

# Journal of Undergraduate Research at NTU

Croft, R. (2018) The effects of experience engagement in shaping a less materialistic society. *Journal of Undergraduate Research at NTU*, Volume 1, Issue 1, p.60 – 88.

ISSN: 2516-2861

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# The effects of experience engagement in shaping a less materialistic society

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## Abstract

The progression of the digital connectivity trend has been disruptive in manipulating the emerging needs of consumers. Through equipping consumers with greater societal control and empowering them to strive for self-development, the classification of consumers as 'individuals' showcases the complexity of their purchasing preferences within contemporary society. These needs expose a shift away from materialism, as consumers are spending more time and money on experiences than on material possessions in order to express their individuality. This article explores the current value that possessions and experiences have in the life of individuals, and identifies the role that experience engagement has in influencing the societal shift away from materialism. Investigation into individuals' materialistic values provides key approaches for businesses to capitalise on such complexities, in order to successfully operate within the competitive Experience Economy. The article contributes to the existing body of research on material culture and experience engagement by focusing on the values and motivations of millennials. Research is based upon a mixed method approach, utilising a vast range of both quantitative and qualitative methods including: surveys, interviews, online and offline observations and an extensive case study analysis. Findings conclude that although the desire for experiences over possessions is apparent, millennials affiliation with material culture is still evident due to the role that possessions play in allowing experiences to shape identity. Consequently, it is anticipated that alongside material culture exists an experience culture, now identifying individuals by their experiences, rather than by their possessions. In studying the intrinsic role experiences play in fuelling individualism, it details the key attributes of the experiences millennials value the most when contributing to their identity. The article also considers how these characteristics are being challenged by society today, and the issues the delivery of experiences may face in the future.

**Key Words:** Identity; Material culture; Consumerism; Experience culture

## Introduction

The relevance of material culture is being compromised. The influx of opportunities for experiences presented to consumers aims to provide them with ways to adhere to their own control and become directly involved within society. This has intensified the complexity of their purchasing preferences, and has led to an individualised approach to consumerism. The classification of consumers as 'individuals' has resulted in the increased desire for experiences over possessions, making the Experience Economy now one of the most important global trends in marketing (Lazarus, 2017). The popularity of experience consumption in order to achieve a differentiated identity has provoked a societal shift away from materialism. The outcome of the shift will be discussed with the aim of exploring the current value that possessions and experiences have in the life of individuals, and identifying the role that experience engagement has had in influencing a less materialistic society. For the purpose of this study, the term engagement is defined as the participation within something, for example, an experience. Studying such complexities will grant a contemporary view of how this shift has affected consumers' expectations of both possessions and experiences in satisfying individuality. The article will firstly consider existing knowledge within the field and the methodological approach, followed by the presentation and analysis of the key drivers of materialistic values. The article will then focus on the independent investigation of possessions and experiences.

## Literature Review

### The Evolution of Material Culture

Considering material culture, the starting point of this study, academics regard eighteenth-century England as the beginning of the consumer revolution. Material possessions were now valued based on their fashionability, rather than by their durability; causing the turnover of fashion to increase at a faster rate (McKendrick, et al. 1985). McKendrick identified an emerging desire for the new; a turning point in providing consumers channels for self-differentiation. It is argued that individualisation was key in driving consumer society. Individualisation radically re-determined social structures, values and attitudes. This led to the emergence of a society built upon novelty, something that was largely perpetuated by the economic system at the time (Miles, 1998). Through addressing the association between social status and the consumption of possessions, Miles contends that the economy was fundamental in driving the progression of material culture and manipulating the view that the consistent consumption of possessions was focal in defining individuality. This confirms the competitive nature of marketing and branding in influencing individuals' attitudes concerning the superiority of possessions. This also exemplifies consumer's trust in brands in fulfilling their self-identity.

An additional explanation was provided by Futurologist; Toffler, who implemented these foundations within a 'wave' framework which distinguished between production and consumption. Toffler argued the First Wave of change was the Agricultural Revolution; where societies had relied on necessary inventions, and the Second Wave of change was the rise of the industrial revolution; where

technology opened the door to mass production, resulting in the creation of endless identical products (Toffler, 1980). Characteristics of the Third Wave are most relevant to today's society. The wave presents a conflicting perspective of material culture's applicability, as opinions shift away from placing self-worth within the ownership of possessions. Toffler defines Third Wave civilisation as the blurring of the line between producers and consumers (Toffler, 1981). The controversy of individuals themselves taking a proactive role in achieving self-identity meant that the personal, and creatively satisfying qualities of Prosumer lifestyles, replaced the homogenous and market-intensive qualities that typified the Industrial Revolution (Toffler, 1980). Where once the market ethic categorized people by what they own, the Prosumer ethic places value on what people do (Toffler, 1980). This is insightful for the purpose of this study, as the emergence of consumer's desire to 'experience' something can be anticipated throughout the evolution of material culture. The Third Wave provides individuals with opportunities for advantaging their future through self-optimisation; something Toffler argues consuming possessions is less capable of ensuring. This projected the notion that experiences were the new form of exhibiting individuality, and was the key driver in diminishing materialistic values.

The influx of visual communication platforms exposed consumers to not just what people own, but what they experience. This presented a diversity of lifestyles for consumers to measure themselves against, which fueled consumers' ability to achieve a more complex version of the self (Toffler, 1980). Toffler's evaluation reveals the ambiguity of individual's genuine motivations when consuming concerning self-identity. Attfield theorised these motivations by the contradictory concepts of 'choice'; where people choose what to consume based on their own sense of individuality, and of 'lifestyle'; where people consume what is dictated by marketing forces that promise entry into a ready-made lifestyle (Attfield, 2000). This study builds on these interpretations by highlighting the specific motivations of consuming possessions and experiences in relation to how materialistically they satisfy individuals.

## **Opposing Portrayals of Materialism**

In view of the vast contributions that theorise materialism, a divide is evident between the positive and negative societal consequences that material culture implies. Miller positively argues that society's identification with material culture allows people to enhance their appreciation of humanity (Miller, 2010). Richins progresses Miller's debate by suggesting that people's most important possessions characterise their personal values, thus allowing people to form meaningful social relationships through physicalising their ideals (Richins, 1994). Kasser opposes this through asserting that individuals who exercise strong materialistic values place little emphasis on valuing social relationships (Kasser, 2002). Further research will re-assess the contemporary link between people and possessions, in order to gauge its impact in diving a less materialistic society.

## **Materialism and Experiences**

Thus far, literature has emphasised consumers' desire for experiences. Wallman's stuffocation theory contributes to this by signifying to the abundance of possessions people own. He proposes that consumers will respond to stuffocation by increasing their purchases of 'experimental products' for the experiences they provide (Wallman, 2015). Here, the relationship between individuals and material culture is still evident, however, individuals are looking beyond the acquisition of possessions and valuing their purpose post-purchase Pine and Gilmore further this by classifying the Experience Economy as a separate entity, as unlike commodities, goods and services, experiences exist only in the mind of the individual that encountered it (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Although acknowledged as internal to the consumer, social media is arguably a platform that allows experiences to become external, and therefore similar amongst multiple individuals. However, Carter and Gilovich dispute that engaging in experience can also be materialistic if the intention is to impress others (Carter and Gilovich, 2012). The fear of missing out (FOMO), presents itself as a societal consequence of materialism as it showcases that the Experience Economy is as likely to deliver the same stress as materialism as people are consuming experiences to satisfy their external motivations (Wallman, 2015). Research explores the role social media plays in emphasising the exclusivity of experiences and the effects of individuals' materialistic values on experience engagement.

## **Aims and Objectives**

The study further investigates the broad complexities of this subject and provides a more in-depth understanding of the effect experience engagement has had in shaping a less materialistic society. The unsolved gaps aim to be filled through the key research objectives; to determine the shifting societal consequences of materialism and define the factors within the Experience Economy that are influencing the shift; to explore consumers' attitudes towards materialism; by determining how and why individuals value experiences and possessions; to investigate why individuals are motivated to engage with experiences over possessions, and discover the value this has in forming self-identity; and finally to analyse how and why brands are satisfying the focus of providing experiences; and the affect they believe this has on their relationship with consumers.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Approach**

The study adopted a mixed method approach that combined both quantitative and qualitative processes. This allowed the research to capitalise on both traditions, whilst also ensuring their deficiencies were overcome (O'Leary, 2010). The extensive set of methods used meant that the complexity of the subject could be approached critically. This was strengthened by the focus on qualitative techniques, as they were deemed most appropriate in tackling the intimate relationship between individuals' attitudes, behaviours and influences regarding the consumption of possessions and experiences to inform their self-identity. This approach also enhanced the authenticity of responses on a vaster scale.

## Sampling Strategy

In challenging this complexity further, the study specifically targeted male and female millennials aged between 18-24. Whilst now more than 3 out of 4 millennials would choose to spend their money on experiences over possessions (Eventbrite, 2014), millennials are also recognised to be engaging in experiences to help form a sense of identity differently to how other generations expressed identity at their age (Meyerson in Rose and Johnson, 2015). The age range appeared most relevant in capturing millennials who were both narcissistic and appreciated being part of a social collective. The synergy between these characteristics proved interesting in determining their materialistic values in reference to possessions and experiences. Although niche, this approach was successful in ensuring the analysis and evaluation of findings delivered robust conclusions. Methods took place both online and offline, and a range of different participants representative of the whole age range were sourced from both Bristol and Nottingham. This was due to the high density of young people living in these cities (Legal and General, 2013) and the accessibility to these places on behalf of the researcher.

## Methods

The first strand of data collection procedures took the form of a part quantitative and part qualitative online survey of 50 males and 50 females. This gathered data represents a large proportion of the demographic and attitudes towards materialism and millennials' materialistic values. The survey also explored millennials' relationship with possessions and experiences in relation to their significance and personal preferences. The responses collected informed subsequent qualitative methods to investigate initial findings further.

The second strand of procedures were quantitative observations of 3 males, 3 females and of the top 6 most followed accounts on Instagram (Bishop, 2016). The 6 millennials who took part were randomly chosen based on the regularity of images posted to their personal Instagram accounts. The researcher's accessibility to their profiles was acquired. Online observations supported the presence of the types of possessions and experiences valued by millennials which were identified throughout the survey. Overall investigation into the key trends within users' last 30 posts of possessions and experiences was key in understanding social media in relation to experience popularity and the formation of self-identity.

The third stand consisted of a participant restaurant observation of 5 females aged between 18 and 24 at their annual Christmas meal on the 19/12/2016. Participants were selected based on their personal friendships with each other. As the first and second strand of procedures identified the preferential nature of social experiences, the participants selected were considered to provide an authentic representation of how and why experiences with friends were valued so greatly. Participants were informed that they were going to be observed throughout the meal. Although this made them more aware of their actions, their established relationship allowed them to feel comfortable and act naturally with one another. The exercise observed individual participation within a social experience to understand its key attributes. The observation schedule focused on physical setting, occasion,

company, use of digital connectivity, key happenings and presence of objects. Follow up questions concerning what they remembered to be special about the experience were asked to participants a week post-observation on 26/12/2016 to reinforce the validity of the data collected. The same questions were also asked a week after participants' Christmas days on 01/01/2017 to examine the mention of factors relating to both possessions and experiences. Analysis of responses provided key insights into what made these separate experiences special and memorable.

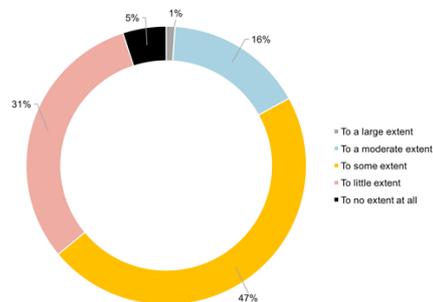
The fourth strand of procedures were bedroom observations of 6 males and 6 females. These aimed to advance perspectives into the importance of possession ownership, and the effect this has on representing millennials' sense of identity. Participants led the discussions about their most important possessions and the possessions they displayed around their bedroom. Thematic analysis of post-observation findings allowed for the categorisation of how and why millennials value possessions, details of which are all explained in the findings and discussion section.

The fifth strand involved face to face, semi-structured depth interviews with 6 males and 6 females to capture insights from individuals in isolation. The same 12 millennials were randomly selected across the 18-24 demographic to participate in both the bedroom observations and interviews. Due to the time restrictions presented by the study, participants were personally known to the researcher. However, this was valuable in allowing participants to speak confidently and honestly about their own possessions and experiences. During the interviews, participants were asked about 3 purchases of possessions they have made, and 3 experiences that they have had in order to explore the memorability of possessions and experiences. Individuals' influences and motivations in relation to experience engagement were also investigated. Particular emphasis was placed on the role social media has in influencing the desire to consume experiences, the appreciation millennials have for socially driven experiences, and the relationship between their experiences and their identity.

The final strand of procedures were email interviews with the industry experts; Edouard De Broglie, Director of the sensory experience Dans Le Noir and Maria Mihaylova, Social Media and Marketing for the Heineken Experience. These experts were selected as they are directly involved in providing innovative experiences for their customers. They were able to provide insight into how people engaged with their experiences and what was involved in their delivery. Lara Piras, a freelance Trend Forecaster for LSN Global and The Future Laboratory was selected for an interview due to her expert knowledge of how experiences are shaping different sectors within the fashion and lifestyle industry. Finally, Ian Kirby, UK Sales Manager at Nixon, was selected as his level of seniority within sales was valuable in investigating the incorporation of experience within a brands' commercial offering. The diversity of interviews granted professional perspectives on all aspects of how and why businesses are providing experiences. Insights gained were evaluated in relation to consumer findings and case studies.

## Findings and Discussion

### Materialistic Values: Key Drivers



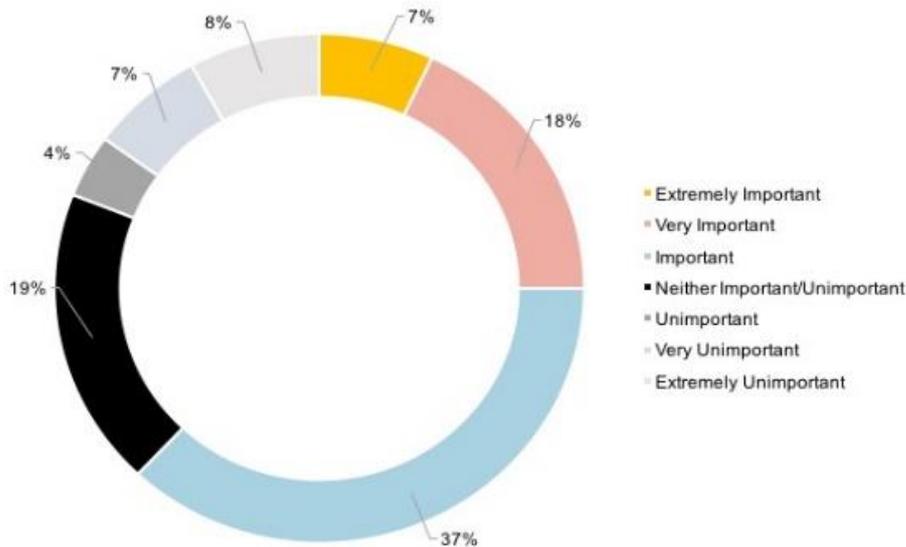
**Figure 1: Graph** - To what extent do you consider yourself as being materialistic?

Existing academic research discussed within the literature review highlighted that the accessibility to experiences has been effective in shifting the focus away from material consumption. However, survey results displayed in figure 1 show that the majority of millennials still consider themselves to be materialistic 'to some extent'. Although results are weighted towards the lower end of the materialistic spectrum, rationales provided by respondents present how their attitudes are being influenced by external forces that are working against their lower level of materialism. A particular recurrence was the role society plays in encouraging a higher level of materialism. One respondent stated: "in modern society, it is hard not to be materialistic, technology and fashion are huge parts of everyday life" (Survey, 2016). This is comparable to the additional justification: "it is now a necessary attribute to be relatively materialistic in order to keep 'in touch' with western civilisation" (Survey, 2016). These statements confirm the contemporary occurrence of Attfield's 'lifestyle' consumption theory amongst millennials, as marketers are dictating materialism as a 'lifestyle' that proves necessary for active participation in society today. A matured consumer understanding of this dictation was apparent amongst responses, one respondent argued "society teaches us that we need things when in fact it is simply a case of want" (Survey, 2016). This skepticism was not shown to be preventing material consumption fully, instead, the extent to which this manipulation has affected consumers was evident through the identification of material consumption as a 'routine'. The process of this routine was acknowledged by the response:

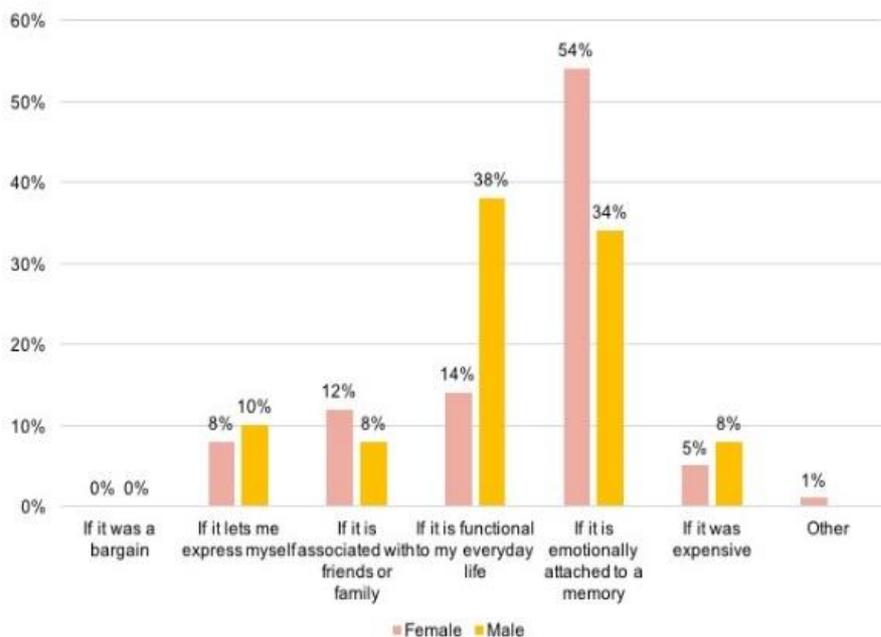
When I own something, I become complacent and do not think about life without it, in turn becoming dependent. Then when it is gone or broken, I realise I want it back, therefore buy it, hence being materialistic. However, I do not actively want anything new, but if I got something new, the same process would commence. I think in developed countries this is, for most people, a normal occurrence that is often not thought about (Survey, 2016).

Findings disclose that whilst a shift in focus from possessions to experiences is distinctive, the future progression of a less materialistic society will face opposition from the consumption 'routine'. As long as this is being perpetuated by both consumers and businesses, the ultimate success of the Experience Economy existing alone will be hindered.

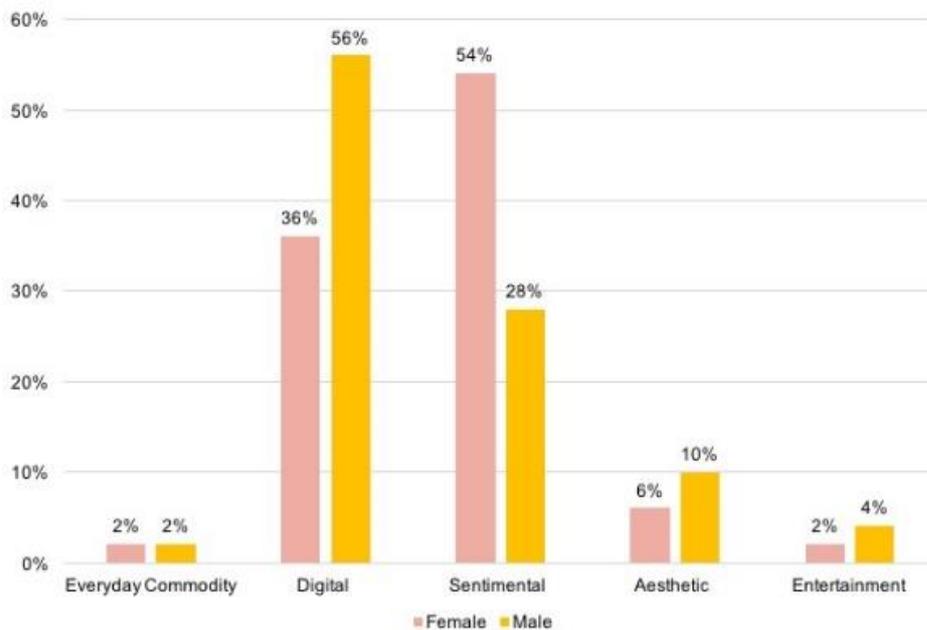
### The Value of Possessions



**Figure 2:** Graph - How important are material possessions in allowing you to be an individual?



**Figure 3:** Graph - What type of material possession do you value the most?



**Figure 4:** Graph - What makes a material possession valuable to you?

This section is dedicated to determining the current value of possessions and their relative importance in relation to experiences. The discussion is sectioned into the different purposes of millennials' possessions. These include; social, memorable, functional and emotional possessions. Following an overview of millennials' current relationship with possessions, it will be debated whether millennials' materialistic values are translated into these purposes.

Possessions appear in peoples' bedrooms for a number of different reasons. These range from survival and performance to compensations and self-expression, and are all considered necessary for people's existence (Zuccotti, 2015). The possessions found in millennials' bedrooms concluded that overall, self-expression was the focal reason for the ownership and presentation of their possessions. Participant 9 (male) exclaimed: "I think they reflect different parts of me" (Participant 9, Bedroom Observation, 2016). The significance of possessions was further reinforced by figure 2 which shows that millennials regard possessions as 'important' in allowing them to be an individual. The types of possessions that were considered to achieve this sense of identity are displayed in figure 3. Data shows that female respondents mostly value 'sentimental' possessions, whilst male respondents mostly value 'digital' possessions. This dissimilarity is arguably caused by the differing characteristics of digital and sentimental possessions. Digital possessions are updated into new versions, whereas sentimental possessions are often personally unique to the individual. This implies female millennials are less materialistic due to the unknown external purpose of the possession. Digital possessions, on the other hand, can be materialistically judged by their brand and specification. Figure 4 shows that possessions are valuable to females if they are 'emotionally attached to a memory', and valuable to

males if they are 'functional to their everyday life'. These explanations correspond to the types of possessions they value the most and contradicts the earlier assumption that digital possessions are materialistic, as they allow males to do other things. Although the appearance of a possession may be considered materialistic, their purposes are more complex and cannot be decided based on their aesthetic makeup. The following sections will further Richins' debate into possessions characterising values by stressing what these values are amongst millennials.

## Social Possessions



**Figure 5:** Image - Participant 4; 5 Most Important Possessions



**Figure 6:** Image - Participant 12; 5 Most Important Possessions

Findings from the bedroom observations oppose Kasser's viewpoint regarding materialism consenting to a lack of consideration towards people. Instead, a positive relationship between possessions and people was evident; consequently pointing in the direction of Miller's 'stuff' theory. Possessions that were given to participants consistently appeared within participants' 5 most important possessions. Participant 4 (female) spoke about her Grandma's ring (figure 5): "I don't get to have her but I get to have the ring which is a piece of her and represents her" (Participant 4, Bedroom Observation, 2016). This is similar to participant 12 (male) who spoke about his Great Grandad's pocket watch and ring (figure 6): "it is nice to know they were owned previously" (Participant 12, Bedroom Observation, 2016). These statements provide insight into the relevance that possessions have in physically representing relationships with people, and that ownership is important in adding personal meaning to the possession's value. Possessions have the ability to characterise someone's identity without the physical presence of that person, thus representing that individual for a longer period of time. The longevity of this connection is beneficial in allowing possessions to be inclusively shared and valued by other people. Nevertheless, this is problematic for the Experience Economy, as although experiences are durable in memory, their exclusivity only exists in the minds of the individuals involved.

Case Study 1: Footwear retailer TOMS and their 'One for One' model donates a new pair of shoes to a child in need for every pair purchased (TOMS, 2017). TOMS executed this campaign by using the twentieth-century materialistic marketing model 'buy one get one free' and has given it an experientialist twist. Instead of gaining the attention of consumers by encouraging them to purchase

more possessions, TOMS incentivises consumers to buy by giving them something invisible, intangible and more valuable (Wallman, 2015).

Case study 1 applies the insight that millennials value possessions due to the relationship they represent with people. TOMS promote the purchase of their products in enabling a better life for a child in need. Participant 2 (female) suggested: “it is satisfying to partake in someone else’s experience and doing something for someone else” (Participant 2, Interview, 2016). Through this non-traditional model, TOMS strengthen their relationship with their consumer by providing them with a possession and an experience that is shared with someone else within wider society. This was supported by Ian Kirby who expressed that providing an experimental element adds dimension to the product offering. He continued by suggesting it is imperative to drive an emotional connection between consumer and brand as this has far more longevity than with commodity brands where the relationship is purely transactional and short-term (Kirby, Interview, 2016). This signals to the emotional value experiences can bring to emotional purchases, like shoes, thus attaching more meaning to the possession. This allows the purchase to be less materialistic but still fulfil the ‘routine’ of possession acquisition.

## Memorable Possessions



**Figure 7:** Image - Participant 5; Notice Board



**Figure 8:** Image - Participant 2; 5 Most Important Possessions



**Figure 9:** Image - Participant 8; 5 Most Important Possessions

Possessions found in participants’ bedrooms were associated with their experiences. Possessions acted as physical reminders of their memories and represented periods of their lives. Participant 5 (male) outlined the use of his notice board (figure 7); “all of the things that I’ve done, I’ve collected something from that thing, brought it back, and displayed it on my notice board” (Participant 5, Bedroom Observation 2016). This outlines the consequences of materialism, as millennials are obtaining tangible evidence from an experience. This suggests the enduring memory of an experience is reinforced by a possession. This is problematic for an Experience Economy that exists alone. While experiences can be seen to shape a less materialistic society, a necessary level of materialism is needed to increase the likelihood of a memorable experience.

Many of the participants’ most important possessions were acquired for the memories attached to them. Participant 2 (female) described this analysis: “I like buying things that have a story to go

alongside it" (Participant 2, Bedroom Observation, 2016). She references her trainers that were acquired from a festival (figure 8): "I don't particularly wear them but I could never throw them out because of the memory" (Participant 2, Bedroom Observation, 2016). This reflects how the memory of an experience is able to elevate the value, which could otherwise be judged as materialistic. Alternatively, participant 8 (female) argued how a possession is able to elevate the value of an experience through the use of her diary (figure 9): "because I can document what was going on at the time it allows me to learn about myself" (Participant 8, Bedroom Observation, 2016). Participant 8 provides awareness of how possessions enable self-development through experiences. These balancing interpretations expose the millennial desire to re-live experiences, and the active role of possessions as secondary emphasisers of experiences.

## Functional Possessions

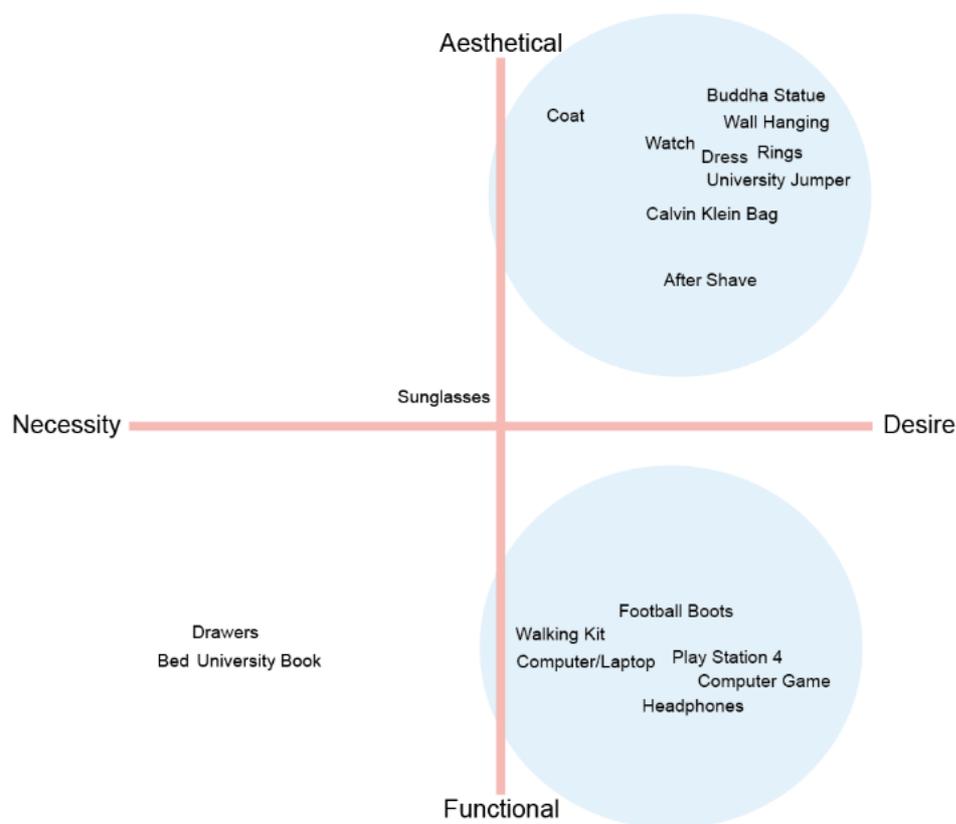


**Figure 10:** Image - Participant 11;  
5 Most Important Possessions

Possessions that allowed participants to 'do' something was a prominent element of the bedroom observations. Participant 11 (male) referenced to his most important possessions (figure 10); "if I had a guitar that I couldn't play, I would probably get rid of it [...] it is the things that they allow me to do that I value" (Participant 11, Bedroom Observation, 2016). This highlights the integral role possessions lay in the execution of experiences, and it is the active use of possessions that contributes to its overall value. Whilst findings prove Wallman's forecast of 'experimental purchases' is being exercised by millennials, findings also identify that millennials now have a selective relationship to possessions regarding their relevant functionality. This emphasises the role experiences have in shaping a less materialistic society, as although important, the possession is now considered only a necessity for the creation of the experience and it is therefore inferior in comparison. Moreover, possessions act as a representation of what individuals are interested in doing. Participant 11 compared functional possessions to sentimental possessions and argued; "most people do value sentimental things so it doesn't really say anything specific about me" (Participant 11, Bedroom Observation, 2016). This stresses the importance of functional possessions in externally contributing to individuals' self-identity, whereas sentimental possessions contribute internally to millennials values.

Case Study 2: The Library of Things is a space where people borrow useful items like DIY tools, kitchenware, and events equipment; learn how to use items in workshops; and get to know their neighbours at open nights. (Library of Things, 2017). The Library of Things encourages the borrowing instead of the buying of items. The business differentiates itself from other Sharing Economy ventures by placing more focus on driving social interaction at a community level.

The inferiority of possessions to the experiences they provide is re-imagined by case study 2: The Library of Things. The business encourages people to borrow things to support the argument that possession usage creates meaning. The company delivers the experience of doing something alongside community interaction, without product ownership. This is an innovative way of challenging individuals' materialistic values of owning possessions to prove that borrowing can equally contribute to self-identity.



**Figure 11:** Perceptual Map - The Top 3 Possessions Interview Participants Remembered Purchasing

The significance of functional possessions was reinforced by interview findings that discovered many of the possessions that individuals remembered purchasing allowed them to do something else. Figure 11 places these memorable possessions on a perceptual map according to their aesthetic or functional nature and their necessary or desirable applicability to millennials' lives. Participant 11 spoke about his headphones; "I use them the most now, they are new in my life, they are not boring and I have not got used to them" (Participant 11, Interview, 2016). Although this shows how usage aids the memorability of possessions amongst millennials, it also points to the consumption 'routine',

as functional possessions are only satisfying millennials for a limited period of time. Therefore, although millennials' desire for functional possessions does not portray them as materialistic, their acquisition challenges this by driving continuous consumption.

## **Emotional Possessions**

Interview findings illustrated in figure 11 revealed a large number of aesthetic possessions that millennials remembered purchasing were purchased themselves, with the intention of proving a point. Participant 2 (female) referenced to the purchase of her coat; "I was proving a point to myself that I could treat myself and afford something by saving up for it" (Participant 2, Interview, 2016). This showcases the importance that millennials place on acquiring possessions as a way of self-achieving. This insight was reinforced by participant 3 (female) who asserted; "If I did not have the possession, I would not have anything to show for my money" (Participant 3, Bedroom Observation, 2016). This could prove difficult for the sole existence of the Experience Economy as millennials are rewarding themselves through product consumption. This is a direct consequence of materialism as millennials desire both physical proof from their expenditure and the immediate satisfaction that is attained through consuming possessions. The emotional pride created through these purchases allow the possessions to be significantly remembered due to the direct involvement the individual has in its procurement.

## **Possessions Summary**

In summary, memorable and functional possessions play an integral role in the success of experiences before, during and after their occurrence. Social possessions depict the value individuals place on social relationships, whilst emotional purchases show the personal satisfaction achieved through possession ownership. Although the purposes of these possessions do not appear materialistic, the complex consequences of materialism prove challenging for the Experience Economy in existing alone.

## **Experiences Over Possessions: Key Drivers**

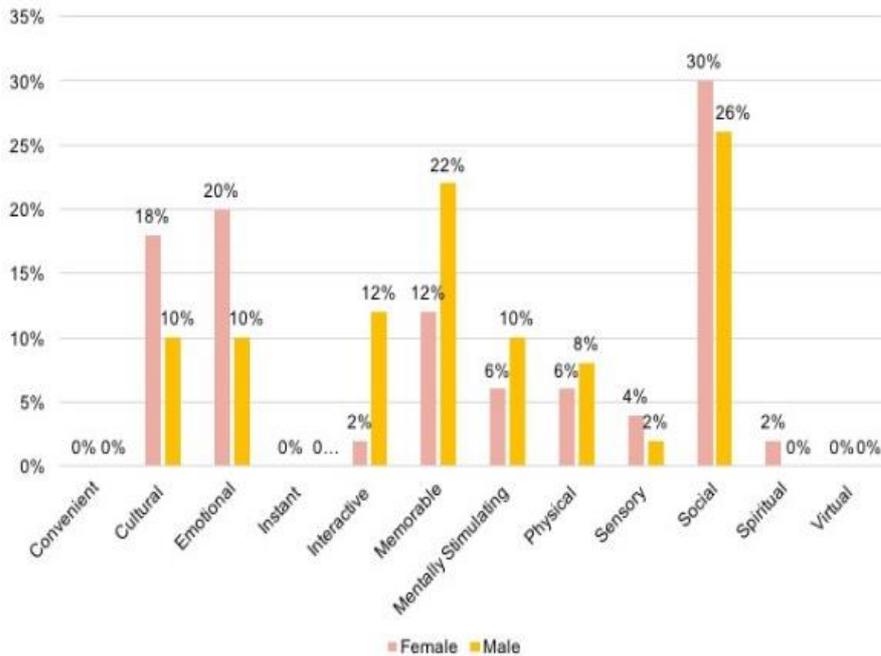
Survey and interview findings unearthed key factors within the Experience Economy that are influencing the shifting value from possessions to experiences. Initially, 98% of survey respondents chose an experience over a material possession. Similarly, 100% of interview participants stated that they would prefer to know what experiences someone had had before they met them. Justification of these internal and external preferences fell into three classifications:

Firstly, the exclusivity of experiences was favoured. Participant 10 (male) outlined; "with the availability of stuff now, you can buy something because you like the look of it, it doesn't necessarily mean anything, anyone can have it, the meaning can be totally skewed" (Participant 10, Interview, 2016). The flawed capabilities of possessions stressed by millennials reflect their established understanding of their complex needs. Weakened materialistic values are alluded to here, through the millennial desire to be recognised accurately as an individual, and not restricted by association to broader status groupings.

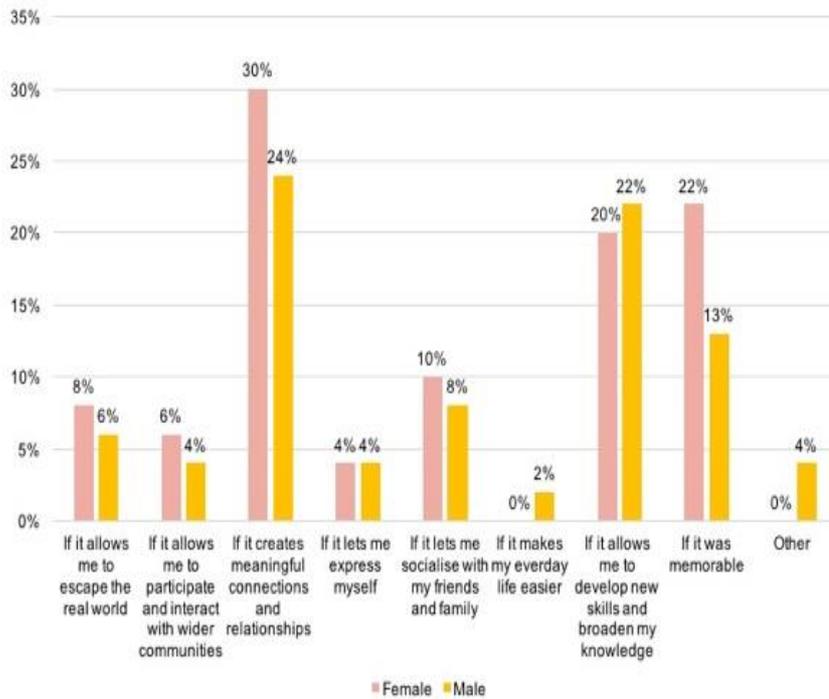
Secondly, justifications concerning self-development were prevalent. One respondent contended; “experiences (good or bad) help me develop as a person” (Survey, 2016). This reflects the constructive versatility of experiences, arguably something which possessions cannot compete with as they are acquired from personal preference. Another respondent claimed; “experiences are doorways to understanding life, people and being able to appreciate what it is to be human, it helps us understand others and emphasise with the experiences of other people” (Survey, 2016). This response acknowledges the ability experiences have in socially connecting millennials to others, and the millennial desire to learn from exposure to other people’s experiences. A comparison can be made here to the previous discussion surrounding ‘social possessions’. Whilst possessions are key in representing millennials affiliation with their relations, experiences progress this connection to a larger cohort of people on a continuous basis. The comparison between experiences and possessions was advanced by participant 11 (male); “if I wanted to gauge someone’s standard of doing something, it wouldn’t be the possession that allowed me to do this, but the experience that would give me the right gage” (Participant 11, Interview, 2016). This attitude continues in underlining the limiting capabilities of possessions as, although they help to show, and allow for the appreciation of who people are and what they can do, experiences are communally beneficial, allowing the relationship between millennials and the activity to be impartial.

Finally, the longevity of experiences was preferential, one respondent stated; “you won’t remember the things you owned (or didn’t own), but the things you did (or didn’t do)” (Survey, 2016). This examination celebrates the sustainability of experiences in relation to possessions. Although this analysis identifies the mentally lasting nature of experiences in reducing millennials’ materialistic values, the transient nature of experiences is problematic for its success. One respondent suggested that experiences are “gone before you can appreciate their true value” (Survey, 2016). As such, the memorability of experiences is essential for the development and fulfilment of their true value; a characteristic which is investigated further through subsequent sections.

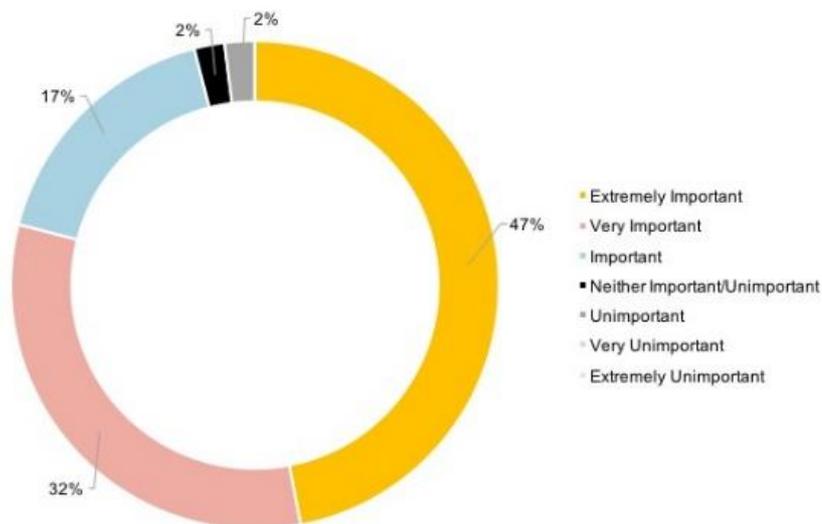
## The Value of Experiences



**Figure 12:** Graph - What type of experience do you value the most?



**Figure 13:** Graph - What makes an experience valuable to you?



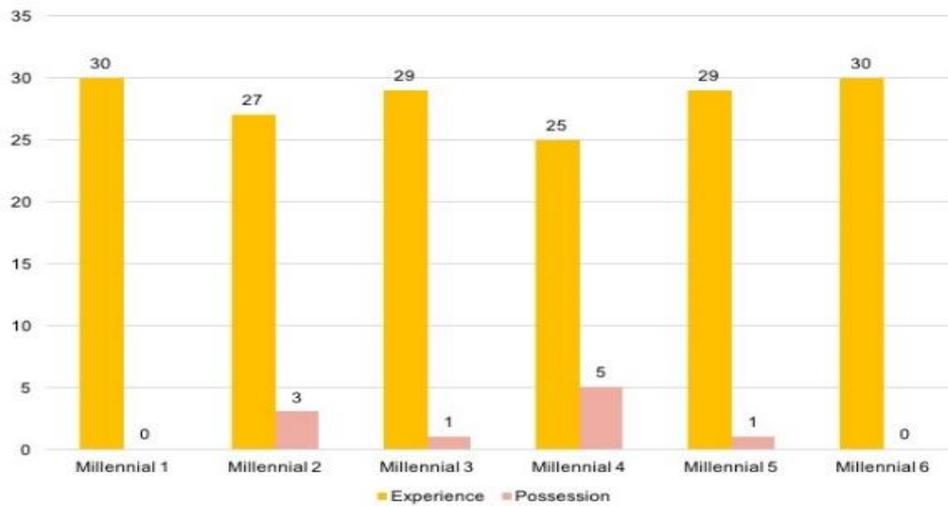
**Figure 14:** Graph - How important are experiences in allowing you to be an individual?

This section investigates the desirability of experiences, unearthing insights into their valued existence in the lives of millennials today. The complexities of materialism will be analysed in relation to experience engagement and the importance experiences have in achieving self-identity. The discussion will be organised into three subsections: social media and experience engagement, extraordinary experiences, and social experiences.

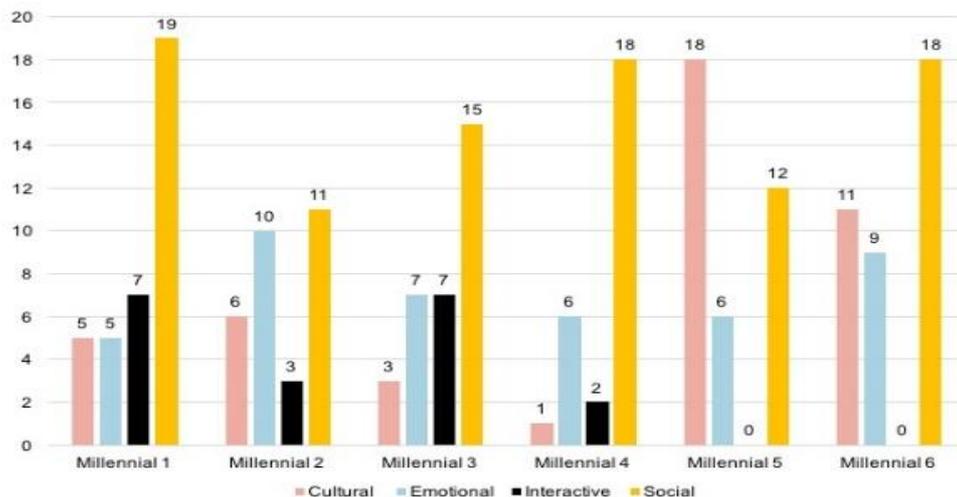
83 % of survey respondents described an experience as ‘something special that does not happen everyday’. Whilst this established millennials’ association with experiences, the broad nature of this association was further strengthened an investigation into how and why individuals value experiences. Figure 12 exhibits that the top three types of experiences that female respondents mostly value are social, cultural and emotional, whereas, male respondents mostly value social, memorable and interactive. The diversity of these types allude positively to the capabilities of experiences, proving opportunistic for the future development of the Experience Economy. Findings also emphasise how although it is shown that millennials are now demanding a multitude of different experiences to satisfy their complex needs, social experiences were by far the most favoured. Figure 13 confirms that an experience is valuable to male and female respondents: ‘if it creates meaningful connections and relationships’, ‘if it was memorable’ and ‘if it allows them to develop new skills and broaden their knowledge’. From this, it is clear that millennials have become advanced in their awareness of the intricate characteristics of experiences. This has caused millennials’ expectation of the outcome of an experience to be much more individualised in its influence. This is verified by figure 14 which demonstrates that respondents consider experiences to be ‘extremely important’ in allowing

them to be individual. These valuable characteristics can be assessed in correlation to the themes explored in the possessions section, as they show that individuals' value connectedness to people and desire to remember experiences. Moreover, these findings establish a framework for further exploration into engagement with these types of experiences, how they contribute to millennials' sense of self, and how these factors within the Experience Economy can be implemented innovatively by brands.

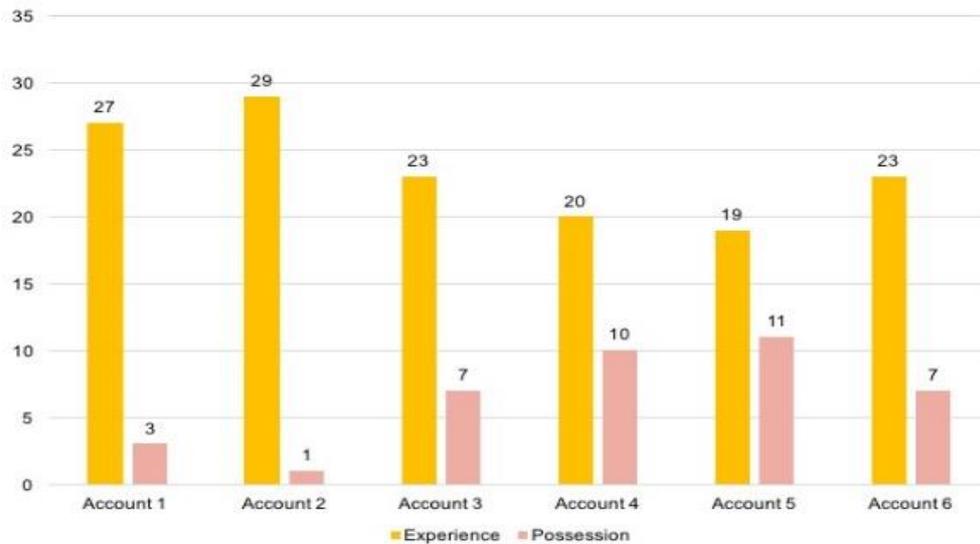
## Social Media and Experience Engagement



**Figure 15:** Graph - Experiences and possessions present within the last 30 Instagram posts of 6 millennials



**Figure 16:** Graph - Themes present within the last 30 Instagram posts of experiences by 6 millennials



**Figure 17:** Graph - Experiences and possessions present within the last 30 Instagram posts of the top 6 most followed accounts

Social media is an example of millennials actively using experiences to showcase their self-identity. Figure 15 displays the findings from the observations of millennials' Instagram accounts. The majority of posts are of experiences, which signifies that millennials want to be represented by the experiences they do, opposed to possessions they have. This has led to the existence of an experience culture that has been developed following the rise of social media. Furthermore, the types of experiences valued in the survey were identified throughout millennials' Instagram posts (figure 16). Memorable experiences were excluded from the evaluation due to their subjectivity, therefore, additional analysis will disclose what makes an experience memorable. Millennials consistently posted social experiences. This maintains their valuation of social relationships and highlights the role other people have in contributing to the identity of millennials. Instagram observations of the top six followed accounts, highlighted in figure 17, show again, that the majority of posts are experiences. Interview findings argue that millennials do not measure themselves against these external influencers in determining their own self-identity. Participant 2 (female) suggested that social media is; "more information than lifestyle inspiration" (Participant 2, Interview, 2016). Therefore, individuals are not superficially influenced to participate in experiences due to their significant promotion through social media. Alternatively, social media acts as an experience information source. Trend forecaster Lara Piras addressed its value; "social media has enabled brands to deliver innovative experiences that are simple, low cost, yet highly effective" (Piras, Interview, 2017). With individuals discovering experiences online, social media presents itself as an integral part of successful experience delivery. Interview findings found that 9 out of 12 participants share photographs of their experiences on social media, participant 1 (male) stated:

*"I share my experiences because it shows what I like doing and it is a portrayal of my character, but I suppose at the same time there is a small element of impressing people with what you have done, but I wouldn't say it is anywhere near a sole reason for taking part in something."* (Participant 1, Interview, 2016)

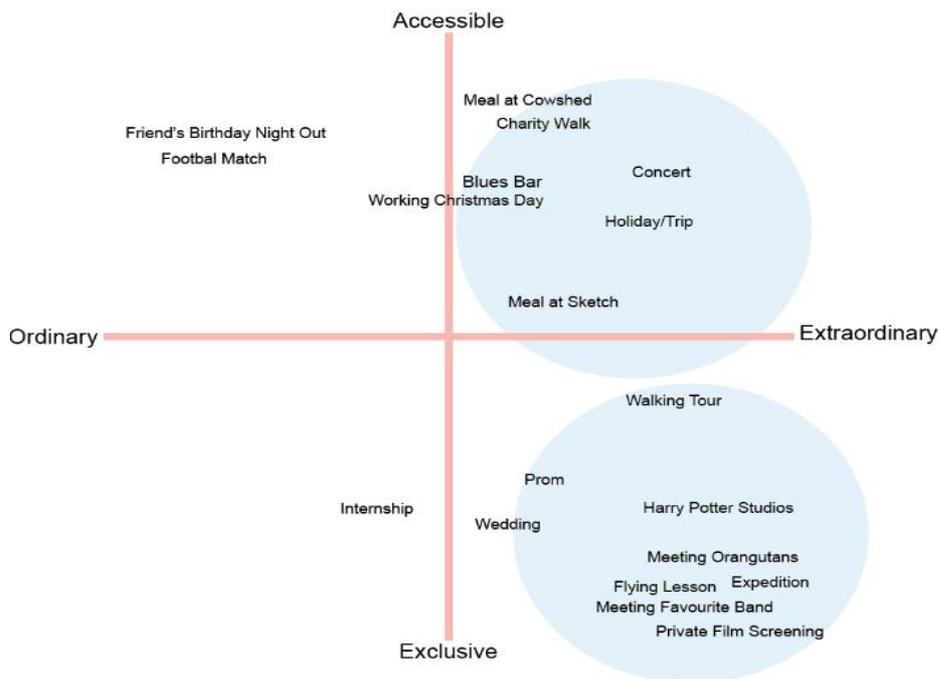
This statement reflects the complexities of individuals' genuine motivations when engaging with experiences to fuel self-identity. Findings established that individuals' primary motivation for both engaging in experiences and digitally sharing experiences are carried out for their own satisfaction. The statement provided by participant 1 indicates towards impressing people with experiences when posting on social media. This proves that social media is reinforcing individuals' materialistic values by encouraging millennials to attribute experience engagement with influencing their peers' perceptions of themselves. Although initial experience engagement is genuine, social media is working against these desires. This was evidenced by participant 11 (male), who claimed; *"there is a certain expectation to uphold your social appearance when you post on social media"* (Participant 11, Interview, 2016). This provides insight into the pressures that are driven by digitally sharing experiences. These conflicting motivations are hindering the benefits of experiences in shaping a less materialistic society by propelling experiences to be consumed in a materialistic way.

Findings show that consumers are aware of the consequences of sharing experiences on social media. These actions are reducing the exclusivity of experiences as they have now become accessible on a mass scale. Participant 11 stated; *"if nobody knows that I have done something, the exclusivity makes it more personal to me and increases the value of what has happened"* (Participant 11, Interview, 2016).

Case Study 3: Secret Cinema is an immersive experience that creates live cinema productions. The company recreates film sets in top secret locations. Secret Cinema has the desire to fill the void left over by the over-saturated technological world. The experience that is provided intends to explore one of the forgotten pleasures in a time with constant access to information: secrets (Secret Cinema, 2017).

This insight was brought to life by case study 3; Secret Cinema, which provides individuals with a 'secret' experience. The company is able to create a satisfying relationship with its consumers as the exclusivity of the experience cannot be weakened through the mass accessibility to it through social media.

## Extraordinary Experiences



**Figure 18:** Perceptual Map - The top 3 experiences interview participants remembering having

The desire for a memorable experience was focused on in-depth during interviews. Participants were asked to name three experiences that they remember having. Figure 18 illustrates these responses on a perceptual map regarding the experience's accessibility and exclusivity and its ordinary and extraordinary nature. The memorable experiences stated were weighted towards the extraordinary end of the spectrum. This underpins the understanding that individuals believe an experience is 'something special that does not happen every day' (Survey, 2016).

Theme	Mention of Theme (Out of 5)	Key Quotes Used to Identify Theme
Reminiscing	4	'Chatting about our favourite memories such as iconic group moments' / 'Reminiscing about holidays and fun times together' / 'We were reminiscing on memories' / 'Reminiscing on all the memories with my girls'
Service	4	'Waiting for our food' / 'The food wasn't great, and if it was better I would have had a perfect night' / 'The food wasn't that great' / "The food was quite bad. The service was bad, although they did make up for it by giving us a free bottle of Prosecco'
Company	3	'I remember us all sat around the dinner table' / 'The company is more important than the food' / 'We still had a lovely time together'
Enjoyment	3	'I remember having a fun time with my friends' / 'The constant laughter and chatter going on between my friends and I' / 'It was a really fun evening'
Celebration	1	'It was nice to catch up and celebrate Christmas together'

**Figure 19:** Table - The Special Attributes of Millennials' Christmas Meal With Friends

Theme	Mention of Theme (Out of 5)	Key Quotes Used to Identify Theme
People	4	'Being with my family' / 'I spent loads of time with my baby brother' / 'My cousins are older so now have children, so it was nice to spend time with them' / 'It was nice to have the family together'
Occasion	4	'I don't often see him so it's important to me to play with him as much as possible while I can' / 'Christmas is the one time of year that everyone is together' / 'Not something we get to do everyday' / 'The same day we have every year but this year we had a dog'
Reflection	1	'It's been a hard year'
Enjoyment	1	'We just enjoyed each other'
Indulging	1	'Not having to do anything all day'

**Figure 20:** Table - The Special Attributes of Millennials' Christmas Days

Additional key attributes of 'special' experiences were identified by the post-observation follow up questions. Figure 19 and 20 display the themes within the responses, which discovered that the people and the occasion made these experiences special. These conclusions reinforce the earlier projections that millennials value social experiences, and the exclusivity of an extraordinary experience brings value. Therefore, the inclusion of these attributes increases an experience's memorability.

The extraordinary experiences highlighted in figure 18 were memorable due to the majority of them being new to participants. Participant 8 (female) spoke about meeting orangutans; "the whole absurdness and extraordinary nature of the situation was completely new to me" (Participant 8, Interview, 2016). Whilst this emphasises the value of new experiences, it can also be compared to the value of new possessions. Interview findings suggest that millennials remembered owning possessions because they were newly purchased. The materialistic satisfaction created through new purchases is temporary due to the consistent replacement of 'new' possessions. In comparison, the satisfaction from a new experience is less replaceable and the value of its novelty is not restricted by its recent occurrence. This is insightful for the practical application of brand experiences as new experiences will always be considered new. This means the Experience Economy is not fuelled by the same pressures as product consumption. Although this contradicts traditional marketing and branding techniques that drive the consistent replacement of purchases, this also increases the pressure for brands to stimulate millennials with experiences that excite (Piras, Interview, 2017). This standard of experience has fostered as a result of social media maturing millennials' awareness of experiences. In turn, this has caused experiences to appear ordinary and has increased the need for extraordinary moments.

New experiences were also deemed to enable the self-development of individuals; a key factor within the Experience Economy that is influencing the shift away from materialism. This was supported by participant 7 (female), who suggested; "experiences allow you to do things that challenge you and overcome your fears" (Participant 7, Interview, 2016). The development of self-confidence was a key theme that millennials stated they would wish to develop through an experience. This insight reflects

the sophistication of millennials in understanding that confidence is not fulfilled through product consumption, therefore, altering the role of brands to support independence within wider society through experience delivery.

Case Study 4: Dans Le Noir? provides a sensory dining experience where guests dine in complete darkness whilst being served by visually impaired staff. Restaurant owner; Edouard De Broglie described how the concept of removing guests' sense of sight and taste works, he stated; "people will focus on taste much more, their communication with others also becomes more intense and authentic" (Broglie, Interview, 2016). The experience enables visitors to completely re-evaluate their perception of taste and smell whilst socialising and meeting others in a fun and surprising environment totally devoid of vanity. (Dans Le Noir?, 2017). The experience aims to question peoples' minds about food, how we socialise and disability (Broglie, Interview, 2016).

Case Study 4; Dans Le Noir? creates an experience which contradicts traditional materialistic marketing techniques that focus on aesthetic. Instead, the experience provides guests with the opportunity to develop an emotional understanding of themselves in relation to others. The experience is valuable in working against materialistic values through alternative sensory exploration that is completely new to guests.

## **Social Experiences**

Findings concluded that social experiences are memorable due to the people involved. This was a common theme during interviews about participants' memorable experiences, participant 2 (female) exclaimed; "*it was the people that made it memorable*" (Participant 2, Interview, 2016). This was supported by observation findings of millennials at their Christmas meal, which identified that the exchange of presents prior to the meal was not mentioned throughout the experience itself. Alternatively, conversations were focused on shared memories. This suggests that social experiences, in particular direct attention away from objects and therefore drive a less materialistic society. A key insight was the value social experiences generate post-experience. Participant 2 continued to suggest that '*it is all about the memories attached to reminiscing. I cannot sit after I have had an experience on my own and discuss it with someone, the discussion is where people truly develop. It is almost like the after effects of the experience are better than the experience itself. I think social experiences shape you within your group of friends, as if you are with a big group, although the memory is shared, everyone has their own take on the memory and uses it differently*' (Participant 2, Interview, 2016).

This determines that social experiences are valued due to the continuous opportunity they create for social interaction post-experience. This allows the experience to be kept alive for longer as additional people are able to remember different elements. The experience is therefore interpreted diversely, which both strengthens its collective value and permits further individual development. Furthermore, social media has facilitated vast opportunities for people to connect. This has translated into consumer desire to develop existing relationships and create new relationships through experiences. This was a key insight from consumer interviews, participant 8 (female) outlined this correlation; "*I*

*think it is very important to nourish the relationships you already have, but it is also equally important that you meet and learn from new people as that is the way we gain experience in our lives"* (Participant 8, Interview, 2016). Although social media satisfies materialistic pressures to engage in experiences, it is responsible for promoting social relationships in the wider context of what is fashionable. The popularity of social experiences can be determined in relation to its benefits in forming desirable self-identity. The analysis suggests that although the desire to be individual is evident amongst millennials, social experiences have a significant role in achieving this.

Case Study 5: Heineken provides its consumers with the Heineken Experience, an interactive experience built within the brand's first brewery in Amsterdam. The experience allows consumers to learn about the heritage of the brand. Maria Mihaylova explained that the experience creates value by turning their consumers into brand ambassadors through personalising the brand for consumers. (Mihaylova, Interview, 2017).

Heineken imbeds experience into its marketing strategy through the execution of the Heineken Experience (case study 5). Key findings from the interview with Maria Mihaylova suggest that its application was due to the understanding that their product is enjoyed during social experiences. She stated; "Heineken is not just about products, but about those moments that you share with close ones over a cold beer" (Mihaylova, Interview, 2017). The value of this form of experiential marketing allows consumers to associate the brand with the memory of being social. Lara Piras notes that "in-store acts as a playground for consumers to experience the brand in its physical form" (Piras, Interview, 2017). In Heineken's case, in-store is substituted for the experience, which recreates their brand identity of enjoyment. The social excitement created by the experience is consequently translated into post-experience conversations, which fulfils the brand's aim of creating brand ambassadors.

## **Experiences Summary**

In summary, millennial engagement with experiences present innovative opportunities for brands as experience providers. Social and extraordinary experiences are memorable due to the effect they have on individuals' self-identity post-occurrence. However, the contemporary way of portraying self-identity on social media is admitted to be driving external materialistic pressures that work against millennials' genuine engagement with experiences.

## **Conclusion and Closing Recommendations**

Studying the effects of experience engagement in shaping a less materialistic society has exposed millennials' contemporary expectations of the role possessions and experiences now have in fueling their sense of identity. Case studies analysed throughout the report depict how brands are benefitting from the shift away from materialism by integrating varying degrees of experience within their strategies. Although this showcases how brands are responding to the complex needs of individuals through experience application, the following key insights act as recommendations for further change in the delivery of experiences within the fashion marketing and branding industry. This will enable businesses to take advantage of the multifaceted effect of experience engagement in shaping a less

materialistic society, and implement experiences that are desired by millennials, and resonate with their affiliation with material culture.

Firstly, as the future of material culture will continue to see the acquisition of possessions, the co-existence of possessions and experiences is most appropriate moving forward. Research determined how millennials are now focused on the purposeful role possessions have in creating memorable experiences. Findings also discovered the integral role possessions play in the relative success of experiences and their valued importance regarding social and personal fulfillment of self-identity. Although possessions are considered inferior compared to the experiences they provide, they are important in physically representing individuals' experiences, which allow experiences to achieve their value of shaping self-identity. The habitual attachment to tangible means of self-expression proves problematic for the Experience Economy in existing alone. Therefore, alongside material culture exists an experience culture that now identifies individuals by their experiences as opposed to by their possessions. Whilst a desire for experiences over possessions was evident, findings appeared contradictory with regards to what millennials said. This contradiction poses the reality that it may not ever be possible to reduce materialistic values all together as they are still largely embedded within contemporary society.

Secondly, millennials are increasingly becoming more socially driven in their attitudes and behaviours; making social experiences one of the most valued when contributing to their individuality. This has been fuelled by social media, which has encouraged millennials' collective characteristic and has promoted the importance of developing social relationships through experiences. Social experiences have been identified as important in achieving the key factors that favour experiences over product consumption. The analysis discovered that the involvement of other people within an experience was fundamental in allowing millennials to successfully develop, as this allowed them to learn through exposure to other peoples' experiences. Findings also disclosed that social experiences are significantly valued due to their shared interpretation and the capabilities they have in providing millennials with opportunities for interaction post-experience. However, although social media has been beneficial in facilitating greater development amongst millennials through driving the popularity of social experiences, it has been detrimental in effecting the accessibility to the additional types of experiences millennials value; exclusive and extraordinary experiences.

Finally, a key problem has arisen from the shift away from materialism. Millennials value exclusive experiences due to the way they allow millennials to differentiate themselves from others. This determined that the exclusivity of experiences in relation to possessions was a key factor in contributing towards a less materialistic society. Similarly, extraordinary experiences were valued by millennials due to their memorability and the way they allow millennials to develop themselves. However, social media has matured consumers' awareness of experiences. This has led to the decrease in the exclusive and extraordinary nature of experiences, whilst also causing experiences to be consumed in a materialistic way. To ensure businesses avoid contributing to the undifferentiated appearance of experiences, they must acknowledge the importance experiences have in forming

identity and respond to the experiences millennials value the most. With experience consumption ultimately linking back to individual fulfillment, the reduction in the exclusive and extraordinary nature of experiences has led millennials to desire more meaningful experiences that re-confirm their individuality. For future success within the Experience Economy, this societal conformity needs to be challenged to re-determine the significance of experiences to ensure experiences continue to be valued as fundamental in shaping identity.

## Acknowledgements

This body of research is part of my final year project on BA Fashion Marketing and Branding. This study has become a reality due to the immense encouragement from family, friends and the staff at Nottingham Trent University. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my tutor Dr Naomi Braithwaite for her support throughout the development of this project. I would also like to thank all of the people that agreed to participate in the study for their invaluable contributions.

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