



# **Why consumers choose experiences over materials: the role of social class, meaning, and social motivation**

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Dissertation written under the supervision of professor Daniel Fernandes.

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the MSc in Management with a specialization in Strategic Marketing, at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa, January 2026.

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## **Abstract:**

Experiential consumption is often assumed to provide greater well-being than material consumption; however, preferences for experiential versus material purchases vary substantially across individuals. This research examines how social class shapes these preferences by investigating the psychological and social mechanisms underlying consumption choice. Drawing on social class theory and consumer psychology, the research proposes that social class influences consumption preferences indirectly through meaning-based psychological processes and social motivations rather than through a direct effect.

Survey data were collected from an international sample and analyzed using reliability analyses, and multiple regression models, including mediation and moderation tests. Social class was operationalized as subjective social position, while psychological mechanisms were defined as meaning seeking and authenticity orientation. Social factors captured relational orientation, social identity, and need to belong. Consumption preference was measured as a relative preference for experiential versus material purchases.

Results show that social class does not directly predict consumption preference. Instead, psychological mechanisms fully mediate the relationship between social class and consumption preference, indicating that individuals higher in perceived social class are more likely to prefer experiential consumption because they place greater importance on meaning and authenticity. Social factors did not moderate this relationship but exerted a moderating positive effect on experiential preference of social class. Together, these findings suggest that experiential consumption is not universally preferred but emerges from the interaction of social position, internal meaning-making processes, and social motivations. The results suggest that experiential strategies should be tailored to consumers' underlying motivations rather than demographic class alone.

**Keywords:** experiential and material consumption, social class, psychological mechanisms, purchase behavior, social factors, consumer behavior.

## **Por que os consumidores optam por experiências em vez de bens materiais: o papel da classe social, do significado e da motivação social**

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### **Abstrato:**

O consumo experiencial é frequentemente associado a maior bem-estar do que o consumo material; contudo, as preferências entre estes tipos de consumo variam entre indivíduos. Este estudo analisa como a classe social molda essas preferências, explorando os mecanismos psicológicos e sociais subjacentes às escolhas de consumo. Com base na teoria da classe social e na psicologia do consumidor, propõe-se que a classe social influencia as preferências de consumo de forma indireta, através de processos psicológicos de construção de significado e de motivações sociais.

Os dados foram recolhidos por meio de um inquérito aplicado a uma amostra internacional e analisados com modelos de regressão múltipla, incluindo testes de mediação e moderação. A classe social foi operacionalizada como posição social subjetiva. Os mecanismos psicológicos incluíram a busca de significado e a orientação para a autenticidade, enquanto os fatores sociais abrangeram a orientação relacional, a identidade social e a necessidade de pertença. A preferência de consumo foi medida como uma inclinação relativa para compras experienciais versus materiais.

Os resultados mostram que a classe social não prediz diretamente a preferência de consumo. Em vez disso, os mecanismos psicológicos mediam totalmente esta relação, indicando que a valorização do significado e da autenticidade explicam a preferência por experiências. Os fatores sociais exerceram um efeito direto e positivo sobre o consumo experiencial. Em conjunto, os resultados sugerem que o consumo experiencial emerge da interação entre posição social, processos psicológicos e motivações sociais.

Palavras-Chave: consumo experiencial e material, classe social, mecanismos psicológicos, comportamento de compra, fatores sociais, comportamento do consumidor.

# Table of Contents

<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>2. Theoretical discussion</b> .....	<b>9</b>
2.1 Social class.....	9
2.2 Psychological mechanisms.....	10
2.2.1 Meaning seeking.....	11
2.2.2 Authenticity.....	11
2.2.3 Self esteem and identity expression.....	12
2.3 Social factors.....	13
2.3.1 Relationship-building.....	13
2.3.2 Social identity & status.....	14
2.3.3 Need to belong & social network strength.....	14
2.4 Consumer preference: experiential vs. material consumption.....	15
2.4.1 Experiential consumption.....	15
2.4.2 Material consumption.....	16
<b>3. Methodology</b> .....	<b>19</b>
3.1 Participants and design.....	19
3.1.1 Research design.....	19
3.1.2 Participants.....	20
3.2 Measures.....	20
3.2.1 Psychological mechanisms.....	20
3.2.1.1 Meaning seeking.....	21
3.2.1.2 Authenticity orientation.....	21
3.2.1.4 Identity expression.....	22
3.2.2 Social factors.....	22
3.2.2.1 Relationship-Building orientation.....	23
3.2.2.2 Social identity & status motives.....	23
3.2.2.3 Need to belong & social network strength.....	23
3.2.3 Consumer preference: experiential vs. material consumption.....	24
3.2.4 Social class.....	25
3.2.5 Control variables.....	25
3.3 Data handling and analysis.....	26
<b>4. Analysis and results</b> .....	<b>28</b>
4.1 Descriptive statistics.....	28
4.2 Hypotheses testing.....	29
4.2.1 Hypothesis 1.....	29
4.2.2 Hypothesis 2.....	30
4.2.3 Hypothesis 3.....	31
4.2.4 Additional analysis.....	32
<b>5. Discussion</b> .....	<b>33</b>
<b>6. Conclusion &amp; implications</b> .....	<b>36</b>
<b>7. References</b> .....	<b>38</b>

<b>8. Appendix.....</b>	<b>42</b>
8.1 Appendix 1: Summarized overview of participants.....	42
8.2 Appendix 2: Survey questions.....	43
8.3 Appendix 3: Descriptive statistics.....	47
8.4 Appendix 4: reliability, validity and correlation tests.....	47
8.5 Appendix 5: Hypothesis testing.....	48
8.6 Appendix 6: Additional analysis.....	49

# 1. Introduction

A night at the movies or buying the bag you've been wanting for months? Booking a holiday or upgrading your car? Treating yourself to a memorable dinner or investing on new tableware? Although these choices may appear trivial, they reflect a deeper and increasingly relevant dilemma in contemporary consumer culture: whether to spend money on experiences or on material goods. Experiences provide mostly meaning and connection (Gilovich et al., 2015), whereas material goods offer signaling value and positional benefits (Tumbat & Belk, 2011). At first glance, these decisions appear spontaneous or idiosyncratic, yet a growing body of research suggests that they are systematically shaped by different factors, such as: psychological, social, and socioeconomic forces.

Over the past decade, consumer behavior has witnessed a noticeable shift toward experiential consumption. Individuals, particularly younger generations, increasingly allocate their discretionary income to travel, dining, festivals, wellness activities, and other immersive experiences rather than accumulating physical goods (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Millennials and Gen Z consumers are frequently described as “experience seekers,” prioritizing events and memorable activities over material possessions, as experiences are perceived to contribute more strongly to personal identity, happiness, and social connection (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014; Barton, Koslow, & Beauchamp, 2012). Recent research further suggests that Gen Z, in particular, places high value on experiences that are socially shareable, identity-relevant, and aligned with personal values, often viewing consumption as a means of self-expression rather than ownership (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Surprisingly, this generational shift seems to contradict earlier findings by Bhattacharjee and Mogilner (2014), who show that as people age, ordinary experiences become increasingly tied to personal identity and happiness, suggesting that older consumers should, in fact, benefit more from experiential purchases. This creates an intriguing empirical puzzle: if experiences generate greater well-being for adults, why do younger generations appear to consume more of them?

Industries across the economy have responded swiftly to this experiential turn, strategically embedding products and services within curated experiences to appeal to experience-driven consumers. Luxury brands, in particular, increasingly position material goods as gateways to exclusive experiences, such as private launch events, immersive pop-ups, and artistic

collaborations, thereby enhancing symbolic and emotional value beyond ownership (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Atwal & Williams, 2009). In the luxury sector, high-net-worth consumers are reported to allocate a growing share of their discretionary spending toward immersive experiences, including travel, gastronomy, and cultural events, rather than additional material possessions, reflecting a shift from accumulation to experiential enrichment (Julius Baer, 2022). Similar dynamics are evident in the hospitality industry, where restaurants are increasingly designed as staged, multisensory experiences, and consumers favor dining concepts that engage emotion, atmosphere, and storytelling rather than merely satisfying functional needs (Nation's Restaurant News, 2021). Beyond traditional consumer industries, technology and AI-driven firms have also adopted experiential pop-ups and interactive installations to humanize their brands and foster emotional connection with consumers in an increasingly digital environment (Axios, 2023). Together, these developments highlight that the experiential shift is not only an academic phenomenon but also an economically consequential transformation reshaping competitive strategies across industries.

Yet despite widespread acknowledgement of an “experiential preference,” a fundamental question remains underexplored: why do some individuals prefer experiences while others gravitate toward material goods? A core question remains underexplored: how and why do consumers shift from valuing things to valuing experiences? What internal changes, psychological reorientations, and social forces drive this transition? Consumer research has increasingly examined the conditions under which individuals prefer experiential over material purchases, revealing that experiences often provide greater and more enduring well-being (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014; Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). While this “experiential advantage” is robust, recent studies suggest that such preferences vary substantially across individuals (Weingarten et al., 2021). A growing body of work in marketing, psychology, and sociology highlights the role of social class in shaping cognition, affect, and motivation (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009; Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2012). However, far fewer studies investigate the underlying mechanisms that drive the preference itself. Even fewer examine how structural factors, particularly how one's social class shape the psychological meanings consumers attach to purchases.

Understanding these mechanisms matters. For researchers, it clarifies how economic inequality shapes consumer psychology. For marketers, it prevents superficial or ineffective experiential strategies. As Tumbat and Belk (2011) argue, the commercialization of

extraordinary experiences risks creating a tension between authenticity and performance; without aligning with consumers' deeper psychological motives, experiential offerings may feel contrived, hollow where the consumers' feel dissatisfied. For policymakers, the shift toward experiences reflects changing well-being priorities and has implications for sustainability, community building, and social cohesion.

Preliminary evidence supports a model in which accumulated life experience increases the salience of meaning, authenticity, and identity expression, which in turn mediate preferences for experiential over material consumption. Sun and Pham (2025) identify three core dimensions that render experiences psychologically "special": uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity, which help to explain why experiences are increasingly valued over time. Complementing this view, Orazi and Van Laer (2023) introduce the concept of the "bleed effect," whereby extraordinary experiences extend beyond the moment of consumption and leave enduring traces on individuals' identity and everyday life. Similarly, Mead and Williams (2023) demonstrate that meaning-seeking consumers actively reallocate resources away from costly material possessions toward consumption that provides greater purpose. Taken together, these findings suggest a fundamental psychological reorientation in consumption: experiences derive value not merely from their occurrence, but from their capacity to generate lasting meaning and contribute to identity construction.

However, not only psychological mechanisms explain why preferences vary so widely across individuals. Social forces play a critical role. Shared experiences strengthen relationships and satisfy the need to belong (Chan & Mogilner, 2017). Social identity and status motives can make certain experiences more desirable and could even re-materialize them as consumable symbols (Tumbat & Belk, 2011). Cultural norms determine whether meaning, connection, or achievement is prioritized (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014). These social factors may shape when psychological mechanisms matter most.

Taken together, a substantial gap remains: the role of social class in shaping experiential versus material preferences is not well understood, despite evidence that social class profoundly influences cognition, emotion, motivation, and interpretation of the world (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009; Stephens et al., 2012). Lower-class individuals tend to adopt a relational, contextual, and interdependent orientation, whereas higher-class individuals typically emphasize autonomy, independence, and self-expression (Piff et al., 2010). These differences could have direct implications on how consumers interpret the meaning of

purchases, the value of experiences, and the symbolic power of material goods. Yet empirical research connecting these literatures is scarce.

This research fills this gap by examining how social class shapes the psychological and social processes that influence whether consumers prefer experiential or material consumption. Rather than treating the preference as universal, stable, or purely hedonic, this research adopts a socio-psychological lens to understand why different individuals favor one form of consumption over the other. Accordingly, the main research question is:

*How does social class influence consumer preferences for experiential versus material purchases?*

To answer this question, the following sub-questions are examined:

1. Do different psychological mechanisms (meaning seeking, authenticity, and identity expression) mediate the relationship between social class and experiential preference?
2. Do different social factors (relationship building, social identity, cultural values, need to belong) moderate the effect of the psychological mechanisms of social class on consumption preference?

This research proceeds by developing a theoretical framework integrating research on social class, psychological mechanisms, social factors and difference between consumer preference (experiential vs. material). Followed by an empirical research testing a moderated mediation model. The findings aim to provide novel insight into how socioeconomic structures shape consumption motivations and how different individuals derive value, meaning, and identity from the things they buy.

## 2. Theoretical discussion

This research proposes that psychological mechanisms, such as meaning seeking, authenticity, and identity expression mediate the relationship between social class and consumption preferences, and that these psychological processes are further conditioned by social factors such as relationship-building motives, need for belonging, and social identity concerns. The following sections develop each theoretical component and justify the conceptual framework.

### 2.1 Social class

Social class is typically understood along two dimensions: objective social class (income, education, and occupational status (Piff et al., 2012)) and subjective social class (individuals' perceived rank relative to others in society (Kraus et al., 2009)). Both forms of class influence psychological orientations, decision-making, and interpersonal behavior.

Social class differences in cognition and motivation. Low social class tends to be associated with: contextualism and situational sensitivity (Kraus et al., 2009), stronger relational and communal orientations (Piff et al., 2010) and higher prosocial tendencies and attunement to others (Piff et al., 2012). Whereas high social class, predicts greater self-focus and autonomy (Stephens et al., 2012), increased personal control (Kraus & Tan, 2015) and heightened status motives (Bourdieu, 1984). These class-based orientations shape how individuals interpret consumption and what they value from their purchases.

Experiences provide meaning and connection (Gilovich et al., 2015), while material goods offer signaling value and positional benefits (Tumbat & Belk, 2011). The influence of social class consumption priorities in predictable ways. Lower-class individuals tend to prioritize utility, relational goals, and basic needs (Vieites & Jiang, 2020), whereas higher-class individuals gravitate toward symbolic goods that communicate identity, taste, or distinction (Bourdieu, 1984; Piff et al., 2012). Consumption thus becomes an expression of class-based orientations. Because experiences are identity-relevant and socially communicative (Gilovich et al., 2015), they may be interpreted differently depending on class background.

Taken together, prior research clearly demonstrates that social class systematically shapes how consumers interpret and assign meaning to their purchases, which in turn directs whether they prefer experiential or material forms of consumption. Lower-class consumers, who tend

to adopt a more interdependent and relational orientation (Piff et al., 2010; Kraus et al., 2012), often value purchases that provide connection, emotional richness, and memorability, which are features that are more strongly associated with experiential consumption (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014). In contrast, higher-class consumers, who typically emphasize independence, self-expression, and personal agency (Stephens et al., 2012; Kraus & Keltner, 2009), may gravitate toward material goods that signal status, autonomy, and personal success (Belk, 1988; Côté, 2011).

These class-based orientations influence the psychological interpretation of what consumption means, such as whether it is seen primarily as a source of identity expression, social connection, long-term meaning, or symbolic value. Because experiential and material purchases deliver these psychological benefits in different ways, social class is able to (in)directly guide consumers toward one consumption type over the other. Concluding, the literature strongly supports the proposition that social class is a foundational antecedent to consumption preferences through its influence on underlying psychological processes. Which leads to the first hypothesis:

**H1:** Social class has a direct effect on consumption preference (experiential vs. material consumption).

Whereas lower social class is associated with a stronger preference for *experiential* consumption due to relational and contextual psychological orientations. And higher social class is associated with a stronger preference for *material* consumption because of self-expressive and status-oriented interpretations.

## 2.2 Psychological mechanisms

Social class fundamentally shapes the cognitive and motivational frameworks through which individuals interpret their environment, including consumption experiences. Research indicates that individuals from lower social class backgrounds tend to adopt a relational and contextual perspective, prioritizing social connection, interdependence, and shared meaning (Piff et al., 2010; Kraus et al., 2012). This orientation influences how purchases are perceived: experiential consumption, which fosters relationships and emotional engagement, is more psychologically valuable for these consumers (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003;

Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014). Conversely, higher-class individuals often emphasize autonomy, self-expression, and status signaling (Stephens et al., 2012; Kraus & Keltner, 2009), leading them to interpret consumption primarily as a tool for identity construction and social distinction. Consequently, social class is able to shape the psychological lens through which consumers evaluate the utility, meaning, and identity relevance of both material and experiential goods, establishing the foundation for systematic differences in consumption preference. Therefore, different psychological mechanisms are able to explain how social class influences consumption preferences. This research focuses on three types of psychological mechanisms: meaning-seeking, authenticity and identity expression.

### 2.2.1 Meaning seeking

Meaning seeking refers to the motivation to pursue activities that provide purpose, coherence, and personal significance (Mead & Williams, 2023). Experiences generally allow individuals to derive meaning through emotional engagement, personal growth, and reflection (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014). Therefore, meaning seeking guides consumers to prefer experiential purchases, which are inherently more meaningful than material goods. Meaning seeking could therefore shape the preferences of consumers. Where lower-class individuals, due to higher exposure to unpredictability, often seek stability and meaning in relationships and experiences. Whereas, higher-class individuals seek meaning in self-expressive or extraordinary experiences or materials (Bourdieu, 1984).

### 2.2.2 Authenticity

Authenticity refers to the perception that a consumption choice aligns with one's "true self" and reflects personally meaningful values rather than external pressures or instrumental motives. Prior research suggests that experiences are often perceived as more authentic than material possessions because they are lived and enacted, rather than owned and displayed (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Sun & Pham, 2023). As a result, experiential purchases are more easily integrated into individuals' self-concepts and life narratives, reinforcing feelings of self-congruence. Importantly, perceptions of authenticity are not uniform across social classes. Research in social class psychology indicates that lower social class individuals tend to associate authenticity with relational closeness, shared meaning, and emotional connection, whereas higher social class individuals are more likely to link authenticity to uniqueness, autonomy, and distinction (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2012; Stephens et al., 2014). These

class-based interpretations of authenticity help explain why social class translates into distinct consumption patterns, particularly in the preference for experiential versus material purchases.

### 2.2.3 Self esteem and identity expression

Self-esteem and identity expression refer to the use of consumption as a means of communicating who one is, reinforcing self-worth, and expressing personal or social identity (Belk, 1988; Ahuvia, 2005). Consumption choices function as symbolic resources that allow individuals to construct and maintain coherent self-definitions. Experiences are particularly effective tools for identity construction because they become embedded in personal narratives and autobiographical memory, shaping how individuals understand themselves over time (Tumbat & Belk, 2011; Orazi & Van Laer, 2023). From a social class perspective, identity motives provide an important mechanism through which class shapes consumption preferences. Lower social class identity expression tends to emphasize relational belonging, shared experiences, and social connectedness, whereas higher social class identity expression is more likely to be individualistic, autonomy-focused, or status-oriented, using consumption to signal distinction and personal achievement (Stephens et al., 2014; Berger & Ward, 2010). These differences help explain why individuals from different social classes find different forms of consumption expressive or fulfilling.

Concluding, these psychological mechanisms serve as the processes through which social class influences consumption preferences. These mechanisms may explain why experiences often hold greater subjective value for certain consumers and material goods for others. For instance, meaning seeking drives individuals to prefer purchases that provide purpose or narrative coherence (Mead & Williams, 2023; Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014), while authenticity ensures alignment with the self, enhancing satisfaction with experiences (Sun & Pham, 2023). Identity expression reinforces the integration of experiences into one's personal narrative, which increases their relative importance over material possessions (Van Laer & Orazi, 2023; Tumbat & Belk, 2011). Collectively, these mechanisms may mediate the relationship between social class and experiential versus material consumption, providing a theoretically grounded explanation for observed behavioral differences. Providing the hypothesis:

**H2:** Different psychological mechanisms: meaning-seeking, authenticity, and self esteem / identity expression mediate the effect of social class on preference for experiential versus material consumption.

Whereas, lower-class consumers' relational and contextual orientations enhance the salience of meaning, authenticity, and shared memories, increasing their preference for *experiential* consumption. And higher-class consumers' autonomy and status-focused orientation strengthen identity-expression motives, which may favor symbolic *material* consumption.

## 2.3 Social factors

While psychological mechanisms explain how social class translates into consumption preferences, social factors are able to determine when these mechanisms matter more or less. Social factors, including relationship-building motives, social identity/status concerns, and need to belong, determine the contextual strength of psychological processes linking social class to consumption preferences. Research indicates that social motives amplify or attenuate how individuals interpret the value of purchases (Chan & Mogilner, 2017; Tumbat & Belk, 2011; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). For example, individuals with strong relationship-building motives are more sensitive to the relational related benefits of experiences, enhancing the impact of meaning seeking on experiential preference. Similarly, consumers with pronounced status or identity motives may focus more on how purchases signal personal distinctiveness, potentially altering the influence of authenticity and identity-expression mechanisms. In essence, social factors are able to condition the psychological pathways by which social class shapes consumption, determining when and for whom these mechanisms exert the strongest influence.

### 2.3.1 Relationship-building

Relationship-building refers to the motivation to use consumption as a means of fostering interpersonal connection and shared emotional experiences. Prior research shows that shared experiences are particularly effective in strengthening social bonds because they create common memories and promote feelings of closeness (Chan & Mogilner, 2017). Individuals with strong relationship-building motives therefore tend to derive greater value from collective and socially engaging experiences. From a psychological perspective, high

relationship-building motivation amplifies the impact of meaning and authenticity mechanisms on experiential preference, as experiences are perceived as opportunities for connection rather than individual possession. Conversely, when relationship-building motives are weak, the social value of experiences diminishes, and material goods may appear equally or more attractive due to their functional or individual utility.

### 2.3.2 Social identity & status

Consumption is frequently used as a symbolic resource to signal social identity, group membership, and status (Bourdieu, 1984; Tumbat & Belk, 2011). Status motives shape not only what people consume but also how consumption is interpreted. When status concerns are salient, individuals may prefer experiences that carry symbolic distinction, such as exclusive travel, high-end cultural events, or invitation-only experiences, because these signal taste, privilege, and social positioning. At the same time, strong status motives can weaken authenticity- or meaning-driven pathways by shifting attention away from intrinsic fulfillment toward external recognition. In such cases, experiences may become “re-materialized,” functioning similarly to material goods as status symbols rather than as sources of personal meaning (Tumbat & Belk, 2011). Thus, status motives can both enhance experiential preference and redirect it toward materialistic forms of symbolic consumption.

### 2.3.3 Need to belong & social network strength

The need to belong reflects a fundamental human motivation to form and maintain meaningful interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Individuals with a strong need to belong are particularly sensitive to the social and relational value of consumption, including opportunities for social sharing, conversational relevance, and relational signaling. Experiences are especially appealing under these conditions because they can be easily shared, discussed, and embedded within social networks, thereby enhancing their psychological value. In contrast, when the need to belong is relatively low, the social benefits of experiential consumption are less salient, weakening the psychological appeal of experiences. As a result, material goods may become equally attractive, as they satisfy personal needs without relying on social engagement.

Empirical and theoretical evidence supports the proposition that social factors act as boundary conditions for psychological mechanisms. That is, the effect of meaning seeking, authenticity, and identity expression on consumption preferences is not uniform across individuals but is moderated by the strength of social motives. Consumers with high relational orientation or a strong need to belong are more likely to translate psychological benefits into experiential purchase preference, whereas those with low social motivation or heightened status focus may experience a weaker or differently directed effect. This moderated pathway explains variation in how social class impacts consumption through psychological mechanisms. Following into the third hypothesis:

**H3:** Social factors moderate the indirect effect of social class on preference for experiential versus material consumption through psychological mechanisms.

Whereas, the mediated relationship is stronger leaning to experiential consumption for individuals with higher social motivations.

## 2.4 Consumer preference: experiential vs. material consumption

Consumer preference for experiential versus material purchases represents a central dimension in understanding modern consumption behavior. Experiential consumption refers to expenditures on events, activities, or life experiences that are lived, rather than acquired as tangible objects. Examples include traveling, attending concerts, or participating in workshops. Material consumption, by contrast, involves acquiring physical goods, such as electronics, clothing, or luxury items, which are tangible and can be possessed over time (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014).

### 2.4.1 Experiential consumption

Extensive research in consumer psychology has documented the so-called *experiential advantage*, referring to the tendency for experiential purchases to generate greater and more enduring happiness than material goods. Experiences typically elicit stronger emotional responses because they involve anticipation, active engagement, and post-consumption reflection, all of which enhance emotional intensity and prolong hedonic impact (Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015). Unlike material possessions, experiences unfold over time and are remembered subjectively, allowing consumers to reinterpret them in increasingly positive ways.

In addition to their emotional benefits, experiential purchases often promote social integration. Experiences are frequently shared with others or discussed in social contexts, strengthening interpersonal bonds and contributing to social well-being (Chan & Mogilner, 2017). This shared nature enhances the relational value of experiences and increases their conversational and social capital. Moreover, experiences play a central role in identity construction and self-expression. Because they become embedded in autobiographical memory and life narratives, experiences are easily incorporated into how individuals define themselves and communicate who they are to others (Belk, 1988; Tumbat & Belk, 2011).

Empirical studies consistently show that, when controlling for income and other contextual factors, experiential consumption is associated with higher levels of subjective well-being than material acquisition (Weingarten, Goodman, & Irmak, 2021). One reason for this advantage is that experiences are less susceptible to negative social comparison. Because they are often unique, personal, and non-transferable, experiences are less easily evaluated against others' possessions, reducing comparison-driven dissatisfaction and further amplifying their satisfaction value (Gilovich et al., 2015).

#### 2.4.2 Material consumption

Material consumption, in contrast, is characterized by tangible ownership, durability, and functional utility. Material goods offer clear benefits in terms of control, security, and long-term use, and they often serve as visible markers of achievement, social distinction, or status (Belk, 1988; Tumbat & Belk, 2011). Through ownership, consumers can signal taste, success, and social position in ways that are immediately observable to others.

Material purchases are particularly effective in satisfying autonomy, prestige, and status-related motives. Research in social class psychology suggests that higher social class individuals, who emphasize independence, personal control, and hierarchical positioning, may be especially drawn to material goods that communicate distinction or exclusivity (Kraus & Keltner, 2009; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). At the same time, material goods can provide a sense of stability and utility, making them appealing to individuals with pragmatic orientations or concerns about long-term security.

Although material consumption may be more vulnerable to social comparison and hedonic adaptation than experiential consumption, it remains an important domain of consumer value.

Rather than being inherently inferior, material purchases fulfill different psychological and social functions, particularly when consumption is oriented toward status signaling, control, or functional necessity. Understanding these distinct pathways is essential for explaining why consumers differ in their preferences for experiential versus material consumption.

Social class plays a central role in shaping consumption preferences. Individuals from lower social-class backgrounds tend to favor experiential purchases, driven by relational and contextual orientations that emphasize connection, belonging, and shared meaning. In contrast, those from higher social classes are more inclined toward material goods, reflecting motives related to autonomy, self-expression, and status signaling.

These relationships are not direct but are shaped by underlying psychological mechanisms. Meaning seeking, authenticity, and identity integration mediate the link between class and consumption, making experiential purchases especially appealing when these psychological needs are salient. At the same time, social factors moderate these effects. Relationship-building motives and a strong need to belong amplify preferences for experiential consumption, whereas status-oriented motives can shift preferences back toward material goods or prompt individuals to reinterpret experiences as status symbols.

Although experiential purchases generally provide greater well-being than material ones, this is not universal. Variations in social class, psychological needs, and social factors create meaningful differences in how consumers evaluate and choose between experiences and material goods. Overall, this research argues that preferences for experiential versus material consumption are shaped by the dynamic interaction of social class, psychological mechanisms, and social factors rather than by stable or uniform individual tendencies.

Despite the general experiential advantage, individual differences significantly shape preferences. Key determinants include (and are visualized in a conceptual framework in figure 1):

- Psychological mechanisms: meaning seeking, authenticity, and identity expression influence whether an individual derives more satisfaction from experiences or material goods (Mead & Williams, 2023; Sun & Pham, 2023).

- Social factors: relationship-building motives, need to belong, and status concerns modulate the value of experiences versus material purchases (Chan & Mogilner, 2017; Tumbat & Belk, 2011).
- Social class: lower-class consumers, due to relational and contextual orientations, may prefer experiences that strengthen social bonds and personal meaning. Higher-class consumers, with autonomy and status orientation, may prefer material goods or extraordinary experiences that signal distinction (Piff et al., 2010; Kraus et al., 2012).

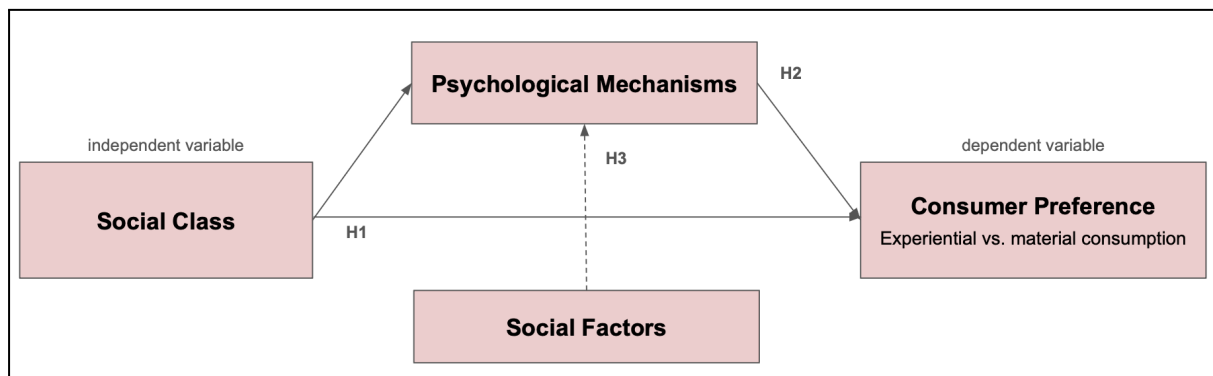


Figure 1: conceptual framework

By explicitly integrating these factors, this research aims to explain variation in consumer preference for experiences versus material goods and to test the mediated-moderation model proposed in the theoretical framework.

## 3. Methodology

The methodology section explains the research design of this research. This part explains the sampling and the design of the survey. This part will also explain which variables are used and how the measurement of these variables is done by the used methods and regression models.

### 3.1 Participants and design

#### 3.1.1 Research design

This research adopted a single design using quantitative survey research. The theoretical research beforehand helped refine the constructs, identify salient psychological and social factors, and ensure that the survey items reflected real-world consumer reasoning. This exploratory step aligns with recommendations for construct refinement in consumer psychology.

The main empirical component is a cross-sectional quantitative research implemented through an online Qualtrics.com survey. This approach is appropriate for measuring latent psychological constructs, testing mediation and moderation effects, and obtaining sufficiently large samples for statistical inference. Quantitative surveys also allow the application of validated multi-item scales and provide the statistical power needed to examine subtle psychological mechanisms underlying consumption preferences (Hair et al., 2020). The survey (which could be found in appendix 1) was divided into 5 constructs; ‘social class’, ‘psychological mechanisms’, ‘social factors’, ‘Preference material or experiential consumption’ and ‘control variables’. Moreover, the survey held 1 attention question for validation of the participants' purpose and added 1 comments section if anyone wanted to add something. The survey was conducted in the English language to get a broader audience. The average time to complete the survey was approximately 6,5 minutes (6.55 minutes). Participants were given the opportunity to complete the survey on any chosen device (a desktop / tablet or smartphone) to make it more convenient for participants to participate and finish the survey. To make sure that all the questions were answered within the survey, all the questions were required to be answered. The participants could also not move back to their previous answered questions, this was done so the participants would not be manipulated

with later questions on their previous answers. The full survey could be found in figures 3-11 in appendix 8.2.

To collect participants, a convenience sampling (using the network of the researcher) strategy was combined with snowball sampling, where participants were encouraged to share the survey within their networks. Additionally, the survey link was distributed through a social media influencer to reach a broader audience and increase demographic variation. Participants were presented with an informed-consent screen and proceeded through the questionnaire until the final debriefing question.

This methodology was chosen for its efficiency, scalability, and suitability for mediation/moderation modeling. Limitations, such as potential sampling bias and self-report distortion, were mitigated by ensuring anonymity, counterbalancing question order, and including both positively and negatively worded items in several scales.

### 3.1.2 Participants

A total of  $N = 187$  participants completed the survey. After checking the survey for outliers, excluding incomplete responses and those failing the attention check,  $N = 175$  remained for analysis. Participants ranged in all age categories and represented 15 nationalities, whereas the most participants were from NL (72%). The gender distribution was 69.1% female, 29.7% male, and 2.1% preferred not to say. Income ranges, education levels, and professional status varied widely, supporting heterogeneity in perceived social class, which is necessary for testing class-based effects. A summarized overview of the demographics of the participants can be found in table 2 in appendix 8.1.

## 3.2 Measures

All measures used 7-point Likert scales unless otherwise noted (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach's alphas will be reported after data collection. Using a consistent scale throughout the questionnaire will avoid creating confusion among the participants (Saunders et al., 2012).

### 3.2.1 Psychological mechanisms

Psychological mechanisms were conceptualized as internal meaning-making processes that shape how individuals interpret and evaluate consumption. Drawing on prior research, these mechanisms were expected to influence preferences for experiential versus material consumption by emphasizing meaning, authenticity, and identity relevance. In the present research, psychological mechanisms were initially operationalized through three dimensions: meaning seeking, authenticity orientation, and identity expression. These dimensions were measured using items adapted from established and validated psychological scales and recontextualized for consumer decision-making.

### **3.2.1.1 Meaning seeking**

Psychological mechanisms were conceptualized as internal meaning-making processes that shape how individuals interpret and evaluate consumption. Drawing on prior research, these mechanisms were expected to influence preferences for experiential versus material consumption by emphasizing meaning, authenticity, and identity relevance. In the present research, psychological mechanisms were initially operationalized through three dimensions: meaning seeking, authenticity orientation, and identity expression. These dimensions were measured using items adapted from established and validated psychological scales and recontextualized for consumer decision-making. Measured using items adapted from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006), recontextualized for consumption (e.g., “I seek purchases that contribute to my sense of meaning or purpose”).

### **3.2.1.2 Authenticity orientation**

Meaning seeking reflects the extent to which individuals pursue consumption that contributes to a sense of purpose, personal significance, and long-term fulfillment. This dimension captures an internal, reflective orientation toward consumption, in which purchases are evaluated based on their ability to enrich one’s life narrative rather than provide immediate pleasure. Meaning seeking was measured using items adapted from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006), recontextualized to apply specifically to consumption decisions (e.g., “I seek purchases that contribute to my sense of meaning or purpose”).

### 3.2.1.4 Identity expression

Authenticity orientation refers to the motivation to make consumption choices that align with one's true self, values, and personal identity. Authentic consumption reflects a desire for self-congruence and resistance to externally imposed norms or purely instrumental motivations. Items measuring authenticity orientation were adapted from Lehman et al.'s (2019) Authenticity Scale and applied to consumer contexts. Participants indicated the extent to which their consumption choices reflected personal values and a sense of being true to oneself.

The initial operationalization of psychological mechanisms included items measuring meaning seeking (Q2), authenticity (Q3), and self-esteem/status-related identity expression (Q5). When all three item sets were combined into a single scale, internal consistency was moderate (Cronbach's  $\alpha \approx .62$ ), suggesting limited coherence among the dimensions.

Subsequent reliability, network, and cluster analyses indicated a clear structural distinction between the components. Items measuring meaning seeking and authenticity (Q2 and Q3) showed strong intercorrelations and consistently clustered together, forming a coherent psychological construct with good internal consistency ( $\alpha \approx .79$ ). In contrast, the Q5 items, which focused on self-esteem and status-related aspects of identity expression, clustered more closely with social identity and status items from the social factors construct (Q7 and partially Q1). This pattern suggests that Q5 captures externally oriented, socially comparative motives rather than internal psychological interpretation.

Based on these empirical and theoretical considerations, psychological mechanisms were operationalized in the final analyses as a composite construct consisting of meaning seeking and authenticity orientation (Q2 and Q3). Items related to self-esteem and status (Q5) were excluded from the psychological mechanisms.

### 3.2.2 Social factors

Social factors were conceptualized as social motivations that shape how individuals derive value from consumption through interpersonal connection, social identity, and belonging. Based on the theoretical framework, social factors were expected to influence preferences for experiential versus material consumption by emphasizing relational value, social meaning, and identity expression. Social factors were operationalized through three interrelated

dimensions: relationship-building orientation, social identity and status motives, and need to belong/social network strength. In the analyses, social factors were examined both as a composite construct and, where relevant, through their underlying dimensions.

### **3.2.2.1 Relationship-Building orientation**

Relationship-building orientation captures the extent to which individuals value consumption as a means of fostering interpersonal connection and shared emotional experiences. This dimension reflects a socio-emotional focus on togetherness, bonding, and relational closeness. Items for this subconstruct were drawn from and adapted based on prior research by Caprariello and Reis (2013) and Chan and Mogilner (2017), which emphasizes the relational benefits of experiential consumption. This dimension was measured using items from Q4 and Q6, which assess preferences for socially engaging and emotionally meaningful interactions.

### **3.2.2.2 Social identity & status motives**

Relationship-building orientation captures the extent to which individuals value consumption as a means of fostering interpersonal connection and shared emotional experiences. This dimension reflects a socio-emotional focus on togetherness, bonding, and relational closeness. Items for this subconstruct were drawn from and adapted based on prior research by Caprariello and Reis (2013) and Chan and Mogilner (2017), which emphasizes the relational benefits of experiential consumption. This dimension was measured using items from Q4 and Q6, which assess preferences for socially engaging and emotionally meaningful interactions.

### **3.2.2.3 Need to belong & social network strength**

Social identity and status motives refer to the use of consumption as a means of expressing social identity, gaining recognition, and signaling status within a social context. Although traditionally associated with material consumption, recent research suggests that experiences can also function as status symbols when they convey distinction or social recognition. Items for this dimension were adapted from the Status Consumption Scale (Eastman et al., 1999), reformulated to capture status and identity motives without an explicit materialistic framing. In this research, these motives were primarily measured through items from Q7, supplemented by conceptually related status-oriented items.

Items from questions Q4, Q6, Q7, and Q8 were initially conceptualized as a single overarching construct labelled social factors. A reliability analysis showed that this combined scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha \approx .84$ ), indicating that the items collectively measure a coherent social orientation.

### 3.2.3 Consumer preference: experiential vs. material consumption

Consumption preference was conceptualized as individuals' relative orientation toward experiential versus material consumption, reflecting whether consumers derive greater value from experiences or from tangible possessions. Building on prior research, experiential consumption is defined as spending primarily undertaken to acquire lived experiences, while material consumption refers to spending on physical objects intended for ownership. This distinction has been shown to capture meaningful differences in consumer motivation, well-being, and identity expression (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014).

Consumption preference was conceptualized as individuals' relative orientation toward experiential versus material consumption, reflecting whether consumers derive greater value from experiences or from tangible possessions. Building on prior research, experiential consumption is defined as spending primarily undertaken to acquire lived experiences, while material consumption refers to spending on physical objects intended for ownership. This distinction has been shown to capture meaningful differences in consumer motivation, well-being, and identity expression (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014).

The experiential versus material preference scale (Q13\_1–Q13\_7) demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha \approx .89$ ), indicating that the items reliably measure a single underlying construct. Network and cluster analyses further showed that the items strongly clustered together, supporting the interpretation of the scale as capturing one coherent preference dimension.

These results provide strong evidence for the reliability and construct validity of the consumption preference measure and support its use as a unidimensional outcome variable in the present research.

### 3.2.4 Social class

Subjective social class is defined as an individual's perceived rank within the social hierarchy, shaped by comparisons to others and evaluations of one's own resources, opportunities, and social recognition (Kraus et al., 2009). This perception influences cognition, emotion, and behavior by shaping individuals' sense of control, entitlement, and identity (Piff et al., 2010).

Research has shown that individuals who perceive themselves as higher in social class tend to experience greater autonomy, personal control, and access to opportunities, whereas those who perceive themselves as lower in social class are more likely to develop relational and contextual orientations. These differences have been shown to affect decision-making, social behavior, and consumption patterns (Yan & Vieites, 2022). Given the focus of this research on consumption preferences, subjective social class is therefore an appropriate and theoretically grounded construct.

To measure subjective social class, this research employed a multi-item self-report scale adapted from prior research by Kraus et al. (2009), Piff et al. (2010), and Yan and Vieites (2022). These studies emphasize the importance of capturing both economic perceptions and social identity-related aspects of class.

The social class scale (Q1\_1–Q1\_8) demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha \approx .78$ ). Furthermore, network and cluster analyses indicated that the items loaded onto a single, coherent construct. This supports the interpretation of Q1 as a valid measure of subjective social position and provides additional evidence for the construct validity of the social class scale.

### 3.2.5 Control variables

To account for alternative explanations and isolate the effects of social class, psychological mechanisms, and social factors on consumption preferences, several demographic variables were included as control variables. Prior research shows that demographic characteristics can influence consumption behavior and perceptions of social class (Piff et al., 2010; Stephens et al., 2012). Including these variables helps ensure that the observed effects are not driven by basic demographic differences.

The following control variables were included in the analyses: age, gender, nationality, income, and professional status. Age was controlled because consumption preferences tend to shift across the life course, with older individuals placing greater value on meaningful and experiential consumption. Gender was included due to documented differences in social orientation and consumption behavior. Nationality was controlled to account for potential cultural differences in consumption norms and value systems, given the international composition of the sample. Income was included as an objective socioeconomic indicator that may influence access to consumption opportunities. Lastly, professional status (e.g., student or employed) was controlled to account for differences in life context and financial stability.

Additionally, an attention check item was included to assess participants' attentiveness and ensure the validity of the responses. Participants who failed this check were excluded from the analyses.

### 3.3 Data handling and analysis

Prior to the main analyses, the dataset was screened in Excel for comprehensive preprocessing and data-screening procedures to ensure accuracy and reliability. All incomplete responses were removed to avoid distortions in scale calculations and model estimates. Participants who failed the attention-check item were excluded, as inattentive responding could threaten data validity. Finally, the dataset was inspected for outliers and assessed for normality through visual plots and descriptive statistics (12 responses needed to be removed). The data set was exported and imported to R studio to compute further analysis. After that, the next step was to get simple descriptive statistics of the sample frame which includes the mean, standard deviation, etc. The next step was to check the reliability and validity of the constructs. And in the last step to test the different hypotheses, multiple regression tests were done.

To check if the scales were measuring the same thing, the questions of the source credibility and the purchase intention were tested with a factor analysis. This analysis is conducted to determine the validity through the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin (KMO) and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The KMO factor score is aimed to exceed 0.70 and to be minimum 0.50 (Hair et al., 2014). To check if the correlation matrix had significantly high correlations across variables, the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (BTS) was used, where the p-value should not exceed 0.01. The next step was determining the reliability of every construct by calculating

the Cronbach's alpha which must be equal to or higher than 0.60 to be considered reliable. After that, the correlation of the data was tested, where the constructs should not exceed  $r > 0.30$ .

Finally, after all the calculations regarding validation, the reliability and the multicollinearity of the data were done, multiple regression analysis for the independent variable (manipulation), the mediation and the control variables on the dependent variable were performed. To explain these results, this research has done some additional analyses to explain whether demographical factors explained the direction of the constructs.

## 4. Analysis and results

This result section presents the results of the conducted data analysis. First, this section provides an overview of the descriptive statistics, where an overview is given about the reliability and validity of the used measurements. After that, the hypotheses are tested and some additional analysis will be described.

### 4.1 Descriptive statistics

A detailed overview of the data gathered of this research is described in table 1 in chapter 3.1. This research gathered a total of 175 participants. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the constructs (mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum) which could be found in appendix 8.3.

Even though the constructs which were used in this research were derived from existing questionnaires the questions needed to be tested for their validity and reliability. First the reliability and the validity of the constructs needed to be measured. The validity of the constructs refers to the extent to which an instrument measures what it intends to measure, while the reliability refers to the ability of the construct to measure consistently. There are 4 constructs which were measured in this research: 'social class', 'psychological mechanisms', 'social factors' and 'preference: experiential vs. material'. The Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the reliability and the internal consistency. To measure the validity, a factor analysis is used. After that, the factor analysis was measured (as mentioned in the method section) by Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO), the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (BTS) and their correlation.

To be considered reliable, the Cronbach's Alpha of a construct needs to be 0.7 or higher and exceed at least 0.6 to be accepted for the research. As mentioned before in 3.2, a view constructs were changed after testing the results on their validity. After that the constructs show them exceeding the required level of 0.6 and most were higher than 0.70, which means that all the constructs are considered reliable and are consistent.

To measure the validity of the constructs, the first analysis which was done, was to measure the overall validity, then the individual constructs were measured. The constructs needed to reach at least 0.5 for the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin (KMO) test, where a higher value indicates a higher validity. The KMO of each construct, which is shown in table 4 in appendix 8.4, exceeded the minimum of 0.5 and therefore could all be considered valid individually. In

addition to the KMO, Bartlett's test has been tested. This test also exceeded its restrictions, because almost all constructs were significant with a p-value lower than the required  $p < 0.01$ . Only the Self-Esteem and Status did not exceed this test. With these outcomes it could be stated that the results done with further testing will be valid and reliable enough to correlation.

Besides the tests for the validity and reliability, the independent variables also needed to be tested if they are not too overly correlated with each other, because too highly correlated independent variables are not desirable for the data analysis of a regression model. The independent variables predict each other and therefore no additional variance is explained. To see if the constructs of this model are correlated with each other, the correlation between each construct was tested. The correlation should not exceed 0.8 to measure against each other. The correlation between the constructs which will be measured against each other did all not exceed 0.8. The correlation of each construct could be found in table 5 appendix 8.4 .

All the constructs were tested on their validity, reliability and its multicollinearity. The results have shown that these constructs are valid, reliable and that there is no multicollinearity, which indicates that these constructs are approved.

## 4.2 Hypotheses testing

After all the checks have been done regarding the constructs, the hypotheses were tested. The hypotheses were tested using multiple regression analysis. Lastly, tests have been done regarding control variables. The results of these tests can be found in different table 6 in appendix 8.5 . A summary of the hypotheses tested is included in table 1, shown at the end of the hypothesis testing where the adapted conceptual framework is visualized in figure 2.

### 4.2.1 Hypothesis 1

The first test was conducted for H1 (social class has a direct effect on consumption preference (experiential vs. material consumption)). This test conducted a linear regression between the independent variable social class) and the dependent variable (consumption preference (experiential vs. material)). A linear regression analysis revealed that social class did not significantly predict consumption preference ( $\beta = .07$ ,  $p = .37$ ). The model explained only a negligible proportion of variance in consumption preference ( $R^2 = .005$ ).

To explore the potential non-linear effects of social class on consumption preference, participants were categorized into low, middle, and high social class groups based on tertiles of perceived social class. A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences in consumption preference across the three groups,  $F(2,172) = 0.13$ ,  $p = .88$ . Mean levels of experiential preference were highly similar across groups (low-class = 4.09, middle-class = 4.12, high-class = 4.16). These findings indicate that social class does not exert a direct effect on consumption preference, even when modeled non-linearly.

Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was not supported and shows that social class does not have a significant direct effect on consumption preference for experiential or material consumption.

#### 4.2.2 Hypothesis 2

Although no direct effect of social class on consumption preference was found, subsequent mediation analyses demonstrated that social class influences consumption preference indirectly through psychological mechanisms. This pattern is consistent with a full mediation model, suggesting that class-based differences in consumption preferences are primarily psychological rather than direct.

The second set of tests were done for H2 (psychological mechanisms mediate the effect of social class on preference for experiential versus material consumption). To test this hypothesis, a series of regression analyses was conducted. First, social class significantly predicted psychological mechanisms, indicating that individuals with a higher perceived social class reported stronger orientations toward meaning seeking, authenticity, and identity integration ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $p = .007$ ). Second, psychological mechanisms significantly predicted consumption preference when controlling for social class ( $\beta = .30$ ,  $p = .001$ ), such that stronger psychological mechanisms were associated with a greater preference for experiential over material consumption. When psychological mechanisms were included in the model, the direct effect of social class on consumption preference was no longer significant ( $\beta = .02$ ,  $p = .81$ ). This pattern of results indicates a full mediation effect, suggesting that social class influences consumption preferences indirectly through psychological mechanisms rather than exerting a direct effect.

### 4.2.3 Hypothesis 3

Lastly, hypothesis 3 was tested (social factors moderate the indirect effect of social class on preference for experiential versus material consumption through psychological mechanisms). A moderation analysis including the interaction between psychological mechanisms and social factors revealed no significant interaction effect ( $\beta = .02$ ,  $p = .89$ ), indicating that the influence of psychological mechanisms on consumption preference does not depend on levels of social factors. Therefore, hypothesis 3 was not supported.

However, additional regression analyses showed that social factors exert a strong direct effect on consumption preference ( $\beta = .36$ ,  $p < .001$ ), independent of social class. Furthermore, social class significantly predicted social factors ( $\beta = .26$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that social class shapes social orientations, which in turn influence consumption preferences. Together, these findings indicate that psychological mechanisms and social factors operate as parallel pathways through which social class indirectly influences consumption preferences, rather than interacting in a moderating manner.

Taken together, these findings suggest that social class does not directly shape consumption preferences, nor does its effect depend on social context through moderation. Instead, social class operates indirectly by shaping psychological mechanisms, while social factors exert an independent, parallel influence on preferences for experiential versus material consumption. The summarized overview of the hypothesis and the results can be found in table 1.

	Testing	Result
<b>H1:</b> Social class has a direct effect on consumption preference (experiential vs. material consumption)	$SC \rightarrow CP$	Rejected
<b>H2:</b> Psychological mechanisms mediate the effect of social class on preference for experiential versus material consumption	$SC \rightarrow PM \rightarrow CP$	Accepted
<b>H3:</b> Social factors moderate the indirect effect of social class on preference for experiential versus material consumption through psychological mechanisms	$PM * SF \rightarrow CP$	Rejected
<b>H3':</b> Social factors moderate the indirect effect of social class on preference for experiential versus material consumption.	$SC * SF \rightarrow CP$	Rejected

<b>H3</b> ”: social factors mediate the effect of social class on preference for experiential versus material consumption.	SC → SF → CP	Accepted
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Table 1: Summarized overview of the results of the hypotheses

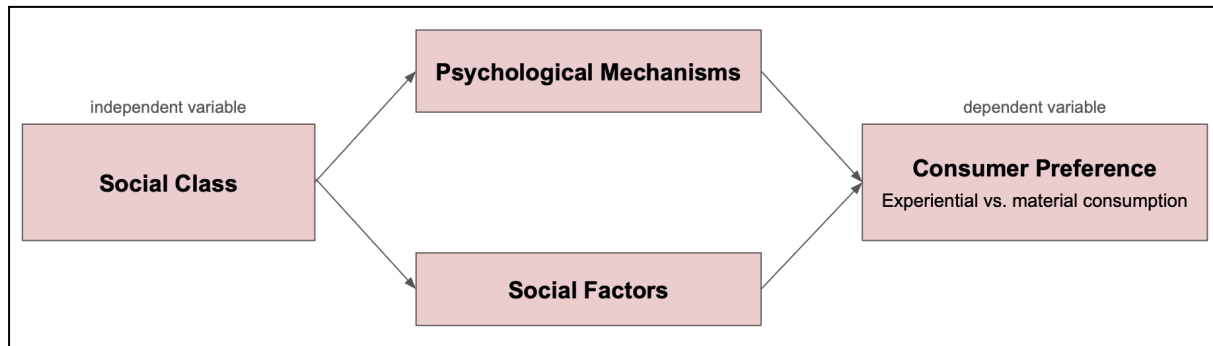


Figure 2: conceptual framework after results

#### 4.2.4 Additional analysis

To account for demographic differences, age, gender, nationality, income, and professional status were included as control variables. Among these variables, only gender showed a significant effect on consumption preference ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating systematic differences in preferences for experiential versus material consumption between genders (whereas females prefer experiential over material consumption). Age, income, professional status, and nationality did not significantly predict consumption preference. Nationality was included as a categorical variable with multiple levels; however, no significant differences between national groups were observed. An overview of the analysis could be found in table 7 in appendix 8.6.

## 5. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine how social class shapes consumer preferences for experiential versus material consumption by unpacking the psychological and social mechanisms underlying this preference. Rather than assuming that experiential consumption is universally preferred, this research adopted a socio-psychological perspective, arguing that consumption preferences emerge from the interaction between social class, internal psychological orientations, and social motivations. The findings provide several important insights that refine existing theory and challenge simplified interpretations of experiential consumption.

A central contribution of this research lies in demonstrating that social class does not exert a direct effect on consumption preference. Although prior literature frequently suggests that lower social class individuals favor experiential consumption due to relational orientations, and higher social class individuals favor material consumption for signaling and autonomy, the present findings indicate that such tendencies do not manifest as a straightforward class-based preference. Instead, social class operates indirectly by shaping how individuals psychologically interpret consumption. This challenges deterministic interpretations of social class and supports more nuanced frameworks that emphasize internal meaning-making processes over structural constraints alone.

Consistent with the proposed theoretical framework, psychological mechanisms fully mediated the relationship between social class and consumption preference. This finding aligns with research suggesting that experiences are valued not merely for their hedonic qualities, but for their ability to provide meaning, authenticity, and identity integration. Individuals with higher perceived social class reported stronger orientations toward these psychological mechanisms, which in turn predicted a greater preference for experiential consumption. Importantly, once these mechanisms were accounted for, social class no longer explained variance in consumption preference. This suggests that class-based differences in consumption are primarily psychological rather than economic or material in nature.

These results extend prior work by Gilovich et al. (2015), Bhattacharjee and Mogilner (2014), and Mead and Williams (2023) by showing why experiential consumption becomes attractive: not because experiences are inherently superior, but because they resonate with consumers' meaning-seeking and identity-based motivations. The findings also resonate with

social-class psychology research, which argues that higher-class individuals possess greater autonomy and control, allowing them to engage in consumption as a form of self-concept construction rather than necessity fulfillment. Experiential purchases, particularly those framed around authenticity and personal growth, may therefore be especially compatible with these psychological orientations.

Contrary to expectations, social factors did not moderate the relationship between psychological mechanisms and consumption preference. That is, relationship-building motives, need to belong, and social identity concerns did not strengthen or weaken the effect of psychological mechanisms on preference. However, social factors were found to exert a strong independent effect on consumption preference. Individuals with stronger social motivations consistently preferred experiential consumption, regardless of their social class or psychological mechanisms. This suggests that social motivations function as a parallel pathway, rather than a conditional one.

This finding has important theoretical implications. Much of the existing literature assumes that social context amplifies psychological processes, particularly for experiential consumption. The results suggest that experiences are not only meaningful because they align with identity or authenticity motives, but also because they facilitate social connection and belonging. This distinction helps reconcile why experiential consumption is often appealing across class boundaries, while still allowing for psychological differentiation.

Additional analyses further strengthen this interpretation. Psychological mechanisms were largely independent of demographic variables, suggesting that meaning seeking and authenticity are not simply reflections of age, gender, nationality, income, or professional status. In contrast, social factors were systematically related to age and gender, indicating that social motivations are more socially embedded and context-dependent. This reinforces the conceptual distinction between internal psychological orientations and external social motivations, both of which shape consumption preferences through different pathways.

Several methodological considerations should be acknowledged. First, the original conceptualization of psychological mechanisms required refinement. Self-esteem and status-related items clustered more strongly with social identity measures than with meaning and authenticity, suggesting that they represent a social rather than purely psychological dimension. While these adjustments improved construct validity, they also indicate that future

research would benefit from more refined measurement instruments that explicitly distinguish between identity-based psychology and status-driven social motives.

Furthermore, although the social factors scale demonstrated strong reliability, cluster analyses revealed meaningful subdimensions that could not be fully explored within the present model. Future studies could examine these subdimensions separately to better understand when social connection, status signaling, or need to belong exert distinct effects on consumption preferences.

Overall, the findings suggest that experiential consumption should not be treated as a universal or class-invariant preference, but rather as an outcome of interacting psychological and social processes shaped by social class. This perspective moves beyond simplistic narratives and contributes to a more integrated understanding of consumer behavior in contemporary markets.

## 6. Conclusion & implications

This research set out to answer the question of how social class influences consumer preferences for experiential versus material consumption. By integrating social class theory with psychological and social mechanisms, the research provides a nuanced account of why consumers differ in how they derive value from what they buy.

The findings demonstrate that social class does not directly determine whether individuals prefer experiences or material goods. Instead, social class shapes consumption preferences indirectly by influencing psychological orientations toward meaning, authenticity, and identity integration. These psychological mechanisms, rather than class itself, explain why experiential consumption becomes attractive. At the same time, social factors such as relationship-building motives and the need to belong exert a strong, independent influence on consumption preference, highlighting the importance of social connection in shaping experiential value.

Taken together, the results suggest that preferences for experiential versus material consumption emerge from the combined influence of social structure, internal meaning-making processes, and social motivations. Experiential consumption becomes valuable when it aligns with consumers' psychological needs and social contexts.

From a managerial perspective, these findings imply that experiential strategies should not be applied uniformly. Marketers should avoid superficial experiential framing and instead align offerings with consumers' underlying motivations. For consumers driven by meaning and authenticity, experiences should be positioned as identity-relevant and personally enriching. For socially motivated consumers, emphasis should be placed on shared moments, relational value, and social connection. Importantly, material products can also be reframed as experiential when marketed around emotion and self-expression.

For policymakers and researchers, the results underscore the importance of considering how inequality shapes not only what people can afford, but how they interpret value, meaning, and well-being. Understanding these psychological and social pathways provides a more comprehensive view of consumption in an unequal society and opens avenues for future research into sustainable consumption, well-being, and social cohesion.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that consumption preferences are not static traits or simple reflections of socioeconomic position. They are dynamic outcomes shaped by how individuals interpret their social world, construct meaning, and connect with others through consumption. By giving voice to these processes, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of experiential consumption and its role in contemporary consumer culture.

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## 8. Appendix

### 8.1 Appendix 1: Summarized overview of participants

N = 175	Items	N	Percentage
Gender	Male	52	29.71%
	Female	121	69.14%
	Non-binair / third gender	-	-
	Prefer not to say	2	1.14%
Age	Under 18	4	2.29%
	18-24	98	56.00%
	25-34	44	25.14%
	35-44	10	5.71%
	45-54	9	5.14%
	55-64	8	4.57%
	65+	2	1.14%
Nationality	AU	1	0.57%
	BE	1	0.57%
	BG	1	0.57%
	DE	19	10.86%
	HU	2	1.14%
	IR	1	0.57%
	ITA	1	0.57%
	LBN	1	0.57%
	LT	1	0.57%
	NL	126	72.00%
	PT	5	2.86%
	SLO	7	4.00%
	TR	3	1.71%
	UA	1	0.57%
	USA	5	2.86%
Professional status	Student	44	25.14%
	Working student	53	30.29%
	Part-time employed	15	8.57%
	Full-time employed	62	35.43%
	Unemployed	1	0.57%
	Retired	-	-
Income	Lower than €5.000	32	18.29%
	€5.000 – €10.000	36	20.57%
	€10.000 – €25.000	36	20.57%
	€25.000 – €50.000	42	24.00%
	€50.000 – €100.000	23	13.14%
	More than €100.000	6	3.43%

Table 2: distribution of participants

## 8.2 Appendix 2: Survey questions

In this appendix the questions of the survey are presented page by page, including the introduction.

0% Survey Completion

Dear respondent,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey!

This survey is conducting an academic study at Católica Lisbon School of Business and Economics about how people make choices in everyday life and what factors shape their personal preferences.

The survey will take around **5 minutes** to complete. Participating in this survey is completely **voluntary** and you can withdraw at any time.

There are no right or wrong answers, your answer is **completely anonymous** which will be treated confidentially and for academic research purposes only. If you have any questions or would like more information about the study, please feel free to contact: [s-twiemers@ucp.pt](mailto:s-twiemers@ucp.pt)

Next page >

Figure 3: page 1 of the survey

6% Survey Completion

\*Please indicate how much you (dis)agree with the following statements

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Compared to most people, I see myself as belonging to a higher social class.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel I have more financial security than most people around me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My social background gives me more opportunities than others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often think about my position in society.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that my current standard of living is comfortable.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I identify with people from higher social classes.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel respected because of my social background.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would place myself near the top of the social ladder.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Next page >

Figure 4: page 2 of the survey

13% Survey Completion

\*Please indicate how much you (dis)agree with the following statements

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I look for meaning and purpose in the things I buy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I prefer purchases that feel personally significant.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy purchases that help me learn or grow as a person.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

\*Please indicate how much you (dis)agree with the following statements

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I prefer to spend money on things that feel genuine to who I am.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I value experiences or possessions that reflect my true self.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel more satisfied when my purchases express who I really am.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Next page >

Figure 5: page 3 of the survey

25% Survey Completion

\*Please indicate how much you (dis)agree with the following statements

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I enjoy sharing experiences with others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Helping others or connecting with people is important to me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often think about how my spending choices affect other people.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

\*Please indicate how much you (dis)agree with the following statements

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I feel confident and respected in social settings.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Owning high-status products makes me feel more confident.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I sometimes use what I buy to show my social status.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Next page >

Figure 6: page 4 of the survey

38% Survey Completion

\*Please indicate how much you (dis)agree with the following statements

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither disagree or agree	Somewhat agree	Strongly Agree
I enjoy spending money on experiences that allow me to connect with others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sharing experiences with friends or family is more rewarding than acquiring possessions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel closer to others when I participate in shared experiences.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I choose what to buy, I consider how it affects my relationships.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often prefer experiences that can be enjoyed with others over solitary purchases.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Attention check

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Select 'somewhat disagree' to show your attention	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Next page >

Figure 7: page 5 of the survey

50% Survey Completion

\*Please indicate how much you (dis)agree with the following statements

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I often choose purchases that signal who I am to others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Experiences or possessions that make me stand out socially are more appealing to me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Some of my spending choices are motivated by how others will perceive me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy experiences that others admire or value socially.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Possessions and experiences can be used to show my place in society.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

\*Please indicate how much you (dis)agree with the following statements

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Feeling connected to others is an important factor in my purchasing decisions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I prefer purchases that help me feel part of a group or community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often consider how my spending affects my relationships with others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel happier when my purchases help me connect with others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Being part of a social group influences what I choose to buy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Next page >

Figure 8: page 6 of the survey

63% Survey Completion

\* Please indicate how much you (dis)agree with the following statements

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I prefer to spend my money on experiences/activities (e.g., events, travel) rather than items.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The experiences I have are more meaningful than the physical things I own.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often choose to "do something" rather than "have something" when spending extra money.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The value of a purchase for me comes from how memorable the experience is rather than how many things I possess.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe that doing things provides more fulfillment than buying things.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I look back on my purchases, experiences stand out more than objects.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I derive lasting satisfaction from memories of experiences more than from material items.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Next page >

Figure 9: page 7 of the survey

69% Survey Completion

\* What is your age?

Under 18

18 - 24

25 - 34

35 - 44

45 - 54

55 - 64

65 or older

\* What is your gender?

Male

Female

Non-binary / third gender

Prefer not to say

\* What is your nationality?

\* What is your current professional status?

Student

Working student

Part-time employed

Full-time employed

Unemployed

Retired

\* What is your yearly income?

Lower than €5,000

€5,000 – €10,000

€10,000 – €25,000

€25,000 – €50,000

€50,000 – €100,000

More than €100,000

Next page >

Figure 10: page 8 of the survey

100% Survey Completion

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.  
Your response has been recorded.

Figure 11: page 9 of the survey

### 8.3 Appendix 3: Descriptive statistics

Construct	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
<b>Social Class</b>	3.22	0.68	1.36	4.75
<b>Psychological Mechanisms</b>	3.97	0.57	1.50	5.00
- (MS) Meaning-Seeking	3.70	0.77	1.00	5.00
- (AU) Authenticity Orientation	3.88	0.75	1.33	5.00
- (SS) Self-Esteem and Status	3.04	0.76	1.00	5.00
<b>Social Factors</b>	2.07	0.57	2.07	5.00
- Social Connection (SE)	4.48	0.66	1.00	5.00
- Relationship Building (RB)	4.33	0.59	2.67	5.00
- Social ID / Status (SI)	2.79	0.90	1.00	5.00
- Need to Belong (NB)	2.96	0.86	1.00	5.00
<b>Preference: experiential vs material</b>	4.12	0.68	1.86	5.00

Table 3: descriptive statistics

### 8.4 Appendix 4: reliability, validity and correlation tests

Construct	N. items* *after reconstructing	Cronbach's $\alpha$	KMO	BTS
<b>Social Class</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>0.78</b>	<b>0.83</b>	P < 0.001
<b>Psychological Mechanisms</b>	<b>3 (MS, AU, SS)</b>	<b>0.78</b>	<b>0.72</b>	P < 0.001
- (MS) Meaning-Seeking	3	0.66	0.59	P < 0.001
- (AU) Authenticity Orientation	3	0.77	0.7	P < 0.001
- (SS) Self-Esteem and Status	2	0.83	0.5	P > 0.1
<b>Social Factors</b>	<b>4 (SE, RB, SI, NB)</b>	<b>0.85</b>	<b>0.84</b>	P < 0.001
- Social Connection (SE)	2	0.83	0.5	P < 0.001
- Relationship Building (RB)	3	0.63	0.65	P < 0.001
- Social ID / Status (SI)	5	0.85	0.86	P < 0.001
- Need to Belong (NB)	5	0.82	0.8	P < 0.001
<b>Preference: experiential vs material</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>0.89</b>	<b>0.89</b>	P < 0.001

Table 4: reliability and validity of the constructs

	SC	PM	MS	AU	SS	SF	SE	RB	SI	NB	CP
<b>(SC) Social Class</b>	1	<b>0.201</b>	0.141	0.179	0.250	<b>0.305</b>	0.144	0.172	0.336	0.146	<b>0.069</b>
<b>(PM) Psychological Mechanisms</b>	<b>0.202</b>	1	0.826	0.852	-0.086	0.212	0.548	0.338	0.030	0.086	0.254
- (MS) Meaning-Seeking	0.141	0.826	1	0.524	-0.193	0.034	0.206	0.123	-0.047	0.003	0.099
- (AU) Authenticity Orientation	0.179	0.852	0.524	1	0.033	0.244	0.310	0.304	0.152	0.108	0.268
- (SS) Self-Esteem and Status	0.250	-0.086	-0.193	0.033	1	0.367	-0.078	-0.030	0.489	0.241	-0.106
<b>(SF) Social Factors</b>	<b>0.305</b>	0.212	0.034	0.244	0.367	1	0.254	0.500	0.813	0.868	0.295
- Social Connection (SE)	0.144	0.548	0.206	0.310	-0.078	0.254	1	0.429	-0.078	0.105	0.244
- Relationship Building (RB)	0.172	0.338	0.123	0.304	-0.030	0.500	0.429	1	0.137	0.313	0.539
- Social ID / Status (SI)	0.336	0.030	-0.047	0.152	0.489	0.813	-0.078	0.137	1	0.550	0.083
- Need to Belong (NB)	0.146	0.086	0.003	0.108	0.241	0.868	0.105	0.313	0.550	1	0.206
<b>(CP) Preference: experiential vs material</b>	<b>0.069</b>	0.254	0.099	0.268	-0.106	0.295	0.244	0.539	0.083	0.206	1

Table 5: correlation between each individual construct

## 8.5 Appendix 5: Hypothesis testing

Hypothes	$\beta$	Sig.	R <sup>2</sup>
H1: SC + CP	0.07	0.37	0.005
H2: SC + PM PM + CP CP ~ SC + PM	0.17 0.30 0.02	0.007** <0.001*** 0.81	0.035 0.059 0.054
H3: PM * SF → CP H3': SC * SF → CP H3'': SC + SF PM + SF CP ~ SC + SF	0.02 -0.14 0.26 0.21 0.36	0.89 0.26 <0.001*** 0.005** <0.001***	0.11 0.08 0.088 0.039 0.077

Table 6: Summarized overview of the outputs of the hypotheses

\*\* significant at 0.01 level (2-sided)

\*\*\* significant at 0.001 level (2-sided)

## 8.6 Appendix 6: Additional analysis

Construct	Predictor	B	Sig.	R <sup>2</sup>
<b>Consumer preference (CP)</b>	Age	0.01	0.88	0.16
	Gender	<b>0.37</b>	<b>&lt; .001***</b>	
	Nationality	.	.	
	Income	-0.07	0.30	
	Professional status	0.06	0.30	
<b>Psychological Mechanisms (PM)</b>	Age	-0.08	0.12	0.07
	Gender	0.08	0.41	
	Nationality	.	.	
	Income	0.0	0.97	
	Professional status	0.01	0.84	
<b>Social Factors (SF)</b>	Age	<b>-0.11</b>	<b>0.014*</b>	0.28
	Gender	<b>0.25</b>	<b>0.004**</b>	
	Nationality	-	-	
	Income	0.01	0.90	
	Professional status	-0.05	0.27	

Table 7: Summarized overview of control variables on constructs

\* significant at 0.05 level (2-sided)

\*\* significant at 0.01 level (2-sided)

\*\*\* significant at 0.001 level (2-sided)