict particularly salient (see also Hur et al. 2015). The designed manipulation was similar to the one employed in Study 2 involving a label illustrating the production process: In the handmade condition, an image of an artisan's hands accompanied a label containing the following description: "*You see also its live production in store: the dish is realized by an experienced artisan*". In the machine-made condition, the label featured an image of a machine producing the plate next to the description: "*You see also its live production in store: the dish is realized by advanced machines*".

Next, we measured participants' perception of anticipated regret using the measure from Rosenzweig and Gilovich (2012), collected on a seven-point scale: "You would regret more the choice of" (1 = Buying the dish; 7 = NOT buying the dish). At the end of the questionnaire, we

assessed respondents' expected enjoyment from consumption through the five-item measure from O'Brien and Roney (2017): "Please indicate to what extent using the dish would be: Pleasant/ Enjoyable/ Fun/ Positive/ Beneficial"; all items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all; 7 = Very much). Finally, we asked participants the following questions as control measures: "How often do they have budget constraints?" (1 = Never; 7 = Always), "To what extent do you like furniture products?" (1 = Not at all; 7 = Very much), "How often do you buy hand-made/ machine-made products?" (1 = Almost never; 7 = Very often), "To what extent do you believe that this product is of high quality?" (1 = Not at all; 7 = Very much), "Please rate how good you are at resisting temptations" (1 = Not at all; 7 = Very much).

## Results

We tested a simple model of mediation in order to ascertain whether the handmade production modality is able to increase regret of inaction, thereby leading to a higher expected enjoyment from consumption.

Operationally, we used the bootstrapping method implemented in the PROCESS SPSS Macro developed by Hayes (2018, Model 4). The PROCESS macro is "a freely-available computational tool for SPSS and SAS that covers many of the analytical problems behavioral scientists interested in conducting a mediation, moderation, or conditional process analysis typically confront" (Hayes 2012, 3). Using the PROCESS Model 4 (simple mediation), we first regressed regret of inaction on the binary independent variable, and then regressed expected enjoyment on regret and the independent variable. We also included control measures as covariates in our analysis.

The results of this simple mediation supported our hypothesis about an indirect-only mediation (see Zhao, Lynch Jr. and Chen 2010). More specifically, the binary independent variable (coded as -1 = machine made and 1 = handmade) had a positive and significant effect on the anticipated

regret of inaction ( $b = .65$ ,  $t(195) = 2.29$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The regret of inaction, in turn, had a positive and significant effect on expected enjoyment ( $b = .34$ ,  $t(195) = 6.89$ ,  $p = .000$ ), while the type of production had a nonsignificant effect on expected enjoyment ( $b = -.02$ ,  $t(195) = -.15$ ,  $p = .87$ ).

Crucially, our indirect effect analysis pinpointed a mediated relationship ( $b = .22$ ,  $CI95\% = .00, .47$ ), even when including all control variables into the model. Thus, our analysis of simple mediation supported H3a, showing that presenting a product as handmade (vs. machine-made) increases consumers' anticipated regret of inaction, which then inspires a higher sense of expected enjoyment from consumption.

## Discussion

In summary, this study provides evidence for our conceptual model by confirming H3a. Thus, it appears that presenting an indulgent product as handmade (vs. machine-made) decreases anticipated regret of inaction related to consumption, which then leads to a higher expected enjoyment from indulging. Importantly, this study uncovered the process that underlies the effect of production mode on consumers' attitude toward and satisfaction from indulgent consumption.

## STUDY 4

In this study, we seek to test H3b and thereby extend our proposed theoretical model while also offering converging evidence for it. In particular, we investigated whether presenting an indulgent product as handmade (vs. machine-made) increases the love perceived in the product, which then activates feelings of missing out, which then leads to a higher anticipated regret of inaction, which finally triggers higher expected enjoyment from consumption. We tested this process in a domain that has been widely investigated: indulgent food. Therefore, we ran a two-cell (handmade vs. machine-made production mode), between-subjects experiment whereby

respondents were exposed to the slice of indulgent cake used in Study 1a. The sample, recruited from MTurk, included 167 participants ( $M_{age} = 38.52$ ,  $SD = 12.21$ , 60.5% female) who were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions.

In the study design, participants were presented with a scenario in which the self-control goal was made salient (see also Hur et al. 2015): *“Imagine that you are entering a café to have a break. You want to eat HEALTHY, however, you are presented with this indulgent option”*. In both conditions, the same slice of chocolate cake titled “Cake – Delicious & indulgent” was illustrated.

In the handmade condition, an image of an artisan’s hands accompanied a label containing the following description: *“The cake is freshly prepared, uses high quality ingredients, and it is realized by an experienced artisan with his hands”*. In the machine-made condition, the label featured an image of a machine next to the following description: *“The cake is freshly prepared, uses high quality ingredients, and it is realized by an advanced machine”*.

Next, we asked participants to assess the perceived love embedded in the product using a three-item measure taken from Fuchs et al. (2015): *“Please indicate to which extent do you agree with the following statements. The dish can figuratively be described as: Warm – Full of love – Full of passion”*; all items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1=Totally disagree; 7=Completely agree). Then participants were asked to evaluate how much the decision of not buying the dish would produce feelings of missing out through the following measure: *“NOT buying the dish you would experience feelings of missing out”* (1=Not at all; 7=Very much) (see Kivetz and Keinan 2006). Then, participants’ perception of anticipated regret, respondents’ expected enjoyment and the control variables were measured as described in study 3. In this case, we used the bootstrapping method implemented in the PROCESS SPSS Macro developed by Hayes (2018, Model 6). This analysis confirmed H3b in this context and showed a significant sequential indirect effect of triple mediation of production mode on expected enjoyment ( $b = .04$ ,  $CI95\%: .01, .10$ ). This means that, even in the

context of indulgent food consumption, handmade production has a positive effect on consumers' attitude toward indulgence. More specifically, presenting an indulgent product as handmade (vs. machine-made) activates feelings of missing out that flow through perceived love; those feelings trigger regret of inaction, leading to a higher expected enjoyment from indulgent consumption. Thus, we may conclude that handmade products activate an indirect positive effect on consumers' attitude toward indulgent consumption.

### STUDY 5

In Study 5, we test the prediction of H4 that promoting a product as aesthetically perfect (i.e., without imperfections) might dilute the demonstrated attractiveness for indulgent handmade products. In other words, products' aesthetic perfection might represent a moderator of the handmade effect on purchase intention. More specifically, we argue that products' aesthetic perfection – while theoretically representing a positive trait – might dilute the positive handmade effect in the specific context of indulgent products. We know that human-produced products are often unique, containing non-uniformities that result from variability involved in human production (Arnould and Price 2006), while consumers tend to associate uniformity with mass production (Paxson 2013) due to associations with mass production and machine manufacturing (Moisio, Arnould, and Price 2004). Interestingly, a recent study by Suher et al. (2021) demonstrated that imperfections positively influence consumers' perception of processed foods. This is due to consumers perceiving more human care in the production of aesthetically imperfect foods, which suggests that aesthetic imperfections signal human presence and human care. Moreover, scholars have demonstrated that, in the context of non-utilitarian goods, consumers tend to prefer products associated with mistakes because they perceive them as more improbable (vs. products made intentionally) and consider them to be more unique (Reich et al. 2018). Furthermore, scholars have uncovered that the perception of indulgent goods as non-



interchangeable influences the type of anticipated regret felt by consumers. More specifically, Carter and Gilovich (2010) demonstrated that consumers' type of anticipated regret moves from the one of indulgence to one of inaction when indulging in experiences (vs. material possessions), which stems from consumers' perception of experiences as less interchangeable. We decided to test our prediction by leveraging the marketing variable of consumers' willingness to purchase. Thus, we hypothesized that a product's aesthetical perfection might moderate the effect of handmade (vs. machine-made) production mode on consumers' willingness to purchase.

## Method

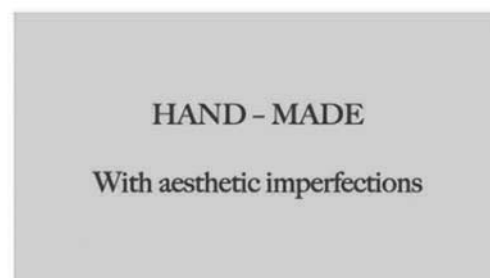
We ran a four-cell, between-subjects experiment where respondents were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (production mode: handmade vs. machine-made) x 2 (product aesthetic perfection: with imperfections vs. without imperfections) experiment. Using MTurk, we recruited 240 respondents ( $M_{\text{age}} = 40.40$ ,  $SD = 12.68$ , 52.1% female) and randomly assigned them to one of four conditions (see figure 3). In all conditions, participants saw the image of a bakery product, an accompanying product label, and a manipulated description. The bakery image was manipulated depending on the condition of perfection, while the label was manipulated depending on both conditions related to production mode and perfection. All participants were presented with the following scenario: *"Entering in a premium bakery you are impressed by an indulgent sweet, however, it is particularly expensive. Please read its label carefully"*. Participants in the handmade (machine-made)/ without imperfection condition were presented with the image of the perfect product, the label *"HANDMADE (MACHINE-MADE)– without aesthetic imperfections"*, and the following product description in bullet points: *"Handmade by an experienced artisan (machine-made by an advanced machine). The surface is without imperfections"*. Meanwhile, participants in the handmade (machine-made)/ with imperfection condition were presented with the image of

the imperfect product, the label “*HANDMADE (MACHINE-MADE) – with aesthetic imperfections*”, and the following product description in bullet points: “*Handmade by an experienced artisan (machine-made by an advanced machine) - the surface has small imperfections*”.

After being exposed to the manipulation, participants were asked to indicate their willingness to buy the product: “Please indicate your intention to buy the product” (1 = Very unlikely to buy; 7 = Very likely to buy). We also controlled for possible confounding factors (see Fuchs et al. 2015). More specifically we asked participants: “How much do you like bakery products?” (1=Not at all; 7=Very much), “Please indicate how often you buy handmade (machine made) products” (1= Almost never; 7= Very often), “Please rate the extent to which you believe that the product presented is of high quality?” (1=Not at all; 7=Very much), “How often do you have budget constraints?” (1= Never; 7= Always), “Please rate how good you are at resisting temptations?” (1=Not at all; 7=Very much).

FIGURE 3  
Condition of handmade product with aesthetic imperfections

- **Hand-made by an experienced artisan**
- **The surface has small imperfections**



## Results and discussion

To test our argument, we conducted a moderation analysis running a 2 (production mode: handmade vs. machine-made) x 2 (product aesthetic perfection: with imperfections vs. without

imperfections) ANOVA on willingness to buy. As illustrated in H4, we predicted that promoting the absence of aesthetic imperfections would dilute the positive handmade effect on consumers' intention to buy the product. This allowed us to probe the conditional effects of the predictor variable (production mode) on the dependent variable (willingness to purchase) at different levels of the moderator (product aesthetic perfection). We expected a pattern of moderation in which the effect of production mode is significantly moderated by the communication of a product aesthetic perfection.

The analysis confirmed the focal prediction of H4 by showing that, even when controlling for alternative confounding factors, there is a significant interaction between production mode and product aesthetic perfection ( $F(1, 230) = 5.40$ ,  $b = .23$ ,  $p < .05$ ), indicating that the effect of handmade on willingness to buy depends on the product's aesthetic perfection. Follow-up planned contrast tests showed that participants who were exposed to the bakery product with imperfections reported a significantly higher willingness to buy when the product was presented as handmade ( $M_{\text{handmade}} = 4.52$ ,  $SD = .20$  vs.  $M_{\text{machine-made}} = 3.72$ ,  $SD = .19$ ;  $F(1, 230) = 7.48$ ,  $p = .007$ ). In contrast, participants exposed to the product without imperfections did not report a significantly different willingness to buy depending on production mode ( $M_{\text{handmade}} = 4.08$ ,  $SD = .20$  vs.  $M_{\text{machine-made}} = 4.21$ ,  $SD = .21$ ;  $F(1, 230) = .19$ ,  $p > .05$ ). This study demonstrates, ironically, that promoting a product as aesthetically perfect might dilute the handmade effect, and thereby diminish the attractiveness of handmade indulgent products. Conversely, the maintenance and communication of product imperfections might be beneficial in fostering the appeal of indulgent handmade products.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

This research sheds light on the positive effect that a product presented as handmade (vs. machine-made vs. unspecified) may have in lowering consumers' anticipated feelings of regret. Across four studies, we assessed the existence of a handmade effect in the context of indulgence, which prompts a higher willingness to indulge and higher expected enjoyment from consumption.

In Study 1, we found that presenting indulgent products as handmade (vs. machine-made vs. unspecified production) reduces consumers' anticipated regret of indulging. In Study 2, we used a field experiment to further corroborate and demonstrate the external validity of the positive handmade effect on consumers' tendency to indulge. Through Study 3 and Study 4, we confirmed the assumed process that is activated by the handmade effect, as well as assessed its generalizability across different contexts of indulgent consumption. First, we found support for our conceptual model showing how handmade products influence the type of regret that consumers perceive, which leads to higher expected enjoyment from consumption. Second, we found evidence of a triple mediation model: Handmade production increases the love perceived in the product, which activates feelings of missing out, which prompts a shift in anticipated regret from indulging to inaction, which finally has a positive effect on consumers' expected enjoyment. By controlling for common confounds, the present study demonstrates the important role of production mode in determining the prevalent type of regret that consumers anticipate when making consumption choices. More specifically, the presence of humans in the production process seems to shift the type of regret from the one of action (indulging) to one of inaction, thus determining consumption choices.

### Theoretical Implications

Our findings offer a clear contribution to important fields of marketing research. First, we contribute to literature on indulgent consumption identifying handmade (vs. machine-made) production as a to-date unexplored factor potentially licensing indulgence in consumers' minds (e.g., May and Irmak 2014; Nikolova, Lamberton, and Haws 2016; Prinsen et al. 2018; Romero and Craig 2017; Wang and Huang 2018). Regarding licensing factors related to the indulgent goods or service (e.g., Hur et al. 2015; Kivetz and Zheng 2017; White, MacDonnell, and Ellard 2012), our manuscript is the first, to the best of authors' knowledge, to investigate a factor related to the production process of indulgent goods.

Second, we contribute to the literature on self-control regrets by identifying a specific factor – handmade production – that can influence consumers' anticipated regret from consumption, and thereby determine consumers' behaviors and choices. We differentiate our findings from previous literature by identifying an element, such as handmade production, that is actionable by practitioners, while previous studies had studied factors, such as experiential (vs. material) consumption (Rosenzweig and Gilovich 2012), time horizon (Keinan and Kivetz 2008) and consumers' self-focus (Mehta et al. 2014), that are essentially out of practitioners' control.

Third, we advance the literature on the positive handmade effect (e.g., Fuchs et al. 2015; Granulo et al. 2021), by revealing handmade influence on consumers' emotional responses and recognizing how the handmade effect may be particularly beneficial when communicated for indulgent goods. Moreover, we reveal how handmade production, through its influence on consumers' regret, influences also individuals' willingness to indulge and well-being. Our results also speak to the literature on psychological contagion (e.g., Norton et al. 2012; Schroll et al. 2018) by demonstrating how a specific emotion – encapsulated in the idea of 'handmade' – may become relevant in the particularly complex domain of indulgent consumption.

## **Managerial Implications**

Beyond its theoretical significance, our study offers important managerial implications. For managers looking for effective marketing strategies, this study shows when and how the effort of maintaining and enhancing human presence in the production process might become highly valuable for both consumers and brands. Moreover, this study advanced our understanding of how the communication of other product traits (e.g., the absence of aesthetic imperfections) might dilute the marketing benefits arising from the handmade effect.

Our results suggest that, for practitioners operating in an increasingly complex context characterized by conscious consumption, maintaining and communicating a certain human presence in the production process is incredibly valuable, even despite the conveniences offered by today's technological advancements. Indeed, our results make clear that handmade production can promote a better attitude and spur higher consumer satisfaction in the form of consumption enjoyment. Marketers might stress the handmade production in their communication strategies through detailed product descriptions or dedicated retail strategies. For example, well-known indulgent brands, such as Dolce & Gabbana, are placing their artisans and their work directly into brand stores in order to increase their visibility and prompt consumption.

Furthermore, our study encourages practitioners to communicate a product characteristic that can shape consumers' perceived regret, which can then inspire consumers' willingness to buy. We might conclude that consumers decide if and how much they want to indulge based on their knowledge about production modalities. Moreover, our study implies that practitioners might increase consumers' tendency to select their most indulgent offer (e.g., in terms of price positioning) by implementing or communicating their brands' handmade production.

Moreover, our work clarifies that emphasizing a product's perfection, while seemingly beneficial, can dilute the positive effect of being handmade on consumers' willingness to purchase

an indulgent product. Indeed, in the context of indulgence, marketers might find more success in promoting their offering's artisanal traits rather than underlining other characteristics.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This research is, to the best of our knowledge, the first to explore how regret related to consumption might be influenced by production modalities. While it represents a first step in understanding the phenomenon, it still features several limitations that represent interesting cues for further research. To illustrate, one might argue that external validity of our results is compromised by the fact that many real products are not explicitly presented as machine-made; rather, their production process is simply not specified. Nonetheless, we did address this issue by considering three conditions in Study 1 (handmade vs. machine-made vs. unspecified), where we found evidence that the impact of machine-made on regret was similar to that for unspecified production; thus, we merged those two conditions. We also inferred that the unspecified mode might be more easily confused with the handmade production mode; as a result, we decided to investigate the phenomenon through a clearer lens by comparing the handmade condition with the machine-made one as a control. Furthermore, this approach is consistent with the one that Fuchs et al. (2015) adopted when conceptualizing the handmade effect. One can also find numerous examples of real products that are explicitly presented as machine-made.

Another possible criticism of our approach might be that the identified handmade effect on indulgent consumption could be explained by more intuitive processes, such as the products' perceived quality and healthiness. To address this concern, we controlled for potential confounding factors and alternative mechanisms. Amidst these efforts, we were most interested in disentangling the role of perceived love, as previous literature suggests that this factor drives the regret of inaction by eliciting feelings of missing out. Thus, production modality represents an

interesting unexplored territory of investigation for self-control regrets and a crucial determinant of indulgent consumption. Furthermore, considering our finding that presenting a product as imperfect (vs. without imperfections) might influence handmade product perception, it would be interesting to more deeply explore different facets of imperfection (e.g., stylistic vs. on purpose, made by mistake). While we focused our studies on the most common domains of indulgence – luxury and food consumption – we advise further studies to consider other indulgence domains. Likewise, future scholars should gather respondents from non-Western countries, as cultural factors may influence the investigated effect and perceptions of indulgence. For example, in countries where manual production is perceived as alienating, it is possible that handmade products might be unrelated to positive perceptions of love and regret of inaction. Additionally, future research should consider the potential implications of the identified effect on consumers' general well-being, beyond expected enjoyment. It might be that the effect of production modality on regret also leads to specific consumer choices in terms of quantity of consumption and portion size. Moreover, it might be that consumers experience a different kind of regret in the long run based on their past indulgent choices depending on the production mode.

Furthermore, the handmade effect on regret might be moderated by several different factors that call for future research. To illustrate, a higher psychological proximity with the producers or providers' personal characteristics (e.g., reliability, authenticity) might magnify the identified handmade effect; conversely, the effect might be diluted by consumers' utilitarian (vs. hedonic) consumption goals. Moreover, even consumers' personality traits – such as the need for affect and uniqueness – might affect the influence of handmade production on indulgent products' perceptions.



## CONCLUSION

Our study illustrates how consumers feel about indulgent consumption when learning that a product features a certain degree of human touch. This evidence offers an important insight to marketers, especially as consumers become more cost-conscious and increasingly prefer socially sustainable brands. In this vein, our study supports practitioners by identifying marketing strategies that can maintain the delicate balance between technological innovation and the preservation of craftsmanship. Our investigation makes clear that managers should recognize and valorize human labor to elicit positive feelings in consumers' minds, despite the evidently appealing convenience offered by automated solutions. Defining and communicating the right production mode is crucial to lower anticipated regret associated with consumption, which bolsters consumers' satisfaction and ultimately increases their willingness to consume indulgent products.

Generally speaking, our research also underlines the potentially crucial role of human presence in determining consumers' self-control and well-being. We hope that our investigation will improve practitioners' awareness of the special appreciation that consumers have for the human and societal factor. Thus, marketers should focus on the unique value and potential benefits of maintaining human labor, rather than the apparent costs. Marketing strategies focused on handmade production might even help to drive a virtuous cycle that benefits consumers, marketers and the welfare of society.

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