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Living life or denying death? Towards an understanding of the bucket list

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ABSTRACT

Since the movie *The Bucket List* was released in 2007, the practice of compiling a list of things that people wish to achieve during their lifetime – a bucket list – has become increasingly popular amongst not only those who have received a terminal diagnosis (as in the movie) but also the wider population. Moreover, predominant in such lists are tourism-related goals. Surprisingly, however, little academic attention has been paid to the role and significance of the bucket list. The purpose of this paper is to address this gap in the literature. Drawing on the outcomes of an exploratory survey framed within terror management theory (TMT), it considers the relationship between the bucket list and existential anxieties and, in particular, the extent to which a fear of death motivates the compilation of such a list. The research reveals that the compiling a bucket list has become a contemporary cultural practice which, though evidently a means of managing existential anxieties, is also an explicit manifestation of consumption directed towards the creation of identity and self-esteem. The paper concludes by identifying future areas of research in the context of the bucket list.

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Bucket list; existential anxiety; terror management theory; immortality; self-esteem; identity

Introduction

In December 2007, the movie *The Bucket List* premiered in Hollywood. After an initial 16-cinema run, it was screened in 2915 venues across the US (Gray, 2008) and although receiving a number of unfavourable reviews (e.g. Brooks, 2008), it proved popular with the public, grossing around $175 million worldwide (IMDbPro, n.d.). Relating the experiences of two men who meet in hospital and who, having both been diagnosed with cancer and given less than a year to live, together compile a 'bucket list' – a list of things they want to accomplish before they die (Niemiec & Schulenberg, 2011) – it follows their adventures, arguments and shared moments of both disappointment and joy as they progress through their list. As such, the movie is a story of awakening, compromise, the re-evaluation of the lives and, ultimately, the death of the two main characters.

The commercial success of *The Bucket List* arguably reflected the significance of its underlying themes that, similar to other movies, address existential awareness and a search for meaning in the face of impending death. As Niemiec and Schulenberg (2011, p. 388) observe, 'movies provide a medium for facing death as the viewer identifies with characters and follows a story and, at the same time, can provide an avenue for escaping death because the viewer knows these are just actors on a screen'. Following its release, the concept of the bucket list became widely adopted with people of varying ages, income and health conditions (that is, not only those with terminal illnesses) creating and completing lists of things they wished to achieve. Moreover, the bucket list concept remains popular. According to Hughes (2018), around 20 percent of the UK population have compiled a bucket list whilst surveys have revealed that, in the US, not only do 69 percent of Americans have a list of 'life's things to do' (Garcia, 2011) but also, significantly, travel tops the list for 89 percent of them. In fact, travel and tourism are the most common goals; on average, a bucket list includes eight travel destinations or experiences (Provision Living, 2020).

It is surprising, therefore, that little academic attention has been paid to the role and significance of the bucket list and, indeed, to the prevalence of travel and tourism goals within them. In the tourism context in particular, just one study explores the relevance of bucket lists to identity formation (Thurnell-Read, 2017) whilst more generally, a small number of studies focus on the relationship between bucket lists and age (Chou et al., 2005; Chu et al., 2018; Periyakoil, 2018). Others explore the potential contribution of bucket lists to palliative

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care (Periyakoil et al., 2018; Portman et al., 2018) whilst they are also referred to indirectly in research in the fields of medicine, gerontology and death studies (for example, Armitage, 2018; Niemiec & Schulenberg, 2011). For the most part, however, discussions of the bucket list are most commonly found in the popular media rather than academic publications.

The purpose of this paper is to begin to address this gap in the literature. Drawing on the outcomes of an exploratory survey, it seeks to enhance knowledge and understanding of the bucket list as a contemporary popular (and typically tourism-related) phenomenon with a focus on how such lists are perceived and the reasons for their compilation. More specifically, given the apparent relationship between bucket lists and death and dying, it seeks to identify not only the extent of this relationship – that is, are bucket lists primarily influenced by a concern with death or are they more about living life to the full? – but also the factors that determine the nature of this relationship. In order to do so, terror management theory (TMT) is employed as a framework for the research. This is discussed shortly, but it is first necessary to review the origins of the bucket list and its conceptual underpinnings.

Conceptualising the bucket list

Whilst the now widespread practice of compiling a bucket list was popularised by the 2007 movie of the same name, the concept of the bucket list has since been appropriated by the advertising industry, TV shows (for example, *An Idiot Abroad 2: The Bucket List*, 2011) and publishers of innumerable books of the '100 places to visit before you die' genre. It has also been the focus of a number of TEDx talks (for example, Terry, 2018) whilst mobile phone apps have become available to facilitate the organisation of bucket list goals and the sharing of them with others (Caring Village, 2021).

There is no evidence to suggest that the term 'bucket list' was in use prior to 2007; many attribute it to the movie's screenwriter, Justin Zackham. However, it is commonly thought to be based on the idiom to 'kick the bucket' (Santoso, 2019), a euphemistic term meaning to die, although its origins are less certain. Some, for example, suggest that it refers specifically to death by suicide; in September 1788, Jackson's Oxford Journal reported the death of one John Marshfield who committed suicide by hanging himself by kicking the bucket from beneath his feet. Others believe that the 'bucket' refers to a yoke or beam from which pigs were traditionally hung by their heels to be slaughtered – as the animals struggled, they gave the impression of kicking the bucket (Word Histories, n.d.) – whilst yet others suggest the term derives from an old burial custom in the Catholic church of placing a bucket of holy water at the feet of deceased (Quinion, 2016). Whatever the case, there can be no doubting what might be described as the 'dark' roots of the concept of the bucket list or, more precisely, its association with death as manifested both in the movie and in numerous subsequent accounts of terminally ill people compiling such lists (Moss, 2017). Indeed, the bucket list is arguably most commonly and simply thought of as a 'set of meaningful goals that a person hopes to achieve before they die' (Chu et al., 2018, p. 151). It is logical, therefore, to conceptualise the bucket list from this perspective.

Death and the bucket list

According to Hefferon and Boniwell (2011, p. 138), bucket lists are 'done under the assumption that there is a race against death. This could be a death that is imminent or a 'to do-list' before you die. Either way, there is an implicit challenge against time and mortality'. Yet, does such an explicit relationship exist between death and the compilation of a bucket list? On the one hand, the Epicurean school of philosophy proposes that human beings do not live to witness death because the states of being alive or dead are mutually exclusive (Scarre, 2014). Hence, since they never physically or mentally experience it, the prospect of death should have no impact on people's lives. Making specific reference to bucket lists, Thurnell-Read (2017, p. 63) suggests in a similar vein that those compiling such lists do not concern themselves with life's transience; bucket lists are, he claims, 'shorn of any overt association with the finality of death and mortality that might urge us to reflect on the meaning and values of life' (Thurnell-Read, 2017, p. 63).

For others, on the other hand, life and death are inseparable; life can only proceed under the strict supervision of death (Kearl, 1990). Pessimistically, this may mean that, as claimed in the novel *White Noise*, 'Once your death is established, it becomes impossible to live a satisfying life' (DeLillo, 1985, p. 285) although more positively there is a more general consensus that, in Bauman's (2006, p. 32) words, 'remembering the imminence of death keeps the life of mortals on the right track – by endowing it with a purpose that makes every lived moment precious'. In other words, the awareness of death is a powerful influence on human behaviour (Vail et al., 2012); specifically, it encourages people to evaluate and direct their goals towards achieving a meaningful or fulfilling life or as Pratt et al. (2019, p. 4) argue, 'Existential philosophy considers death as one of the most important drivers for leading an authentic

life because without the fear of death, there would be less motivation to achieve something in life', not least through touristic activities. This suggests that not only the prospect of a more imminent death following diagnosis of a terminal illness but also a more general acceptance of mortality motivates people to establish a set of goals for a meaningful life. Moreover, the study of such goals 'is useful for understanding humans' relations with the future' (Kasser & Sheldon, 2004, p. 481), which then points to the question: to what extent might age influence the setting and nature of goals (and bucket lists)?

Death, age and the bucket list

Although there appears to be an intimate relationship between impending death and bucket lists – numerous accounts exist of people of all ages compiling them following a terminal diagnosis and, as already noted, research has revealed their value in palliative care (Portman et al., 2018) – they are popular amongst the wider population with, again, people of all ages having bucket lists. Nevertheless, Freund (2020) refers to what he terms the 'bucket list effect' whereby the goals may be postponed to later years in life; one reason that younger people might compile a bucket list is because it 'allows them to put off some of the nonessential fun goals they feel they cannot easily pursue during earlier phases of the life span to the time after retirement' (Freund, 2020, p. 501). Similarly, Armitage (2018, p. 281) concludes that 'the period of our lives reserved for our bucket list is, in fact, when we're least able to complete it'. Therefore, it is logical to speculate that people are more likely to have a bucket list as they become older, not only because they might have greater financial and temporal resources but, more significantly, because they sense the increasing proximity of death.

Certainly, it is recognised that attitudes towards death (of the self) differ between younger and older people. For instance, older people tend to be more religious and may hold stronger beliefs in an afterlife (Wong et al., 1994); they are also more likely to have witnessed death but, at the same time, to be more accepting of the certainty of death than younger people (Kalish & Reynolds, 1977). Indeed, particularly notable is that denial or fear of death is, most often, associated with younger people. In other words, although it might be presumed that as people age they become more anxious about death (Kastenbaum, 2004) or, alternatively stated, 'young adults feel that they have a long time in which to carry out all their projects and goals' (Abengozar et al., 1999), many argue that, paradoxically, younger (adult) age groups experience greater anxieties about death than older people (Cicirelli, 2001, 2003; Kalish & Reynolds, 1977). Hence, if bucket lists are indeed influenced by existential concerns, this might explain their prevalence amongst young adults; as is discussed shortly in the context of TMT, bucket lists may be a response to death anxiety or fear. Before doing so, however, it is useful for the purposes of this paper to dwell briefly on the role of bucket lists as a compilation of goals.

The bucket list and goals

A bucket list is, by definition, a set of goals; Periyakoil (2018) uses the terms interchangeably and it is acknowledged that bucket lists are a popular, effective and, importantly, visible means of establishing goals. Indeed, Hefferon and Boniwell (2011) observe that goals which are written down or discussed with others are more likely to be accomplished than those which remain undocumented and, hence, a written bucket list is arguably a commitment to the goals identified. However, the significance of goal setting in the context of bucket lists is typically overlooked in the relevant literature.

When conceptualising the bucket list, it is pertinent to ask why people compile such a list of goals. According to Emmons (2003), goals orient people towards a meaningful existence whilst, more specifically, the establishment and achievement of goals may contribute to identity creation (Moskowitz & Grant, 2009; Thurnell-Read, 2017). Of course, not all goals are meaningful; some may be trivial or shallow and, though contributing to daily life, may lack the capacity to render life more meaningful. Nevertheless, Emmons (2003, p. 107) emphasises that, generally, 'Goals are essential components of a person's experience of his or her life as meaningful and contribute to the process by which people construe their lives as meaningful or worthwhile'. Moreover, observing that goals provide a useful metric for examining the positive trajectories without which life would lack purpose and structure, he proposes that achieving them is 'a major benchmark for the experience of well-being' and happiness (Emmons, 2003, p. 106).

Equally, happiness and well-being may be the outcome of not only goal achievement but also of progression towards a goal. Committing to goals is an adaptive coping mechanism, valuable at times of uncertainty and adversity (Cantor & Sanderson, 1999) – including death anxieties – whilst Hefferon and Boniwell (2011) observe that goals add meaning to life and help maintain a dialogue with time. Consequently, it has been found that people who pursue goals are significantly happier than those who do not (Hefferon & Boniwell,

2011). Hence, both the compilation of a bucket list as a particular set of goals and also its eventual completion – if indeed they are completed because, implicitly, to do so is to contradict their purpose for contentment in life may equate to accepting death (Wong, 2010) – may be seen, consciously or otherwise, as both a path towards a meaningful life and a means of confronting or responding to a fear of death. The purpose of this paper is, as established in the introduction, to explore the extent to which this case and to do so, the next section turns to a discussion of TMT as a framework for the subsequent research.

Terror management theory

In his seminal book, *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker (1973) argues that human beings are uniquely aware of their existence and ultimate demise; moreover, such an awareness results in a terror of death which, in turn, stimulates the need to deny it, to develop mechanisms to manage existential fears that would otherwise lead to living in a continual state of terror (Biran & Buda, 2018). Terror management theory (TMT), initially developed in the early 1980s (Goldenberg et al., 2000; Solomon et al., 2004), seeks to formalise Becker's ideas and has since attracted significant academic attention, with numerous studies testing his hypotheses (Burke et al., 2010).

The fundamental premise of TMT is that, in order 'to make life with the awareness of mortality liveable' (Bauman, 2006, p. 31), people and societies create cultural belief systems to manage their anxiety of death. Such systems or shared cultural worldviews, offer an existential narrative that enables people to buffer their existential fears. More specifically, TMT proposes that cultural belief systems offer an appealing prospect of immortality (Lifshin et al., 2017, p. 81), such immortality being either literal or symbolic (Wisman & Heflik, 2016). 'Typically linked to the culture's religious beliefs, literal immortality is the belief that life extends beyond the physical world into some form of afterlife, such as heaven, reincarnation or nirvana' (Yetzer et al., 2018, 244). Conversely, symbolic immortality is the hope that, following physical death, people will live on, that 'some symbolic vestige of the self will persist in perpetuity' (Solomon et al., 2015, p. 84) either in the hearts and minds of those left behind or in some more tangible form, whether children, a work of art or some other lasting legacy.

Importantly, adherence to a particular cultural world view may be insufficient to keep existential anxieties at bay; hence, of equal significance to TMT is the need to maintain a sense of self-esteem or 'the feeling that one is a valuable participant in a meaningful universe' (Solomon et al., 2015, p. 39). This might be achieved through recognition of being a contributor to a cultural narrative – that is, functioning effectively as a member of a particular 'cultural or social system' (Biran & Buda, 2018, p. 521) – or through more specific behaviours. When such self-esteem is threatened by, for example, fateful moments (Giddens, 1991) which diminish an individual's confidence in their cultural worldview or, in particular, so-called mortality salience or reminders of death of the self or others, people are likely to reinforce their cultural worldview (Vail et al., 2012) or engage in behaviours that rebuild self-esteem (Solomon et al., 2015).

As noted above, TMT has been both widely tested (Burke et al., 2010). It has also been applied in a variety of contexts, although only recently and to a limited extent within tourism research in particular. For example, Nanni and Ulqinaku (2020) explore how virtual tours may alleviate mortality threats, while Kwak and Hong (2017) explore how TMT affects travel intentions. Unsurprisingly, it is most commonly applied in the context of dark tourism (Iliev, 2020; Oren et al., 2019), with research commonly concluding that a visit to a dark tourism site evokes a sense of mortality salience. Additionally, Biran and Buda (2018, p. 526) examine TMT within dark tourism as 'meaningful entertainment', calling for more research into other forms of tourism within the TMT framework.

In a sense, this paper responds to this call, applying TMT to a 'traditional' tourism context as the majority of bucket list experiences are tourism-related. More generally, the bucket list may be considered to be one form of the cultural narrative that has evolved to manage existential anxieties or the terror of death. As Ritzema (2013) suggests, 'Checking off items on a bucket list seems to be a modern version of the denial of death that Ernest Becker thought was so central to human motivation'; it might contribute, as Thurnell-Read (2017) suggests, to identity creation, self-esteem and, perhaps some form of symbolic immortality or legacy or, more simply, a means of denying death by keeping busy until the end (Jones, 2020). Equally, the bucket list can be considered a response to fateful moments or mortality salience – numerous documented examples exist of people compiling bucket lists at times of personal crisis – or challenges to a cultural system such as the declining relevance of religion and consequential sequestration of death in contemporary societies (Stone & Sharpley, 2008).

Therefore, it is speculated that bucket lists are a response to death in the form of denial. Different defence mechanisms accompany the thought of impending death (Strachan et al., 2001). In particular,

even the refusal to write down a bucket list may be interpreted as a proximal defence, whereby some may not wish to concern themselves with such a macabre term which only confirms life's finality. In other words, proximal defences are instant reactions to exposure to death. As Strachan et al. (2001) illustrate, a person may quickly flip through the gruesome pages of a newspaper in order to focus on more mundane news. In contrast, choosing to write a bucket list may be a distal defence against thoughts of death, a defence which utilises a cultural worldview by making the individual think that they are a valuable contributor to the cultural narrative to which they subscribe (Strachan et al., 2001). For instance, an individual may experience a sense of contentment by reminding themself that they are a recognised author, a loving parent or an adventurer who ticks off the most socially desired experiences. By acknowledging their successes (for example, through a means of ticking the bucket list), individuals can keep death thoughts at bay. Moreover, by creating a list of experiences to tick off, people negotiate their life expectancy; someone who compiles a bucket list of 20 items does so in expectation of living long enough to experience them. Either way, TMT offers a valid conceptual framework for the empirical research, which sought to explore the significance of the bucket list and its evident relationship with existential anxieties.

Methodology

As noted in the introduction, this paper draws on an exploratory survey into respondents' perceptions and understanding of the concept of the bucket list and, indeed, the content and purpose of their own list should they have compiled one. The survey took the form of a self-completion questionnaire which primarily comprised a series of 5-point Likert scale statements informed by the key themes identified in the literature review. However, it also included a number of descriptive/categorisation questions as well as specific questions regarding the actual or imagined content of bucket lists. For the latter, in addition to listing their personal goals, respondents were asked to rank in order of preference 15 activities compiled by the authors that summarised the most popular bucket list goals to be found on bucketlist.net, an online community for bucket-listers (see Table 1). The questionnaire was initially piloted, as a result of which some statements were reworded for clarity. Utilising Qualtrix software, it was subsequently administered online during the latter months of 2020 (the only viable method given the prevailing pandemic-related restrictions). It was distributed by the first author via social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter and Reddit), a convenience form of sampling which, as noted in the following section, reflected the membership of social groups that participated and hence inevitably influenced the composition of the sample. Specifically, younger age groups were more likely to respond. In addition, data analysis was limited to frequency and, where relevant, correlations between selected variables based on Spearman's rho, a test considered most suitable to Likert scale data (Bernard, 2000). Nevertheless, the survey method was considered appropriate to the exploratory aims of the research. Ethical approval was gained by the University of Central Lancashire Ethics Committee and all participants were asked to accept the consent to participate and were able to withdraw at any point. A total of 200 completed questionnaires were generated.

Table 1. Ratings of bucket list activities (1–15).

Activity	Average rating
Travel the world	4.06
Learn a different language	5.03
Fall in love	7.02
Throw a dart at a map and go wherever it lands	7.38
Climb a mountain	7.39
Learn to play a music instrument	7.48
Donate a sum of money to a charity	7.99
Ride in a hot air balloon	8.01
Publish a book	8.09
Swim with dolphins	8.21
Plant a tree	9.00
Donate blood	9.02
Win a lottery jackpot	9.07
Run a marathon	9.46
Become famous	12.03

Research outcomes

The respondents were distributed by age as follows: 73 (36.5%) were in 18–30 age group, 61 (30.5%) in the 31–45 age group and 55 (27.5%) in the 46–60 group. Just 11 respondents (5.5%) were 61 or older. The small number of respondents in the 61+ age group is acknowledged as a limitation; however, the age distribution reflects the social circle within which the research was conducted. All respondents lived in the UK and tended to travel 2–3 times a year (45.5%); none reported that they had never travelled. The correlations between age and various aspects of the bucket list are discussed shortly but, first, the survey addressed three overarching issues: (i) did respondents have/plan to have a bucket list? (ii) what is/would be on that list? and (iii) how did they broadly understand the bucket list concept?

Overall, 104 (52%) of respondents claimed to possess a bucket list in one form or another although, of particular note, more than half of these (68) indicated that they did not have a formal, written bucket list; rather, it was a

more abstract mental list, challenging the notion that a bucket list is a physical entity. Moreover, the 22% of respondents who reportedly did not have a bucket list nevertheless stated that they had an idea of what would be included if they had one. This immediately suggests that although most, if not all people, have longer term goals and aspirations, the possession of a bucket list (tangible or otherwise) may indicate an intent to pursue them; that is, a bucket list may signify not a list of goals, but the desire or determination to achieve them.

As for those goals, the questionnaire generated two data sets that highlighted the most popular items included in bucket lists. On the one hand, as explained above, respondents were asked to rank in order of preference 15 typical bucket list activities; on the other hand, they were also asked simply to state five bucket list goals that they wished to pursue. The latter generated around 1000 statements which were analysed by content. Content analysis refers to a 'systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics' (Neuendorf, 2017, p. 1) and is a commonly utilised research method within the social sciences (Camprubí & Coromina, 2016). Here, it was employed by using the Text IQ feature of the Qualtrics software. The data were scrutinised, clear themes (codes) of bucket list goal orientations were identified and, consequently, the words employed by respondents were grouped into categories of goal orientations such as 'tourism', 'wealth' or 'mastering a skill'. The most popular was again, perhaps unsurprisingly, tourism, with 26.4% of statements categorised as such. An illustration of participants' inputted data is provided in the word cloud in Figure 1. As can be seen, the word 'travel' is the most prominent, followed by 'world' and 'visit'.

It should be noted that only goals that referred explicitly to travel or particular destinations were included in this category; other goals which implicitly involved travel to facilitate their achievement (e.g. 'seeing wolves in the wild') were not. Hence, tourism-related goals were more numerous than directly suggested which, along with 'Travel the world' having the highest average ranking (4.06) of the 15 bucket list items, confirms the dominance of tourism in bucket list goals referred to earlier in this paper.

With regards to their broad understanding of the bucket list concept, specifically its relationship to death and dying (or life and living), respondents were required to indicate the extent to which they agreed/disagreed with four statements addressing this issue in the questionnaire. As can be seen from Table 2, although semantically distinct, respondents agreed/strongly agreed in almost equal measure with the statements that a bucket list is a list of things to do 'in my lifetime' and 'before I die', pointing to some ambivalence in attitudes. In contrast, whilst 63.5% agreed that bucket lists can be associated with 'you only live once', just 27% agreed that they can be associated with *memento mori*. In other words, an initial outcome of the research is that the bucket list may not be an explicit response to existential anxieties but, rather, a manifestation of a desire to simply live life to the full. This does not, however, reveal the potentially varying significance of the bucket list, particularly amongst people of different age groups, whilst as suggested in the literature

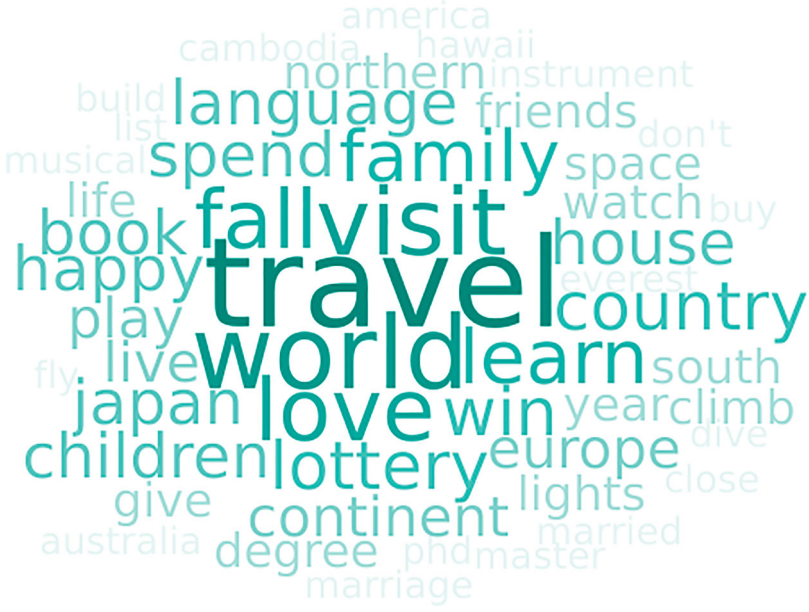

Figure 1. Word cloud of participants' bucket list items.

Table 2. Perceptions of the meaning of the bucket list (% of respondents).

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
A bucket list is a list of things that I want to do in my lifetime	0.5	1.0	2.5	15.0	81.0
A bucket list involves things that I would like to do before I die	1.0	0.5	4.5	14.5	79.5
My bucket list can be associated with the phrase 'you only live once'	7.0	10.5	19.0	42.0	21.5
My bucket list can be associated with the phrase 'Memento Mori' or 'Remember that you must die'	15.5	20.5	36.0	17.0	11.0

Table 3. Death and the bucket list (% of respondents).

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I have no fear of death as such	16.0	23.0	22.0	19.5	19.5
My bucket list does not reflect the worry about dying	5.0	8.0	29.5	27.5	30.0
I fear dying having not completed everything from my bucket list	38.0	26.5	18.5	12.0	5.0
If I was to have a terminal disease, completing meaningful activities would be necessity for me	8.0	11.5	21.5	31.0	28.0
A bucket list can, in a way, be a part of my legacy	17.0	19.5	24.5	21.5	17.5
I want to always be remembered by things that I have achieved	15.0	20.0	28.0	21.5	15.5

review, reasons for compiling a list may also vary. Hence, the questionnaire went on to explore a number of specific themes emerging from the literature review, as discussed in the following sections.

Bucket lists and death

As many suggest, there appears to exist an intimate relationship between death and the bucket list, not least in the term itself but also in the frequent association between the certainty of death and the compilation of such lists (Chu et al., 2018; Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011). More specifically, according to the tenets of TMT, the bucket list maybe a contemporary means of managing existential anxieties, of denying death (Ritzema, 2013). Hence, the questionnaire sought to explore this relationship through responses to six statements (see Table 3).

Interestingly, attitudes towards the statement 'I have no fear of death as such' were ambivalent, an equal proportion of respondents agreeing or disagreeing. To an extent, this outcome reflects previous research; Kastenbaum (2004), for example, notes that, in one study, three out of four people claimed to have no fear of death. However, he goes on to suggest that 'most people are in the habit of suppressing their anxieties, trying to convince themselves and others that death holds no terror' (Kastenbaum, 2004, p. 32). In other words, denying fear of death is one mechanism by which people manage or suppress existential fears. It is, therefore, unsurprising that just 13% of respondents disagreed that a bucket list does not reflect a worry about dying, an outcome which, on the one hand, might point to a fear of death not being a catalyst for compiling a bucket list, a point perhaps supported by just 17% of respondents agreeing that they feared dying before completing their bucket list. On the other hand, it might be a manifestation, even within the bucket list context, of death denial; as Wong et al. (1994, p. 122) argue, 'It is commonly believed that fear of death is universal and that its absence may reflect denial of death'. Equally, death (in the practical sense of the end of life) might be a temporal as opposed to an emotional (fear) driver for compiling a bucket list.

Notably, however, there was 38% agreement with the statement: 'A bucket list can, in a way, be a part of my legacy' and 37% agreement with 'I want to always be remembered by things that I have achieved'. Hence, a more nuanced association between death and the bucket list is revealed for, as discussed earlier, the desire for symbolic immortality, for being remembered through some form of tangible or intangible legacy, is fundamental to TMT (Solomon et al., 2015). It might be assumed that such a desire to leave a legacy might be more prevalent amongst older people; indeed, Thurnher (1974) has argued this to be the case. Curiously, then, not only was there a significant correlation in evidence between age and the 'legacy' statements in Table 4 but also for both statements that correlation was found to be negative; that is, younger age groups are

Table 4. Correlations of age and death variables.

Statement	'P' value	'r_s' value
A bucket list can, in a way, be a part of my legacy	0.000	−0.273
I want to always be remembered by things that I have achieved	0.000	−0.247

more likely to view bucket lists as contributing to their legacy or to how they would like to be remembered.

Also fundamental to TMT is the notion that adherence to a particular cultural worldview may offer protection from existential fears (Lifshin et al., 2017) but also that the need exists for people to maintain or enhance their self-esteem – to have a meaningful existence – when, for example, they lose confidence in that cultural worldview or they experience mortality salience or, perhaps, fateful moments (Vail et al., 2012). In this context, it is interesting to note that tourism (or the consumption of touristic experiences) has long been considered one such means of achieving meaning, that with the declining significance of a religious cultural worldview tourism has taken on the mantle of a secular sacred journey (Graburn, 1989; Sharpley, 2009). A discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper but, given the prevalence of tourism-related goals on buckets lists, it can be logically proposed that a bucket list (including non-tourism-related goals), irrespective of whether it is motivated by a conscious fear of death, maybe one means of building self-esteem or achieving a meaningful life through the consumption of experiences. Hence, the questionnaire sought to elicit respondents' attitudes towards bucket lists being a contemporary form of consumption in general before going on to explore in particular the extent to which they contribute to meaning-making, self-esteem and identity.

Bucket lists and consumption

By their very nature, bucket lists are a collection of experiences, the acquisition of which requires at least some economic input. Specifically, in order to complete a bucket list, sufficient disposable income is required, estimated by Hughes (2018) to be on average up to £428,000. In other words, following bucket list goal is a form of consumption; it cannot be divorced from the economic cost of doing so. Hence, the questionnaire addressed a number of issues relevant to bucket lists being, in essence, a type of 'shopping list'.

There is evidence from online communities such as bucketlist.net that many of those with bucket lists like to publicise them. Hence, an immediate question to arise is: is the bucket list a form of conspicuous consumption? As can be seen from Table 5, respondents did not perceive (or admit to perceiving) as such, with 65.5% disagreeing with the statement 'I think that a bucket list is about showing off your economic and social status'. Some caution is necessary here, however; as discussed shortly, a substantial proportion of respondents were positively disposed to sharing their bucket lists in one way or another. In a similar vein, 43.5% disagreed that the bucket list, in a sense, legitimises potentially lavish spending on a holiday, although the 'normal' consumption of holidays might be considered distinct from tourism-related goals and ambitions. The notion of conspicuous consumption is, however, not unfamiliar to the phenomenon of bucket lists. Just like eco-holidays are promoted on their appeal of being a 'better' form of tourism (Sharpley, 2011, p. 293), tourists pursuing a bucket list expected to travel further and spend more on the basis that bucket lists consist of once-in-a-lifetime experiences. In particular, experiential purchases from the bucket list can contribute to the construction of the self (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003); by sharing their publicised bucket list experiences online, individuals not only create the 'digital self' (Gammon, 2014, p. 252) but also signal their desired lifestyles to others. As Stonham (2019) comments on the relation between public bucket lists and forged identity: 'It's as though

Table 5. Consumption and the bucket list (% of respondents).

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I think that a bucket list is about showing off your economic and social status	39.0	26.5	17.5	11.0	6.0
Having a bucket list makes me feel less guilty about spending money or needing a holiday.	18.0	25.5	36.0	13.0	7.5
I am afraid of missing out on meaningful experiences that life can offer me	9.5	12.0	17.0	37.5	24.0
If things from my bucket list did not cost as much, I would have already completed them	6.0	19.5	17.0	28.0	29.5
A bucket list could help me remember things that I want to do	5.0	8.5	12.5	37.0	37.0

we are all waiting to be told where to go to have a good time and to be seen to be 'on-trend' and to address our 'Fear of Missing Out'.

Conversely, a majority of respondents (61.5%) were in agreement with the statement 'I am afraid of missing out on meaningful experiences that life can offer me'. Fear of missing out (FOMO) is a socially and commercially constructed phenomenon, particularly favoured by tourism marketers (Hodkinson, 2019), which is defined as 'the uneasy and sometimes all-consuming feeling that you're missing out' (Jones, 2020, p. 150) and, importantly, also the feeling that others are not missing out. In other words, FOMO is defined in terms of what others are doing or not doing. Moreover, according to Morris (2019, p. 2) 'Bucket lists, faultless Instagram fodder and footless, fancy-free millennials fuel FOMO'. Hence, this research suggests that the bucket list is a consumerist response to the FOMO message; further analysis revealed a positive correlation with the question: Do you have a bucket list? and a negative correlation with age – that is, younger people appear more susceptible to FOMO. Nevertheless, positive correlations were also identified with two statements in Table 3 related to death and the bucket list, specifically those referring to terminal illness and dying prior to completing a bucket list (see Table 6). In other words, a more subtle interpretation is that FOMO is a means of addressing existential anxieties.

Given the potential financial costs incurred in undertaking bucket list goals, it was logical to ascertain whether the extent and completion of a bucket list is determined by an individual's financial resources. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a majority (57.5%) indicated that this was indeed the case, that a lack of money impeded the completion of a bucket list; it should be also noted that, elsewhere in the questionnaire, 54% of respondents agreed that their bucket was without end (i.e. the list is dynamic, with new items being added over time). The implication is that, with sufficient financial resources, a bucket list might never be completed. Also unsurprisingly, a significant negative correlation was identified between the statement: 'If things from my bucket list did not cost as much, I would have already completed them' and age; younger respondents were more concerned about their ability to afford all the experiences on their lists. They were also more likely than older people to see a bucket list as an *aide memoire* or as a shopping list of 'things that I want to do', suggesting that younger people's lists may be more comprehensive but also giving credence to Freund's (2020) concept of the bucket list affect referred to earlier.

Table 6. Correlations for FOMO and death.

Statement (against I am afraid of missing out on meaningful experiences that life can offer me)	'*P*' value	'r_s' value
If I was to have a terminal disease, completing meaningful activities would be necessary for me	0.000	0.402
I fear dying having not completed everything from my bucket list	0.000	0.338

Bucket lists, self-esteem and identity

As indicated in the preceding section, bucket lists can be seen as a manifestation of contemporary consumption or, at least, a means of organising future consumption. Therefore, following the widely-recognised symbolic nature of (post)modern consumption and its relationship with identity creation (Sassatelli, 2007), the questionnaire sought finally to establish whether bucket lists are compiled as a basis for establishing an individual's identity or, from a TMT perspective, self-esteem. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they disagreed/agreed with six statements (Table 7).

Table 7. Bucket lists, self-esteem and identity (% of respondents).

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I think that my bucket list could tell others a lot about me	2.5	8.5	19.5	42.0	27.5
My life ambitions are on my bucket list	12.5	16.0	26.5	27.5	17.5
I like to share my bucket list activities with my friends and family	7.0	20.5	25.0	30.0	17.5
I enjoy sharing my unique experiences through social media.	28.0	17.0	18.5	27.0	9.5
I would be unhappy if someone saw my bucket list as distasteful.	27.0	15.0	32.0	17.0	9.0
I would never engage in socially frowned upon activities, no matter how much I would like to experience them.	17.0	19.5	24.5	21.5	17.5

In previous research, it has been established conceptually that bucket lists comprise a list of 'good' (tourism) experiences, facilitating 'the pursuit of meaningful experiences as the necessary imperative of individuals seeking reassurance that they are valued as a person and that their life, as they are choosing to live it, is one they and others see to be 'well lived'' (Thurnell-Read, 2017, p. 65). To some extent, this is confirmed by this research. The majority of respondents (69.5%) agreed with the statement: 'I think that my bucket list could tell others a lot about me', though fewer agreed that the bucket list revealed their life ambitions, pointing to questions surrounding the significance of particular goals listed. Moreover, sharing (communicating) bucket list activities with family and friends were revealed to be important for almost (47.5%) of respondents. However, respondents had less appetite for sharing their experiences through social media whilst not only did just 26% indicate they 'would be unhappy if someone saw my bucket list as distasteful' but also 36.5% disagreed with the statement: 'I would never engage in socially frowned upon activities, no matter how much I would like to experience them'. In other words, contrary to Thurnell-Read's (2017) assertion that bucket lists are defined by culturally proscribed 'good' activities, this research suggests that people seek identity and self-esteem by appearing individualistic.

Importantly, significant positive correlations were identified between 'I enjoy sharing my unique experiences through social media' and two statements focusing on travel and tourism experiences within bucket lists, namely: 'Travel contributes to the majority of things on my bucket list' and 'A bucket list is a product of my wanderlust'. This suggests that, given the predominance of tourism-related goals, bucket lists may indeed be a vehicle of identity creation, reflecting tourism's similar role (Bond & Falk, 2013). However, it also questions the extent to which non-tourism activities might be motivated by the need for identity or self-esteem. And importantly, there were positive correlations between 'I think that my bucket list could tell others a lot about me' and the two statements: 'A bucket list can, in a way, be a part of my legacy' and 'I want to always be remembered by things that I have achieved' (Table 8). Hence, a bucket list may not only serve as an anticipated autobiography of an individual's life but also, as Kearl and Jacobsen (2016, p. 74) put it, 'With fully checked-off bucket lists, we have a tangible measure of completeness to share at funerals'. That is, a completed bucket list may create or maintain identity following death or, more precisely, symbolic immortality as proposed by TMT.

Table 8. Correlations for identity and legacy.

Statement (against I think that my bucket list could tell others a lot about me).	'*P*' value	'r_s' value
A bucket list can, in a way, be a part of my legacy	0.000	0.273
I want to always be remembered by things that I have achieved	0.001	0.221

Conclusion

As noted in the introduction to this paper, the origins of the concept of the bucket list lie in the 2007 movie of the same name, as a consequence of which it initially became associated with impending death. In other words, in both the movie and subsequently in reality, the bucket list was seen principally as a list of things (typically tourism-related) that people, having received a terminal diagnosis, wish to achieve before they die. Rapidly, however, the practice of compiling a bucket list became more widely adopted; hence, the question addressed in this exploratory study: what is the significance of the bucket list or, more precisely, is the bucket list – as the term suggests – primarily influenced by a concern with death or is it more about life and living?

A number of implications can be drawn from the outcome of this study, summarised in Figure 2, that not only contribute to the, to date, limited understanding of the significance of the bucket list but also point to potential future research. First, the popularity of the bucket list as indicated by a number of surveys is confirmed by this research although, importantly, it was found that for many respondents the bucket was a mental construct as opposed to a physical written list. This arguably suggests that the bucket list has become culturally symbolic, a widely accepted form of 'shopping list' of desired experiences that people, irrespective of their life-stage, wish to achieve. How this list and the significance of goals (touristic or otherwise) within it might vary according to age and other personal circumstances might be the focus of further research but the point is that the bucket list has become culturally embedded (at least within the UK as the context for this research) as a means of identifying and perhaps prioritising goals.

From this perspective, the bucket list can be considered to have evolved into a cultural narrative or worldview that, as suggested in the literature review, people resort to as a means of managing existential anxieties; that is, a relationship between the bucket lists and death and dying might be apparent. The second implication to be drawn from this research, however, is that this is not necessarily case. That is, although the majority of respondents agreed that bucket lists comprise things they wished to do during their lifetime or before they die, the emphasis was on temporal restrictions (i.e. lifespan) rather than on a recognised fear of death. Hence,

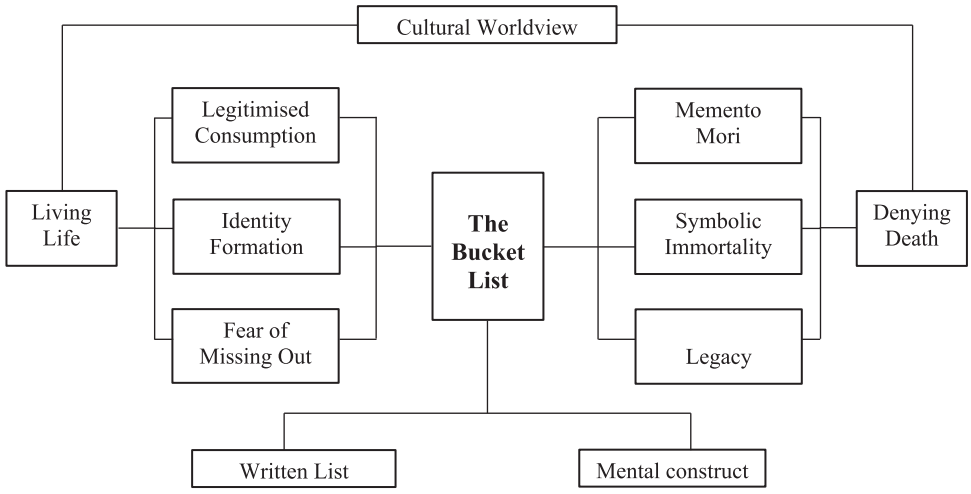

Figure 2. Significance of the bucket list.

although as some suggest, denying death or, as in this research, denying an association between the bucket list and anxiety about death, is one means of suppressing such anxieties, it may be speculated that compiling a bucket list is in all likelihood a subconscious response to *memento mori*. Again, this is an issue that warrants further, more in-depth investigation, not least because this research also revealed that a majority of respondents considered the achievement of bucket list goals as contributing to their legacy/memory or, in terror management terms, symbolic immortality.

And third, this research has clearly identified the bucket list as a manifestation of contemporary consumer culture, not only insofar as it is a means of organising the consumption of experiences that is evidently financial resource-dependent but also such consumption is directed towards the creation or self of identity and self-esteem. Despite the propensity for people to publicise their bucket lists as demonstrated by numerous personal accounts and relevant online communities, this research suggests that bucket lists or, more specifically, the achievement of goals within such lists, are not considered to be a form of conspicuous consumption; notably, publicising bucket list experiences on social media was generally found to relatively uncommon amongst respondents. Rather, a bucket list was seen by respondents as communicating a lot about them to others and, in particular, defining their individuality. Nevertheless, further analysis revealed a strong positive correlation between tourism as the predominant category of bucket list goals and the online sharing of such experiences. This is not surprising; photographing, documenting and online sharing is a recognised aspect of contemporary performative tourist experiences (Haldrup & Larsen, 2010). This suggests that some categories of bucket list activities, such as tourism, may be more prone to online sharing than others and points to the need for further research into the significance of specific types of goals and the reasons for the inclusion in bucket lists and, in particular, why such an intimate relationship appears to exist between tourism and bucket lists in the context of identity creation and, indeed, as potential means of managing existential anxieties.

In conclusion, it must be acknowledged that, as an exploratory study that is relatively limited in both scope and scale, the outcomes of this study cannot be considered by any means definitive. Nevertheless, not only does it begin to unpick a widely-recognised but arguably poorly understood contemporary phenomenon – the bucket list – exploring in particular simplistic assumptions about its relationship with death and dying. It also highlights the need for further research into what has evolved into a pervasive cultural practice predominantly related to the consumption of tourism.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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