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Empowerment as latent vulnerability in techno-mediated consumption journeys

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ABSTRACT

Marketers, retailers, and brands increasingly rely on digital technologies to shape consumers' journeys. Extending from the paradox of technology, which captures the coexistence of inherent benefits and risks, we propose that empowerment from techno-mediated interactions with brands conceals vulnerability; thus, introducing the concept of latent vulnerability. Adopting a dream interpretation approach from psychoanalysis, we explored consumers' reflections on the integration of techno-based interactions with brands in their consumption journeys. The analysis unearths processes whereby consumer empowerment may convert to experiences of vulnerability. This research shows that, while giving consumers a sense of empowerment, techno-mediated journeys may hide a form of latent vulnerability. Latent vulnerability becomes manifest through revelation mechanisms that allow consumers to develop self-reflexivity and recognize their dependence and manipulation. We discuss the ethical implications that latent vulnerability raises.

Consider the following scenario:

"She is putting on her running shoes and heading for the streets for her morning run. For several months now, she has been using the app of a sport retailer to plan and guide her runs and share them with her friends. Thanks to this app, she has become an active member of a community of runners, she receives personalized advice related to her running activity (nutrition, material, performance…). Back home, she receives a notification from her app, which has calculated it is time to replace her running shoes, with a special offer customized for her. She orders the shoes on the app and selects the store where to try them. Later that day, as she gets near the store, she receives a notification from the app to activate geolocalization to guide her to the right place. As she passes by, a large wall billboard lights up, displaying an ad for new bracelet colors for her Fitbit bracelet. She feels very tempted".

This is an overview of a video developed by a tech company to illustrate a typical consumer journey through the eyes of a main character who experiences personalized interactions with brands via technology. Drawing a parallel to Epp, Schau, and Price (2014) study of mediating technologies, we refer to the interactions that frame and guide consumers' experiences with brands through digital technologies as techno-mediated consumption journeys. As technology enables brands and retailers to provide their customers more immediate and personalized services, digital interactions with brands increasingly permeate people's lives. While consumers may welcome the sense of empowerment that such techno-based brand interactions bring to their journeys, this can only happen when they perceive such brand messages as relevant and customized to their environment (Xu, Luo, Carroll, & Rosson, 2011). Indeed, consumers are no longer passive recipients of marketing communications (Oguz, Acar, & Puntoni, 2016). These potential tensions make it important, from both a societal and a practical perspective, to understand consumers' experiences of techno-based brands interactions.

Prior research is mostly anchored on the idea that technology is paradoxical: mixed emotions coexist and consumers are often ambivalent about technology (e.g. Mick & Fournier, 1998; Ratchford & Barnhart, 2012). Conflicts and paradoxes are ripe in the context of technology: for all the benefits that technology offers, it also brings fears and concerns (Mick & Fournier, 1998). The paradoxical lens on consumers' relationships with technology emphasizes the coexisting duality of pros and cons.

In an extension of this perspective, we propose that while technology-based interactions with brands may seem empowering (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009; Labrecque, Vor dem Esche, Mathwick, Novak, & Hofacker, 2013; Oguz et al., 2016), they instead conceal vulnerability. We explore whether and how consumers' own reflections on their techno-mediated journeys reveal the processes whereby the seeming experience of empowerment may reveal itself as vulnerability.

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This research thus focuses on the question of whether and how techno-mediated interactions with brands may fuel empowerment but also conceal vulnerability.

Previous research has positioned empowerment and vulnerability as opposite ends of a spectrum with control and power at one end and lack of control and manipulation/dependence at the other. In this research, we build on the notion of cultural vulnerability which refers to structural characteristics of the marketplace that generate negative outcomes (Shultz & Holbrook, 2009). We demonstrate that the relationship between these two constructs (control/power vs manipulation/dependence) may be conjunctive (and) rather than disjunctive (but/or). Unlike the vast majority of research on consumer vulnerability, cultural vulnerability does not refer to who in the marketplace is vulnerable, but rather considers that any consumer may find him/herself in a position of vulnerability, as may be the case regarding seemingly empowering technology-based interactions with brands.

We adopt a dream interpretation approach (Barrett, 2002; Freud, 1900; Lacan, 1966; Lahire, 2018) to uncover the latent meanings behind consumers' journeys. Indeed, dreams and nightmares provide a window into how people create a narrative structure to organize memories and experiences (Barrett, 2002). The dream interpretation method, centered on collage-based elicitation (Zaltman, 1997), allows consumers to articulate otherwise unconscious meanings, and brings insight as to how perceived empowerment in consumers' techno-mediated journeys may conceal vulnerability. This novel approach based on dream collages and narratives brings forth a new ethical perspective on consumer vulnerability, at the intersection of technology and marketing, by advancing the notion of latent vulnerability.

This research thus extends the existing literature in four ways: (1) it updates the paradox of technology literature by uncovering the processes whereby consumers shift from empowerment to vulnerability; (2) it introduces the notion of latent vulnerability, as an extension of cultural vulnerability that accounts for the ways in which consumer empowerment can conceal vulnerability; (3) it provides new insights to the growing discussion of ethical issues in marketing in the digital area; and (4) it provides evidence of the richness and usefulness of dream analysis to access latent content that escapes rational reasoning in consumer research.

1. Theoretical foundations

1.1. Consumers' ambivalent relationships with technology

Technology is increasingly and inherently interwoven into human activity, especially in commercial activity, i.e. while browsing, shopping or exchanging with or about brands (Kozinets, Patterson, & Ashman, 2017). Consumers' relationship with technology is ripe with contradictions, paradoxes, and ambivalence. Paradoxes represent "contradictory yet interrelated elements (dualities) that exist simultaneously and persist over time; such elements seem logical when considered in isolation, but irrational, inconsistent, and absurd when juxtaposed" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 386). Polar opposites can coexist or at least 'be potentiated in the same thing' (Mick & Fournier, 1998, p. 124). Since Mick and Fournier's seminal article in 1998, a large body of research has documented the many paradoxes of technology and their consequences for consumer behavior (e.g. Meuter, Ostrom, Bitner, & Roundtree, 2003; Tian et al., 2014). When using technology, consumers may experience increased control, efficiency, adaptability and flexibility, anticipation of fun or enjoyment, and greater social assimilation (Mick & Fournier, 1998; Parasuraman, 2000; Ratchford & Barnhart, 2012). Techno-mediated consumption journeys generate perceptions of freedom, ubiquity, and power (Collin-Lachaud & Vanheems, 2016). But consumers also fear technology-based interactions because they reduce efficacy (Li, 2016), increase fatigue, anxiety, frustration, risk, and create a sense of being overwhelmed (Lee, Kozar, & Larsen, 2003; Mick & Fournier, 1998; Ratchford & Barnhart, 2012). The extant research thus positions consumers as having to live with these coexisting, paradoxical tensions inherent to technology, despite its increasingly central role to consumption journeys.

1.2. Empowerment through technology-mediated consumption journeys

Technology's central promise to consumption journeys is that it empowers consumers. Empowerment is the perceived ability to control and influence decisions that affect one's life (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Giddens, 1984). Thomas and Velthouse (1990) identified four elements of empowerment: meaningfulness (the personal relevance of the object/practice), self-efficacy (a belief in one's capabilities to control a situation and produce specific desired outcomes through one's own actions), self-determination (having the choice to initiate, regulate, and carry out a certain action, Ryan & Deci, 2000), and impact (the perception that doing this action makes a difference, Schweitzer & Van den Hende, 2016).

Marketing scholars acknowledge that, in the digital age, the balance of power has shifted from marketers to consumers (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009; Labrecque et al., 2013; Oguz et al., 2016). They consider empowerment as "the dynamic process of gaining power through action by changing the status quo in current power balances" (Labrecque et al., 2013, p. 258). In this consumer-sovereignty perspective of power (Denegri-Knott, Zwick, & Schroeder, 2006), consumers are seen as heroes of modern market societies, "as kings (or queens), deciders or rulers who exercise their free choice" (Heath & Heath, 2016, p. 815). This understanding of power takes its sources in classical and neo classical economic theories.

Critical theories within consumer research have pointed out the limits of this consumer-sovereignty perspective of power (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006) i.e. the restrictive view of consumers as rational decision makers and the limits of the assumption that exercising choice equals freedom and happiness (Shankar, Cherrier, & Canniford, 2006). Indeed, despite greater freedom of choice and action in the market, consumers have limited control over the consequences of those choices (Shankar, Whittaker, & Fitchett, 2006). For example, consumers can better control their diet with food apps (information power), but often ignore that free apps sell consumer data to health insurance companies. So, despite an increasing ability to exercise choice in almost all aspects of their lives, consumers do not always control the personal and societal consequences of such choices. Such lack of control signals potential vulnerability.

1.3. Consumer vulnerability

Consumer vulnerability has been defined as "a state of powerless [ness] that arises from an imbalance in marketplace interactions or from the consumption of marketing messages and products" (Baker, Gentry, & Rittenburg, 2005, p. 134): consumers feel vulnerable when they are not able to accomplish their goals. As such, consumer vulnerability characterizes situations when barriers prohibit control or prevent freedom of choice (Broderick et al., 2011); in particular, when consumers are 'influenced by external stimulation or temptation that can lead to decisions harmful to their own welfare' (Shi, Jing, Yang, & Nguyen, 2017, p. 769). Within the marketing context, segments of the marketplace may experience vulnerability if they perceive that marketers ignore or misrepresent their identity; for instance, when brand communications emphasize the dominant majority (Kipnis et al., 2013).

Building on the limitations inherent to the consumer sovereignty perspective (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006; Shankar, Cherrier, et al., 2006; Shankar, Whittaker, et al., 2006), previous research has highlighted that technology also makes consumers vulnerable (e.g. Elms & Tinson, 2012). Consumers may indeed believe that new technologies facilitate exploitative practices and thus increase "their odds of being victimized" (Ratchford & Barnhart, 2012, p. 1213). If consumers worry about these vulnerable positions, they may simply resist technology or certain

technological tools such as geolocalization (Banerjee, 2019). However, in some situations, and as we study here, consumers may feel empowered through their techno-mediated consumption journeys and not realize their own vulnerability.

Whereas previous vulnerability research has emphasized vulnerable segments and populations at risk, we extend the literature by focusing on cultural vulnerability. Traditional views of vulnerability are based on consumers' lack of resources to deal with the marketplace. In contrast, cultural vulnerability signals that the growth of techno-mediated interactions with brands may render consumers vulnerable, even when they have plenty of resources to acquire what they need. When consumers are in an environment that prevents them from foreseeing the consequences of their choices, ethical issues can arise (Shultz & Holbrook, 2009). Working from the assumption that consumers are generally unaware of unfair business practices (Lee & Soberon Ferrer, 1997), and that techno-mediated journeys may have unforeseen consequences, we unearth the processes through which technology-mediated journeys expose consumers' potential vulnerabilities.

1.4. Connecting empowerment and vulnerability

The notion of cultural vulnerability suggests that empowerment and vulnerability may coexist: they are not disjunctive (either/or) states. Yet, this relationship is not a paradox (Mick & Fournier, 1998) as vulnerability is not immediately visible but rather hidden under perceptions of empowerment. Consumers' "autonomous decision-making ability" (Hackley & Kitchen, 1999, p. 17) is hampered as they get transported by the empowerment narratives that brands communicate (van Laer, de Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014; van Laer, Feiereisen, & Visconti, 2019).

We propose that the prevailing discourses of consumer empowerment, and in particular, the promise of an enchanted world (Heath & Heath, 2016) mediated by technology, can be approached through the lens of cultural vulnerability. Instead of considering fear of vulnerability as a factor that reduces consumers' propensity to engage with technology (Ratchford & Barnhart, 2012; Parasuraman & Colby, 2015), we consider (cultural) vulnerability as emerging from the use of technology in a seemingly empowering way. This cultural vulnerability lens questions the ethical implications of consumer empowerment through techno-mediated consumption journeys and motivates the central research question addressed here: do the seemingly empowering techno-mediated interactions with brands conceal vulnerability?

2. Method

2.1. Approach

We approach consumers' experiences of the technological environment not as fragmented and restricted to specific touch points, but as a holistic process (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). We consider consumers' narratives of techno-mediated interactions with brands to expose the subjective experience of empowerment and unearth their inherent potential vulnerability (Baker, Labarge, & Baker, 2015). Digital interactions in the context of consumption journeys are numerous and often go unnoticed as they are integrated to people's everyday experience (De Certeau, 1990). To facilitate access to latent meanings, we adapted a dream interpretation approach from psychoanalysis. Some psychoanalysts (e.g. Whitman, 1963) find that a written recording of dreams is useful in psychoanalytic treatment, theorizing that writing makes the dream's content available for analytic work: on awakening, the confrontation with reality results in shifts to secondary process thinking, to external perception, and to motor activity that is incompatible with the dream state. Writing or discussing the manifest content of a dream thus enables the emergence of multiple unconscious meanings (Blum, 2000).

Building on a cultural approach of vulnerability, our objective was to gain cultural knowledge about consumers' experience of empowerment in their techno-mediated journeys and explore whether such experiences reflect vulnerability. We collected narratives about lived and dreamed experiences of such journeys. In the spirit of postmodern interviewing (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003), we let participants construct and negotiate meaningful accounts of social reality through an interactive process. One way of engaging the interviewees is to have them discuss cultural phenomena in focus groups (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Through these social interactions, participants tell stories about themselves, but also reflect upon other's stories. Given that sharing dreams as a social practice facilitates this reflexive process (Wax, 2004), we allowed the dream interpretation to emerge collectively and unearth collective reflection on techno-mediated consumption journeys.

We conducted focus groups guided by a video featuring a tech-heavy day in the life of a consumer (featured in the introduction), and a collage creation task performed in sub-groups. These tasks, used as elicitation materials (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006), provide a "nodal point" (Lacan, 1981) for consumers to articulate their experience of techno-mediated journeys. As researchers, we use this manifest dream content as "a translucent envelope, a surface that may reveal, conceal, or both" (Blum, 2000, p. 661). The video and the collages enabled projective identification, a process initially considered as a "method of evacuating unpleasure" (Brown, 2010, p. 670) and now recognized as a means for eliciting and making sense of latent meanings (Brown, 2010; Heisley & Levy, 1991). Per Zaltman (1997) metaphor elicitation technique, the collages and narrative processes provide an imaginative space in which consumers project themselves. The collages provide a creative, unbounded, projective task that bypasses participants' defense mechanisms, rationalization, and social desirability biases (Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003; Zaltman, 1997). Through the images they select, consumers express a representation of unquestioned mundane experiences (Heisley & Levy, 1991).

Collages focused on either dream or nightmare techno-mediated journeys. Dreams help the process of emotional regulation by creating narrative structures and new associations for memories (Maquet, 2001). We believe that dream narratives, akin to 'waking dreams' where the patient talks out imaginative images, whose meanings are formulated through the help of an analyst (Lacan, 1966), would provide a novel lens to uncover consumers' reflections of their experience in such a world. Dreams (Freud, 1900) are a 'powerful condensed metaphor for irrational beliefs' that cannot otherwise be articulated (Barrett, 2002; Lahire, 2018). Contemporary dream theories consider that situations depicted in dreams represent 'the relationships between internal objects' (Fairbairn, 1944).

Within Consumer Culture Theory, researchers have adopted projective techniques from psychoanalysis to "peel away the various layers of ego protection, much like one would peel an onion, in order to reveal the 'true', 'real' beliefs and behavior" (Tadajewski, 2006, p. 44), just as Freudian psychoanalysts interpret dreams (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Levy, 1986). The use of "consumption dreams" (D'Astous & Deschênes, 2005) is helpful to identify consumers' unconscious motivations and "perpetual and endless cycle of desires" (Campbell, 1987, Belk et al., 2003; Deschenes, 2011). "Imaginary dream-telling" stories (Mick & Fournier, 1998, p. 127) can also be used to uncover complex relationships such as the ones consumers experience with technology. Because dreams provide a narrative that connects elements that are often contradictory and of disparate origin (Lahire, 2018), their analysis reveals insights into the relationships between self and objects, and we use it here to unfold the interplay of techno-mediated consumption journeys and consumers' sense of self.

2.2. Procedure and participants

We organized focus group discussions around two activities. First, we used a professional video to confront participants with a typical technology-mediated consumption journey. The video was developed

by a leading high-tech company to demonstrate the potential of techno-mediated journeys for consumers, brands, and retailers. The company used this video as a commercial tool to provide a consumer centric view of their digital solutions. Its plot follows the techno-mediated brand interactions listed at the opening of the paper. Following viewing of the fifteen-minute video, participants shared their feelings and were invited to comment on the different steps of the consumption journey. We considered the video as a "stimulus text," a cultural product "made up of signs and signification" (Törrönen, 2002, p. 344), to foster group discussion. The ensuing group discussion allowed participants to express their own aspirations, fears, and experiences (McGrath, Sherry, & Levy, 1999). The group dynamics facilitated this reflection as participants built on each other's ideas by enriching, documenting, reformulating, or contrasting them (Morgan, 2002).

Second, participants of the focus group were split into sub-groups of 4–7 participants, provided access to magazines, and asked to create group collages. The subgroups were organized by the researchers and each subgroup was randomly assigned to create an ideal journey in the techno-mediated world (dream collages) or a nightmare collage in such a world. Each sub-group was then invited to present their collage to the other groups. Each collage narrative was followed by questions and comments from the audience, which generated group interactions and discussions.

The study was conducted in two large French cities. Each focus group was moderated by one or two authors of the paper. We organized six sessions with groups that differed in terms of age and experience in using digital devices. We recruited informants with digital interest (focus groups 1, 4, 5) from a popular event dedicated to digital change. These participants volunteered and registered to participate in a workshop dedicated to "shopping in the digital era;" they did not receive any compensation for their participation. We recruited informants with no specific digital experience, who were owners and users of smartphones, through snowball sampling among business school students (focus groups 2 and 3) and active adults (focus group 6) from diverse professional backgrounds not directly related to technology (e.g. administrative assistant, photographer, business consultant). These informants were offered a voucher for their participation. We made sure that the researchers did not know the informants. With this process, we guaranteed inter-group heterogeneity, diversity of experiences of techno-mediated journeys, and in-group homogeneity to facilitate the discussions (Morgan, 2002). Sessions lasted between two and three and a half hours. Focus group size varied from 10 to 21 participants. This size facilitated the organization of 2–4 collage activities, conducted in subgroups of 4–5 participants, and ensured that each participant had a voice and could share his/her thoughts and experiences. In total, 92 informants participated and 18 group collages were generated (Table 1).

2.3. Data analysis

The analysis is based on declarative (focus groups transcripts), symbolic (collages images), and projective (collage narrative transcriptions) data. The combination of methods enabled data production according to the "never-ending process of semiosis" (Törrönen, 2002, p. 345), which suggests that meaning emerges through co-constructed and successive interpretations. Taking into account the entire body of data (transcripts of the 6 focus groups, symbolic analysis of the 18 dream and nightmare collages and their corresponding narratives), enabled cross validation of emerging findings and coalesced into a deep understanding of the phenomenon. Two authors coded the data separately to identify emerging categories of meaning (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and then shared their interpretations. To ensure reflexivity, these interpretations were systematically presented and challenged among the four authors during working sessions that took place from the beginning of data collection until the writing phase. Data analysis followed a two-step process (Spiggle, 1994).

Table 1
Data Collection.

Groups	Demo Profiles	Number of Participants	Age range	Video as stimulus text	Focus Group Discussion	Group Collages	Collage narratives and discussions
1	Young Professionals from a IT Company	14 (11 females, 3 males)	22–28	Yes	Yes	2 Dream collages: A& B 2 Nightmare collages: C& D	Yes
2	Business School Students	10 (4 females, 6 males)	19–24	Yes	Yes	2 Nightmare collages: E & F	Yes
3	Mixed Active Adults (No specific digital interest)	10 (5 females, 5 males)	30–45	Yes	Yes	2 Nightmare collages: G & H	Yes
4	Managers with digital interest	21 (13 females, 8 males)	25–60	Yes	Yes	2 Dream collages: L &M 1 nightmare collage: N	Yes
5	Managers with digital interest	20 (13 females, 7 males)	25–60	Yes	Yes	2 Dream collages: I&J 1 nightmare collage: K	Yes
6	Master Students in communication & media	17 (11 females-6 males)	22–25	Yes	Yes	2 dreams collages: O & P 2 nightmare collages: Q & R	Yes
Total	**6 groups**	**92 participants**		**6**	**6**	**18 group collages**	**6**

Fig. 1. Empowerment as Latent Vulnerability in Techno-Mediated Consumption Journeys.

The first step was to unfold how techno-mediated journeys contribute to consumer empowerment and can manifest into vulnerability. Data analysis centered on a semiotic analysis of the corpus of collages: identifying the signs (for example images of superheroes, labyrinths, or clones) and words used and how, when interrelated, they produced meaning (Barthes, 1964). This enabled us to identify consistent evidence of concepts emerging through a "montage of heterogeneous floating signifiers" (Kozinets, 2008, p. 866). We compared and confronted our semiotic analysis of collages to the analysis of the informants' narratives about their collage. The group discussions supplemented the analysis of manifest meanings by showing how such metaphors referred to lived experiences. This first analysis enabled identifying sources of perceived empowerment and manifestations of consumer vulnerability presented in the findings.

The second step was to identify the process whereby consumers shift from experiences of empowerment to situations of vulnerability. Data analysis centered on the shift from dream to nightmare in collage narratives and induced mechanisms through which consumer empowerment turned into vulnerability. Then, we systematically analyzed experiences of vulnerability shared during the focus groups to check the validity and completeness of these mechanisms. This process allowed us to identify the mechanisms that reveal consumer vulnerability. Last, we conducted a second interpretation of dream collages and narratives, focusing on whether and how vulnerability may already be embedded in situations of perceived empowerment. We systematically identified experiences of empowerment shared during the focus groups to check the validity and completeness of the interpretation that the seemingly magical powers of techno-mediated journeys conceal vulnerability. This is how we induced the concept of empowerment as latent vulnerability.

3. Findings

The analysis unearths dimensions and processes of empowerment and vulnerability that are visually represented in Fig. 1. We first unfold how techno-mediated journeys contribute to consumer empowerment (perceived empowerment, on the left) but can manifest into vulnerability (manifest vulnerability, on the right). We show that empowerment and vulnerability in techno mediated interactions affect our relationships to the material word, to others, and to the self (left part of the figure). We then identify some mechanisms (errors, malfunctions, redundant or accumulated information) that expose manipulation and dependence, which are facets of vulnerability (pivot at the center of the figure). These revelation mechanisms make vulnerability become manifest. Hence we put forth the idea that consumer empowerment is in fact "latent vulnerability:" dependence and manipulation are concealed by empowerment (left side of the pivot, doted lines).

3.1. Sources of consumer empowerment

Consumers first view their journeys in the techno-mediated world as empowering, as suggested in prior research (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009; Labrecque et al., 2013; Oguz et al., 2016; Ozer & Bandura, 1990): technology equips them "with sufficient knowledge and autonomy to allow them to exert control over a certain decision" (Camacho, De Jong, & Stremersch, 2014, p. 294). Dream collages and narratives involve metaphors of fairytales and superpowers (Heath & Heath, 2016) emphasizing three sources of consumer empowerment: controlling the material world, connecting with people (relation to others), and being treated as unique (relation to the self).

3.1.1. Controlling the material world

Dream collage narratives describe worlds in which objects hold magical properties (Belk, 2017) and serve consumers as if they were a prince/princess echoing how marketers represent them (Heath & Heath, 2016; Shankar, Whittaker, et al., 2006). Like superheroes, individuals use their smartphone as a magic wand, an extension of their selves (Belk, 2014), which multiplies the control they have over their environment. For instance, a bed tidies itself up (collage C) or objects

gravitate around a woman to better serve her (collage D). Techno-mediated journeys erase geographical constraints: they travel from one country to another (collage D, collage O, collage P), or from one planet to another (collage C), effortlessly. Central to the notion of empowerment, self-efficacy and self-determination are exemplified by the removal of constraints, as well as immediate and exclusive access to information. Consumers can see traffic jams in advance (collages C and D), or access travel and shopping information immediately. All these services save time and facilitate or even re-enchant the life of consumers:

> *"We have chosen to put the woman at the center in her armchair, to show that she is able to do everything smoothly. Connected devices provide everything she needs. She saves time and she is really relaxed!"* (Eline, FG1, narrative on collage D)

Individuals also develop a power of ubiquity (Collin-Lachaud & Vanheems, 2016); for instance, they shop while travelling (collage C) or relaxing (collage D). Personalization and immediacy of those digital interactions provide new capabilities, represented as superpowers as symbolized in the picture of Wonder Woman (collage P), a collectively shared mythical figure that individuals use to represent power (Levy, 1981; Thompson, 1997, 2004).

3.1.2. Connecting with people

Dream narratives convey how digital services facilitate interpersonal connections (Epp et al., 2014). Techno-mediated applications enable the gathering of a community sharing a hobby (running in collage O, playing ping-pong in collage C) and maximizes connections between individuals. For instance, several collages reveal the power of applications in finding a partner, who is perfectly matched to one's profile and behavior, instantly and effortlessly (collages C, O, P). With technology-enabled access to data, consumers can anticipate others' desires and expectations, as if they had the superpower to read minds. For example, one dream collage (C) depicts a male character who, thanks to an application, knows that his dating partner loves strawberry cake; he can thus bring her to a nice restaurant that offers such a meal. Through some collages, especially collages C and O, individuals find their soulmates in fairytale-like *scenarii*:

> *"She meets this charming young man who happens to run with her. He becomes her running partner and over time they fall in love (…). And so she leaves for Mauritius with her prince charming because they won the trip together".* (Joy, FG6, narrative on collage O)

3.1.3. Being treated as unique

In these environments, consumers stand out from the crowd with unique and personalized privileges. "*It is all about you*" as verbalized in collage O and visualized in collages D and P that feature main characters standing in the middle of the collage. "*You forget everybody, they only see you, only talk to you*" (FG4, comment on collage M). Most dream collages feature very few people, depicting instead images of deserted or urban backgrounds. The characters seem relaxed and their pictures are particularly large in relation to other visual elements, conveying the importance of individuals and their needs (collage D) and the idea of exclusivity. Princes, princesses, or brand muses are explicitly mentioned (FG 4, comment on collage L) or referred to through images (collage D and collage O) that capture their projective power (McGrath et al., 1999). In such dreams, informants project themselves, through these characters, onto an ideal life where they benefit, explicitly or implicitly, from exclusive and personalized services that can be compared to services in a luxurious place.

> *"She will finish this experience and this adventure with a huge personalized "good bye!" while being individually valued, in other words being treated as a princess."* (Daniel, FG4, narrative on collage M).

4-star hotels and gourmet restaurants are represented through images of bedrooms (collage C), exclusive views over nature or the sea (collages D, L, M, O, P), and tables with elaborate decorations or exotic dishes (collages C, D, I, L, M, P). In this self-centric world, consumers feel empowered because their digital interactions with brands help fulfill their needs and desires (material, social, and emotional) before they even express them and without any effort.

3.2. Manifestations of consumer vulnerability

Yet, nightmare collages and narratives show that vulnerability becomes manifest when consumers' techno-mediated journeys make them lose control on the decisions they make, deteriorate relationships, and diminish their perception of their self.

3.2.1. Losing control

Instead of facilitating lives and increasing individuals' control over their everyday actions, technology can complicate consumer journeys. Participants describe nightmares as worlds in which they lose their priorities and end up in absurd situations: they buy things they neither want nor need (a ballerina wearing football shoes in Collage N), or fight with other customers over a purchase (collage K and R). Such absurd situations can happen in real life experiences such as ordering a birthday present that is delivered one month too late (Focus Group 3).

Nightmare collages are more complex than the dream collages: they are loaded with images, objects, colors, and crowds that create obstacles for consumers. Many depict images of labyrinths in which consumers get lost (collage H, N, R). In collage K, a Rubix Cube illustrates the complexity of life. In collage K, the character searches for the nearest shop to buy milk only to find the most unhelpful list of 100 options. This loss of control is at the very essence of vulnerability, which occurs "when a person is unable to accomplish his or her goals in a consumption situation because of being powerless, out of control" (Baker et al., 2005, p. 134). In line with Ratchford and Barnhart (2012, p. 1213) who conjectured that "as consumers become more aware of potential malicious activities that technology give rise to, their sense of vulnerability increases", our findings show that, only when consumers realize the risks inherent to the empowering benefits of their technology-enhanced journeys, do they understand that their faith in technology is misplaced (Banker & Khetani, 2019).

3.2.2. Deteriorating relationships

The data vividly reveal that, instead of connecting people, techno-mediated consumer journeys can also isolate them: images of lost or abandoned characters (e.g. the man alone and the body posture of the biker in collage G), of crowds, gathering people having no contact with each other or, even worse, fighting one another. Nightmares show that consumers struggle at facing the reality of social issues, as they experience conformism or aggression (Nobus & Downing, 2006).

Techno-mediated consumer journeys can trigger destructive and hurtful interpersonal exchanges, as illustrated in collage Q where the character tries to imitate ideals of beauty but does not reach her objective and instead receives humiliating comments such as:

> *"You are ridiculous." Informants lament that "people criticize on social networks, everywhere critics, haters everywhere, so she has to deal with the consequences, she is too much involved in this story, and so… she has it all… Break down."* (Maya, FG6, comment on collage Q).

The feeling of being judged by others or abandoned by one's devices can also generate isolation. Consumers would rather be left alone to flee what they experience as moral violence:

> *"Finally, she decides to cut off from social networks, from her phone. So she watches movies with Robert Pattinson"* (Lauranne, FG6, narrative on collage Q).

3.2.3. Diminishing self

While personalized messages produce feelings of exclusivity and uniqueness in dreams, they also lessen personal identities by standardizing tastes and behavior in nightmare narratives and collages (Baker et al., 2015). For example, the character in collage Q becomes frustrated because her officemate, who received the same "personalized" recommendation, is wearing exactly the same jumper. She realizes that the recommendation she followed is only the result of a mechanical algorithm and an outcome of segmentation and targeted marketing communications, probably sent to many other customers.

Many nightmare collages underline physical conformity by showing people dressed the same way or making similar gestures (collages H, K, N, and Q). The loss of sense of self, amongst these uniform groups, is detectable in the crowd visuals, where no specific human face can be discerned. Informants realize the potential standardization that could emerge from seemingly personalized recommendations:

> *"If she had followed all the beauty-standard recommendations she received, we would all look the same, like clones"* (Bérénice, FG1, narrative on collage B).

In nightmare stories, repeated and personalized posts result in humiliations (when private information is disclosed publicly, collage F), judgments (comments on physical appearance collages E, F, and Q), pressure to adopt a lifestyle (when the character cannot escape ads and notifications, collage Q), and even orders when individuals are told where to shop, what to look at, how to dress, what to eat, and when to move (collages B and E). These social representations and persuasion acts underline power relations enhancing consumer vulnerability (Visconti, 2016). In collage B, the lady receives personalized notifications based on her weight, such as "*you shouldn't eat chocolate but rather anti cellulite vegetables such a fennel, this is good for you*" (Emmanuelle, FG1, comment on collage B).

Their sense of self and uniqueness being ignored, informants can feel overwhelmed or even harassed by repeated notifications:

> *"This is something I can't bear: being told what to buy, or what's available. If I want something I buy it. If I don't want it I don't want it. I don't want to be told what I need."* (Sean, FG6)

In conclusion, these examples outline a situation of vulnerability, in which, instead of developing a higher sense of self in techno-mediated journeys, consumers express a feeling of "diminished self" (Connelly, 1987).

3.3. From latent to manifest vulnerability

The comparative analysis of dream and nightmare narratives enabled the unpacking of revelation processes whereby consumer empowerment (the left part of Fig. 1) reveals itself as manifest vulnerability (right part of Fig. 1). We identified several revelation mechanisms, such as errors, maladjusted information, repetition, and accumulation, through which consumers' dream-like experiences turn nightmarish. These mechanisms expose manipulation and dependence (center of Fig. 1) making vulnerabilities, that are latent in experiences of empowerment, becoming manifest. These processes allow us to reconceptualize consumer empowerment as "latent vulnerability."

3.3.1. Revelation of dependence

Consumers' overreliance on techno-mediated interactions with brands ultimately puts them in a situation of dependence that is revealed when such interactions dysfunction. Many nightmare collages (A, F, G, K, N, R) depict customer journeys as obstacle courses: images of labyrinths, traffic jams, and crowds illustrate dysfunctions that consumers have to overcome. Characters get lost because of errors (wrong address) and interruptions (lost Wi-Fi connections). Collage H visually depicts the shift between dream and nightmare: the color illustrates the wonderworld, the sun is shining, and the characters are happy because they can find the information they were looking for. In contrast, the other images in the same collage are black and white and depict distraught people: the information they got was false "*Google made a mistake and gave us the wrong direction*" (Adrien, FG3, narrative on collage H), they got lost. They eventually find the shop but it is closed.

Group discussions reveal that dysfunctions in techno-mediated consumption journeys are part of consumers' everyday experiences and create frustration:

> Jules: *"This happens when you check the stock on-line, then you go to the shop, you are sure you have it but no (…)*
> Valentin: *I have the feeling it is always like this. Every time they mention the product is available on the website, it turns to be out of stock in the shop. Conversely, when I go to the shop to order because the product is not available, actually it is available"* (FG3).
> *"Theoretically, everything works perfectly well on-line. But when you arrive in the shop, the experience is not as good. It is not always related to what you have seen online, you don't always find the shoes you are looking for, the place is not as cool …"* (Roger, FG6).

Techno-mediated information helps consumers control their surrounding material environment, especially by saving them time and effort, as illustrated in the ability to check stock levels online before traveling to a retail store. When consumers lose this control and become aware of their undiscerning overreliance on the immediacy of techno-mediated information, their dependence, invisible when everything works well, becomes apparent. As we observed in this research, informants only realize this when they reflect on their own practices, as the below focus group exchange illustrates:

> Patrick: *"We tend to believe the information. … You see on Google that the store is open from this time to that time but actually it is not.*
> Bastien: *And we believe what we're told. We do not question it.*
> Adrien: *We don't think we'd better call ahead. We search for information and accept it as is."* (FG3, comments on collage G).

Our findings thus show how consumers' empowerment in their techno-mediated journeys conceals a form of dependence, which is revealed when consumers experience dysfunctions.

3.3.2. Revelation of manipulation

The findings also bring forth consumers' heightened perceptions of manipulation in their techno-mediated journeys. Consumers identify persuasion attempts when they perceive being pushed to do something they would not spontaneously do (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Gueguen, 2014). For example, in collages B and E, the personalized recommendations, based on the character's profile and weight, are at odds with consumers' real desires. Collage B shows a crossed-off image in which fennel, the smartphone's recommendation based on the character's weight metrics, clashes with her preferred option: chocolate. Such unexpected recommendations are seen as injunctions to behave according to supposedly appropriate behavior. As these comments capture, they generate internal tension:

> Marion: *"At lunchtime, she receives straight away a notification that tells her "today, it would be good for you to eat this and that (…)". Perhaps she had not planned to eat that and this can be stressful to receive this information (…).*
> Anna: *It can make her feel guilty if she feels like having a big McDonalds' sandwich!"* (FG2, narrative on collage E).

Feelings of manipulation also surface when commercial messages intrude into the private sphere (Miltgen & Peyrat-Guillard, 2014) such as when app notifications pop up early in the morning or at night, as illustrated below:

> *"When she goes to bed or when she wakes up, these are private moments when you don't feel like being annoyed. It is not the right information*

because in the morning you don't need such stuff at such time" (Marine, narrative on collage E).

The social context in which consumers receive techno-mediated notifications can also heighten feelings of manipulation. For example, consumers may be embarrassed if other people access or see personal information. In collage F, a nightmare that began with inaccurate recommendations culminates when the sales representative accessed the consumer's personal profile and data:

"It's as if this happened to him in Time Square and tons of embarrassing things appear about him (…)" (Vincent, FG2, narrative on collage F). "*the brand holds [us] by the tie*" (Hippolyte, FG2, narrative on collage F)

The timing, social context, or content of a message make consumers aware of the manipulation and activate their persuasion knowledge (Fitzsimons & Lehmann, 2004). The focus group discussions provided evidence of how revelation of manipulation raises consumers' reflexivity: even when they are in situations of perceived empowerment, for example when they appreciate the ease of ordering books online, they raise questions about the ever growing collection and use of their personal data (Fournier & Alvarez, 2013; Miltgen, Henseler, Gelhard, & Popovič, 2016):

Adrien: *"I know that 70% of my online purchases are for cultural goods so I don't mind receiving posts or this kind of things. Because I am interested in them and most of the time they are relevant.*
Patrick: *That being said, I hope our data are kept and not sold out. My readings also show my opinions, which you can easily guess."* (FG3)

Feelings of manipulation also surface when consumers realize the endless repetition and accumulation of techno-mediated marketing messages. This is visible in informants' nightmare collages: repetition of images (collage A, F) and repetition of words in the narratives as illustrated hereafter: "*her smartphone tells her "Warning, warning, you should avoid chocolate, you're going to put on weight*" (Emmanuelle, FG1, narrative on collage D). Some participants experienced repetition as a cycle, a nightmare that repeats again and again and never ends. The following exchange illustrates the overwhelming and discomforting nature of repetition:

Théo: *"It's like the beep in a car when you do not have your seatbelt on…*
Anne-Marie: *"At one point, you want to tell yourself: can we just unplug? Is that too much for a single day? Yes, we feel that it is too much"* (FG2).

As consumers become aware of the permanent bombardment of marketing messages in private spheres, feelings of oppression and harassment ultimately overcome illusions of empowerment.

3.3.3. Empowerment as "latent vulnerability"

As described above, dependence and manipulation are not accessible to consumers unless revealed through mechanisms such as dysfunctions. We thus propose that, in techno-mediated journeys, consumer empowerment conceals vulnerability: vulnerability is latent in the experience of empowerment. Latent vulnerability manifests itself through the material world (when consumers lose control), the social world (when relationships are deteriorated), and the personal world (when consumers express a sense of diminished self) (see Fig. 1).

First, empowerment rests on material dependence. Whereas the power of immediate digital interactions and the magical properties of connected objects (Belk, 2017) promise an enchanted world (Heath & Heath, 2016), the relinquished agency increases consumers' material dependence on those devices and thus lessens their control and sense of self. Material dependence is central in dream narratives where smartphones and digital devices are omnipresent in characters' lives, as this narrative illustrates:

"Of course, the phone is always loaded, it doesn't break down. We've imagined a system to reload the phone at home thanks to induction plates" (Narrative collage I, FG5).

In their dream narratives, experiences of empowerment are possible due to some degree of automation and delegation: a connected fridge orders directly when food or drinks are missing (collage C and M), a GPS selects the fastest road according to the user's criteria (collage C), a yoga mat suggests positions according to how tense the person is feeling (Collage D), etc. Individuals no longer have to plan everyday chores, leisure activities, or appointments, which they now delegate to their connected devices (Collage C, D, I, M, O, P). However, delegating to smart devices can reduce consumers' agency over their everyday decisions. For instance, informants debate whether to treat notifications from their connected fridge as purely informational *"it is an information I have, I do what I want. Just I am told what is missing in my fridge"* (Vincent, FG2) or threatening their control and even sense of self: "*I think we are infantilized. I am big enough to know if there is no more milk or beers in my fridge*" (Léon, FG2) or "*I am not at ease that algorithms decide what I need. You are the one who decides when you want to buy something*" (Véronique, FG2). Although they acknowledge having "consented" to these notifications, they start realizing how dependent they have become. Focus group discussions show that the more consumers feel empowered thanks to the control they have on the material world, the more they delegate to apps tasks they used to do by themselves, and the more dependent they may become on such apps in the end. Situations that insidiously threaten consumers' agency even though they feel empowered reflect latent vulnerability.

Second, empowerment hides psychological dependence. Through the collage-narrative exercise, informants express how the increasing integration of connected services in their lives rely on the promise of a new version of themselves. Such experiences create idealized star myths (Morin, 1972) as images of the self (Shankar, Whittaker, et al., 2006) with divine qualities. Nightmare collages illustrate the illusory aspect of such empowerment, with the example of VIP consumers, who feel downgraded (diminishing self, Fig. 1) when they realize that virtually all consumers are VIP (narrative on Collage Q), or when they receive discounts with so many restrictions that they cannot use them (narrative on collage R). Conversely, in dream narratives, characters' consumption activities become driven toward maintaining their status. For example, in collage P, wonder woman, "the cliché of the active, dynamic, sporty woman," becomes dependent on posting about herself "*she also has to take tons of photos, and being accountable for everything she does at the end*" (Joy, narrative on collage P). Here, consumers become dependent on maintaining their narcissistic self-perceptions (Baek, Yoo, & Yoon, 2018) to reach illusory new versions of themselves.

Psychological dependence becomes manifest when consumers' high expectations regarding their techno-mediated interactions with brands are not met. For example, young adult informants report their impatience when technology does not work, how crazy they become if they have to wait ten minutes to download a movie, and compare themselves to their own parents who are less dependent on their smart devices: "*our personality changes, we are made dependent… And what is amazing is that we do not always notice it*" (Alfred, FG6). This hyper dependence echoes the society of "turbo-consumption" whose driving ideology of permanent consumption reduces adult identity "to the isolated, self-centered and pampered consumer driven by an irrational sense of entitlement for unlimited, instant and constant gratification" (Gottschalk, 2009, p. 322–23).

Third, empowerment hides manipulation because empowered consumers lose their critical sense. The collage elicitation exercise of dreams and nightmares helped informants reflect about the magic of their techno mediated journeys. Dazzled by the immediate and constant flow of information and idealized social media images, consumers fall prey to this perceived hyper reality, which they no longer question, as this group exchange illustrates:

"Bastien: *We get the information and we think "it's the truth", the system*

does not invite us to reason, doesn't invite us say "And you what do you think?", we think less and less …

Jeanne: *"Exactly, poof, I click, and information shows up right away. We believe in it. It's like all those videos that circulate on Facebook, unbelievable topics, but we watch the video, and we believe in it. Sometimes I wonder how gullible we are…"* (FG3).

While techno-mediated journeys seemingly enable consumers to "control the material world" (left upper of Fig. 1), this control is fragile and at times illusory as consumers, enchanted by easiness, do not bother checking the validity of information, as the above focus group discussion illustrates. This may lead them to do things they would not do in other contexts: share a video they receive on social media or buy something they do not want. Manipulation emerges as a direct result of consumers' feeling of empowerment. The disillusions they experience make them reflect on their vulnerability.

Fourth, empowerment rests on manipulation in interpersonal interactions. Here, manipulation and objectification of others participate to the feeling of empowerment. Objectification, defined as a "process of subjugation whereby people, like objects, are treated as means to an end" (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008, p. 111) was a major theme in consumers' nightmare narratives. People felt they were no longer treated as individuals with their own identities, tastes, and desires, but rather as commodities, targets, whose behaviors are planned, predicted, forced, and whose data can be sold. Unexpectedly, our findings suggest that consumer empowerment is fueled by commoditized relationships, where characters use others as resources to their own ends. Thus, extending on the neo liberal marketing discourse that possessions contribute to happiness and anything can be commodified (Shankar, Whittaker et al., 2006), our findings illustrate a process of commodification of individuals. For instance, in dating apps, individuals evaluate each other as commodities. Not only are individuals' own personal data instrumental to others who want to seduce them, but individuals themselves package their own appearance to conform to others' tastes (narrative on collage C). While this commoditization may enable them to reach their objective of seduction, such perceived empowerment rests on the manipulation of human relationships. Vulnerability is latent in these commodified relationships that give the semblance of empowerment when in fact they objectify people.

4. Discussion

Technology has permeated many facets of consumers' journeys. In an extension from prior research on the paradoxes inherent to technology in general (Mick & Fournier, 1998), this research introduces the concept of "latent vulnerability:" consumers can be in situations of vulnerability even if they feel empowered by techno-mediated interactions with brands. With latent vulnerability, we uncover the processes whereby and why consumers shift from perceived empowerment to vulnerability. This latent vulnerability marks a departure from Mick and Fournier's informants who appear resilient, able to access "behavioral copying strategies" when they "deal with salient paradoxes" (Mick & Fournier, 1998, p. 139). In contrast, our study indicates that consumers are culturally vulnerable: they lack understanding of the impact technologies have on their social world and sense of self, and only experience a sense of vulnerability when manipulation and dependence are revealed. Conceptualizing vulnerability as latent in situations of empowerment contributes new insights to the growing discussion of ethical issues in marketing (Shankar, Cherrier, et al., 2006; Shultz & Holbrook, 2009).

4.1. Latent vulnerability: Theoretical and ethical stakes

This research builds on the often stated but seldom studied proposal that all consumers can be vulnerable (Baker et al., 2005; Shultz & Holbrook, 2009). Indeed, "latent vulnerability" captures vulnerability's implicit presence in consumers' experiences of empowerment.

4.1.1. A new lens to understand cultural vulnerability

The concept of latent vulnerability provides a new lens through which to understand vulnerability. Whereas consumer vulnerability was traditionally defined as emerging from the lack of access to external conditions (Baker et al., 2005), latent vulnerability emerges from the seemingly unlimited access to technology and its benefits for consumption journeys. Updating the theoretical concept of cultural vulnerability (Shultz & Holbrook, 2009) in the context of techno-mediated consumer journeys, we put forth latent vulnerability as a form of cultural vulnerability that is neither accountable to individual characteristics, nor to individual states (Baker et al., 2005) but to marketing promises of an enchanted world (Heath & Heath, 2016). We stress vulnerability's invisibility as consumers rely on the illusory power of digital interactions and we illustrate how empowerment hinges on manipulation and dependence. Not only do consumers not always know what is good for them (Shultz & Holbrook, 2009), they also lack sentience of the impact of such self-centered understanding on both their social world and their sense of self.

4.1.2. Ethical implications of latent vulnerability

With the growth of artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things and the promise of 'magical robots' (Belk, 2017), the management and education of latent vulnerability becomes a societal issue (Walker, Milne, & Weinberg, 2019). Consumers' vulnerability towards technology-based interactions with brands emerges as a perverse byproduct of its benefits. In particular, regardless of its reliability, information immediacy renders consumers' experiences magic and effortless until dysfunctions expose their overdependence on such interactions. Our research indeed enlightens how collective imagination has incorporated the ideology of marketers, featuring consumers in enchanted worlds.

It is clear marketing both reduces and contributes to consumer vulnerability (Shultz & Holbrook, 2009). In today's technology-driven society, consumers face different technology-mediated pressures resulting from marketing stimulations and temptations, which make them more likely to engage in non-rational behavior or in decisions that reduce their welfare (Shi et al., 2017). Adding to prior conceptualizations of vulnerability (Baker et al., 2005), this study shows how vulnerability can occur even while still not felt. Indeed, it is still unclear if, when, and how consumers themselves become aware of and experience vulnerability.

The concept of latent vulnerability suggests that seemingly empowering consumer experiences can be deceptive as such empowerment is only possible thanks to the material and psychological dependence that techno-mediated interactions with brands create. This perspective brings to mind Plato's famous allegory of the cave (Plato, 1968) which, though rarely used in marketing or management studies (for an exception, see e.g. Henderson, Oakes, & Smith, 2009), depicts humans as locked in a cave during childhood. They face a wall on which they can see shadows of objects that puppeteers, behind the wall, are projecting. Being chained to the wall, humans mistakenly consider these shadows as reality while reality is actually outside the cave. This metaphor can be applied to consumer empowerment stories in techno-mediated journeys: just as the puppeteers create shadows of objects to lure men into the cave, enchantment stories can frame consumers' perceptions of reality, representing them with superpowers, and unearth situations of vulnerability. Therefore, unlike the concept of paradox that suggests both sides of it are known and visible, the allegory of the cave offers a new interpretation of the benefits and downsides that techno-mediated consumer journeys create, based on the concept of illusion. In such a situation, technology "induces disengagement from reality" (Borgmann, 2000, p. 418) as its perception is blurred.

Another ethical dimension of techno-mediated journeys lies in the relational norms marketers develop through their digital interactions

with customers (Keep & Schneider, 2010), ethics being considered as normative in this perspective (Tsalikis & Fritzche, 1989). Individuals interact with each other instrumentally, as captured in the "commodified relationships" that were explicit in nightmares but only latent in dream narratives. Our research suggests that consumers, when digitally interacting with others, reproduce the commodified-based norms they experience through their digital communication with brands. These relational norms do not match with Kant's Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1959), stating that every person should be treated as an end and never as a mean.

4.2. Methodological contributions

Exploring consumers' fluid reflections on their technology-mediated journeys (Kozinets, 2008) requires a multifaceted view of the role of technology in (post-) modern life. Its paradoxical aspects (Mick & Fournier, 1998; Kozinets, 2008) call for methodological tools that can explore all the aspects of this multifaceted and complex phenomenon (McGrath et al., 1999). Following van Laer et al. (2019) call for qualitative research "enhancing the engaging power of digitally mediated stories" (p. 144), we used a combination of methods based on the concept of dream as "another link in the chain of associations that help to retrieve both the latent content of dreams and other communications" (Fischbein, 2011). The dream approach as a system of signs for accessing the unconscious residues of daily encounters and experiences shows the usefulness of psychoanalytical concepts in consumer research and communication perspectives (Conigliaro, 1997; Kozinets et al., 2017). Dreams exaggerate our sentiments (Lahire, 2018). By engaging informants into magical and absurd stories, the metaphorical process of creating a collage enabled access to latent content that escape rational reasoning (Levy, 1981; Zaltman, 1997). This method helped participants notice and put words to feelings related to mundane digital interactions they had not questioned before.

The combination of both declarative (focus groups), symbolic (collages), and projective (collage narratives) techniques thus enabled deeper understanding of how dreams and nightmares are interrelated and contribute to the social construction of latent vulnerability. Uncovering latent meanings that might otherwise be lost, this research sheds light on a composite image of post-modern life and complex reflections. We believe this research opens new paths for future research using the dream approach, largely underexplored in social sciences (Lahire, 2018), to go beyond the cognitive approach of complex phenomena related to post-modern life.

4.3. Practical implications

The interrelatedness of empowerment and vulnerability in techno-mediated consumer journeys has implications for both practitioners and public policy makers. Identifying the notion of "latent vulnerability" pinpoints marketers' potential contribution to vulnerability in the marketplace. This contribution brings out clear ethical implications given that the ruling consumer sovereignty perspective so far "absolves marketers, and business in general, of any guilt or responsibility for any negative consequences of their actions, any responsibility for making people miserable" (Shankar, Whittaker, et al., 2006, p. 490). By highlighting the negative counterparts to the benefits that customers derive from their techno-mediated journeys, this research signals that marketers should acknowledge the hidden aspects of the interactions they develop with customers: dependence and feelings of manipulation.

Marketers can develop more sustainable relationships with their customers if they manage to better anticipate the phenomenon of latent vulnerability. For instance, anticipating dependence and its counterparts could motivate marketers to encourage their customers to double check information available online when looking for directions, opening hours, item availability, or promotional offers. While applications are often designed to remove direct contact with salespeople, marketers should consider re-introducing contact with sales advisors via phone, chats, or other systems, to help customers confirm the information they receive. Another possible action for marketers is to better communicate about the dependence that techno-mediated interactions may generate. For instance, in a 2019 award winning TV commercial, a leading phone operator in France partnered with players of the national French Soccer team to encourage consumers to put away their phone and instead engage in off-line interactions and physical activities. This type of marketing communication recognizes the negative effects of technology in consumers' lives and provides a counterbalance to the "magic" of techno-mediated journeys.

Anticipating feelings of manipulation require that marketers consider how the content of personalized recommendations but also their quantity and timing may affect audiences. Marketers should favor pull-based personalized information so that consumers can request only what they need and when they need it. In recognizing that techno-based interactions may damage consumer-brand relationships, marketers could reconsider the promise of magic suggested by their communications, and move toward more responsible messaging.

Marketers must also find ways to enable empowerment while limiting the latent vulnerability those interactions also create. Our research suggests that, if people are educated to be more self-reflexive about digital interactions with brands, they can better manage their potentially perverse effects. Along the line of these findings, to promote self-reflexivity and critical thinking, policy makers could require that references to magical worlds in marketing be explicitly referred to as fiction. Policy makers could also engage a public debate on the extent to which references to magical, dream-like outcomes should be allowed to market products and services.

4.4. Research avenues

This study suggests several avenues for further research. First, the finding that empowerment from techno-based interactions with brands hides vulnerability prompts the questions: Could the reverse be true? Might visible vulnerability hide some forms of latent empowerment? Future research could tackle this issue through the concept of "copying strategy" (Mick & Fournier, 1998, p. 139), which is instrumental in how consumers deal with the paradoxical nature of technology. It would be useful to identify which forms of empowerment consumers develop to face the multi-dimensional vulnerability inherent to their techno-mediated journeys. Given that latent vulnerability may be much stronger than the state of stress and confusion presented in Mick and Fournier (1998)'s study, we believe consumers could develop resilience, resistance (De Certeau, 1990), and self-reflexivity above and beyond "copying strategies" to overcome such latent vulnerability.

Second, the novel insights generated from the dream elicitation methodology, inspired by the field of psychoanalysis, can motivate further research that requires an approach suited to trigger self-reflexivity (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Such projective techniques, designed to explore consumers' unconscious feelings, could guide further exploration of the dimensions of latent vulnerability introduced here.

Third, deeper understanding of the sociocultural elements surrounding the revelation mechanisms we uncovered is warranted. The focus groups and collective collages used in this research generated cultural talk (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006) and facilitated the induction of a cultural phenomenon, latent vulnerability, without conditions to this vulnerable state. A sociocultural lens, for instance based on observations of consumers' shopping experiences, would unearth other facets of the complex interrelationship between empowerment and vulnerability.

5. Conclusion: reflections on empowerment as latent vulnerability

Our results highlight the limits of the consumer sovereignty model (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006; Shankar, Cherrier, et al., 2006) and point to

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the usefulness of revisiting Plato's philosophical perspective to identify ethical implications related to empowerment. On one hand, the enchanted narratives consumers encounter create ideals "for consumers to aspire to and in so doing, better themselves" (Heath & Heath, 2016, p. 829). Technology's emancipatory potential is inherent to the idea that techno-capitalism creates unfettered consumer desire (Kozinets et al., 2017). On the other hand, our study signals that vulnerability emerges as a function of self-reflexive awareness of the, perhaps illusory, nature of technology-facilitated empowerment (Foucault, 1988). This reflexivity is triggered by revelation mechanisms that awaken consumers' sense of vulnerability. Yet, our findings suggest that consumers may not realize when and where dependence and manipulation begin. The empowerment/vulnerability processes are thus difficult to disentangle as both dependence and manipulation happen insidiously, creating the "unconscious state of confusion" (Hackley & Kitchen, 1999) described in nightmares. (Re)turning to ancient Greek philosophy provides a novel ethical lens to discuss latent vulnerability as fueling *meta*-ethics (Tsalikis & Fritzche, 1989). We thus hope this article will motivate further research on the relations between visible, or perceived, empowerment, and its latent form of vulnerability that seems highly connected to the notion of truth in an ethical perspective.

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Appendix A. Collages

Collage A (Nightmare)

Synopsis collage A:

The day starts happily until the shirt of the main character gets burned as he uses a smart iron, which gets the cloth wrong. Then he receives his new sofa, which was supposed to match perfectly with his living room dimensions but ends up too large. As he does not use the app Waze to get to work, he ends up stuck in traffic. Once he arrives, his printer explodes and his boss fires him for that. He is mocked at work. As he tries to get back home, his connected car takes control and drives him away to strange and unsafe places. He ends up locked up because someone had put drugs in the back of his car. He manages to get back home in the end.

Collage B (Nightmare)

Synopsis collage B:

In this story, the main character turns 25 today. Her smart scale indicates that she should go on a diet and her smart razor notifies her she should have shaved long ago, and that it is time to shave now. As she goes shopping the sales advisor advises her not to buy the dress she would like as it makes her look fat. In the drugstore, where she asks for essential oils, the pharmacist advises her to buy slimming pills and anti-cellulite cream instead. Later, she receives the same kind of notifications from her smart phone as she walks in the pastries section of a supermarket. Her app notifies her she looks too pale and doesn't match with the fashion criteria. Following these notifications, she gets a different haircut than the one she really likes. In the end she is being geolocated and notified she should exercise when she passes a gym. She ends up depressed on her birthday, which turned out to be the worst day of her life.

Collage C (Dream)

Synopsis collage C:

The character wakes up in his comfortable smart bed, that tidies up on its own. As he enters his kitchen, he finds that his groceries have been automatically ordered and delivered and his breakfast is served. He also benefits from a smart shower system, with perfect temperature, 100% adapted to him. He goes to work cycling to avoid traffic jams. He connects to an app through which he finds a Ping-Pong spot and Ping-Pong partners. Later, as he travels, he uses an app to find a seat close to the girl he would like to date. Thanks to the information he gets about her, he organizes the date according to her tastes (taxi, restaurant, food, and drinks) and is able to seduce her. The girl can also access information about his tastes, and decides to dye her hair blonde, like he likes. They spend the night together in his connected bed and start a new day together.

Collage D (Dream)

Synopsis collage D:

In this story, all daily routine activities of the main character have been organized. She pilots everything from her armchair. She can focus on her emails and looks for vacation discounts. She chooses the kind of places, transportation, restaurants she likes, thanks to the personalized notifications she receives from her app. For lunch, she is proposed vegetarian dishes, because she is vegetarian, and chooses home delivery. Then she takes her smart car that proposes the best way to go shopping. In the shop she collects a special edition bag that was advertised to her online earlier. Thanks to her smart watch, she can finally book a relaxing yoga class and uses a smart mat that recommends positions adapted to her.

Collage E (Nightmare)

Synopsis collage E:

In this story, the main character receives notifications and calls at any time of the day that make her feel upset. Her day starts with an advertising message from a supermarket as she wakes up, then a call from a brand representative to urge her to come to a shop to benefit from a special offer; and then notifications with personalized healthy food recommendations at lunch time. She receives a special offer just having completed the purchase. The last promotions arrive at night as she is in bed.

Collage F (Nightmare)

Synopsis collage F:

It is about a man who has a unique consumer profile, for instance, he goes running naked. Because of his unconventional consumer profile, brands mistake him for a woman and send him female-oriented or embarrassing products. When in a shop, the salesperson has access to his ambiguous consumer profile. Because of a technological bug, she also can access private data like party pictures or his political tastes, but above all a lot of contradictory data. Everything about him becomes visible, including his sexual performances. He feels as if all his life was posted on Times Square screens, as if big brother was checking everything he does, as if the brands hold him by the tie. When he decides to offer a present to his girlfriend, the surprise effect is ruined because the lipsticks appears on screens as they walk together.

Collage G (Nightmare)

Synopsis collage G:

This collage depicts short stories about purchasing failures based on real experiences. In the first one a product is being transported everywhere in town before being delivered. In the second one, candles cannot be lit for a birthday either because the apartment lacks electricity or because there is a very long purchasing delay that has not been declared from the beginning. In the third one, a woman goes to pick up a meal she ordered only to find that it has been prepared in a far-remote restaurant. Finally, it is about a character who finds out the product she just bought is 50% cheaper in the shop next door.

Collage H (Nightmare)

Synopsis collage H:

This is about a person who gets upset as he spots a shop on Google and finds out the address is wrong. Once the correct address is found, the person stands in front of a closed shop. The next day, as the person comes back, the product is out of stock. Eventually, his credit card has been hijacked.

Collage I (Dream)

Synopsis collage I:

It takes place in a shop. The shop manager knows the customer's profile and tastes in order to welcome her as well as possible in the shop. The customer can organize her private life (meeting friends, eating in restaurant, going to concerts) thanks to the app. This way, the app makes her life happier without imposing purchasing.

Collage J (Dream)

Synopsis collage J:

In this shop, the customer has sensory experiences (tasting, listening…). The customer feels she belongs to a community and feels treated uniquily as she receives personalized advice and presents.

Collage K (Nightmare)

Synopsis collage K:

The day starts with a strike that makes the character change his daily plans. Then his connected device keeps sending notifications about what foods to buy. The character cannot do his shopping because of the strike and the fridge keeps on putting pressure on him. On the internet, he finds a list of billions of shops. Eventually he finds a shop in which customers are fighting over products because it runs out of them. Salespersons are like strangers for the customer and cannot help him. In the end, the customer is being helped thanks to a family traditional shoe shop where he gets the information where to do his shopping.

Collage L (Dream)

Synopsis collage L:

A female character arrives in a shop. She is welcomed personally with a music band. She gets a personalized recommendation to dye her hair blond. She gets a gourmet dish and in addition 30% off for her birthday as she shares this experience with her community. The dedicated sales team even remind her she can watch her favorite TV show tonight. She feels very special.

Collage M (Dream)

Synopsis collage M:

In his home, the character receives information from his fridge about what and where to shop. In transportation he can be entertained thanks to his smartphone that connects him to his favorite shop and social media. In the shop, he can relax, meet people and even have his kids entertained. A robot can analyze his implicit and explicit needs and assist a salesperson. Thanks to an augmented reality helmet, the character has access to infinite choices. Thanks to a 3D printing process, the character can have immediate access to personalized products such as printing the drawing of the kids on a T-shirt.

Collage N (Nightmare)

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Synopsis collage N:

It all starts as the character is peacefully at home, trying to buy a pair of shoes through her smartphone. Because of a poor Wi-Fi connection, she goes out to buy it. On her way, she receives too many notifications and starts feeling puzzled. She finds it hard to park and has to pay for the parking. In the shop, she waits a long time for the salesman to be available and once he is available he tells her rudely that they are out of stock. He shows her a different model which confuses her even more. In the end, she faces a payment problem, and buys a pair of shoes she no longer wants and ends up totally confused.

Collage O (Dream)

Synopsis collage O:

Mary, the main character runs. Her running app recommends partners she could run with as they perform as well as she does. This is how she meets her prince charming, a runner like her, and they fall in love. They run together, post a lot of pictures on their running app community where they become a reference. They win a trip to the Maldive islands thanks to a game competition organized by their running app.

Collage P (Dream)

Synopsis collage P:

Betty is a sporty girl, she is connected and shares her races' information on her social networks. A sports brand spots her and offers her to become their muse. This way, she can travel around the world, she becomes rich, falls in love in Mauritius Island with an Ironman champion. She becomes the woman of her dreams, a "wonder woman" who is successful and admired for everything she does. She becomes a real influencer, she posts about her competitions and her diet.

Collage Q (Nightmare)

Synopsis collage Q:

The main character wakes up and finds out, reading her horoscope, she will have a bad day. Indeed, her washing machine leaks and her boyfriend has left. It's raining outside, she can't go running. She decides to go pick up shoes she ordered online, but it all goes wrong: she can't pay and the size and color are wrong. She checks her Instagram feed and sees amazing photographs of sporty girls she cannot keep up with. She also receives posts on ski resorts because she planned to go skiing with her boyfriend, which makes her feel even worse. At work, her colleague wears exactly the same outfit as she received exactly the same "personalized" recommendations. She decides to cut off from any connection to her smartphone and her social networks.

Collage R (Nightmare)

Synopsis collage R:

The character is willing to shop in her favorite online store, but as she has lost her password and cannot connect. She has to go to the physical store. She does not understand anything in this store, she does not understand the discounts which are very clear when she navigates on-line, she is not used to going there anymore. The escalators break down, the shop is huge. She gets lost. She ends up buying something and has to wait a long time to pay because every customer is facing the same problem with the app. In the end, she does not have enough money to pay so she feels she has spent 2 h40 in the shop for nothing.

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