

# THE ROLE OF DESIRE IN SELF CONSTRUCTION: CITY AND IDENTITY NARRATIVES

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## **Abstract**

### **Research objectives**

The broad objective of this research is to gain understanding of how consumers experience desire. The previous research has provided little information about the role of desire in developing the sense of identity. The present research seeks to address this gap by investigating how consumers interpret their desires, and how they handle its conflicting nature. The present research follows narrative approach to develop an understanding of what the role of desire is in consumers' narratives of self. Desire towards a city was chosen as a context for the present research, because such context provides necessary space and longevity to investigate the experience of desire. This research is interpretive in nature; therefore, its aim is to develop an understanding of the phenomenon, which is reflected in the author's interpretation, rather than construct generalizable knowledge.

### **Research method**

To develop an understanding of the role of desire in consumers' narratives, two methods were utilized: analytic autoethnography and phenomenological interviewing. In addition, an analysis of a thematic blog was conducted. The author's own experience of desire was explicated in a written autoethnography, which was used as a part of data and allowed to enhance pre-understanding of the phenomenon. After that, two interviews were conducted to gain access to versatile interpretations of desire. Finally, a blog analysis was conducted to provide contextual richness to the collective story of desire. Data was analyzed using narrative analysis method, which involves creating a shared narrative from separated fragments of data.

### **Findings**

The findings show that consumers interpret their desire as storage of inner values, as a way to extend their sense of self and approach the more appealing version of self. Desire is incorporated within identity narrative in a way that supports the flow of the story and communicates the sense of self in a desirable way. Consumers interpret their desires as providing continuity and the sense of belongingness in their lives, which helps to reduce the tension between morality and seduction, embedded into the experience of desire. Another major finding concerns nurturing desire. By nurturing desire, consumers are able to control their experience of desire. By increasing or decreasing the amount of nurturing and varying its content, consumers achieve control over desire and can regulate how long it lasts and what kind of meanings are attached to it.

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## 1. Introduction

Consumer research is increasingly interested in the meanings that consumers attach to their key possessions (Mehta & Belk, 1991; Lastovicka & Sirianni, 2011; Curasi, Price, & Arnould, 2004) and consumption activities (Schouten 1991). Consumers use their key possessions to define and extend their sense of self (Belk, 1988), reconcile identity conflicts (Ahuvia, 2005), as well as construct a rite of passage from one social role to another (Schouten, 1991).

Recent work by Belk et al. (2003) has extended the stream of research on key possessions to include the objects of consumers' desires. Though the phenomenological account of desire has received some attention, the relationship between desire and the sense of self has not, however, been fully explored yet.

This research seeks to understand the role that desire plays in consumers' identity narratives. The nature of desire is conflicting – it has a potential to become a destructive force in one's life by fueling the conflict between morality and seduction. This conflict arises as a tension between the pleasure of longing, and the pressure to follow the rules of the social order. Thus, in order to develop an understanding of how consumers incorporate desire within their sense of self, I have, in this research, focused on how consumers cope with the conflict that desire involves.

Researchers argue that consumers strive to resolve the conflicts within their sense of identity and create a unified sense of self (Ahuvia, 2005; Cushman, 1990). By focusing on the conflict between morality and seduction, I have been able to develop a better understanding of how consumers interpret their desire and the meanings they attach to the desired object.

The context of the present research is consumer's desire towards a city; to move to and live in a particular city. Moving to a new city is often accompanied by a change in social role or status (Mehta & Belk, 1991). Therefore, in order to understand how consumers maintain and develop their sense of identity, when following their desire, I draw from the body of research on identity in transition. I examine how consumers interpret their desire at each stage of the transition process. This approach allowed me to better grasp the meanings that consumers attach to their desired city in the presence of the challenges of identity reconstruction.

The research methods I used in the present study are analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006), and phenomenological interviewing (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989). In addition, I analyzed a blog about desire towards a city. All these methods have worked together to help me to develop a deep understanding of the experience of desire; I have been able to utilize my own experience of desire towards a city and enhance my pre-understanding of it. By using the

interviews, I have been able to develop an understanding of how consumers tell the stories of their desires, and what kind of meanings they attach to it. Finally, the blog provided me with contextual richness of the experience of desire and helped me to interpret separate events of our collective story of desire in relation to the whole, through the process of semiotic-structural analysis. Moreover, such sample of methods allowed me to fully explore the process of desire, which is also known as the cycle of desire (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003). Each informant's experience shed light on a particular stage of the cycle. Thus, considering individual experience, and evaluating it as a part of the whole, provided me with better understanding of the full cycle of desire.

This research contributes to the body of research on key possessions and identity construction by linking the concept of desire to self-construction. The findings of this research also enhance our understanding of how consumers construct a coherent sense of self by describing how they interpret the conflict between morality and seduction that desire involves. Finally, this research highlights the notion of nurturing desire, an aspect that has received little attention in previous research.

### **1.1. Research background, context and contributions**

The stream of research on key possessions has extended our understanding of consumption and its role in constructing the sense of identity. The relationship between consumers' favorite possessions and identity projects has been studied quite extensively to show that consumers use consumption to extend, strengthen, and maintain their sense of identity. Recently the stream of research on key possessions was extended to include the notion of desire. Belk et al. developed a comprehensive descriptive account of desire across three cultures (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003). However, the link between desires and consumer's identity projects is still lacking. It is still not clear in what way desires are incorporated within the sense of identity. Moreover, given the dual nature of desire, its potential to become addictive and destructive, an understanding of how consumers cope with the potential conflicts involved with the experience of desire is yet to be developed.

To address this gap, I used desire towards a city as a context for the present research. Desire towards a city means that consumer desires to move to a particular city and live their life in that city. The phenomenon of desire towards a city is not a mere theoretical fancy, as Belk, Ger and Askegaard (2003) identified such cases in their data.

By choosing desire towards a city as a context, I have been able to explore a rich variety of consumers' interpretations, as city as an object of desire provides ample background for construction and interpretations of symbolic meanings, beliefs, sensations, and experiences, which consumers use to construct their sense of self. Even on the larger levels of culturally-shared meanings, certain cities are ascribed with certain characteristics and particular experiences, such as "romantic date in Paris" or "crazy shopping in Milan". This leads us to believe that on an individual level, consumers may construct a vast array of symbolic interpretations and use them for purposes of self-construction.

Moreover, city, as an object of desire presents possibility for longitude consumption. While longing for a city and longing for a new pair of shoes might be conceptually similar, I would argue that the post-acquisition stage is more intense in the case of city, because of time and effort needed to explore a city, and rich symbolic context embedded into it. Such longevity of desire towards a city has allowed me to consider each stage of the cycle of desire (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003), and its relation to the whole cycle, in greater detail.

The findings of this research contribute to the existing research on desires by linking it to the concept of self-construction. As the findings show, consumers interpret the object of their desire as manifestation of who they perceive they are, and as a connection to who they want to become.

This research also enhances our understanding of how consumers interpret the conflict between morality and seduction embedded into the experience of desire. Consumers interpret the object of desire as providing sense of belongingness and continuity in their lives, which legitimizes desire and make others accept it.

This research also discusses nurturing as a key element of desire to much greater extent, than it has been discussed before, and highlights the aspects of nurturing that has received little attention in previous research. Findings suggest that nurturing is consumers' means of constructing and regulating the whole experience of desire, as consumer is not a victim of desire, but an active creator of it. The present research suggests that nurturing is a greater aspect of desire than just a consequence of material possession love (Lastovicka & Sirianni, 2011) and instrument of self-seduction (Belk, Ger, Askegaard, 2003), as it has been discussed before.

## **1.2. Research objectives**

The objective of the present research is to develop an understanding of how consumers experience desire. The aim is to understand how people interpret such experience from the view

point of identity construction. Desire towards a city is chosen as a context for the present research.

The experience of desire presents a challenge for constructing a coherent sense of identity, because it involves a conflict between morality and seduction; thus, desire can potentially become a destructive and bothering experience. This research aims to understand how desire is incorporated within the sense of self. Specifically, the present research is interested in how people interpret and make sense of the experience of desire towards a city; and how they deal with the conflicts that desire involves.

To achieve the objectives and goals of this study, presented above, I have developed the following research question and sub-questions.

*What is the role of desire in developing a coherent sense of identity?*

- *What kinds of meanings do consumers attach to their desired cities?*
- *How do consumers cope with the conflicts involved in the experience of desire?*

### **1.3. Outline**

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. First, I review the relevant theory. The key characteristics and underlying motifs of desires are provided; the concept of identity and the role of key possessions in it are presented. Then, I discuss the relationship between the concept of self and physical surroundings, and the process of transition, which is triggered by changing physical surroundings. After that, I summarize the key theory that guides my work in chapter 6. Methodology and method of my research are presented in chapters 7 and 8. After that, I present and analyze the findings of my study. Then, I further discuss and interpret the findings in chapter 10. Finally, I conclude by recapping the foundations of this research and presenting theoretical implications, suggestions for future research and limitations of the present study.

## 2. The concept of desire

Desire is one of the main concepts that my research is based on. Within the field of consumer research, the concept of desire has not been widely studied. Perhaps, the most comprehensive study of desire (in the field of consumer research) is found in Belk, Ger and Askegaard's paper (2003), which I mostly draw on when defining and discussing desire.

In the following sections, I discuss main characteristics of desire, such as the conflict between morality and seduction, and the role of imagination. I will also describe the underlying motifs for desire, and the process of desire, which is also known as the cycle of desire. The role of nurturing in the experience of desire is also discussed.

### 2.1. Characteristics of desire

In their study of consumer passion, Belk, Ger and Askegaard (2003) develop phenomenological account of consumer desire. Desire emerges as a powerful emotion that can be best described as passion. Desire is experienced as intense pleasure that permeates consumer's body and mind. However, desire is felt by informants as a two-sided phenomenon. Positive, energizing, and motivating, at times, desire becomes overpowering, addictive, and uncontrollable. Consumers describe themselves as being "seized", "enslaved", and "captured" by their desires. This inability to control desire adds to its seductive nature and mythical power.

The main attraction of desired object is in its promise of transformation and change. The desired object possesses almost magical qualities in transforming one's life and identity into a different, altered state of being. Belk and his colleagues (2003) find that direction of this transformation is diverse – desired object has power to revive past experiences, construct appealing future, and offer escape from the present conditions to a different place. This corresponds to Sartre's argument that frustration, dissatisfaction with the present condition is one of the main drivers of imagination (Sartre, 1948, see Illouz 2009).

Imagination is a crucial aspect of desire, which distinguishes it from consumer's wants and needs (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003). Imagination is free, when it comes to the choice of desired objects, contrary to the need, which is rooted in a lack of a particular category of objects. Want, on the other hand does not cover passionate aspects of desire, since it is too controlled by the mind, and reflects personal preference structure, which is somewhat reasonably constructed. In the next section, I discuss the concept of imagination in greater detail.

### **2.1.1. Imagination**

Through imagination consumers transform undesirable situation into a more bearable one. In the context of the present research, consumers imagine how moving to the desired city would change their current life situation to a new, advanced one. Mentally elaborating all the pleasurable aspects of new life, consumers enhance the appeal of the city by ascribing transformative power to it, and consequently, fuel their motivation to make a move. Moreover, this process of longing and mental arousal is a very pleasurable experience itself, as argued by Lee and Qui (2009), who found that consumers experience greater pleasure, associated with the future positive event (such as moving to the desired city), when they are in the situation of temporary uncertainty regarding the details of the event.

In line with this discussion, Illouz (2009) suggests that emotions, which are of vital significance in consumption, are often experienced in imaginary mode, meaning that they are a result of consumer interacting with images and fantasies, which are in turn produced by social interaction. The ability of consumer goods and experiences to produce emotional attachment lies, therefore, in their abilities to place consumer in the realm of possibilities of who he or she is, or could become. (Fernandez & Lastovicka, 2011). Rich, multi-faceted context of a city, thus, should provide a strong impulse for consumer imagination and be able to generate various levels of emotional attachment.

### **2.1.2. Conflict between morality and seduction**

Seduction is one of the key parts of desire. Belk and his colleagues (2003) notice that sensual anticipation of desired object is much like our anticipation of smell, touch and the sight of the beloved other. Sensation and imagination fuel our longing for desire, but at the same time, these bodily senses provoke the fear of obsessive passion and its destructive powers. The same exciting aspects of desire that feed hot emotional and bodily sensations, awake the feeling of danger of going out of bounds and losing control. These feelings can be framed as guilt, sin, or imbalance, because passionate longing is clashed with social order and duty.

Desire is profoundly motivating and intense. Unlike wants and needs it may seem illogical and irrational, possessing almost childlike qualities. Following desire might involve breaking the established order, and thus, might be viewed inappropriate by the larger society. On the other hand, it is hard to resist seductive nature of desire. One of the main goals of the present research is to explore how consumers negotiate their sense of self in the presence of the conflict between morality and seduction, which brings additional struggles into building a coherent sense of identity.

### **2.1.3. Underlying motifs for desire**

What makes consumer desire a particular object is not the characteristics of the object itself. In fact the objects of desire are often everyday mundane things. The appeal of desired object does not lie within the object itself. The consumer has a major role in constructing the object of desire within the social context. Belk and his colleagues (2003) suggest that what makes an object desired, is consumer's own hopes for an altered state of being, which involves an altered state of relationships with others.

#### **2.1.3.1. *Desire for otherness***

Belk, Ger and Askegaard (2003) argue that underlying desire for an object is desire for otherness. "In each case the desire is to escape to something far better, to a life diametrically opposed to the one currently being lived, to a condition of sacredness that transcends the profane present" (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003, p. 335). Otherness is seen as an antidote to the present dull existence, and it is often sought in the past or future time, or in another place. Desire for the past is often seen as a return to the prior state of joy, which is often associated with childhood. Desire for the future is often derived from movies and books. Belk and his colleagues (2003) also find consumers seeking otherness of a place, which transforms into a desire of travelling and living in other countries.

#### **2.1.3.2. *Desire for sociality***

Desire for otherness is accompanied by desire for sociality. Consumers' reports suggest that they see objects of their desires as facilitators of the creation of social relationships. Belk and his colleagues (2003) conclude that underlying even most object-centered desires is desire for relationships with other people, obtaining acceptance and desired response from them. In this case, the value is not in the object per se, but in its perceived ability to make consumer be and feel like one of the others. Thus, desire is ultimately social.

Ahuvia (2005), in his study of loved objects and identity narratives also reaffirms the social nature of key possessions. Loved objects often symbolize belongingness to a particular social group. They are important to us because of the way they mediate our relationships with others. Loved objects can be used to maintain and manage the relationships with these groups and certain individuals, such as family members and significant others.

## **2.2. Process of desire**

In this chapter, I discuss the process of desire. Belk, Ger and Askegaard (2003) develop a framework for capturing the cycle of desire. They describe the process of desire as a cycle that

includes several stages - from newly emerged desire to its realization to a new desire. The cycle starts from self-seduction and longing, progresses through acquisition, and ends with reformulation of desire. The concept of nurturing is also discussed in this chapter.

### **2.2.1. The cycle of desire**

The cycle of desire consists of initiation stage, acquisition, and re-initiation of desire. Desire originates and cultivates in imagination. In the beginning, consumers enhance their emotions toward desired object through continual mental rehearsal of what it would be like to obtain and possess the object of desire. Thus, consumers are far from being a victim of advertisement and marketing, instead they actively engage into self-seduction and emotional self-arousal.

When the object of desire is acquired, it seems to lose its magical qualities. The joy of longing for desire is no longer available; the object of desire becomes a routine and, in some cases, can even evoke negative feelings. . Consumer reformulates their desire and finds a new object to long for.

Belk, Ger & Askegaard (2003) conclude that underlying the reinitiating of desire lays a basic desire to desire. Desire to experience the pleasurable sense of longing, accompanied with hope of achieving control (having) over the object of desire, keeps the cycle of desire forever moving. However, it is impossible to sustain pleasurable state of longing for indefinite period of time. If the object of desire is not acquired after a long period of time, hope of acquiring it may eventually fade, and from being pleasurable, desire can become painful and unbearable.

### **2.2.2. Nurturing**

Belk and his colleagues (2003) provide sufficient evidence that, although desire can be induced by marketers and cultural context, consumers actively engage into nurturing it. Consumers engage into internal dialogue, contemplating the magical powers of the object of their desires. These practices of self-seduction are necessary element of desire, but self-seduction is, however, only one aspect of nurturing.

Nurturing does not limit itself to self-seduction. Lastovicka and Sirianni (2011) find that even after acquiring the desired object consumers develop a caregiving system to nurture the beloved object. Such system involves consumer spending time, energy and money, or other available resources to enhance the beloved object. Nurturing may include do-it-yourself activities as well as buying professional services and products to benefit the beloved. In extreme cases, consumers may create a lifestyle that is organized around the beloved possession, including the choice of employment and residential area.

Nurturing, thus, plays an important role not only at the beginning of the cycle of desire, but also, at the post-acquisition stages. At the beginning of the cycle, consumers seduce themselves into following desire, while later nurturing activities are aimed at fostering the beloved object and the relationship with such object.

### **3. Possessions and identity**

In order to understand the role of desire in self-construction, one needs to develop an understanding of the general role of possessions in our life. In this chapter, I discuss the relationship between possessions and our identity projects, and present the ways of how an object can be incorporated into the sense of self.

#### **3.1. Role of possessions**

It has long been recognized that our possessions play much more important role in our lives than a mere provision of utility. Important possessions are deeply integrated within our sense of self (Belk, 1988; Ahuvia, 2005; Lastovicka and Sirianni, 2011). Through observing what we have, we contemplate what we are. Possessions allow us to reflect on our past, shape our present actions and future aspirations. Our possessions contribute to our self-concept by extending our sense of self and communicating it to others.

In his iconic work on possessions and extended self, Belk (1988) brings an impressive amount of research together to formulate a framework of how consumers use possessions to support, strengthen and extend their sense of identity.

Possessions assist in shaping the sense of identity through the lifespan. First, an infant distinguishes self from environment by exercising control over an object. Those objects that can be controlled become a part of self, whereas objects that cannot be controlled are seen as environment. At later stages of childhood, a child gains ownership over objects, distinguishing self from others, who do not own those particular objects. During adulthood, people define themselves through possessions that reflect their skills and experiences, such as, for example, athletic equipment. As individual progresses through the lifespan, the future orientation, typical for teenagers and young adults, is substituted with the past orientation. This means that we start to define ourselves through what we have accumulated previously, rather than what we could do in the future. Favorite possessions of the elderly often include photographs, gifts, and other memorabilia that symbolize people and relationships. Moreover, evidence has been found (Unruh, 1983 see Belk 1988) that possessions can be seen as capable of extending one's self beyond death. Collections of objects, accumulated over the lifetime, can be distributed to those, who are believed to keep and care for them, thus, honoring the donor even after his or her death.

Belk points out that those possessions, which are incorporated into extended self, "serve valuable functions to healthy personalities" (Belk, 1988, p. 159). They act as manifestation of personalities, helping us to get feedback and response from other people; they serve as personal

archive that allows us to reflect on our past, present and future; they provide a sense of community and belongingness.

However, not every consumption object, and not every possession becomes important for our sense of self. Only those possessions that we invested time, energy and other resources in become integrated within identity narrative. These possessions include things that represent past accomplishments, enjoyable experiences and dear relationships. Possessions that we acquire during our lifetime also symbolize our past, which is deeply integrated into our sense of self (Belk, 1988). However, the relationship between identity and possessions are not one-directional meaning that not only our sense of identity is extended to include an object, but sometimes the object is important, because it represents and acts as a storage of a particular aspect of identity. For example, a collector who collects things from the past, which had been made even before the collector was born and had belonged to another family or a person, might seek to identify with an era, place, or values represented by the object (Belk, 1988).

Objects that are important to us are characterized by emotional value we consume through them. People attach warm feelings to them. They are part of identity, because of the efforts involved to master, create and know them (Sartre, 1943).

### **3.2. Ways of incorporating possessions into the sense of self**

To answer the question of how consumers incorporate an object into the sense of self, Belk (1988) utilizes Sartre's (1943) framework. According to the framework, there are three ways in which one can integrate an object within their sense of self: controlling, creating and knowing.

By mastering control over an object, we extend our sense of self to include the object. Besides the tangible objects, this concerns also services, experiences and more complex objects, such as, public places and environment. By walking in a forest, making a map of it, watching it change through the seasons, we master control over it. It moves from the gray area of unfamiliar to be included as a part of identity. Sartre (1943) also mentions gift-giving as a special case of control over an object. By offering it to a receiver, we imply ownership of it, which means that the object is a part of our sense of self.

Creating an object, bringing it into existence is also a way to incorporate an object into the sense of self. As long as the object bears a sign of its creator, such as autograph or a patent, it bears a sense of creator's identity.

Finally, object can become a part of identity by knowing it, being familiar with its intimate characteristics, its history, its capabilities and even its faults.

#### 4. Identity as a structure and a narrative

In this section, I present two views on the concept of self and identity – identity as a hierarchical structure, and identity as a narrative project.

Identity was once seen as a relatively stable and structured concept, reflecting things like social roles, status, relationships, and personal preferences. One's identity was seen as quite stable and solid (Kellner, 1992; Epstein, 1980), although having multiple components (Sirgy, 1982). One's ability to become a mature person was, therefore, seen as intertwined with his or her ability to discover "true" self, to arrive at the stable perception of identity, and minimize variation from this understanding in the future (Epstein, 1980). Belk develops a framework of self (1988), which is in line with this thinking.

Belk suggests that the structure of self is represented by four concentric levels of consumption objects, centered around core self – individual, family, community and group level. We identify with each of the level through consumption objects and key possessions. Personal possessions, such as jewelry or clothing help to define us as individuals. On the family level, house is the central possession that reflects our family identity. Community level may be represented by community-shared spaces and objects. Finally, belongingness to a group is signified by various symbolic objects, such as the flag of the country or public monuments.

Belk's conceptualizations of self as a multi-level structure implies existence of core self, given to an individual by various forces, such as genetics, socio-cultural background or even higher powers. According to Belk (1988), objects and possessions can be incorporated into the extended self, meaning that the level of core self stays untouched.

Over the past three or so decades, various aspects of the relationships between possessions and identity have been subjects of research interest. Conceptualization of self has started to change, although the idea of possessions contributing to our sense of self, crystallized by Belk, has been supported and extended.

Industrialized society blurred many borders between classes, countries, and even time and space, allowing an individual to occupy many social roles, be simultaneously here and there, change the course of life as often as one likes. Seeing self-concept as a uniform venture has become problematic and required adjustments. Identity re-emerged as a project that needs to be constantly re-visited and re-formulated. Consumers construct, deconstruct and construct their concept of self again, reconciling internal conflicts (Ahuvia, 2005) between competing aspects of identity, formulating possible selves, trying to approach the positive and avoid the negative ones

(Markus & Nurius, 1986). Identity is seen as dynamic process, in which consumer is an active agent, constantly re-inventing the concept of self and communicating identity narrative through symbolic meanings ascribed to objects. The marketplace facilitates identity projects by providing the choice of consumption objects with sometimes prescribed symbolic meanings (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), thus, empowering consumers to develop their narratives in a way that communicates their life story. An individual, thus, never arrives at a stable state of understanding of who he or she is, but develops an ever-changing narrative. Such narrative communicates the sense of self to others by assembling past events, present actions and future aspirations in order to present the sense of self in a desirable way (Gergen & Gergen, 1983).

This view of identity as a narrative is adopted by a number of consumer researchers (Ahuvia, 2005; Schouten, 1991; Shankar, Elliott & Fitchett, 2009; Kleine, Kleine III & Allen, 1995). In particular, Ahuvia (2005) criticizes Belk's notion of core self as potentially "misleading" (Ahuvia, 2005, p. 182) in its suggestion of the existence of romantic true self, which one can find and happily live in accordance with. Belk himself, in his later work presents more complex, dynamic concept of self, as dealing with competing aspects (Tian & Belk, 2005) and transformative impulses (Mehta & Belk, 1991).

## 5. Identity and a city

The context of the present research is desire towards a city. But how important are the physical spaces and places for our identity narratives? And what kind of implication a change of residential area has on identity? In the next two sections, I discuss the relationship between our physical surroundings and self-concept. The discussion then progresses on what happens with the sense of identity when one moves to live in a new city.

### 5.1. Physical surroundings and identity

A comprehensive discussion on this subject is found within the field of environmental psychology, which widely employs term “place identity” (Proshansky, 1986; Twigger-Ross & Uzzel, 1996; Lalli, 1992; Chow & Healey, 2008).

Place identity refers to the implications that our physical surroundings have on identity narratives. This concept suggests that belonging to a place is a key element for the sense of self to evolve and change: “there is for virtually everyone a deep association with and consciousness of the places where we were born and grew up, where we live now, or where we have had particularly moving experiences. This association seems to constitute a vital source of...identity and security” (Relph, 1976, see Chow & Healey, 2008, p. 364).

My informants are united in their strong desire to move to a new city. For some of them it is the first move away from the place they grew up in, while others have already experienced a few cities. Nevertheless, moving and adjusting to a new city might pose challenges for each of them.

The studies of transition experience within the field of environmental psychology (Chow & Healey, 2008; Speller, Lyons & Twigger-Ross, 2002) uncover negotiation of identity through important places, and challenges posed by the change of physical environment.

Chow and Healey (2008) in their study of undergraduates making the transition from home to university, find that first-year students experience great need for continuity with their previous lifestyle in home city. However, the meaning of home is reevaluated as students proceed with their lives in a new city and root their identity in local experiences. Establishing social relationships is particularly important in creating meaningful experiences within the new city. Students’ sense of self extended to include new people, topography of the city, new customs and rules, and all those experiences that constitute life in a city.

Of course, such transition was not pleasant to all of the informants. Some of them reported missing home severely, while others found it difficult to leave their “comfort zone” and meet new people.

Moreover, Mehta and Belk (1991), in their study of Indian immigrants to the United States reveal how a new environment may present a problem to the coherent and integrated identity narrative by facilitating a break with prior anchors of identity, represented by social networks, familiar places and relationships that were essential to the continuity of identity prior to the move.

Despite the challenges of relocation, the city of desire aids my informant’s identity narratives, because of attachment they experience towards the city. Twigger-Ross and Uzzel (1996) find out that people, who experience emotional attachment to an area, discuss their relationship with the local environment in way that supports and develops identity processes; whereas those who are not attached to it do not consider it in such a positive way.

## **5.2. Identity in transition**

A geographic move is often accompanied by a change in social role and status (Mehta & Belk, 1991), especially when the move is due to a new stage in career, education, or family relationship. Although my informants’ primary motivation to move to a new city is a passionate feeling of desire, rather than necessity, but such a big step as more or less permanent move to a new city requires some changes in formal status as well. For example, one of my informants has sold her business in order to move to her desired city, and changed her occupation. The other informant left her job and moved to a new city as a student. Therefore, by moving to a desired city (and even by just planning to do so), my informants subjected their self concepts to transition process.

In his study of consumption of aesthetic plastic surgery, Schouten (1991) describes the process of identity reconstruction. The process starts when some event triggers separation from a key component of identity. Then a period of liminality and formulation of possible self follows. The transition process is completed when a new component of identity is integrated within the sense of self.

Transition is induced by a triggering event that highlights some conflict or undesirable aspect of identity narrative, which was previously in rudimentary or suppressed state. Schouten specifies that triggering event may occur literally in time and space, as for example, the first encounter with the desired city, or it may occur internally, through a reflective process of reconstructing

past events and daydreaming. Triggering events serve an important role of initiator of the transition process, and are probably experienced as epiphanies – remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person's life (Ellis, Adam & Bochner, 2011)

This significant moment triggers separation from some component of the extended self, such as social role or relationship. When an individual experiences a loss or rejection of a component of identity, they enter the state of liminality. Liminal state is “a limbo between a past state and a coming one, a period of ambiguity, of nonstatus and of unanchored identity” (Turner, 1969, see Schouten, 1991, p. 421). At this point formulation of competing possible selves begins. This formulation can proceed as assembling various past events, role models, and future plans according to one's goals, fantasies, and desires. Possible selves might be initially articulated rather loosely, but their elaboration continues throughout the process of transition, or may even occur as a triggering event, preceding separation: one of the Schouten's informant reported frequently imagining herself with a new nose. She considered rhinoplasty, and this mental elaboration helped her to commit to the surgery.

At the beginning stages of transition, an individual learns to adapt to a new environment and reformulates the identity narrative in a way that fits the new context. At the same time, a person, who experienced a loss of a component of self, may feel the need to fulfill the existing gaps with new roles, or by emphasizing the importance of already existing roles and relationships.

If a newly formulated possible self is sufficiently appealing, and possesses motivational power, a person proceeds to incorporate and actualize it. During incorporation, an individual learns to incorporate the new aspects of self within identity narrative, reformulating and enhancing it. Actualization, according to Schouten, may occur through consumption of instrumental goods that symbolize various aspects of new self.

During the period of transition, integrity of identity might be threatened and people might attempt to support and maintain the coherency of identity narrative through their favorite objects. Mehta and Belk (1991) find that Indian immigrants to America fulfill their psychological need for security through the household shrine and collections of Indian music and films. These transitional objects, brought from home, help them to achieve a sense of continuity, and manifest their past.

Similarly, Ahuvia (2005) describes how a collection of antiques serves an informant to resolve a tension between two competing aspects of identity by symbolizing the family heritage and an

urban sophisticated professional, helping to balance and reconcile the narrative. Thus, a part of my goal is to develop an understanding of how my informants manage the integrity of their identity narratives while moving to a new city and going through identity reconstruction process.

## 6. Summarizing the research approach

The objective of this research is to understand the role of desire in self construction. To achieve this goal, I have reviewed three main concepts that are embedded in this objective: desire, identity, and the relationship between the object of desire and identity. Below I summarize the key theory on these subjects that guides my interpretation.

In developing pre-understanding regarding desires, I used Belk, Ger and Askegaard's paper (2003). The key concepts I draw on are the cycle of desire, and the conflict between morality and seduction. The cycle of desire includes three stages: longing for the object, acquisition of the object and reinitiating of desire. By using this concept, I have been able to view desire as a complex experience, instead of only focusing on the first stage of the cycle, which is longing. Longing is a hot, passionate stage of desire, something that represents its essence from the common sense point of view. However, the experience of desire is much more than that, and this is why I used the cycle of desire as a framework. The second concept that characterizes desire is the conflict between morality and seduction. Belk and his colleagues argue that consumers experience a great tension between seducing themselves into following desire, and losing control, which is viewed as inappropriate by others. Regarding this conflict, my interest is to understand how consumers cope with it, and how they interpret it within their identity narrative.

As for the concept of identity, this research adopts the view of identity as narrative. Narrative may be defined as story-telling, through which consumers interpret various chains of events to achieve a particular impression. Narrative approach is suitable for this research, because it allows me to explore consumers' own interpretations of desire, their feelings and thoughts; and, thus, enhances my understanding of the experience of desire.

Regarding the relationship between identity and the object of desire, this research follows Belk's (1988) idea that consumers use their key possessions to extend and enhance their sense of identity. Consumers utilize the object of desire to reconstruct their sense of self by incorporating the object into it. The object of desire in this research is a city. Moving to a new city triggers the process of identity transition (Schouten, 1991), thus, I utilize the framework of this process to develop deeper understanding of how consumers reconstruct their identity narrative while moving to a new city, and how they incorporate desire within their narratives.

## **7. Methodology**

In this section, I describe the research philosophy my study is based on. My research falls within the interpretive paradigm; it follows the narrative approach, and is based on hermeneutic philosophy.

### **7.1. Interpretive paradigm**

My research seeks to develop an understanding of the role of desire in self-construction by interpreting consumers' stories of desire. This research does not aim at identification of any causality, or finding the way to predict consumer behavior, but seeks to provide an understanding of the meanings that consumers attach to their experiences of desire. As such, this research falls within the interpretive paradigm.

Guba and Lincoln (1998) define paradigm as a set of beliefs, which must be accepted purely on faith, about the nature of the world, the individual's place in the world, and possible relationships between the world, its parts, and the individual.

Below, I present the basic beliefs of interpretive paradigm, summarized in ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions; as well as how these assumptions translate into the methods adopted within the interpretive research approach. The categorization presented below is developed by Hudson and Ozanne (1988).

#### **7.1.1. Ontological assumptions**

Ontology answers the questions about the nature of reality; whether it exists independently from social beings, or constructed by them; whether there is a single uniform reality, or individual realities can be created (Burrell and Morgan, 1979).

Within the interpretive paradigm, social beings are seen as proactive; they create and shape their environment through constant interaction. In this constant interaction, multiple realities are created, at the intersection of individual and collective perspectives (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Reality is always a product of social interaction, since all knowledge is developed and maintained within social settings (Berger & Luckman, 1967), but, at the same time, they are mental and perceived. Moreover, Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain the dynamic nature of realities: whenever social setting changes, realities change as well, since their meaning is dependent on the system within which they are constructed. Therefore, no unified reality exists, but multiple and changing realities are constantly being constructed.

For my research process it means that I must be aware that my own system of reference differs from that of my informants'. I need to be ready to adapt and be sensitive to the meanings my informants ascribe to the experience of desire. Only this way we can co-create a shared reality in which our collective story of desire makes sense.

### **7.1.2. Epistemological assumptions**

Epistemology refers to the question of how knowledge is produced, and what can be known about the world. Burrell and Morgan (1979, p. 1) see this question as “how might one begin to understand the world and communicate this as knowledge to fellow human beings?”

From the interpretive perspective, knowledge is always time-bound and context dependent (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). Interpretive researchers seek to create and communicate knowledge through producing a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973). Thick description determines and interprets motifs, meanings and subjective experiences that are dependent on time and context.

Because of its context-sensitivity, this approach does not imply creation of generalizable knowledge, identification of causalities, or finding the way to predict behavior. Interpretivists do not believe that reality is composed of parts or facts (Rist, 1977), and this is why the general understanding of the world cannot be achieved. What can be accomplished is the co-created meaning that is constructed through the interaction of the researcher and the informant (Shankar, Elliott, Goulding, 2001). The world is so complex, that we can only achieve an understanding, a subjective and time-bound interpretation of the reality that is co-created by the researcher and the informant (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988).

For my research it implies that my interpretation will never be complete, moreover, it will never appear the same to the reader as it appears to me. Anyone who attempts to repeat this study will arrive at different interpretations, reflecting their own reality.

### **7.1.3. Axiological assumptions**

Axiology concerns the value of the research and its findings (Hart, 1971). It answers the questions of what the fundamental goals of the research are, and determines the techniques used to achieve these goals (Hudson & Ozanne 1988).

The primary goal for the interpretive researchers is to understand behavior, not predict it (Rubinstein, 1981). However, understanding in the interpretivists' view is not an end product, it is a process in which preceding understandings enter into current one and thus, produces a new interpretation. That's why the process of interpretation is never complete, it requires researchers

to be adaptive and change the techniques and direction of the research, whenever the new interpretation requires so (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988; Denzin, 1984).

This requires me as a researcher to iterate throughout the whole research process, to be ready to change my initial plan, and accept that my pre-understanding should not control the research process and must be defeated at some point.

#### **7.1.4. Interpretivist method**

Research method is “the way in which one attempts to investigate and obtain knowledge of the social world” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; p.2)

Several criteria for interpretive research have been discussed in the literature. First of all, the research must be conducted in the natural setting of the phenomenon (Patton, 1980). The natural setting is necessary, because it is a context that ascribes meaning to the phenomenon. Besides this, the researcher should familiarize themselves with the setting to feel as comfortable as the informant. That would facilitate the access to the insider meanings (Blumer, 1969; Anderson, 2006). Also, the researcher should produce a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the phenomenon, meaning that it is detailed and inclusive of the contextual aspects.

As there is no unified reality within the interpretive paradigm, the universal research technique is also absent. However, the guiding principles of interpretive research do exist. Design of interpretive research evolves throughout the whole process. Because the interpretivist researchers seek to describe perceived reality, which is not visible beforehand, they must be ready to adapt their research techniques to the context. This, however, does not imply that the researcher has to avoid developing any pre-understanding of the phenomenon or general research plan. Hudson and Ozanne (1988) point out the crucial role of the informants in the evolution of the research design and shaping the researcher’s pre-understanding into more comprehensive interpretation. The informants assist in unfolding the study and act not only as mere providers of data, but also co-creators of ideas, questions and research techniques.

The significance of the informant in co-creating the research outcome has become one of the key features of the interpretive research. Shankar et al. (2001) for instance call for limitation of the subject-object split that to some degree characterizes the interpretive research. He suggests participative research techniques, where the researcher essentially becomes an informant, and the informant becomes a co-researcher. As Shankar et al. (2001) argue, such approach results in the shared narratives of consumptions, which are conversations, rather than interviews.

Data, generated by interpretive research, is often presented in a narrative. This comes as no surprise, because we gain and communicate knowledge through stories. Narratives permeate our lives. We learn about the world and our place in it through stories. The narrative perspective, and the philosophical hermeneutics it draws from, will be discussed in the following chapters of this paper.

## 7.2. Narrative perspective

Narratives are stories, accounts, tales, and descriptions (Shankar, Elliott & Goulding 2001). Since the moment we are born, stories enter our lives. Knowledge is transmitted from one generation to another in a form of a story, which makes our language and mind so accustomed to a narrative form, that story has become the most significant form through which we make sense of our experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988). Fisher (1985) even suggested that we are in fact *Homo Narrans*.

Since narratives are the most important means, by which we make sense of our lives, creating an understanding of a narrative is a way to explore how we make sense of our consumption experiences. It is especially relevant for interpretive researchers, whose data often comes in a form of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973).

Consumer research in its study of consumption is increasingly turning to the humanities for both, theory and method (Shankar, Elliott & Goulding 2001). The recent “narrative turn” in the human sciences (Riessman, 2001) has influenced consumer researchers as well (Thompson, 1997; Thompson, Pollio & Locander, 1994; Shankar & Patterson, 2001). Bush & Bush (1994), for instance, propose the narrative perspective to evaluate and improve advertisements; and Shankar and Patterson (2001) use metaphor technique to analyze the development of interpretive consumer research through the plot of Homer’s *Odyssey*.

This research falls within the narrative perspective of consumer research because of the nature of its objectives. The objective of my research is to understand how people make sense of their desires. Therefore, my study is interpretive in nature, and implies acquiring informants’ accounts and interpretations of their consumption experiences. The narrative perspective and analysis seem to be a fruitful approach to guide my interpretation of consumers’ experiences of desire, because the dominant way in which meaning is assigned to experience is through language and narrative (Shankar, Elliott & Goulding, 2001; O’Shaughnessy & Holbrook, 1988).

When it comes to constructing interpretations, narrative perspective draws heavily on hermeneutics philosophy. Hermeneutics traditionally deals with texts and language, which is

“the universal medium in which understanding occurs” (Arnold & Fischer, 1994, p. 5). Shankar et al. (2001) argue that consumption behavior can be interpreted as a text, and therefore can be a subject to hermeneutic analysis.

In the following sections, I review the key principles of hermeneutics, and their implications for interpretive research.

### **7.3. Hermeneutics**

Hermeneutic philosophy is concerned with the meaning of understanding (Bernstein, 1983). It emphasizes that understanding is linguistic and expressed through interpretation. Moreover, the interpretation itself is a product of co-creative process, in which both the researcher and the subject of the research are engaged. In this process, the line between the object and the subject of the study is often erased as they cooperate closely to create shared knowledge (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Hudson & Ozanne, 1988; Shankar, Elliott & Goulding, 2001)

Hermeneutics offers several principles - means, by which such shared interpretation can be achieved. These are pre-understanding, self-understanding, fusion of horizons and hermeneutic circle. I discuss them in the following sections.

#### **7.3.1. Pre-understanding**

Pre-understanding follows from recognition that the interpreter exists in the same world with what is being interpreted. Therefore, the interpreter is linked to the phenomenon under study through tradition – a system of codes, beliefs, theories and institutions that constitute cultural world (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). A researcher’s pre-understanding, thus, comes not only from reading specific literature on the subject and studying the theories, but also from their experience as a consumer. It comes from everyday experiences and socialization into the world.

Philosophical hermeneutics sees pre-understanding as enabling interpretation, rather than constraining it. It is a starting point of reference, a “window on the world, our base for recognition and comparison” (Arnold & Fischer, 1994, p. 57). If we did not have such a base, it would not be possible to make sense of events, language, or actions of other people.

Hermeneutics suggests capitalizing on pre-understanding, instead of putting it aside. However, as Hudson and Ozanne (1988) suggest, pre-understanding needs to be continuously worked out during the process of research. Pre-understanding’s adequacy should be continuously tested, and attempts made to be open and adaptive to new information.

The concept of pre-understanding is very important for my research. As I have experienced desire myself, I used written autoethnography as a part of data to capitalize on my experience. It served as a starting system of reference in my research. However, I was prepared to change and adapt my pre-understanding, in order to avoid using it as a rigid framework.

### **7.3.2. Self understanding**

Hermeneutic understanding is not what we believe we learn about the other or about the phenomenon. It is what we learn about ourselves, and how our own sense of self changes. As Ricoeur comments: “To understand is to understand oneself in front of the text” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 143).

The stranger becomes more familiar as we get to know them, and include them into our picture of the world. At the same time, by being included into our comprehension of the world, they change it; our self-knowledge and sense of self changes. The boundary between the one who is trying to understand, and the one who is being understood is further transcended, and self-understanding is reflected in our interpretations of others (Gadamer, 1989).

### **7.3.3. Fusion of horizons**

The fusion of horizons is a process in which the subject-object division is overpassed (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). Horizon is a metaphor for the researcher’s system of reference, which is expressed in their pre-understanding, and for the narrative, which researcher is attempting to interpret. In this process, the researcher’s pre-understanding is continuously altered to integrate with the sense of the text. This is how pre-understanding becomes an understanding, reflected in the interpretation.

In order to facilitate the fusion of horizons in the process of interpretive research, Shankar et al. (Shankar, Elliott & Goulding, 2001) suggest using participative techniques. To aid the fusion of horizons in constructing my interpretation of the experience of desire, I have tried to engage my participant into conversation, rather than interview. I have attempted to involve them into the process of interpretation by sharing my own experience with them, thus, creating a collective story of desire.

### **7.3.4. Hermeneutic circle**

The idea of hermeneutic circle is a continuous iteration until an understanding, free of contradictions is achieved. Specific elements of the text are examined over and over, each time from a slightly different angle. Their meaning is understood through referring to the whole text,

while the meaning of the whole text incorporates each separate element (Arnold & Fischer, 1994).

Apart from aforementioned methodological implication, hermeneutic circle has other, more conceptual proposals, concerning the interplay between cultural traditions and personalized meaning (Thompson, Pollio & Locander, 1994). However, the methodological implication of hermeneutics provides me with guidance about how I should approach my data analysis in order to achieve a better understanding of it. As Hirschmann (1990) suggests, I have tried to organize the process of interpretation as iterative, and re-interpret each part of data over and over again, in order to reach a better understanding of the whole.

## **8. Method**

In this chapter, I describe the method of data collection and analysis that I have used to achieve the objectives of my research. The techniques I have used are based on the assumptions of the interpretive paradigm, described in the previous sections.

### **8.1. Data collection**

To gain comprehensive understanding of the experience of desire, I have utilized multi-sited approach to data collection. The actual methods I used were analytic autoethnography, narrative interviews and consumer-generated text. In the following chapters, I describe the principles of multi-sited approach, and present each data collection method.

#### **8.1.1. Multi-sited approach**

The concept of multi-sited fieldwork has been developed by George Marcus (1981). He saw multi-sited research as an answer to the need of a method to explore various processes in our increasingly globalized world. Through globalization people become more and more interconnected, so that ideas, events, and processes extend over multiple locations and even times.

Multi-sited approach suggests that data collection process unfolds by following the path of the phenomenon of the study. Perhaps the most conventional mode of multi-sited fieldwork is following the people (Marcus, 1981). The procedure is to follow and observe the movements of a particular group of initial subjects. This approach is particular useful for migration studies. For instance, Rouse (1991), in order to gain understanding of emigrant identity projects, follows the group of his Mexican informants across the borders of the country.

Marcus (1981) argues that single-sited ethnography cannot offer comprehensive picture of the whole chain of events triggered by a local phenomenon on a global level, although it provides depths of understanding of a localized phenomenon. Multi-sited research suits the need to explore people and ideas in motion, global processes, and extended chains of events. The advantage of multi-sited ethnography is that it provides access to a variety of perspectives and discourses, involved with a specific idea, process, or commodity.

Multi-sited research has been used by researchers within consumer culture stream of thought as means to achieve a variety of perspective, and avoid the boundaries imposed by a single context. For example Belk, Ger and Askegaard in their study of desires (2003), collected their data from

three different cultures, and not only did they interview their informants, but they also used informant's journals, drawings and collages.

In the spirit of multi-sited research, I follow my informants in their journeys to the desired cities. The data I'm using includes textual accounts, created at various stages of the process of transition. By using multi-sited approach, I have been able to see how the meanings attached to desire evolved and changed, when an informant moved to a new place of residence; and how the past was re-evaluated in the light of new experiences.

### 8.1.2. Analytic autoethnography

Autoethnography is an “approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)”<sup>1</sup>

The forms of autoethnography differ in terms of the degree to which autoethnography is closer to arts or to science (Bochner & Ellis, 2003; Anderson, 2006). For the purposes of my research, I have used analytic autoethnography. The term was first introduced by Leon Anderson (Anderson, 2006) to describe autoethnographic approach to research, which does not seek to immerse the reader into a cultural world of the author, but rather aims at enhancing the theory by connecting the first-hand experience with a broader theoretical framework.

Anderson develops five key features of analytic autoethnography, which simultaneously define and legitimize analytic autoethnography, as well as guide an autoethnographer in their work.

1. *Complete member researcher*. The researcher must be a complete member of the social world under study. The social world may consist of unconnected individuals, who might have never met each other, or it might be represented by a close community with clear rituals and sub culture. Being a complete member is about as close to the social world, as it gets. It brings the researcher to the emotional stance shared by other members of the social world, and allows her to attempt to convey this stance to the readers. Complete membership gives the researcher knowledge of first-hand vocabulary of the group (as he or she is also the one who participated in construction of this vocabulary). This in turn, gives the researcher understanding of the social world under study not from detached discoveries but from engaged dialogue (Anderson, 2006)

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<sup>1</sup>Ellis E, Adams TE, Bochner A, 'Autoethnography: An Overview' <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095>, last visited 18.09.2012

2. *Analytic reflexivity*. This concept refers to the researcher's awareness of the reciprocal influence between the researcher, other members and the context. Autoethnographers situate their data within their personal sense-making framework. Therefore there is a shift towards deeper reciprocity between the researcher and other participants, as the researcher is one of those, who have personal stakes and beliefs in the social world under study.
3. *Narrative visibility of the researcher's self*. Traditional ethnographer is seemingly invisible in the text. In autoethnography, however, the researcher is highly present in the text. Her experience, feelings and reflections are considered to be key elements for understanding the phenomenon under study. Such visibility demonstrates researcher's personal engagement with the phenomenon. Arguments and analytic insights are illustrated with the researcher's own thoughts and experiences.
4. *Dialogue with the informants beyond self*. Analytic autoethnography is used to develop theoretical issues and, therefore, analytic autoethnographers must avoid self-absorption in their texts. "Given that the researcher is confronted with self-related issues at every turn, the potential for self-absorption can loom large" (Anderson, 2006, p. 385). Analytic autoethnographers must engage into dialogue with other representatives of the social world under study.
5. *Commitment to theoretical analysis*. Commitment to analytical agenda is a defining characteristic of analytical autoethnography. The purpose of analytic autoethnography is not to evoke emotional response, nor simply give an insider's prospective. The goal is to gain insight into a broader social phenomenon using the researcher's very own experience as empirical data.

Autoethnography offers several advantages. First, it facilitates the availability of data. Being a part of the phenomenon under study provides easy access to other members. This is illustrated by how my experience of blogging let me identify my future interviewees. It also gives access to insider meanings and beliefs, as well as access to certain types of data. Anderson (2006) for example describes how he was able to analyze his own dreams about skydiving, as a part of his research on skydivers' experiences.

Snahkar et al. (Shankar, Elliott & Goulding, 2001) suggest participative techniques of data collection for narrative researchers, because they help to construct a shared narrative of consumption. Being already a participant of the social world I was seeking to comprehend, I needed a way to utilize my experience and make it part of the research process. Analytic autoethnography helped me to achieve this goal. By writing and analyzing autoethnography of

my own experience, I have been able to gain advantage of being a part of the phenomenon under study, such as access to insider meanings and beliefs, as well as to certain types of data, such as, for example, dreams (Anderson, 2006).

In line with hermeneutic tradition, autoethnography became a way to enrich my self-understanding while reflecting on my own experience, and comparing it to that one of other participants. It also helped me to create conversation with my informants, since I could share my experience with them, and had them commenting on it during the interviews. This, in turn, has assisted the fusion of horizons and has enriched my understanding of the experience of desire towards a city.

### **8.1.3. Phenomenological interview**

A phenomenological interview (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989) implies relatively few preplanned questions. Instead, interview emerges as a conversation that stems from the consumer's experiences. The focus here is on the interviewee's interpretations, and the interviewer's task is to be adaptive to the course of the dialogue and ask questions that follow from the theme of the conversation.

Phenomenological interviewing is a common method in interpretive research, because such interviews generate a type of text that is based on consumer's interpretations, and can be subjected to hermeneutic analysis. As a method, interviewing is widely adopted in the research on identity and self-concept. Schouten sees its primary benefit in allowing the researchers "to delve phenomenologically into the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of informants, and to capture and account for the social and situational contexts of those phenomena" (Schouten, 1991, pp. 413-414).

By using this method, I have been able to gain access to consumer's narratives, which were rich in contextual details, and offered insight on how consumers themselves interpret their desire towards a city.

### **8.1.4. Blogs**

Blogs are collections of entries - consumer-generated texts, published online, that offer the author's interpretations on relevant subjects. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) describe blogs as egodocuments (Schulte Nordholt, 2002) that can supply information on daily events, help to sensitize concepts and shed light on the imagery of the author. As Schwarz (2009) argues, blogs can be used as a powerful tool for ethnography of identity, providing the researcher with unique information that would not otherwise be revealed.

By utilizing blog as a source of data, I have been able to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how the relationship between the informant and the city evolved and changed. Blog, as an online diary, implies frequent updates on daily events, as well as deeply reflexive accounts of past experiences, plans and daydreams. The blog, which I have used, is permeated with very personal stories of living in the city, getting to know, cherishing and adoring it. It provided me with a detailed account of the process of desire, and offered insight on how consumer interpreted her experience, and incorporated it within her sense of self.

## **8.2. Data analysis**

To develop an interpretation of my data, I have used the narrative analysis. Below, I describe this type of analysis and its components.

### **8.2.1. Narrative analysis**

Narrative analysis takes the story itself as an object of investigation. It is a family of approaches to diverse texts that are represented in a storied form. What makes such text “narrative” is that events are selected, organized, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience (Riessman, 2003). A storyteller understands the world and experiences they’ve had by constructing a narrative that has sequence and consequence in it. Understanding, however, is always mediated by language, and, as Arnold & Fischer put it: “through language experience is filtered, encoded, and communicated in dialogue” (Arnold & Fischer, 1994, p. 58).

To account for the linguisticity of understanding, and give close attention to the language that my informants use to construct their narratives, I have used the semiotic-structural analysis.

#### **8.2.1.1. Semiotic-Structural analysis**

Semiotic analysis regards text as a system of signs (*syntactics*). Within a text, meaningful events are regarded as such signs, and the interpreter focuses on the relationship between them, as well as on the relationship between the signs and the objects to which they refer (*semantics*) (Arnold & Fischer, 1994).

Structural analysis is closely related to semiotics. The defining feature of structural analysis of a narrative is that, as much emphasis put on the form of the story, as it is on the content. The data is still organized into a more manageable set of emerging themes (Spiggle, 1994; Thompson, Locander & polio, 1989), but the focus is on how the storyteller select particular techniques to make the story persuasive (Riessmann, 2003). In line with the principles of hermeneutics that emphasizes the role of an element in constructing the whole, Labov (1982) highlights the importance of the each clause, and its function, in the overall narrative.

Riessmann (2003, 2001) argues that structural analysis is particularly suitable for case studies and comparison of several narrative accounts and that it “illuminates the intersection of biography, history, and society” (Riessmann, 2001, p. 5).

The data I’ve collected consists of several narratives that are not only accounts of personal experiences, but are often discussions on more general topics, such as ethics, history and culture. By choosing semiotic-structural analysis, I have been able to identify the relationship between language and meaning (Riessmann, 2003) that helped to gain an understanding of consumer’s experiences of desire.

#### **8.2.1.2. *Emplotment***

According to hermeneutic view, the key feature of a narrative is that it is structured by plot lines that organize events and characters in terms of goals, motives, and anticipated futures (Ricoeur, 1981). These plot lines are narratively configured through the process, known as emplotment, “a procedure that configures temporal elements into a whole by “grasping them together” and directing them towards conclusion or end” (Polkinghorne, 1991, p. 141).

Gergen and Gergen (1983) identified 3 temporal forms of a narrative. Stability narrative consists of events linked and evaluated in such a way that an individual appears unchanged. This type of narrative serves an important need of our society for order and predictability. Progressive narrative is constructed, when an individual evaluates past events as incrementally positive. Such narrative communicates a story of achievement and capability of further improvements. Finally, regressive narrative is constructed by linking and evaluating events in such a way, that some characteristics seem to deteriorate and decrement. Regressive narrative can play a role of motivational source to change situation to the better, and construct a progressive narrative.

Hermeneutic researchers see the analysis of the emplotment of the narrative as a key to analyzing human understanding (Gergen & Gergen, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988; Ricoeur, 1981).

Consumers' interpretations are seen as an act of emplotment, and consequently the interpretation of consumer experiences implies analysis of the plot. Thompson (1997) discusses the process of analyzing the emplotment of consumer stories. As he explains, the main task during the analysis is to understand specific stories in relation to the whole interview. In particular, it is important to understand how goals and interpretations of consumption experiences assist the construction of personal history. One way to identify the key meanings of a person’s story is to identify the chains of symbolic association and their relations to a broader theme of the person’s life.

Thompson describes how his informant compares disappointment in a particular car brand with disappointment in a newly bought dining set. By finding this association, Thompson has been

able to link it to a broader theme of being a balanced person, which is very important for the informant.

Thompson also highlights that consumer narratives are selective. They never tell the whole story; rather they feature specific events and interpretations, while leaving other things marginal. The researcher's task then is to identify the pattern of meanings that support the informant's interpretation. In an attempt to do so, the researcher can engage in imaginative variation (Giorgi, 1989) by imagining other ways in which the respondent could have framed the event. Evaluating events according to the informant's framework of reference allows developing comprehensive understanding of the informant's interpretation of the experience.

### **8.3. Research process**

In the following chapters, I describe my actual research process; including the choice of my informants, data collection, and data analysis techniques that I've used during the research process.

#### **8.3.1. Sample**

Altogether, I have analyzed data collected from four informants. I have written an autoethnography of my experience of desire towards a city; I have interviewed two informants, and finally, I have analyzed a blog, written by the fourth informant.

One of the respondents was identified through interpersonal network, while two other respondents were found through their blogs, dedicated to their desired cities. The idea of finding participants via their blogs came from my own experience of blogging about my desired city. Getting involved with the community of bloggers, I noticed that people love to share pictures and thoughts about cities they live in. A blog about desired city is a platform to express feelings towards it and, at the same time, arouse own emotions and enhance the motivational power of imagination by constantly rehearsing how it would be like to live in the city. These practices are known as nurturing desire and desired object (Lastovicka & Sirianni, 2011). Given the importance of nurturing and the ease of access to blogging tools, I was confident that I would be able to find respondents in the digital world. I searched blogs about desired cities using the key phrases "beloved city" and "I love this city". The use of the aforementioned phrases seemed justified, because love is one of the most common emotions that consumers cited as evoked by their key possession (see Ahuvia, 2005). Two blogs were found, in which strong emotional attachment to a city was identified. The authors expressed their strong desire to live in a

particular city, praised the qualities of the city and described the efforts towards moving to the city.

The sample and data collecting methods are based on three foundations: the interpretive research tradition, the need to explore the full cycle of desire, and the contribution of methods to the achievement of hermeneutic understanding. Below, I discuss these foundations.

Relatively small number of informants is explained by the research tradition this study belongs to. Riessmann (2003) argues that narrative approaches are not suitable for studies of large numbers of subjects, because narrative analysis requires high level of attention to details, such as nuances of speech, the organization of a response, social and historical contexts. Concentrating on small number of informants let me develop an intimate knowledge of their lives and experiences, which in turn helped me to construct interpretation of their narratives that accounts for their backgrounds and life stories.

Moreover, Erben (1998) argues that the number of informants and interviews is determined by the objectives of the study. The objective of this study is to gain understanding of a particular consumption experience, rather than create generalizable knowledge. This objective suggests purposive sampling. In order to explore the experience of desire comprehensively, I needed such sample of informants that could shed light on each stage of the cycle of desire (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003). The four informants, whose narratives I analyzed are all situated at the different stages of the cycle. This is why I believe that analyzing their experience has given me a deeper understanding of desire, than I would have been able to gain by concentrating on a single case.

In addition, the data techniques, I have chosen, helped me to construct hermeneutic interpretation. Written autoethnography makes my pre-understanding more explicit, giving me some basic themes that I can further explore in the interviews. It also assists the fusion of horizons with my informants. My informants felt they could relate to me and be open about their own story, because they knew that I also experienced desire towards a city.

The interviews represent consumer narratives. Their value is precisely in the fact that the story teller interprets the past, rather than reproduces the past events as they were (Riessmann, 2003). By altering my pre-understanding, and looking at it through the lenses of the other informants' interpretations, I have been able to fuse our understandings and achieve a new, shared interpretations.

Finally, the blog provides contextual richness to our collective story of desire. It consists of more than 1000 entries that cover the period from 2004, when the informant moved to her desired city, which is Florence, to 2012, when she felt she could not write that blog anymore. The format of blog implies updates on daily events, and thus, I had access to both, very fresh interpretations of the event, constructed when it just happened, and more mature comprehensions, that the author of the blog sometimes published later on. That was a great advantage in the process of hermeneutic circle, because I have been able to see how separate parts of the story relate to the “bigger picture” of desire; how the early years of life in the desired city could be re-evaluated in the light of the later experiences.

Thus, all sources of data worked well together to help me to achieve the objectives of the research, and construct a comprehensive understanding of how people experience desire towards a city. The summary of data sources can be found in Table 1 (Appendix 1).

### **8.3.2. Writing autoethnography**

To utilize my own experience of desire towards a city, I wrote an autoethnography. The paper consists of reflexive descriptions of the moments and events, which I perceive as essential for my experience of desire. The process of writing the autoethnography took about a month, and the text that has been produced covers a period from 2008 to the present days.

In order to re-live those important moments and describe them in a meaningful, nuanced, way, I have used the process of emotional recall (Ellis, 1999). When describing a scene, I imagined being back in it emotionally and physically. Ellis (1999) argues that if you can revisit the scene emotionally, you can recall other details. To achieve a better recollection of particular events, I went to the places where they have happened (if they happened in Helsinki), and immerse myself in emotional recall there. I made notes and often wrote the whole chapters of the autoethnography at those significant places. Ellis (1999) calls this process of immersing self into the past “moving in”. However, moving in is not enough, because being so involved in the scene emotionally means it’s difficult to get outside and analyze the experience from a cultural perspective. To achieve a more analytic perspective on my autoethnography, I used to revisit the chapter, written in the state of intense feelings and emotions, several days later, and add to it when being emotionally distant from the scene. That proved to be a good practice, because I was able to move around the experience and analyze my thoughts and feelings as socially constructed processes.

Using my story as means to gain understanding of a complex consumption phenomenon, I have built on hermeneutic tenets of self-understanding. As Rosen (1991) argues “ethnographers study

others in order to find more about themselves and others” (Rosen, 1991, p.2). By looking inward and studying myself, I have enhanced my ability to create a reflexive dialogue with other subjects of my research. Although there was a risk of crossing the line between reflexive self-study and narcissism, but, as Humphreys (2005) puts it, the risk was far outweighed by the potential of autoethnography to create the “acts of witnessing, empathy, and connection that extend beyond the self and the author” (Sparkes, 2001, p.542)

### **8.3.3. Conducting the interviews**

I have conducted two interviews, and each interview lasted from 30 to 50 minutes. The questions have covered the evolution of the interviewees’ relationships with the desired cities, their past and current life situations, future prospects and aspirations, as well as things they like and dislike. Both interviews have been conducted in person, recorded, and then, transcribed. In one case the interview took place in the interviewee’s home, and in the other case – in a quiet restaurant. In one case, the initial interview was followed up with additional questions aimed to clarify aspects that had emerged during the first interview. The interviewees were encouraged to talk freely about the topics they found relevant and interesting. At the same time, I guided them by asking the questions that would help them to recall and explore their experience of desire.

From my own experience, I knew that the object of desire is very dear to the owner’s heart, and therefore, it was essential to me to convince them that I would treat the relationships with their desired city with respect and dignity. I approached my future interviewees via email first, telling them how inspirational and amazing their blogs are; and how deeply I relate to their feelings. The fact that my informants knew that I share their feelings toward a city, is what eventually helped us to establish connection and trust. My informants felt safe and comfortable telling me their stories during the interviews, and I was willing to share my story with them too. Additionally, they had a chance to read the transcriptions of their interviews and comment on it. That helped to achieve a “power neutral” interpretation-reinterpretation process (Shankar, Elliott, Goulding, 2001).

The interviews have developed and supplemented my understanding of the experience of desire, which was outlined in my autoethnography. By conducting them, I have been able to bring my self-understanding to a new level, and construct a more versatile and comprehensive interpretation of consumers’ narratives of desire.

#### 8.3.4. Reading the blog

The name of the blog, which I have analyzed as a part of my data, is “Living in Florence”. It belongs to Melinda Gallo, a Chinese-American, who, after several years of living in England and France, chose to reside permanently in Florence, Italy. Melinda had been writing her blog since 2004 until 2012. She describes and interprets daily events, as well as her thoughts and feelings towards Florence.

To make the process of reading and analyzing easier, I have printed all the blog posts out. The printed version consisted of more than 1300 pages. I was reading the blog, using the same techniques as with the interview transcriptions. I identified emerging themes, read and reread the text, trying to understand how separate parts relate to the whole, and how the whole can be seen in light of particular events. Reading the blog took about a month and a half. While reading, I would make notes and bookmarks to the fragments that seemed noteworthy to me.

The process of reading was rather exhausting, but it has given a new perspective on the experience of desire. The blog was full of contextual details, such as, for example, daily trips to a grocery market. At first sight, these trips have nothing to do with desire towards a city, but when they are interpreted as a part of the whole (Thompson, 1997), they gain a new meaning, highlighting Melinda’s desire to associate with the locals in her beloved city. Neither interviews, nor autoethnography could provide me with the same contextual details as this online diary did.

All in all, the combinations of data gathering techniques proved to be very successful, as it shed light on each stage of the cycle of desire (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003); served the principles of hermeneutic analysis, and helped me to construct comprehensive interpretation of the experience of desire.

## 9. Findings

Data, gathered from my informants, provides a rich account of relationships between people and cities. Each of my informants has a very personal story of transition, represented in their accounts of desired city, and a process of integrating desired city within their sense of self. Research findings will be organized in three major chapters.

First, in order to represent the process of identity reconstructions, highlight the struggles of it, and understand the role of desired city in this process, I employ Schouten's framework of identity transition (Schouten, 1991) as guidelines for understanding informants' narratives. In this section, I explore the following emerging themes: magic, belongingness and appearance, childhood experiences, the meaning of home, and association with the locals.

Second, in order to understand how desire towards a city affects informants' narratives, I analyze what the function of desire is, within the framework of the story, what role it plays, and what purpose it serves.

Finally, in order to enhance my understanding of desire as a phenomenon, I use Belk, Ger, Askegaard's cycle of desire (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003) to view the data from more ethnographic perspective; and to see how desire evolves and what practices and approaches are involved into consumption of a city. In this section, I discuss a major theme that emerged in my data, which is nurturing desire.

### 9.1. Identity in transition

In this section, I discuss emerging themes organized within the framework of identity reconstruction process (Schouten, 1991)

#### 9.1.1. Triggering moment and magic

For my informants, the event that triggered the beginning of desire and, simultaneously, the process of identity transition, invariably occurred during their stay in the city of desire. It is noteworthy that consumers are mostly not able to articulate what particularly attracted them to the city during that moment, or what actually happened at all. Rather, this moment is experienced emotionally, sensually, and spiritually.

**Interviewer:** *Could you please describe your first visit to Tampere?*

**Nelli:** *Well, that's funny because I didn't really see much of anything else, but the railway station (laughs). I just came out of the train, looked around, and then...something happened, something just happened..*

**Interviewer:** *Did you come for a concert?*

**Nelli:** *Yes. I came out of the railway, and the city just hit me..A very cool feeling fell upon me. Do you understand me? Do these things happen?*

**Interviewer:** *Yes, it happens. The feeling of some sudden understanding, when something clicks or hits..It happened to me as well during my first visit to Helsinki. Could you please tell me more about that moment, when that happened to you?*

**Nelli:** *I don't know.. To me it was as if I had been or lived there before. It was a moment of some kind of recognition.*

Nelli cannot comprehend what happened to her in Tampere. Society has taught her that, in order to explain something, one has to provide a reason, or some kind of argument that would legitimize the following happenings. Nelli, however, does not have a particular “reason” as to why she liked Tampere so much. Moreover, she acknowledges that she did not even see much of the city when she visited it for the first time. Yet, she is determined to do whatever it takes to move there. Nelli seeks reassurance that I understand her and can relate to what she felt, since she feels quite overwhelmed by the inability to provide a reasonable explanation for her desire.

Hanna describes her first encounter with Munich in a similar fashion. She first visited Germany and Munich during a car trip with her friends. Hanna is obviously feeling the excitement when she recalls what she experienced in Munich. Her body language becomes very expressive and her voice starts to tremble.

**Interviewer:** *How can one understand that the place is really hers? What kind of characteristics does the place need to possess? How did you understand that Germany is really your place?*

**Hanna:** *Well, first of all you need to visit the place and then..something just clicks inside you! Like it's mine, I really want it! And then you just have to go for it and try. I, by no means, am sure that if I stay here I'll be 100% satisfied, but at this point I'm willing to give it a try. I really want it. I'm really enjoying this place. Something just clicked inside me.*

**Interviewer:** *Did it click in Munich?*

**Hanna:** *It did! It clicked so loud, that I believe they heard it in Belarus! (Laughs)*

**Interviewer:** *Do you remember that particular moment when it clicked or it'd been a continuous process of realizing that something was clicking?*

*Hanna: Well, there was that particular moment when I saw those swings. There was a park with a street café, and by the café there were the swings. And then it clicked. I just closed my eyes and imagined swinging. I felt so free and so happy at that moment. There I was, in Germany, so happy that even people, drinking their beers around seemed so nice and welcoming to me. (Hanna and Munich)*

To Hanna, that first encounter with Munich materialized in a very solid object, a swing that she saw in the park. To Hanna, a swing becomes a symbol of freedom. This is very important to her, as she has been raised by a family that struggled to provide for children, due to the lack of resources in the post-Soviet Belarus. During the interview with Hanna, the theme of being free has emerged as particularly important. The freedom that the swing symbolizes to Hanna is in part liberation from the hardships that her family experienced, a whole world of opportunities that concentrated into that swing, in a city park of Munich.

Melinda describes the triggering moment as a sudden realization of being home. It happened to her during her first weekend in Florence.

*I found myself standing next to Orsanmichele chiesa (church). I remember the first time I stumbled upon the chiesa the first weekend after I arrived in Florence. While I sat inside admiring the interior, I realized that I was finally home. In that instant I decided that I would live in Florence.*

*In 1997, I walked around the tall square building and peeked my head inside. I didn't know that Orsanmichele was a chiesa at first glance because it didn't have any of the typical signs like a cross at the top or a large empty space leading up to the door. I was stunned by the dark, but rich interior and sat down immediately. The sense that I was home came over me like a heavy blanket. I wasn't looking for a place to call home, and I didn't know that I wasn't already there until I found myself on a wooden bench. (Melinda and Florence, January 2009)*

While Melinda claims she was not looking for home, the theme of creating one is vivid in her blog. By the age of 26, Melinda had had an impressive history of cultures, countries, and even continents that she had once experienced or lived in. Moreover, her Italian-Chinese background often left her attempting to formulate who she is, and where the place she belongs to is. The feeling of being home in Florence might then have emerged as a resolution of these tensions within her sense of self, and this contributed to the birth of desire to stay in Florence.

Informants refer to their feelings and sensations to describe what happened to them. They say that something “just clicked” and they knew that they wanted to live in that city. They talk about

the moment of realization with excitement; they remember it as an epiphany, a significant moment in the development of their narrative of desire and transition.

This important moment connects them to their cities in a deep and meaningful way. However, at this stage informants are not able to articulate what actually happened to them; how this exposure to the city triggered a sense of relief, harmony, or induced some other powerful emotion. Informants often revisit their triggering moment later on, during the process of identity transition, to reevaluate it and ascribe it with meaning. However, when the triggering event occurs there seem to be nothing, but magic to explain the sudden sense of belongingness and happiness.

Recalling the triggering moment, consumers ascribe the city with magical powers and capabilities of transforming them into happy people, whatever it means to them. The desire for transformation that Belk et al. described (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003) is triggered when my informants encounter their desired city for the first time. The prescription of magical abilities to the city to transform one's life is a powerful driver for imagination and fuel for the fire of desire. Melinda, for instance, uses the word "spell" to describe the impression Florence made on her.

*I have felt that Florence was my home for a long time. And well before I married Alessandro, who is fiorentino (Florentine). I honestly have felt that it was my home when I first lived here back in 1997. I was drawn to come to Florence to learn Italian and to find my inspiration to write and very shortly after my arrival, I was under her spell (Melinda and Florence, December, 2007).*

The first encounter with the city of desire becomes a cherished memory to my informants. They recall this moment again and again, while they are away from the desired city. They try to contemplate the magic that happened, and understand why it has such a power over them. These recollections trigger comparison between the happy state of being in the city of desire, and their life at home. This highlights some unsatisfactory aspects of the latter, and my informants start to think what life could be in the city of desire; who they could and would become if only they found a way to move to the city. This is how the transition process begins with the formulation of possible selves (Ahuvia, 2005; Markus & Nurius, 1986).

### **9.1.2. Formulation of possible selves**

Markus and Nurius (1986) argue that, when exposed to a new environment or a new situation, people start to formulate positive and negative possible selves, and generally act in order to approach the positive ones. Walking around the city, experiencing its way of life, or being at

home and recalling their visit to the city, my informants begin to contemplate and imagine who they could become in this city. The city, in turn, seems to provide resources for even the wildest dreams to come true.

*During my evening walks along the sea, it gradually occurs to me, how different this city is, from the cityscape to people's attitudes towards certain things. This city accepts people for who they are, it doesn't cast you away, if you don't fit within some rigid framework. You don't necessarily have to be a lawyer, or a sales manager, or a market analyst to provide living for your family. You can dig deep into yourself and discover, what it is you really enjoy doing, and this city and these people will let you do that without any shame. So that's what I'm doing, walking along the sea – I'm digging deep and run through all the possible careers I can have. There are so many ways to create myself and I consider a lot – from PHD and academia to running a craft school. It's just totally new set of life roads, I would not be able to take in Moscow. (Author's autoethnography)*

In the aforementioned case, possible selves are articulated quite explicitly, which is explained by the reflexive nature of autoethnography. However, in the beginning they do not need be elaborated this way. Their emergence may be based on the general feeling of belongingness to the city, which is intertwined with the appearance of the city and its citizens. Walking around the city, and watching its way of life, provides informants with a sense of acceptance, since people who walk around seem to look just the type of people they are, or they want to be.

#### **9.1.2.1. *Belongingness and appearance***

Nelli, for instance, is very fond of the Finnish metal music, and she is an active member of the metal music sub culture, which involves going to “gigs” and dressing up in black, with massive metallic accessories. When asked about her favorite places in the city, she expresses her enchantment with somewhat industrial look of Tampere (her city of desire):

**Interviewer:** *Do you have any other favorite places in the city?*

**Nelli:** *Yeah. The whole embankment of Tammerkoski! Actually, I can say that I find the way how the city is built to be quite interesting. At one side, there are some industrial buildings, some factories perhaps. Some of them function, others don't. And they're located right at the city center, close to the river. So when you walk along the river you can see the pipes and some other factory parts. However, the water in the river isn't dirty or muddy at all. Actually the water is very clean, you can see big fishes swimming there, and even buy them from the fishermen. (Nelli and Tampere)*

Running through Nelli's pictures on the Internet, I noticed that her clothing style involves a lot of black leather, silver chains and somewhat threatening symbols of black metal sub culture. As Nelli discusses how Tampere looks to her, she makes favorable remarks about that masculine and brutal feeling of the cityscape of Tampere. Being an active fan of metal music, Nelli probably values this similarity between the way the city looks and the clothing style adopted within the sub-culture she is a part of.

Hanna, as well, finds that Munich looks like her:

**Interviewer:** *When you say that it's yours.. Hmm If Munich was a person, would it be similar to you in any ways?*

**Hanna:** *(laughing) yeah, of course! He'd have two braids too (points at her braids and laughs). Well, actually, it would be a boy with white dreadlocks. He would be a very smiley person with sunspots on his face...Yes, he would be very similar to me. He'd be a very positive and creative person. (Hanna and Munich)*

Hanna perceives herself a positive and creative person. Indeed, she pursues a lifestyle that can be called "indie". She travels by hitchhiking and creates various crafts. Munich looks to her like someone with white dreadlocks and sunspots on his face – an unlikely type of person who follows office dress code and spends his days at a desk. Hanna describes Munich as a person, who leads the same lifestyle as she does herself, someone who shares her values and attitude towards life

Both, Nelli and Hanna find similarities between how the city and its inhabitants look like, and how they picture themselves. This provides them with a sense of belongingness to the city. They feel that they can be accepted in the city, which looks so much like them. They see themselves as being able to live life as they want to, whereas it would not be possible in their home cities.

**Hanna:** *Well, now, in Berlin, at the school where I work with 1<sup>st</sup> grade children, I really feel now that working with kids is mine. These little kids, they are so warm and affectionate, I just love working with them. So that's what I'd like to do in Munich. Another way would be to express myself somehow in music and arts. I believe that in Munich, these things are appreciated. I think in Munich I'd start to do some artistic work and develop that part of me. I think Munich would inspire me to do that. (Hanna and Munich)*

The future that informants see in the desired cities is way more appealing to them, than the possible future in their current place of residence. They see the city of desire as a place, where

they can pursue some long term passions, such as music or arts. The informants believe that these things are not appreciated in their hometowns, and that in their desired cities they'd be inspired to live life according to what they believe in. The desired city is seen as an extension of who they are and what they are capable of achieving. The possible selves that the desired city represents are way more positive, appealing and motivating to my informants, than those ones, represented by the hometown or the place of current residence.

#### **9.1.2.2. Childhood experiences**

When asked about the origins of desire, the informants often turn to their childhood. Childhood and childhood experiences are often seen as time, where some essential foundations of self were created.

*This is one of the most awesome features of Helsinki – the way how the nature intertwines with the urban life. I believe that being close to the nature is a key element to my happiness and wellbeing. I remember the little village, at the Urals, where my grandparents lived, and where I spent most of my childhood summers. I was surrounded by all sorts of domestic animals, vegetables and fruits there, I could spend the whole day in the forest picking mushrooms and berries (...) The whole world was a big adventure. I remember the road to the lake – we had to cross a river and the only way to do that was to cross a very old, wooden cable – stayed bridge. It was patched all over, squeaking and trembling under our weight, every here and there a piece of wood was missing so you could actually see a fast stream of water under your feet. That was scary and exciting (...) Only years after, living in Moscow did I start to realize how deeply that world is rooted in me, and how important being close to the nature is to me. (Author's autoethnography)*

In this fragment of autoethnography, I incorporate Helsinki into my life narrative as extension of a particularly joyful childhood experience. The fragment tells about the experience that I lost at one stage of my life, and which Helsinki promised to return. The city of desire is interpreted in a way that supports the narrative with continuity, and provides a path to evaluate my self-concept as a story of personal development and growth. That scene from the past is seen central to my identity, and throughout my lifespan this central identity theme of nature and adventures had once been lost, but then, restored and elevated onto a new level, when I found myself living in Helsinki. Through its appreciation of nature and wilderness, the city reminded me of one small village at the Urals.

The theme of childhood and continuity is present in other parts of data as well.

**Interviewer:** *Let's start from the beginning. How did your interest and affiliation towards Finland start?*

**Nelli:** *Well, actually, the first time I visited Finland, I was approximately 8 years old. I remember we walked in some forest. It was so clean and green there, so I felt somehow different than I did in my hometown.*

**Interviewer:** *You were just 8 years old...*

**Nelli:** *Yeah. There is one more episode from my childhood associated with Finland. I was even younger then. It was in St. Pete, I was out, in a child playground. There were many other children, and that little Finnish boy. We didn't have a common language – he spoke only Finnish and I spoke Russian, but somehow we were getting along and playing together.*

Nelli describes several significant episodes related to Finland that took place in her childhood. Not only does she remember the event from her early childhood that took place in a child playground, but she chooses to describe it as essential to the beginning of her relationship with Finland. Doing this, Nelli signifies the importance of her beloved country to her identity narrative, and verifies her desire to move to Tampere, as a logical continuation of her story.

### **9.1.2.3. Associating with locals**

As Belk argues (1988), we define ourselves also through our belongingness to particular social groups. Being a part of community strengthens our sense of self, and provides a psychological anchor; a safe harbor from which identity can develop further. Belk, Ger and Askegaard (2003) also argue that underlying desire for an object is often a desire for sociality; desire for acceptance from the group or for particular reaction from the group. My informants observe daily life of desired cities and construct an image of the city, considerable part of which is how citizens look, speak, behave and just live their normal life.

*Florence continually encourages me to open my heart and be the person I was born to be. Maybe in some ways, I am desiring to be more like Florence: emotional, passionate, independent, creative, and invincible. My beloved city is not just my home, but also a source of inspiration and encouragement. (Melinda and Florence, March 2012)*

When describing Florence, Melinda employs adjectives, such as “passionate” or “creative”, which are more often used to describe people than cities. This suggests that, when one desires a city, one consciously or unconsciously desires to belong and be accepted by its citizens, because the city becomes a symbol of values of the people, who live in it.

One wishes to distance from being just a tourist and grow to own the city, to become its representation.

*It's a beautiful summer day – the sky is blue and sun is gently touching my face. There are a lot of tourists around, but I'm distancing myself from these crowds, as always, I'm pretending to be a local – just another Helsinki girl, spending free time at Suomenlinna.... This feeling, although very satisfying, brings a shadow of bitterness. After all, how many true locals would come to Suomenlinna alone, on a free day? Wouldn't they bring friends with them? I know they would, and my lack of relationships with locals suddenly becomes apparent to me. I'm no more than a tourist in this city. This makes me sad and I imagine what my life would be like if I moved to Helsinki. First of all, I'd for sure have proper picnics with friends at Suomenlinna, I would never wear high heels again, I'd have a beautiful apartment, full of light, I'd start to do some sport, I'd explore my creative side, I'd become happy and balanced person (...) Helsinki seems like a woman I want to be. By exploring it, I'd discover myself. (Author's autoethnography)*

In the account above, my formulation of possible selves is intertwined with my perceptions of the locals. I observe their behavior and find myself daydreaming of living my life the way, I perceive, it's done in Helsinki –not having to worry about appearance so much, and being able to explore creative side of life. This desire to associate with locals, expressed in the form of desire towards a city, sometimes translates into purchasing goods that bear symbols of belongingness. For instance, I describe in my autoethnography, how I purchased a tube scarf. The only reason behind spending money on it is that every “Helsinki girl” owns one, and wearing it makes me look like a “Helsinki girl”. It provides a disguise and makes me feel more of a local.

For Melinda, her desire to live in Florence reaches new levels, when she is reassured that her long formulated possible writer self would flourish in Italy.

*I saw poet and novelist Ben Okri on TV a few weeks ago and he spoke with an Italian woman who spoke of writers who go to Venice to get their inspiration. There's something magical and mystical about Venice that brings back, or out, their passion to write and create. It was then that I realized that my dream to move to Florence to find my inspiration to write was correct. (Melinda and Florence, March 2006)*

The city serves as a representation of values embedded into it by its citizens or other social groups associated with it. It becomes important in the identity narrative as a point of reference for the formulation of possible selves. However, if a possible self is perceived unattainable, it does not have enough motivational power to fuel desire (Belk, Ger, Askegaard, 2003). Belk, Ger

and Askegaard (2003) argue that only when desire is accompanied by hope, does it become enjoyable and motivational. Therefore, the desired city becomes even more appealing, because its citizens evoke the sense of hope by being a living proof of the attainability of the possible self.

My informants attach perceived qualities of the citizens to the desired city itself, through the systems of symbols, images and hints that they co-create with the city and its citizens. Consider for example, architecture. I believe that there is no contemporaneity in architecture, because buildings are constructed to serve for tens and hundreds of years. Our cities are built by our ancestors, not us. And any building that our generation designs and constructs will be consumed by many and many generations after us. Only a small proportion of the lifetime of the building is consumed by its creators. Thus, whenever we consume architecture, we consume values that have travelled through time to reach us as coded symbols of past dreams, aspirations, and fears. They, in turn, influence us to construct our own systems of cultural codes, and send them to the future through our cities. The city and its citizens are inseparable, and one cannot distinct where one thing ends and the other one begins. It is impossible to say if the city looks romantic, because its citizens are romantic people, or the citizens are romantic, because they live in such a romantic city. But there is no doubt that city and its citizens are intertwined and are subjected to reciprocal influence. This is why the passionate desire my informants feel towards their cities cannot be clearly articulated and reasoned, it is best described by sensations and subtle feelings they experience when being in the city.

#### **9.1.2.4.    *The meaning of home***

I approached the informants at that stage of their lives, when they had left their home cities and had been living somewhere else for a while. At the same time, they were dreaming about moving to their desired cities. These multilevel relationships with different cities made the theme of home quite important. Discussing the city of desire, my informants contemplate the importance of finding and building their own home.

**Hanna:** *Yeah, I think there are two definitions of home. The home you were born to, your childhood home and the home, which you build yourself, you build it for your own family and for your future. And this second home, the home for future I'd like it to be in Germany. But the first "childhood" home, which bears all the warm memories, that home I have left in Belarus.*

**Interviewer:** *Yeah, I can relate to that. I believe it's important to find and build your own home. But on the other hand, many people find and build that home at the same place as their childhood home is. And the others...*

**Hanna:** *(Interrupts) What a bore!*

**Interviewer:** *Why so? Do you think it is boring?*

**Hanna:** *Of course! You don't get to meet new people or see new places. For example, my parents... They have never been anywhere (abroad). I think I should visit different places and choose what is really mine, instead of sitting at home and assuming that it's the best option. (Hanna and Munich)*

To Hanna, it is important to invest energy and time into a place, in order for it to become home. While the place where she grew up will always be close to her heart, it belongs to her past. In order to continue her life story, Hanna prefers to focus on the future. She highlights that contrary to her parents, she is not bounded by her home in Belarus, she wants to make a free choice of where to live and how to define herself. The home she is planning to construct will be built in a place that manifests her identity, and it will be a subject of her own choice.

Melinda also seems to believe that home is where one can support and develop own sense of identity.

*I consider Florence my home. Even if I were to leave, I would still feel connected to Florence. I don't feel this bond as much with California where I was born and raised. I love my country and especially my state, but it didn't provide me with what I really needed in my life: a chance to find my true self. (Melinda and Florence, January 2007)*

*In 2004, I moved back to Florence and initially thought that I'd stay only a couple of years. I had planned on going back to the US with my then American husband. However, within a short period of time, something inside of me urged me to stay in Florence. I felt that Florence had become my home again, and I couldn't bear to leave it. I felt as if I could finally be myself and that I didn't have to put on a show to fit in. (Melinda and Florence, November 2008)*

Desired city plays an important role in the development of identity narrative by providing feeling of belongingness and safety. Melinda feels that she fits in within the context of Florence, and this gives her makes her feel welcomed and accepted. Home seems to be a place where one can find "true self". This desire to live according to inner values seems to be universal among my participants. The desire city becomes representation of these values, a safe harbor where my informants can fit in.

Hanna mentions that being able to choose where to live is essential for finding or creating home. To Melinda, a free choice is also meaningful. In the paragraph below she explains that England

would have never become her home, simply because she did not choose the country at the first place.

*After a year and a half, we broke up and yet again I was forced to make it on my own, but this time in a country that I didn't consider my home. I loved England and have fond memories of living there, but I think I mostly didn't feel at home there because I didn't choose England, it chose me. (Melinda and Florence, January 2007)*

The theme of finding and building home in part seems to relate to the formulation of possible selves and continuity of the life story. Informants refer to the concept of home as something reflecting their “true” selves, a space that cannot be built at a random place. It is important to make a choice of a place of certain characteristics, which represents a “true self”, or helps to approach it. The city of desire seems to possess such characteristics and provide resources to build home.

### **9.1.3. Distancing and liminality**

Desire to associate with locals seems to be intertwined with desire to distance from the representatives of home culture, and from tourists in general. For example, I describe in my autoethnography how, in my early months of living in Helsinki, I would only buy coffee from self-service places, so that I would not have to disclose my non-Finnish identity. In the paragraph below, Melinda experiences the same kind of impulses, when she decides not to help her fellow Americans in a grocery store.

*I went to La Standa to pick up a few things today. I try not to go because of the long lines and high prices. "Hey, they've got tortilla bread here," an American girl yelled to her friend at the other end of the aisle. Not many people yell in grocery stores unless there's a fire or robbery. Even though Italians can be loud at times, they don't normally yell in enclosed public spaces unless it's at their kids and even then, not normally in front of other people.*

*I thought about telling the "loud one" that La Standa has some really good tortillas(...)But, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that I didn't want to tell her. I don't want anyone else who heard her yell a few minutes earlier to think that I was one of "them." Unfortunately, Americans have a bad reputation for being loud and obnoxious: they get drunk in bars, hang out in discos, and walk around in packs. (Melinda and Florence, January 2005)*

Melinda obviously does not want to be perceived as one of “them”, as she referred to the Americans. Instead, she wants to represent the Italians, who “don’t normally yell in enclosed public spaces”.

Melinda finds these Americans' behavior inappropriate, but it is not the only reason, why she wants to distance from them. In order to embrace the new turn of her life fully, she wants for the American aspect of her identity to recede into the background. This reminds of the ritual of cleansing (see Mehta and Belk, 1991), when people, making a move to a new place, leave most of their important possessions behind as to symbolically rebuild their sense of self through acquiring new possessions.

Melinda wrote the two aforementioned blog posts in 2005, only one year after her arrival to Florence. During that period, she seemed to undergo the separation stage of her identity transition process (Schouten, 1991). Distancing from the Americans symbolized distancing from the American part of her identity.

Melinda moved to Florence in the end of 2004. In the first couple of years after moving, her blog posts describe her daily life in Florence often reflecting on her lack of relationship with the locals. The first years of Melinda's blog are filled with very extensive accounts of her trips to the local grocery market. She describes in detail her conversations with the vendors, and she is often concerned if she leaves good impression on them. She contemplates the relationships between the vendors and their customers, and pays attention to the way the vendors look and speak. Below is a typical blog posts from Melinda's early years in Florence.

*Little after 1PM, I went to the mercato (market (...)) I went to the gastronomia and was helped by my usual guy who is quite soft-spoken and upbeat. He always remembers which cheeses I buy for Dave and lets me taste anything I want. Today, even though it was quite busy, we talked some more. He told me that all three of them (he, another man, and a woman) are brothers and sisters and that they opened their gastronomia back in 1989, "quando eravamo giovani" (when we were young) he told me (...)*

*Usually when I go to the gastronomia, his brother and sister let him wait on me. Once, his sister began helping me and as soon as he finished helping his other customer, he finished getting my things for me. He and I have been talking a bit more each time and I've promised to make him chocolate-chip cookies because he loves chocolate. He always teases me because I buy a lot of butter and eggs, so he thinks that all I do is make dolci (desserts) (Melinda and Florence, February 2006).*

As Schouten (1991) notices, at the transition stage of identity reconstruction process people may exaggerate existing relationships and social roles. Such exaggeration contributes to the comforting feeling of fulfillment during the liminal period, when the individual's connection to

some past key aspects of identity is loosened, and new social roles do not yet exist. Melinda's extensive description of her trips to the market seems to manifest her relationships with the vendors. The fact that the vendor "always remember which cheese I buy (..) and lets me taste anything I want" highlights that Melinda is not just a regular customer at the market, but she is a privileged one; she is accepted as a member of the market community. This sense of belongingness is comforting; it gives Melinda a safe platform to develop her sense of self as a Florentine, because although she does not have many local friends, the market and the vendors will always be there for her to feel welcomed and important.

The local market is an essential part of the city, and to Melinda, being accepted there reassures her that she is accepted by the city itself. The desired city again facilitates the development of identity narrative by providing the context in which one can build meaningful relationships and create new social roles at their own path, without being rushed or discouraged.

#### **9.1.4. Actualization and integration**

After about four years since the beginning, Melinda's blog started to attract attention of journalists, professional writers and just regular people, both in Italy and on the international level. People viewed her as an expert of the city, someone who could appreciate the city as an insider, but also evaluate it from the distance, as an American expat. Melinda gave a number of interviews to various magazines; she created a web page "Florence from the Heart" (<http://www.florencefromtheheart.com/>), where locals could share their stories of being Florentines; she wrote several book reviews and guest posts, dedicated to her beloved city. She was even offered a regular column in "The Florentine", an English language newspaper published regularly in Florence, for which Melinda takes interviews and writes stories of other expats, living in Florence. Melinda finally started to fulfill her writer self and created regular outlets for her self-expression as a writer.

*The new website I've been working on over the past few months has finally come to fruition. Florence from the Heart publishes articles, photos and videos from locals who want to share their experiences of life in Florence. I began writing when I was living in Paris. It quickly became a passion of mine, but I couldn't stop work and just write. I didn't have the courage or the discipline to write full-time as a career. While in Florence, I unleashed my heart and discovered that I had a great desire to express myself through words. I initially began writing short stories, but this last year I have shifted my focus on non-fiction. It has been a surprise to me since I love the stories that twirl around like ballerinas in my head. (Melinda and Florence, July 2010)*

Schouten (1991) explains that a successful identity transition process includes integration into a new role and actualization through acquiring the tools and skills, which are necessary to successfully fulfill the requirements of the new role. In 2009-2010 Melinda was certainly well on her way to successfully completing the integration of the writing aspect of her self within her identity narrative. Not only did she start to actually write for general public, but through her blog and other outlets of her self-expressions she got a chance to meet new people, including writers, and integrate within the writer community of Florence.

Melinda's passion towards Florence became a subject of her writing; her blog updates of 2008-2010 are filled with flattering posts about Florence. Her beloved city has helped her to actualize her writer sense of self, making her story of identity transition more complete and coherent.

At the same time, Melinda does not feel the need to distance from the American part of her identity anymore. Quite the contrary, she becomes proud of it. The Florentine writer in her is strong and stable; and embracing the American self brings nothing but the sense of balance and harmony in Melinda's identity narrative. Presidential election in the USA, an important event for the whole nation, serves as an anchor to revisit the American side of her self.

*Proud to be American*

*Friday, November 7, 2008*

*As of Wednesday morning, I can now hold my head up high and proudly say that I'm American. I know that I am not the only one because almost every other expat that I've spoken to has expressed the same sentiment. Since I've lived overseas, I have never been proud to be American before because of so many inconsistencies between what my country says and what it does. We preach democracy, and yet people are still being prejudiced against in our own country. We run out to help other countries, yet leave our own people to suffer. (Melinda and Florence, November 2008)*

Contrary to her early years in Florentine, when distancing from the American part of her self was necessary to associate with the locals, in 2008 Melinda has other means of integration. She is now an accomplished member, and a proud citizen of Florence, so there is no need to hide her American identity. Moreover, it is a way to create a stronger bond with the expat community of Florence, and by doing that, create an even stronger association with the city.

In 2011, Melinda seemed to have found fulfillment for her writer self. Her blog posts became infrequent and less personal, as she mostly describes Florence, rather than daily matters, as she

had used to do before. A theme of exploring other sides of identity emerges in Melinda's posts when she writes about her very frequent work trips to Paris.

*There's a big piece of me that stays in Florence when I leave. It wasn't until I got on the plane to go to Paris that I realized that my writer's voice seemed to get quieter as I flew away from Florence. I found it odd how each time I'm in Paris, my desire to write becomes weaker. At first, I thought it was because when I go to Paris I focus on my job and write a lot, but the day before I returned to Florence, that little voice came back to me(...).*

*Both cities do allow me to appreciate the different facets of my life. When I am in each city, I embrace the life I am living. There are times I do wish I had more freedom in Paris, but I also sometimes miss my Parisian work environment in Florence. (Melinda and Florence, September 2011)*

Melinda discovers new aspects of herself that she could not see in Florence, having been so focused on her writing. Paris, in turn, highlights a more organized, career-oriented aspect of herself. While she loves her life in Florence, she feels that she needs to explore new possibilities that Paris can offer her.

As Gergen and Gergen (1983) argue, people do not arrive at the stable mind concerning their identity narratives. The narrative constantly evolves and changes. Through her writing, Melinda has successfully recreated her self-concept to include Florence into it. However, the story cannot end, as Melinda continues her journey and elaborates new possible selves, while living part of her life in Paris, and getting to know the city and her own role in it.

Melinda's identity narrative takes a new turn, when Paris highlights possibilities to recreate self-concept by extending it to include that facet of an organized, goal oriented person. Following this possibility, Melinda discontinues her blog about Florence and starts "My Heart in Two Places" (<http://blog.melindagallo.com/>), where she embraces her relationships with both, Florence and Paris.

## **9.2. City and narrative**

Identity narratives evolve around events and comprehension of these events (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Important events may symbolize the end of one stage of life or the beginning of another. These chains of events constitute a narrative. In this section, I analyze how my informants interpret their desire within their narratives, and what purpose desire serves within the framework of the narrative. This approach let me understand how informants make sense of their desire, and what kinds of meaning they communicate through it.

To Melinda, her move to Florence represents a beginning of a new stage of her life, the beginning of a new chapter of the story. She left England and with it, the relationship, which was breaking apart. Florence becomes a place where Melinda can start a new chapter of her life.

*I had strange feelings about my future on that train ride to Italy. I realized how Princess Diana left England and died in France, and how she would never return to England alive. I thought about how I had left England a few days earlier, and realized that I would never return either. I hadn't even arrived in Florence, but I had a feeling that I was experiencing a different type of death. That I was at the end of a leg of my journey. Florence gave me a chance. A chance to finally follow my heart completely and without fear. It was my chance to leave my old life behind and recreate myself. In essence, to be reborn.. (Melinda and Florence, February 2007)*

Melinda's experience is quite spiritual; she feels that one part of her journey is ending with her symbolical death and rebirth at the beginning of the new leg of her journey. This emotional encounter creates an even stronger bond between Melinda and her desired city. Interpreting her move to Florence as a new beginning, Melinda feels a relief from all the pressures of her old life in England. While this may seem as an escape from previous commitments, this in fact a brave action, because Melinda's primary motivation is not to escape, but rather create something new, to start anew, and this certainly requires some courage.

Nelli, on the contrary, sees herself in the middle of a temporary stage of life, and contemplates her future move to Tampere as a finish, a grand finale of her journey.

*Well, my room in Jyvaskyla has grown to be quite important and dear to me. It's a temporary stage of my life, but I feel good there. Of course, there are some problems that spoil everything, like difficulties in finding job, for example. And Tampere, of course, is a final destination. (Nelli and Tampere)*

Nelli is not in a hurry to move to Tampere. The city serves as a safe harbor, where she will arrive one day. She is enjoying her life as it is now, and sees Tampere as a grand prize somewhere in the future. This solution provides her with the sense of calmness. She knows that she will be there one day, but prefers to plan carefully, without any rush.

Besides being a symbol of new beginning or grand finale, the desired city may represent a second chance within the narrative. Sometimes, the direction of the story needs to be changed, and it often requires going back to the point of the story, where things went wrong. In the account below, I interpret my experience in Helsinki as a second chance to figure out my professional identity by symbolically returning to my teenage years.

*I'm in Helsinki for a short break after quitting my job in Moscow. So, I put on very comfy sneakers, jeans, and a bright pink hoodie. I look pretty much like a teenager – I don't even bother putting on much make up. I feel so fresh and young in this outfit. I understand that I'm at somewhat transition point of my life, so this teen look manifests a fresh start to me, a return to my youth where I was supposed to make a choice of career and professional identity. Quitting my job seemed a right step to me towards professional identity I should have chosen years ago (although I am still not sure what this professional identity is). So looking like a teen feels like I'm back in time, and I can try to make the right choice again. (Author's autoethnography)*

Being in Helsinki and wearing that “teen look” let me recall and reconsider the point in my life, when I was making some important choices that would affect my life in the future. Helsinki gave me new ideas about how I could live my life, so it felt like I could have made a better choice back in my teen years. I interpreted my desire towards a city as a second chance, a chance to rewrite my story and turn it towards a different goal. I interpreted my desire as a return to the past, to the crucial point of my life story, where things could be changed.

To my informants, the desired city represents important points of their identity narratives – points, from which they can reach new levels of growth, points where they will be rewarded for all their efforts or points, where they can correct perceived mistakes of the past. My informants, being attached to their desired cities, interpret them in a very positive way, just as Twigger-Ross and Uzzel (1996) found out. Cities are incorporated in people's identity narratives in a way that supports the narrative and justifies present actions, serving valuable role in communicating healthy self-concept.

### **9.3. Nurturing and the cycle of desire**

In this section, I discuss the theme of nurturing and its role in the cycle of desire. Lastovicka and Sirianni (2011) show how material possessions love translates into nurturing, that is consumers investing their time, energy and other resources into beloved objects. They found that consumers nurture their beloved objects, in part, by buying complementary products and participating in activities that benefit the beloved.

The theme of nurturing is highly visible in the accounts, provided by my informants. Nurturing is manifested in the constellation of activities that support, maintain and develop desire towards city. My data shows that nurturing is not a mere consequence of desire and material possession love, but a lively mechanism of its creation. Nurturing practices evolve throughout the cycle of

desire (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003) and, sometimes, serve to signalize the transition between the phases of the cycle.

In the following sections, I discuss nurturing practices and their role in consumer experience of desire towards a city. I use Belk, Ger, and Askegaard's (2003) cycle of desire as a framework to structure my findings.

### 9.3.1. Initiation of desire

At this stage, nurturing is focused on supporting the pleasurable and motivating feeling of longing for the desired city. Consumers engage into contemplation of what it would be like to live in the desired city. This rehearsal can be purely mental and invisible to others, although very satisfying and pleasurable for the one imagining the life in a new city. It can also be more accessible to others, when it is reflected in a blog or a web site. Below is a fragment of Nelli's blog, where she describes an unexpected trip to Tampere:

#### ***The name of home...***

28.10.2012

*...is Tampere! I've been thinking a lot about my plans for the weekend. I was choosing between going to a local Halloween party and leaving everything and everyone behind and going to Tampere (...)*

*Tampere. The train has arrived and I felt like I have always been in this city and never left it. L. picked me up at the railway station. The street was covered with ice and we were sliding graciously(...) I know, one day I will be living in this city (Nelli and Tampere, October, 2012 (<http://www.liveinternet.ru/users/lilly-anne/>))*

Nelli uses her blog to document her story. Writing up a blog posts, she relives the pleasurable experience again and again, securing it in the memory and creating anticipation of future trips to Tampere. She highlights that a trip to Tampere is worth "leaving everything and everyone behind", and, by expressing such willingness to break the established order of life, she fuels her desire. The initiation stage of desire is always accompanied by consumers' heating up the emotions and anticipation of future encounters with the city. Although not each of my informants writes a blog about the desired city, but everyone uses the Internet resources in order to collect information about the city, such as pictures, videos, articles, and other people's blogs.

These activities help to recreate the connection to the beloved city, and provide a source of motivation to keep trying to reach the city. The motivational power of nurturing is evident in the

piece of my autoethnography, where I describe reading blogs as a “little treat”, which adds excitement towards my desired city.

*I'm sitting in the office, in front of the computer. It's autumn of 2010 and I'm preparing to take the GMAT. The preparation is very intensive (...) I feel like I'm in a closed room and I just want to get it over. I do not want to talk to anyone, since it would take energy from me, and I cannot afford to lose any - I'm on survival mode (...) And my goal is Helsinki. I feel that I need to suffer through all of this to deserve the right to live in my dream city. The image of it is constantly on the back of my mind, and this is what keeps me going. I enjoy feeding this image by browsing through the internet, finding nice pictures and little videos. But most of all, I like to read the blogs of those Russians who have moved to Helsinki. This is my little treat. They add to my excitement towards the city, they show me new angles of it and tell me about the places I'd want to visit someday. (Author's autoethnography)*

Nurturing activities help to keep the focus and concentrate on what you are trying to achieve. To me feeding the image of living in the city of desire by browsing the internet and reading blogs about Helsinki is a way to survive through difficult times of preparation for moving. Not only is nurturing a pleasurable activity at this point, but it is also a necessity. It is a source of constant motivation to not give up and keep trying.

At the pre-acquisition phase of the cycle of desire, nurturing practices help to prolong the sense of longing, excitement, and hope to achieve the goal. Reading a blog of someone, who has done exactly what you want to do, gives a sense of hope of fulfilling desire, which is a prerequisite for desire to be pleasurable (Belk, Ger, Askegaard, 2003). It also provides motivation to go through all the challenges associated with moving to another city or country.

### **9.3.2. Acquisition**

After desire is fulfilled and the informant moves to the city, nurturing practices are elevated onto a new level. They become more tangible, as they not only support longing, but they help to achieve the sense of relationship with the city.

Lastovicka and Sirianni (2011) illustrate that consumers might attach to their possessions in a way that is similar to a human-to-human relationship, blurring the distinction between humans and objects. This seems to be the case of Melinda's love-like relationship with Florence.

*My love for Florence is very much like my love for Alessandro. I live in Florence and I'm married to Alessandro and yet I still desire to spend more quality time so I can truly appreciate each one even more. I'd love to walk around town, to sit on a terrazza (terrace) watching people*

*walk by, and to stand in the middle of the Ponte Vecchio and look down the river and up at the monuments, just as much as I'd love to lounge around with Alessandro without noticing the hours rapidly pass. (Melinda and Florence, January, 2008)*

*My love affair with Florence is certainly not superficial. I don't need to see the monuments, churches, or artwork to remind me how much I love this city. I can stand anywhere, shut my eyes, and feel its love pulsing through my veins. A love that is not only consistent, but also omnipresent. (Melinda and Florence, November, 2010)*

Melinda compares her feelings towards Florence with the feelings towards her husband, and she refers to her relationship with the city as “love affair”. The way that Melinda narrates about the city, suggests that she perceives her relationship with Florence, as a relationship with a human. Such love-like relationship involves acceptance of the flaws of the beloved and passionate feelings of “love pulsing through my veins”.

To support and develop the relationship, Melinda goes on the “cultural dates” with herself and the city, meaning that she visits museums or some important historical places of the city. Sightseeing is common among tourists and visitors of any city, but Melinda refers to these activities as “dates”, which makes it evident that she perceives her relationship with the city as human-like.

These cultural dates never involve other people, Melinda prefers to go on them alone in order to reconnect with the city and appreciate it. Other informants as well feel the need of these private moments with the city. Nelli, for example, describes the uplifting feeling of deep connection with the city, that she experiences, when she can spend some time alone beside Tammerkoski river. These dates with the city seem to be another form of nurturing the relationship with city and fostering meaningful connection to it.

Nurturing can also manifest itself in more or less symbolic practices of taking care of the beloved city.

*While jumping from one rock to another, I'm noticing all sorts of trash in between of them – cans, plastic containers and cardboard boxes. I'm simply horrified by how alien these objects seem compared to the landscape around me. They don't belong here; they spoil the purity of this place. And I feel that it's my duty to remove them. I want to take care of this city and this is a small thing I definitely owe to Helsinki. So, I collect the trash and place it into the trash bin. Since that day, I do it every time I have my little promenade there. (Author's autoethnography)*

In the fragment above, I attach more than just a want for a clean environment to collecting trash at the seashore. It is a ritual of expressing my commitment to Helsinki, an element of caring, which is necessary in a good trustful relationship. The process of searching and removing trash from the seashore reinforces my feelings towards the city. It is an interaction with the city that helps the relationship to grow stronger.

In a similar fashion, Melinda expresses her discontent with people, who do not respect the rules and customs of living in Florence. The disrespect might be expressed in, for example, parking a bicycle in an inappropriate place. While the bicycle does not cause any discomfort to Melinda personally, she sees it as an act of disrespect to the city's rules and norms, the very essence of its way of living. On the contrary, Melinda likes to meet people who are as fond of Florence as she is. Melinda meets authors, who write about Florence, as well as other expats. However, this communication is not mere exchange or search for the information. Listening to their stories reassures Melinda in her choice of the city, and highlights new angles of the Florence, which she can later explore herself. Meeting people, who adore Florence as much as she does, contributes to Melinda's passion towards the city; it facilitates her learning process, which in turn creates a feeling of deep bond with the city.

Melinda also enjoys showing off her city to other people. She is excited when she has a chance to introduce her beloved city to her family and friends.

*When his train took off, I walked through the centro and back to our apartment. I thought about how much fun I had showing off my city and giving George a small taste of Tuscan cuisine. I hope he'll come back with his wife and two children the next time because Florence is a wonderful city to share with others, and I enjoyed sharing it with him. (Melinda and Florence, July, 2008)*

Melinda is proud to show Florence to the public. By acting as a guide for the newcomers, she highlights her special relationship with the city, and gets positive reactions from valued others. The usage of the phrase "to share Florence" highlights Melinda's special status to the spectator. It seems that what she enjoys to share is not exactly experiencing the city (together), but rather sharing the city in a way that one shares a sandwich with a friend. This type of sharing implies ownership, and it seems that Melinda enjoys sharing Florence, because it gives her a sense of ownership, and proves her special relationship with the city.

Compared to the early phases of desire, when one invests energy into feeding imagination and longing, at the post-acquisition stage, nurturing facilitates creation and maintenance of a strong

bond with the city. Melinda does it through a variety of practices, each of which is aimed at creating a sense of meaningful connection, appreciation and understanding of her city.

### 9.3.3. Post-acquisition stage

During the latter post-acquisition phases of desire, as Belk and his colleagues describe (2003), passion that accompanies desire wears off and desire calms down. During that period of desire calming down, Melinda's blog posts became almost exclusively about the city and its qualities. The stories of that period are often ended with almost prayer-like paragraphs.

*My beloved city is not only beautiful on the outside, but also on the inside. If you come to Florence, be it for a day, a month, a year, or even longer, may you be able to embrace all the wisdom that it possesses and receive the love that it pours out onto us all. If you are open to receiving its wondrous gifts, you certainly will. And, your life will be forever changed as mine has been. (Melinda and Florence, March, 2009)*

These prayer-like posts might be an attempt to reinitiate desire and prolong excitement. What felt so natural in the beginning, now requires a special effort to sustain. Melinda writes extensive flattering posts about Florence, she posts pictures online and creates a Facebook fan page about the city. Alongside with that, Melinda seeks new, unconventional ways to explore her city. She seeks the experiences she had not had before, which could perhaps infuse new passion towards her city. For instance, she starts jogging very early in the morning, before the sunrise, which certainly gives her new perspectives of the city. After five years of living in Florence, she goes on her first organized tour of the city and finally decides to take a sit on the steps of the Cathedral.

Despite these attempts to reinitiate the hot emotional desire, Melinda's relationship with Florence slightly changed. Whereas previously Melinda described her bond with Florence as passionate, love-like connection, later her desire did calm down, as Belk and his colleagues predicted (2003). However, the deep bond between Melinda and Florence does not disappear. Quite the contrary, it gets stronger, and Melinda now characterizes her relationship with Florence as mother-daughter like.

*Over the years, Florence has become like a mother to me. She whispers in my ear every day that I am safe, and that I can continue opening my heart more each day. She reminds me to focus on my qualities and accept my shortcomings. She loves me for the person I am and the person I am capable of becoming. She doesn't tell me that I need to achieve anything in particular, but that I just continue filling my life with joy and love. (Melinda and Florence, May 2010)*

As Melinda interprets the relationship with the city as a relationship between mother and daughter, she mentions that Florence does not expect anything in particular from her anymore. Melinda does not feel the need to prove her love to the city through the nurturing practices that she was engaged before. The city will be there for her, no matter what, and she is now free to explore other sides of her identity, and recreate herself again.

During 2011-2012, the blog posts became very infrequent and in August of 2012, Melinda discontinued her blog about Florence. Melinda started a new blog, where she writes about her life between two cities – Paris and Florence. The fact that Melinda did not simply include Paris into the old blog seems to have a symbolic meaning. Melinda abandoned her major nurturing outlet, and that manifested the completion of one story, one cycle of desire and the beginning of a new one.

In this chapter, I tried to demonstrate the importance of nurturing within consumer experience of desire towards a city. By viewing nurturing through the lenses of the cycle of desire, I have been able to achieve an understanding that nurturing is not only a consequence of material possession love, as Lastovicka and Sirianni (2011) uncovered, but also a necessary tool for its creation. Consumer is an active agent in constructing the experience of desire, and nurturing might be interpreted as a mechanism, by which consumer moves from one phase of experience to another.

## 10. Discussion

In this chapter, I further interpret my findings. I discuss how desires are incorporated within identity narratives, and what role they play in them. The question of how consumers cope with the conflicts that desire involves is then discussed, and, finally, the theme of nurturing is further elaborated.

### 10.1. Desire and Identity Narratives

The present study shows that our desires are no less powerful signals of what we are, than our possessions. Like favorite possessions, desires extend our sense of self to include a very personal conceptualization of what the object of desire stands for. Desire serves an important function within identity narratives, as it seems to be a connection to the “true self”, and storage of the values that have been continuously developed throughout the lifespan. Desires are incorporated into identity narratives in a way that supports and direct the development of the story. The acquisition of the object of desire whether it has already happened or not, is an important moment, which is embedded in the flow of the narrative.

Below, I discuss the three ways in which my informants interpret the acquisition of the desired object within the development of the narrative.

Acquisition of the object of desire might seem to break a chain of negative events within the narrative. Even though, life in a new city is not without its struggles, such as lack of contacts and communication, but even the lowest moments are interpreted positively – as challenges of a learning curve. Acquisition of the object of desire is interpreted as a moment, after which once regressive narrative becomes progressive. Because of symbolic nature of this moment, it is incorporated within identity narrative as the end of one chapter and the beginning of a new one.

The new beginning is an appealing symbol, because it gives a perceived relief from some of the previous commitments and unwanted components of self, as well as mental permission to make mistakes and learn. Thus, viewing acquisition of the desired object as a new beginning facilitates the story of identity recreation in a healthy and supportive way.

Another way to interpret the moment of acquisition is to perceive it as a grand finale of the micro-narrative of identity, as Nelli does it. She sees her desired city Tampere as a safe harbor, home she will eventually create for herself. Meanwhile she enjoys her life in a different city and embraces the experiences her life offers. Moving to Tampere sometime in the future will be an award for all her efforts and, at the same time, commitment she is not ready to make yet.

Viewing acquisition of the object of desire as a final destination of the narrative prolongs the pleasure of longing, and motivates to strive for the object of desire. At the same time, it is a way to relieve the pressure of acquiring the object as soon as possible. Anticipating such an important event in the future justifies some of the actions in the present, and ascribes meaning to them.

Finally, when failed relationships, lost opportunities, and forgotten skills are represented in desire, then its acquisition is a return to the past. Seemingly, desire directs us towards future, because the acquisition of the object of desire has not happened yet. The object of desire seems to assist in extending the sense of self and becoming a changed person, but this transformation will happen somewhere in the future, when the object of desire is acquired. However, the transformation itself might be directed towards the past, to the moment of the narrative, where things went wrong, and where the narrative could take a different turn.

In my autoethnography, I interpret moving to Helsinki as a return to my youth, where I was supposed to make important decisions about the future. Since then, my narrative consisted of chains of events that I interpreted rather negatively, and the acquisition of the object of desire served to bring me back to the moment where it started, so that I could construct a new, progressive brunch of the narrative.

Acquisition of the object of desire bears symbolic meaning within the narrative of self. It signals the beginning of a new chapter of the narrative, grand finale of the story, or return to some moment in the past of the narrative. Thus, desire assists the development of a flawless and consistent narrative that is used to communicate our sense of self to others.

## **10.2. Continuity, belongingness and reduction of tension**

The tension between morality and seduction, identified by Belk and his colleagues (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003) is familiar to my informants too. Overwhelming and powerful feelings, evoked by desires, are alternative to the monotonous stream of everyday life. Longing for the object of desire is exciting and pleasurable, and as such, is constantly fueled through imagination and mental elaboration. However, the idea of falling into the fire of desire destroys the order of daily life, and is often seen as inappropriate by others. For example, Melinda describes a tension between her and her mother, who did not approve of Melinda's desire to move to Florence, which included selling established business and abandoning settled life in London.

The pressure to follow the established order and previous commitments can kill the excitement of desire. Thus, the object of desire is interpreted in a way that can potentially legitimize desire in the eyes of significant others and the individual him- or herself.

When talking about their desires, consumers create a context, within which the decision to follow desire can be presented as somewhat reasonable step. The past events are evaluated and put into an order within which desire falls logically, because it facilitates continuity of the story. My informants describe the city of desire as a place where their “true” selves can be found and would flourish. They refer to the events in the past and the present, which they perceive as significant for their identity, and see moving to the city of desire as consistent with those important events in the past. For example, Nelli describes her encounters with the Finnish culture in the early childhood, and then talks about her love of Finnish music. Moving to Tampere is then can be interpreted as a logical step for someone, who, like Nelli, loves metal music and has been interested in Finland since childhood.

Viewing desire as means to belongingness is another way to legitimize it. The story of identity is constructed to communicate perceived understanding of self to others. For example, reading Melinda’s blog one can develop an idea that Melinda is an aspiring writer, or at least writing is very important for her wellbeing. Given how inspirational and nourishing the Florence city environment is for writing, and how well developed the writing community of Florence is, it is reasonable that Melinda would move there, because that is where she belongs.

Communicating these feelings of continuity and belongingness, as provided by the object of desire, one reduces the tension between morality and seduction by legitimizing passionate feelings and seemingly hasty motions in the own eyes and in the eyes of others.

### **10.3. Nurturing as an act of creation**

Lastovicka and Sirianni (2011) describe nurturing as a consequence of material possession love. People feel the need to take care of their beloved object by grooming it and investing resources into it. The present research highlights that nurturing goes beyond desire to take care of the beloved.

Nurturing practices are diverse and engaging. They require active participation and considerable resources. They are present at every stage of the cycle of desire (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003), but their content and amount varies from stage to stage. By engaging in nurturing, consumers seduce themselves to follow desire. Then, by nurturing the object of desire, consumers learn

about it, and incorporate it within their sense of self. Eventually decrease in nurturing may signalize that relationship with desire is cooling down.

Consumer is not a mere subject of desire, nor a “victim” of it. Consumer is an active creator of the cycle of desire, where nurturing is a vehicle to move from one stage to another. Consumer can take control of how long desire lasts, and when it is time to move on towards other experiences. For example, Melinda was able to constantly re-initiate her desire towards Florence by inventing new, unconventional ways to explore the city. And when the time came, she calmed down her desire by decreasing the number of blog posts, and eventually abandoned the blog altogether.

Nurturing might be seen as a ritual, in which postmodern consumer ascribes the object of desire with symbolic meanings, sensations and images. For example, in order to create and maintain a love-like relationship with the city, one might arrange a symbolic date with the city, or, in the same fashion, by following the rules and customs, adopted in the city, manifest respect and care for the beloved.

Nurturing is deeply embedded into consumption of desire; it is an act of creation, in which the object of desire emerges as a token of future aspirations and hopes. Consumption of desire is a process of co-creation of the promise of magic and transformation, which fuels the fire of desire.

## **11. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I recapitulate the foundations of my study, summarize theoretical implications of it, and discuss its limitations and suggestions for future research.

### **11.1. Research foundations**

The stream of research on key possessions has focused on relationships that consumers form with their favorite possessions, and how these possessions are utilized to strengthen, extend and maintain the sense of self. Recently, the stream of research on passionate consumption has been enriched with phenomenological account of desire (Belk, Ger, Askegaard, 2003), where desire is described as involving a conflict between morality and seduction. However, the question of how (and if) consumers use the object of desire to strengthen their sense of identity has received little attention in previous research.

The primary objective of this research, that is constructed to help to fulfill the identified research gap, is to understand the role of desire in developing a coherent sense of self. This broader objective includes gaining understanding of how people interpret their experience of desire, and how they handle its conflicting nature. The study has been conducted using analytic autoethnography, phenomenological interviews and a blog as data sources. Such combination has helped to achieve a deeper understanding of the phenomenon by merging different perspectives on desire.

Desire towards a city has been chosen as a context for the present research. Such context has provided necessary space and longitude to explore each stage of the cycle of desire (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003).

### **11.2. Theoretical implications**

The findings of this research demonstrate that desire indeed plays a role in developing the sense of self. Desire seems to be a manifestation of informants' values. The object of desire helps informants to formulate who they perceive they are, and what they regard as good and deserving. At the same time it allows to extend their sense of self. City, as an object of desire opens new horizons and new possibilities of approaching desired state of being.

Consumers interpret desire in a way that supports the flow of their identity narrative. They seem to seek relief from the tension between seduction and morality by interpreting the object of desire as providing sense of belongingness and continuity in their lives. Such perceived

purposefulness seems to legitimize desire in the eyes of significant others and even society at large. It creates a feeling that following desire is a logical step and acceptable move.

Finally, this research has uncovered the aspects of nurturing that had received little attention before. Nurturing, as Lastovicka and Sirianni (2011) anticipated, involves an element of recreation and play, but it is also a way to increase motivation to follow desire. It helps to create and develop meaningful relationship with the object of desire. Nurturing seems to be the vehicle in which consumers move along the cycle of desire. Rather than being a victim of desire or a passive figure of any kind, consumer is actively engaged into creating and regulating their own experience of desire through nurturing. Through nurturing consumers produce and attach symbolic meanings to the object of desire, which they later consume and recreate again.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on identity construction by expanding our understanding of how desires are utilized to strengthen and develop the sense of identity. The findings of this research also support the view that consumers strive to resolve tensions and conflicts within their sense of self, and use consumption experiences available to them to achieve this result. Finally, this research contributes to our understanding of the role of nurturing within consumer-object relationship, and highlights the role of consumers as active creators of symbolic meanings attached to the objects and experiences.

### **11.3. Limitations of the study**

It should be noted that this research is limited in its focus on the experience constructed within the European-Christian cultural context, including the conceptualization of the notion of city, typical for highly industrialized societies. Moreover, all informants moved, or plan to move to a city that represents a context, which is familiar or at least, not highly alien to their home culture. Thus, the study of desire to move to a highly unfamiliar cultural context might expose more significant challenges for construction of coherent sense of self, and different practices of resolving identity conflicts.

Moreover, as autoethnography was one of the methods used for data collection and analysis, my pre-understanding might have constrained and limited my ability to interpret the data received from other informants. However, the risk was worth taking, because autoethnography gave me an opportunity to see things from the insider perspective, and helped my informants to relate to me, which, in turn, facilitated good, trustful relationships between me and my informants.

#### **11.4. Suggestions for future research**

Future studies should further explore the relationship between desires and identity. Disposal of the objects of former desire is of particular interest, because as Belk et al. (2003) explains, the cycle of desire is re-initiated when a new object of desire is found. But what happens with the object of former desire has not been sufficiently investigated yet. Does disposal involve a conflict between former self and an extended sense of identity, and if yes, how do consumers cope with this tension? How is identity narrative reformulated and what role does the object of former desire play in the new story? Answering these questions would further develop our understanding of identity construction and human cravings, longings and desires.

Nurturing also deserves future research. In this study, it's been identified that consumers construct their experience of desire, and regulate it by seeking information about their desired cities, arranging "dates" with them, and exploring it from unusual angles and perspectives. Nurturing is certainly, in part, a recreational activity, but I would encourage research to uncover other aspects of nurturing and the implications it presents for identity development.

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## Appendix 1

<b>Informant</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Cultural background (place of origin, parents' culture, places of residency)</b>	<b>Desired city</b>	<b>Method of data collection</b>
<i>Hanna</i>	F	24	Belorussian, Lithuanian	Munich, Germany	Interview
<i>Nelli</i>	F	24	Russian, French	Tampere, Finland	Interview
<i>Melinda</i>	F	46	American, Chinese, French, British, Italian	Florence, Italy	Blog
<i>The author</i>	F	27	Russian	Helsinki, Finland	Analytic autoethnography

*Table 1. Sources of data*