

The Semiotics of Food and Intentional Exercise in Performing Masculinity: Diabetesity¹ in the Seychelles

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Obesity² and diabetes³ are seen as two of the greatest health difficulties the global community is facing this century (Magliano 2015, WOF, 2015). There are currently more people in the world experiencing overweight and obesity than hunger (Brewis, 2011); and more people dying from conditions related to excessive fat than underweight (Mattei et al., 2012). Rates of both diseases are increasing throughout the world; however, the fastest changes are occurring in developing nations. It is commonly believed a phenomena known as the 'nutrition transition'⁴ (Popkin et al., 2011), fosters the development of obesity and diabetes in all industrializing (transitioning) nations. Undeniably, both diseases are economically costly to individuals and communities⁵, thus health bodies and governments feel it is in their interest to prevent them. Globally, interventions however, have shown marginal success in controlling the escalating rates of these diseases (Warin et al., 2008, Brewis, 2011).

A noticeable inequality of obesity and diabetes is the prevalence rate and interventions among genders⁶ (Popkin et al., 2011, Hansford, 2010). According to Brewis (2011), health promotion campaigns show the greatest effect on women, and because of this, women become a targeted group⁷. Additionally most academic studies on food, body weight and the like focus on women (Warin et al., 2008, Popkin et al., 2011, Nash and Phillipov, 2014).

This beckons the question: *Where are men situated in these diseases, public health discourses, and interventions?*

In my view, these public health interventions, although scientifically sound, are incomplete. Medicalizing obesity, food, and health generally ignores culturally specific and individual ways of being in the world. Obesity and diabetes are felt in the social and cultural realm as they are mediated and experienced through the body. Through my research, I am pursuing diabetesity through a cultural framework; informed from my observations working in public health in Australia. Specifically, I am exploring the semiotic meanings of the desired behaviour changes for obesity and diabetes prevention and management in a rapidly developing and expanding society; Seychelles.

Seychelles⁸ hosts the second highest rates of obesity in the African continent after Egypt (WHO, 2006). By gender, Seychelles has the second highest rates of obesity in men, and the fourth highest rate in women in the African region (WOF, 2015). Furthermore,

diabetes is known to be more prevalent among Africa's island nations, with Seychelles in the lead⁹.

As women are highly focused on within health, body image, and food research, this inquiry will aim to locate men within the landscape of semiotic food and physical activity, in relation to obesity and diabetes. Through this investigation, I will aim to find how food and intentional exercise construct social capital and masculine identity among Seychellois men, and the importance these symbols hold within their communities. I will then contrast this to medicalized ways of eating and intentional exercise promoted by public health organisations as well as current public health messaging¹⁰ in Seychelles. In doing this I hope to find the difference in social value between these two ways of being, which may help to explain choice and non-compliance to medicalization of lifestyle, and may aid future public health messaging and interventions.

Few studies have been conducted on obesity, diabetes and males in Seychelles. Both Alwan et al., (2011) and Wilson et al., (2013) suggest that such work is needed to fill this gap in research.

Research approach and methods

My research takes a grounded theory approach, which is an important aspect of this project, as it aims to explore perceptions of local people, specifically men (Hansen, 2006). This approach will help to alleviate some of the barriers of power and difference between researcher (Caucasian female) and research participants (Seychellois men). This research was conducted in stages; allowing each stage to identify concepts and theoretical connections, and inform and direct the next. This has enabled the project to follow a natural direction, allowing for the unexpected. The first phase consisted of spatial mapping of food and physical activity sites around Victoria. Once this was complete, optimal sites for physical activity and eating among men were selected (see Appendix 1). Multiple observations were then conducted at different times and days to examine the performance of masculinity in public spaces in relation to food and physical activity.

The second phase included a variety of interviews including life history, semi-structured and photo elicitation¹¹. All of which performed different functions allowing me to explore changes in food and physical activity over long periods of time, collect perceptions and opinions of masculinity and status, as well as learn about the meanings of behaviour patterns that I had noticed in the first phase. In the second phase, I conducted sixteen interviews with eighteen participants, who were recruited from my social network using a snowballing method. Participants ranged in occupation¹², were aged between twenty-four and sixty-four, and consisted of twelve men and six women. Two of the interviews were with professional researchers and academics regarding the

history and culture of Seychelles. Additionally, I was unexpectedly invited into a local high school to conduct a group interview among male students; regarding their perception of masculinity.¹³

These two phases allowed the gathering of a baseline for common masculine behaviour and perceived identity, as well as local ideas of status mobility and attainment. The third and final phase, which is currently active and incomplete, aims to establish the identity of those with a medicalized lifestyle¹⁴ as a result of clinically diagnosed obesity, diabetes or similar condition. I will then compare this medicalized lifestyle to the food and physical activity used to perform masculinity and elevate status through means of social capital.

Inclusion criteria for research participants:

- ♦ Aged older than eighteen (with the exception of the school group)
- ♦ Resident of Seychelles or identify as Seychellois
- ♦ Speak, and in some cases write in English.

Data collection has been kept in accordance with the standards of the University of Amsterdam.

Findings to date

The last major anthropological work conducted in Seychelles was produced by Benedict and Benedict in 1975 titled *Men, Women and Money in the Seychelles*. This ethnography detailed the entitled position of men as wage earners who worked mostly in labouring positions. Women, on the other hand, were reportedly left at home to rear children and often rely on men for money. Benedict and Benedict described men of this era to be drunkards and womanisers, often leaving their wives and children to fend for themselves. Since the publication of this ethnography, not much work has been done to document the change in Seychelles (pers. com. Mathiot, 20th June 2017).

Upon my arrival in Seychelles, I was immediately struck by my own observations of the large number of women in not just employment, but in powerful and typically male dominated professions such as traffic wardens, security guards and police. I was also bombarded with the proud speech of the Seychellois, ensuring I was aware that women had really forged ahead in this country, undertaking professions such as aeroplane pilots, magistrates and ministers, and furthermore enlightening me that girls are outperforming boys in school. It was to my surprise that women's roles had drastically changed since the 1975 ethnography, women appear to be now on top and in control. Historian and Researcher Tony Mathiot suggested that the shift in gendered employment began with the opening of the airport in the 1971:

It changed gradually, gradually and then overnight. And the men I can tell you were fishermen and labourers and we had construction going on... things suddenly changed because of the population suddenly increased as well. And young girls graduated, girls got scholarships... they can reach their certificate... And then gradually Seychellois women began to be employed.

(pers. com. Mathiot 20th June 17)

Thus, the situation and relationship between men, women and money has drastically changed in this short time period. Many women are now homeowners, full-time workers and child carers. Naturally, this has changed men's roles with women and their families.

Masculinity in Seychelles

To understand the identity of masculinity, I spoke to all research participants about their perception of this identity in Seychelles, specifically asking them to describe the characteristics and behaviours of masculine individuals. In all participants, masculinity was associated with men, and was described as the display of physical strength through either what I term: high or low performance¹⁵. The masculine body was described as one of action; which was recognised through physical prowess, sport or labouring.

Interestingly, high performance, consisting of sporting athleticism and the like only had premium in those thirty years and younger. This cohort, suggested that the physical display of a man's strength through high performance of the body is fundamental to his masculine identity. At a beach party, a twenty-seven year old Seychellois male, after undertaking and winning a series of running races told me: *'You must show that you are strong.'* (pers. com. H, 1st July 2017). R a twenty-four year old Seychellois male echoed this sentiment in an interview:

Yeah you should be [athletic], because if you are at home and there is a fire you have to be the masculine to protect your family, you have to be quick, you have to be strong. You know, you can't be all like big and fat and slow.

Although body image was not specifically mentioned as relevant to masculinity, most young participants mentioned the appearance of strength in some way. Looking 'built' or 'athletic' was frequently mentioned, but did not hold value in the pure sense of image, but was referenced as the visual element of a high performing masculine body. As R mentions above being 'big and fat and slow' hinders high performance and thus relates specifically to function. A high performing body was also essential in teenage years, and kudos was specifically given to young men who developed the image of strength through physically performing their athleticism in Freedom Square. A high performing body was important to teenage boys for the use of physical confrontations. Male students¹⁶ as well

as teachers reported that fights among teenage boys were a regular occurrence. The group of teenage boys strongly suggested that respect was a benefit of masculinity, which was achieved through fighting among other means, one boy suggested:

Sometimes it is hard to get respect... if you are alone, picture you are alone and there is a group of guys and someone challenges you... and if you don't face up to the challenge, they will see you as lesser than them.

(pers. com. Student C, 4th August 2017)

The physical body in teenage years is thus used to gain respect, establish rank in the social hierarchy as well as attract girls¹⁷. In all of the above cases the physical performance of the body, and the image reflecting the body's ability is paramount to performing masculinity and gaining social capital. This importance however appeared to become less in older age groups.

Masculinity in men above forty years of age, was described as caring for family through food and economic provision, labour and maintenance of the house. The importance of the physical body and strength was still present in older age groups; however, the form and type of performance changed. The main characteristic of strength, was shown through physical labour in the home and specifically carrying shopping bags¹⁸. Although still displaying strength, it is at a much lower level than physically fighting or participating in sports. This form of physical strength, which is induced by care, is rewarded with a role in the family. Thus it is clear that meaning and performance of masculinity changes over time, and the body is used as a tool to reap rewards given to masculinity; rewards that are specific to life stages.

Material performance of masculinity

The performance of masculinity also extends beyond the use of the physical body. As my study aims to understand how health behaviour changes intersect with masculinity; I asked all participants how food fits into the masculine image. Among men, the consumption and cooking of traditional Creole food and consumption of large amounts of chilli were referenced to masculinity. All men I interviewed said they had learnt to cook through observation in their family home¹⁹. Similarly, all men who had a male figure present were cooked for by this male at some stage in their life. H reported that he learnt to cook when he was thirteen when he provided meals for his family, he stated: '*I learnt because I am a man.*' (pers. com. H, 28th July 2017). JA a forty-two year old Creole man suggested that men have a significant role in the kitchen and often cook things that are rare or special (per. com. JA, 15th July 2017). The cooking of food, particularly special foods by men may show an element of control, leadership and expertise.

The consumption of chilli was also reportedly a masculine trait, which was referenced many times during interviews. It seems as though tolerating chilli in food is a way to show strength, and seems to be almost an expectation for men to tolerate it.

So I have noticed that in Seychelles, chilli or spicy food or whatever belongs to the men, and if he can't eat spicy food he is not a man... not being dominated by the chilli, that is masculinity where food is concerned in the Seychelles. Because if you hang around the takeaways, you will notice that when they buy their takeaways... men will always be asking for the chilli. Always!

(pers. com. Jeffrey, 14th July 2017)

Negative perception of masculinity

Masculinity as an identity also had a strong negative representation among all participants except for teenage boys. Participants informed me that masculinity in Seychelles is often associated with: unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, deserting families and womanising. This is an image that has extended from the past²⁰. Additionally, Penda Choppy, Director of the Creole Language and Culture Research Institute at the University of Seychelles (pers. com. 10th July 2017) suggested that this character is a product dating back to slavery, where male slaves were used as tools in the field and tools for procreation. This has traditionally giving men a more disengaged role in family life. This image was conscious in all participants I spoke to, and many of the men were saddened by this image and felt judged and trapped by its stigma. Many said that the self-destruction of men through alcohol and drugs was self-perpetuated by this stigma, feeling as though their role in the family and in the workforce has little value. G a Seychellois male explained his feelings toward the negative masculine Seychellois stereotype:

... the conception is that when we talk about all these problems Miss, its men because of the media and all these things that they portrayed all this time. Because of men... If you want to put media to put it like that, yes, and I think it is in an unfair way. I am not judging any other men. At times I feel uh, I feel hurt, like I take care of my family I don't violate my wife, um, I'm living with my granddaughter, in fact I love my whole family. But when I look at it, for a society to say that men are a problem it hurts me.

(pers. com. G, 21st July 2017)

Status

An important feature of my research is the use of social capital for the acquirement of higher social status. To understand this, I first needed to comprehend how social status is defined in Seychelles. Every participant provided the same answer: money and power.

The types of people that can display significant financial wealth and power were reportedly government officials and business people. Such a display of power and wealth is rewarded with honour and respectability in some fashion from the community surrounding the individual: equating to social capital. It was further noted that a person can move up in the social hierarchy by either achieving their own power and money through successful business or prominent employment positions. However if neither of these are obtainable, social connections are key. Despite this, social capital cannot be gained by connections alone, if a person appears to have an elevated status without achievement, they will not gain respectability from their community. Thus, a balance between achievement and connections is essential (pers. com. Mathiot, 8th August 2017).

Image was also presented as an essential component in elevating status. In an interview, two sisters echo Mathoit's sentiments with a stress on image. The women informed me that in addition to achievement a person must act and dress up to their elevated post to be accepted within this position. Thus, conveying status in Seychelles is a conscious act of habitus, image, social connections and achievement. A young male Seychellois business owner, who reported going to the most premium hotels and bars, presented an example of these attributes. His behaviour was carried out with the strategy of being seen in such locations, which results in him making the right connections as well as projecting a high-class image. All of which serves to elevate his social capital and thus status, and in turn his continued success in business.

Material performance

Material objects provide an important means to displaying status amongst the community. In interviews and conversations I had on the street; cars and houses were particularly important in showing social status. While having a casual chance conversation with a man named Norman in the middle of Victoria, he was sure to inform me that he had a large house with four bedrooms, sliding doors and air conditioning. As a foreigner, I found the need to detail the features of his home into a casual chance conversation with a stranger peculiar. However, it was not the first or last time this would happen; while conversing with men in town they told me of extensions being added to their house, their properties generally, and housing locations, with a sense of pride and necessity to share the information.

Cars also represent an important material item for semiotic status; I was struck by the number of people that spoke to me freely about the symbology of the car in status. Something again, as a foreigner, I was not expecting²¹. Cars seem especially important among men who, during my observations, were seen to be driving 9:1 in my selected observation sites²² in Victoria. In these sites, men were more likely to be driving all cars but particularly modified sports cars and utility vehicles. A married couple informed me, that a car itself is a tool that can produce social capital, as it creates a dependency from

others on the car owner (pers. com. B and J, 23rd July 2017). Furthermore, many participants told me that men are most likely to invest in a car than home; which is perhaps a way that men specifically elevate their social status.

Alcohol is the third item that comes up in many conversations for a variety of reasons, but always appears to relate specifically to social status and connections. It is clear that Seychelles has a prominent drinking culture among men and women, as well as across different strata of society. One research participant talked about going to an exclusive bar and ordering a bottle of liquor for himself, which in his story he immediately contrasts his behaviour to other men in the same location, who order only one beer for the duration of the night. In this point, the participant distinguishes himself from those around him through choice and quantity of alcoholic beverage. Thus, choice of alcohol, quantity and price point are all material symbols of status.

Upon speaking to many Seychellois and through my own observations, it seems a person can gain social capital at parties through displaying good quality alcohol to their guests liking, and in generous quantities. Imported alcohol seems to be a standard of high class, particularly with regard to whisky (pers. com. Mathiot, 8th August 2017). Conversely, some of the local alcohol is seen as cheap and strong and only drunk by people of lower socio-economic standing (pers. com. G, 21st July 2017). I myself experienced the class segregation in the consumption of specific alcohol. While on a social outing with a friend, he decided to stop and get some alcoholic drinks. As he was running low on cash in his possession, he purchased a vodka energy drink costing SCR25 with an ironic attitude. He was amused and particularly keen that I would try this particular kind of alcoholic beverage, which was something we had never drunk together before. Responding to his ironic attitude, I asked what type of person drinks this particular beverage, he retorted, *'have you ever seen me drinking this?'* as if to tell me that it is below his class to consume, which became more and more obvious. Before purchasing, he first informed me that he would not be able to purchase this at a particular shop we were passing, as he knew people there. Secondly, he was keen to pour the liquid into a glass in order to not be seen by others with the original bottle; both aspects seemed to be a source of embarrassment for him, and thus a commodity below his social standing.

Image and materiality are symbolic ways to display status, and it seems the idea of this is to project a class above one's own. This results in elevation of status but also the accumulation of social capital.

Implications for public health

It is natural for a person to want to perform a publically acceptable identity and to elevate their social class, as this results in more social benefits and assists wellbeing (Keating, 2000, Courtenay, 2000). The connections that I have been able to make in the

first two stages regarding the association between masculinity and the use and the symbolic meaning of the body, as well as the role of alcohol and the car in social class will all have implications for obesity and diabetes prevention. For example, promoting the use of public transport for incidental activity and better environmental health, disregards the social capital and status that can be gained through use and ownership of a car. Although increased incidental physical activity will have benefits for individuals and the environment, a person's social wellbeing will not be served by such actions. Thus social wellbeing produces more instant gratification, and its benefits outweigh health in the short term. Similarly, the meaning and use of the masculine body is unable to be targeted by one health message, as it has vastly different values throughout age groups. The lack of importance of the physical imagery of the body, will also present a challenge to traditional obesity prevention messages, which often stigmatise the image and concept of fat.

Research progress to date

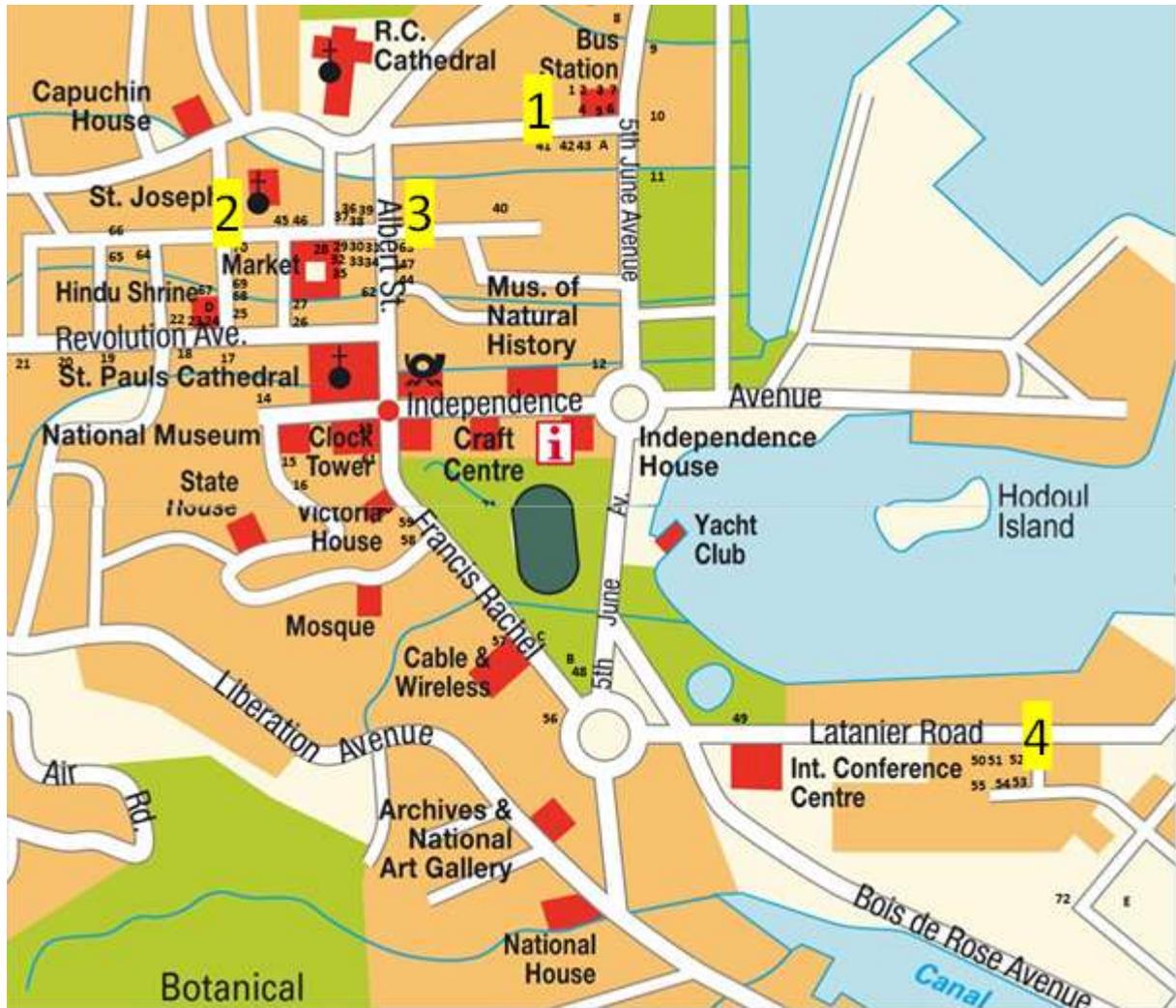
Currently I am in the third phase of my research, which will involve conceptualizing the medicalized lifestyle of physical activity and eating, which I will compare to the findings of masculinity and status described above. The purpose of which will be to find the different values between these identities, and the implications that a medicalized lifestyle may have on a person's social progression and wellbeing. My data collection will cease in September 2017 when I will return to Amsterdam, where I will analyse and write-up my findings.

Limitations

As the research has not yet been completed, full understanding of the implications on social wellbeing as a result of medicalized lifestyle is not yet completely clear. Other limitations of this project include having only one researcher over a three-month period, and only accepting research participants that speak English.

Appendices

Appendix 1



Notes

¹ Diabesity is the term used to describe the co-occurrence of obesity and diabetes within the same population. It suggests that diabetes in the population has occurred in the context of obesity, and thus is obesity dependant (Frag and Gaballa, 2011).

² The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2017) state that obesity (which is excessive bodily fat) increases risk of diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and cancer among other life threatening conditions.

³ Diabetes is a debilitating and potentially fatal disease that can cause blindness, kidney failure, heart attack, stroke and neuropathy (WHO, 2013).

⁴ Industrialising societies experience socioeconomic and demographic changes in transitioning to industrialisation. Within this paradigm a countries economic market changes, jobs become more sedentary, and the function of agriculture changes from feeding a nation to producing cash crops to feed the world. Essentially physical activity levels drop, and fresh food availability becomes less, in favour of imported refined foods. This is a commonly accepted causative paradigm among public health practitioners; this paradigm is however challenged by some anthropologists (Yates-Doerr, 2015).

⁵ Medication, hospitals treatments and lost productivity in the workplace are all costs of diabesity (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2017).

⁶ Over an eight-year period, China in its 'transition' process showed gendered differences in overweight levels: doubling in women, and tripling in men (Popkin, 2001).

⁷ Women may also be a favourable audience because they are often seen as the gatekeepers of food and children (Warin et al., 2008).

⁸ Seychelles is reportedly a transitioning nation (Bovet et al., 2006, Faeh et al., 2007 and Rossi et al., 2011).

⁹ 17.4% compared to 2.1-6.7% for the African region (raw prevalence) (Cavan et al., 2015 pp70-71).

¹⁰ The Seychelles Ministry of Health is currently running a health campaign focusing on obesity prevention called 'My Health, My Responsibility' (Ministry of Health, 2016)

¹¹ Photos were taken in the observation stage and were used to prompt interviewees for meanings on the observed phenomena.

¹² Occupations included were teachers, labourers, business owners, nurses, shop attendants, government employees, and unemployed persons

¹³ A local high school learned about my research into masculinity and health and invited me to conduct a group interview with their male students. The school was interested to learn the perception of male students regarding health and masculinity, and the effect this might have on school performance. A group interview using the same semi-structured script from my research was provided to the group in the session. A survey was also given to the boys regarding specific information the school were concerned about, namely their understanding of health behaviours. Consent was sought from parents by the school prior to the group being conducted.

¹⁴ Relating specifically to change in diet and physical activity

¹⁵ High performance relating to strenuous bodily performance requiring a great deal of physical fitness and conditioning such as sport and fighting. Low performance here is referred to as performances of strength shown through household maintenance, lifting heavy items etc.

¹⁶ Aged 15-17 years

¹⁷ The teenage boys reported that when males reach their 20s physical violence generally stops due to the irrelevance of the school social hierarchy and the switch to a new motivations: earning money.

¹⁸ All men suggested it was a woman's duty to shop for food. Men may only go to the supermarket to help with heavy bags. It was suggested that some men may do market shopping for fresh items like fish, fruit and vegetables.

¹⁹ All but one participant had learned this way, this participant later learned to cook with the help of his family through directions over the phone and use of cookbooks.

²⁰ Benedict and Benedict (1975) also mentioned these types of characteristics in men.

²¹ In conversations of status in Western European and Neo-European countries that I have lived or resided for a significant amount of time (Netherlands, Germany, England and Australia) the car itself and its size is not the premium point, but the brand of the car itself. Through my conversations I noted that big cars appear to be particularly noted as luxurious in Seychelles.

²² Corner of Market and Quincy Streets and Docklands Shopping Centre

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