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**MSC IN INTERNATIONAL MARKETING & BRAND MANAGEMENT**

**‘By Invitation Only’ in Contemporary Consumer Society**  
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**Distinctions Never Go Out Of Style**

- Master Thesis -

Handed in by

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## 1 Introduction

This research paper aims to develop theory in the domains Consumer Identity Projects and Marketplace Cultures in consumer culture theory, by exploring consumer meanings of the previously uncharted but intensifying ‘by invitation only’ phenomenon that entered the commercial sphere in the contemporary consumer society.

We define ‘by invitation only’ as a strategy in which the company is limiting consumption to a selected membership base or crowd. Park et al. (1986) argue that this leads to a so called market shielding effect, as non-targeted consumers find it difficult to consume and the firm can more effectively manage their customer base. Moreover, if the marketing reaches all consumers, the outcome will be exclusivity through the created desirability and unattainability. Brought up in media, ‘by invitation only’ is mainly a creator of exclusivity (Profit 2010), buzz (Economist 2009) and customer relationships (Style 2009). This strategy is suitably popular among luxury firms, as these are positioned according to symbolic consumer needs and wish to maintain exclusive group- or self-image based associations. (Park et al. 1986)

‘By invitation only’ is a global phenomenon that is increasingly visible in the many new nightlife and networking clubs, popping up in metropolitan cities around the world. One of the most famous Swedish examples is *Noppe’s Bar and Restaurant* in Stockholm which circulated a lot in Swedish media since its opening in 2003, as it is one of the strictest ‘by invitation only’ bars in Sweden and as rumors claim that the Swedish king himself is a member (Björling 2006). Consumers applying for the membership card of *The Worlds Finest Clubs* benefit from a network of the most exclusive, trend-setting and elegant member clubs in the world. With this membership card, one is entitled to privileged and free VIP access to all clubs in the network. (Worlds Finest Clubs 2010)

Online based firms such as the social network *ASmallWorld* also utilize ‘by invitation only’ to create an “international community of culturally influential people”. The network offers its members a platform to share information, be part of a dialogue, get travel advice, seek social and business opportunities or attend events. (ASmallWorld 2010) The success story *Spotify*, a Swedish software program that allows its users to stream music online, grew internationally by restricting membership to people who pay for the service and the people these customers choose to invite (Spotify 2010).

‘By invitation only’ also entered the marketing and branding practices of manufacturers and retailers in the fashion industry. There is no shortage of ‘members-only’ shopping sites similar to *Secret Sales*, which sells discount wears from a variety of premium and luxury designers.

Whilst the membership for *Secret Sales* remains free, the option of becoming a member is available for a limited time only, leaving the consumers interested to join dependent on finding an existing member to invite them into this private club. (Secret Sales 2010) The ground breaking German luxury fashion label *VonRosen* was founded in 2007 and claims to be the first and only luxury fashion brand that strictly restricts the consumption through ‘by invitation only’, thereby taking exclusivity to a new level (Brandchannel 2009; VonRosen 2010). More specifically, out of the 10,000 people that applied, only 1,500 members were accepted (New York Times 2009). *Von-Rosen* has received substantial media attention. Elle (2009) and Times Online (2010) even named this as a future trend in the fashion industry. In an interview with the company’s founder David von Rosen, he stated, “All customers have the right to choose a brand” ‘...’ ”We wanted to turn the perspective around and choose our customers” ‘...’ ”We’ve turned down people who applied, like any good club would” (Style 2009).

Although the presence of ‘by invitation only’ in the consumer society is increasing, no consumer research explores this phenomenon. The rising postmodern societal movement that challenges established marketing conventions and ideas (Brown 2006) leads us to depart from the consumer research field of ‘consumer culture theory’, as this enables richer and more powerful explorations of consumer meanings (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

The consumer meanings and historical evolvement of the ‘by invitation only’ phenomenon can be traced back to socio-historical research concerning membership in elite clubs as an increasingly common and pervasive feature of British aristocrats social life from the seventeenth century and onwards (Clark 2000; Taddei 1999). The London clubs in the late nineteenth century were characterized by well-defined procedures for selecting members, which gave the selected individuals an important source of status, networking and information opportunities. Throughout time, the growth of clubs was characterized by periods of greater or lesser intensity, which has been attributed to politics as well as new technologies in transportation and communication. (Taddei 1999) Another stream of research, the socio-economical perspective on membership clubs, dates back to Buchanan’s influential paper in 1965, where he addresses specific ownership - consumption agreements in a club context.

Although some knowledge exists of membership clubs, it is very important to research the ‘by invitation only’ phenomenon in a contemporary context as the world of consumption has changed significantly since due to transformations in consumer behavior and society (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Featherstone 2007; Brown 2006; Holt 2002; Dwyer 2009) Due to the necessity to gain insights into consumer meanings of this ‘old’ topic that has now entered postmodern marketing practices and spreads to new fields, we will explore consumer meanings underlying ‘by

invitation only' in this study, as this will add to postmodern consumer culture theory (Holt 2002; Brown 2006). More specifically, we will provide insights about the following:

- a) What socio-cultural dynamics and motives drive consumption of 'by invitation only' in postmodernity?
- b) How do consumers form feelings of social solidarity and create cultural worlds through the pursuit of 'by invitation only'?

These insights are leveraged from consumer interviews as well as membership literature and related theoretical constructs, with the aim to 'recycle' key concepts in postmodern consumption theory such as one-to-one marketing, tribal marketing, brand authenticity and status theory.

In doing so, this thesis constitutes a first step towards contemporary consumer meanings of membership-related constructs, creating an understanding of the mechanics, cultural dynamics and social consequences of exclusive membership spheres. This will guide future research in this increasingly important field and help to better understand the mechanisms of 'by invitation only' as a marketing or branding strategy, as the consumer meanings can be understood as worldly and rich constructs.

Guided by the possibilities to gain as rich data as possible in answering our research questions, we conducted existential-phenomenological interviews with six young and affluent consumers of diverse backgrounds (see chapter 3.5) that were experienced of and knowledgeable about a broad spectrum of 'by invitation only' events and triggers.

## 2 Theory

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*In this section we first explain and argue for our departure in research and our research aim, followed by a discussion of our field of research and the specific domains, where we add theory. As no research addresses the 'by invitation only' phenomenon directly, we build a theoretical foundation through a review of the related research streams about membership clubs. We then move on to the theoretical part, which framed our research including consumer research within postmodern social movements and its implications for marketing and branding. Finally, we discuss status theory, as this is linked to exclusive membership constructs.*

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### 2.1 Consumer Culture Theory as the Theoretical Departure

There is no agreed meaning of the term postmodernism (Featherstone 2007: 11). It has been defined as the traits of the socio-economic condition that emerged throughout the prosperous countries of Europe and of European descent in the second half of the twentieth century. Architects were first to use the term 'postmodern' in the 1960s to describe a break with modern functional and rational thinking. (Cova 1996) Namely, "the progressive, optimistic, forward-looking, ever-onward-ever-upward worldview of the modern era has been replaced by a pessimistic, almost apocalyptic, sense of apprehension, anxiety, apathy and anomie" (Brown 2006: 214).

Brown (2006) argues that the rising postmodern 'societal movement' challenge established marketing conventions and ideas, as postmodernism recognizes that the modernity goals of relieving people from ignorance and irrationality will never be reached (Cova 1996). "It is a transition era in Western society, without ideology, not offering an utopia, and characterized by a plethora of trends and styles, as well as by a juxtaposition of conflicting features" and thus, "postmodern thinking is characterized by fragmentation, ambiguity, and a distrust of universal explanations" (Ibid: 494). This had a tremendous impact on marketing management as "postmodernism attacks scientific assumptions of the last thirty years - its epistemology, methodology, its claims to knowledge, and in particular, the modern assumption of single reality." (Ibid: 494)

These postmodernism acknowledgements have given strength to a new field of research: Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), which often leads to more precise and powerful explanations in contrast to traditional consumer research approaches (Arnould and Thompson 2005). More specifically, CCT is a field of consumer research that explores the heterogeneous division of meanings and the diversity of overlapping and conflicting cultural groupings within a broader socio-historic framework of globalization and capitalism. Centralized in CCT is the consumption of fabricated commodities and desirable marketing symbols. Here, consumption is viewed as a sub-

ject of the individual's free choice (Holt 2002) based on personal and negotiated meanings that consumers embody in social roles and relationships (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Moreover, marketing symbols are seen as a tool used by groups to construct practices, identities and meanings to guide their members' experiences and life's (Kozinets 2001). Thus, CCT traditions involve investigations of the dynamic relations between consumer actions, the meaningful ways of life decided by culture and the symbolic objects on which they depend as they are mediated through markets (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

As the phenomenon 'by invitation only' is previously not researched in CCT, although its presence in the consumer society is increasing rapidly, our aim is to add to theory in this field of research. To increase our chances of capturing the most relevant consumer meanings, we chose to adapt a broad viewpoint in CCT where we focus on both the individual consumer as well as the group of consumers that are consuming 'by invitation only'.

Accordingly, our work somewhat departs from the CCT research domain *Consumer Identity Projects*, which addresses the socio-cultural dynamics that drive consumption. Namely, we investigate what personal goals consumers try to achieve through 'by invitation only' and how this helps them in the search and creation of their identities. This "concerns the co-constitutive, co-productive ways in which consumers, working with marketer-generated materials, forge a coherent if diversified and often fragmented sense of self" (Ibid: 871). We will highlight the conflicts, internal contradictions and ambivalence that consumers are said to experience. CCT proponents argue that individuals enact and personalize cultural roles that align their selves with the larger consumer-driven global economy, while they pursue personal goals through their consumer positions. (Ibid)

We also investigate 'by invitation only' from the perspective of the CCT domain *Marketplace Cultures*, which investigates the ways consumers form feelings of social solidarity and create cultural worlds through the pursuit of common consumption interests (Ibid). Maffesoli's (1996) work on neotribalism (see chapter 2.4.2) and the dialectic between "radical individualism" and the "more ephemeral collective identifications", can be seen as the theoretical common ground (Arnould and Thompson 2005: 873).

## **2.2 Literature Review of Membership Clubs**

The aim is now to present an overview of our field of research from a theoretical point of view with a departure in consumer identity projects and marketplace cultures in CCT. As we are not aware of any current research of 'by invitation only' in this research field and its consumer meanings, the closely related subject of membership clubs became our theoretical departure. However,

the previous literature about membership clubs does not address consumer meanings of profit-driven organizations in postmodern society. Therefore, it is our objective to address this important topic in a contemporary study, as the (Western) world entered a postmodern and qualitatively different historical era that is increasingly multinational, globalized and capitalistic (Brown 2006), causing considerable changes in the world of consumption. Namely, Firat and Venkatesh (1995: 239) state that new consumption possibilities emerge “due to the rise of ethnic consciousness, multiculturalism, and the global diffusion of consumer culture, accompanied by the rapid growth of new technologies of information and communication.” Our review of membership club literature is therefore a helpful tool for us to help us understand why consumers increasingly make use of ‘by invitation only’ in a contemporary context.

### **The Evolvement of Membership Clubs - A Socio-Historical Approach**

Clubs and societies can be found in many countries from the earliest times and can be distinguished by their functions and purposes. Sodalities and informal clubs played a significant role in the political and cultural life of classical Athens, and to a lesser extent, of ancient Rome. During the middle ages, merchant guilds emerged in European towns as a result of the quickening pace of commercial expansion. In British social life, clubs and societies were an increasingly common and pervasive feature from the seventeenth century and onwards. In the 1800s, these had become a vital component in social life of the educated English-speaking classes, whether at home or abroad. Interestingly, eighteenth century commentators regarded clubs and societies as a distinctly British phenomenon. For example, *The Gentlemen’s Magazine* reported in 1732 that the institution of clubs is completely English and foreign observers agreed. Furthermore, these clubs and societies were primarily urban phenomena, reaching down from the metropolis to smaller towns (Clark 2000).

Taddei (1999) explored elite membership clubs in late nineteenth century London. In this context, clubs existed in fashionable locations that reserved rooms for the exclusive use of aristocrats, to remedy that they had started to draw people that aristocrats did not necessarily want to mix with. These London clubs were dedicated for men and existed for almost any interest (Ibid), for example musical, scientific and philanthropic interests (Clark 2000). Mostly politicians populated these British clubs as members; other professional groups included military men, diplomats, members of the administration, lawyers, and businessmen. In contrast, clergymen, academics, writers and physicians had a low membership rate. (Taddei 1999)

Taddei (Ibid) showed that throughout time, the growth of clubs was characterized by periods of greater or lesser intensity. The extent of clubs grew as a result of democracy, as this caused an expansion of the middle class. However, the decline of clubs at a later point in time

corresponded with the introduction and spread of new communication and transport technologies (e.g. the telephone, the electric tram, the automobile and the electrification and extension of the Underground). During stages when clubs were increasing, the competitive environment led to a high turnover of clubs in which only the core of the top clubs remained stable. One explanation for this is that once the supply of clubs became too high, clubs devalued their own exclusivity. (Ibid)

### **Exclusive Club Memberships and Its Socio-Cultural Meanings**

Cultural meanings of membership have been previously attended in the context of London's late nineteenth century exclusive membership clubs. Taddei (1999) demonstrates that club membership provided a ready-made means for social intercourse, an information network, and a source of societal status. In detail, these clubs functioned spatially and provided a pre-made "social set" that individuals chose to join in order to find new acquaintances and to have a place to meet other members. In addition, club membership provided an important and necessary source of status, causing membership to be sought after, as members gained prestige from being perceived as an important person worthy of belonging to that club, the luxurious premises and the well-defined procedures for selecting members. Lastly, members gained restricted access to other influential club members (Ibid).

Basu (1989) suggests that the membership of clubs and societies is a classic association good in the sense that the objective of acquiring membership is mainly to gain the status associated with being admitted. By being picked as a deserving customer, members acquire association in the eyes of others. This is called association value. The amount of status gained is dependent on the allocation rule that decides who will be admitted. Thus, the value of the membership is not so much the intrinsic value (Ibid), which in this study is the restricted access to consuming certain objects and in some cases access to other members.

Moreover, status is dependent on the reputation of the club, which in the context of Gentlemen's Clubs was mainly defined by its success in attracting prestigious members. This explains the careful selection process implemented in club procedures. The harder it was to get in, the more prestige was awarded to the members. More findings showed that the increased status of club members also stemmed from the fact that members typically had some power over the selection of new members through nomination and voting rights. (Taddei 1999)

### **Club Memberships - A Socio-Economic Approach**

The socio-economic literature on clubs gives further insights and strengthens arguments to the previously reviewed literature concerning membership clubs. Socio-economic approaches go back to Buchanan's influential paper (1965), where he goes beyond the sharp distinction between purely public and purely private goods, arguing that in between these two extremes there is a continuum of ownership-consumption possibilities. He introduces the terms clubs and club membership to refer to specific ownership-consumption agreements.

Congleton (1989: 175) talks about status seeking games, which are "games in which an individual's utility is determined by his relative expenditure on status seeking activities rather than on his absolute consumption." The author also points out that status seekers may take coordinated actions to limit the costs of status seeking activities by making it difficult, if not impossible, for new status seekers to join. For instance, the "most exclusive clubs restrict eligibility for membership in arbitrary ways. Many clubs require new members to be acceptable to current members and/or limit membership to people of a particular genology, creed, or sex" (Ibid: 184).

Häckner and Nyberg (1996) mention the interesting example of prestigious brand-name goods, where the value of the brand is negatively related to the total number of purchasers, as it is the exclusiveness of the product that creates its value. Owners of these exclusive goods can be thought of as a club sharing an amount of status, meaning that the larger the number of people sharing, the lower each person's utility. The authors present a model where identical consumers choose between a number of branded goods of identical intrinsic quality, and a composite good. The utility of the branded good increases in exclusiveness and at the same time the sales volume of that brand decreases.

Van Ackere and Haxholdt (2002) extend the notion of clubs to specifically include the issue of a heterogeneous population, where some individuals are more desirable members than others. They show that it is optimal from the club manager's perspective to exclude undesirable individuals, even though these are willing to pay the joining fee and would benefit from joining, when the population attaches a high value to status. If exclusion is not an option, increasing the weight of status results initially in the whole population joining, while further increases cause the most desirable members to leave. In addition it is illustrated that, from a commercial point of view, the introduction of honorary members could lead to strongly enhanced revenue, while their presence will provide others with an incentive to join. (Ibid)

### 2.3 The Contemporary World of Consumption

Postmodernism has a large effect on how consumption is practiced (Brown 2006; Holt 2002). “Consumption can no longer be seen as an innocent act, but as a part of the change of interdependencies which binds people together across the world in terms of production consumption and also the accumulation of risks.” (Featherstone 2007: 18) This is the case as globalization and the tendencies in consumer society have led to an increasingly complex global consumer culture. (Ibid: 21) As the marketing concept entails fulfilling peoples needs (Kotler et al. 2005) it can be questioned why the ‘by invitation only’ marketing practices are becoming increasingly popular across industries in the commercial sphere. We can begin to explain what lies behind this phenomenon by reviewing current global societal movements and its impact on marketing practices.

Featherstone (2007) brings up developments in postmodernism. One important aspect for this study is that there is a widening gap between the rich and the poor in Western society but also globally. This results from the neo-liberal economic globalization that was established in USA and Britain in the 1980s and has been later increasingly globalized. (Featherstone 2007: 19) The consumption patterns have therefore changed significantly. On the one hand, there is an evident boom in luxury spending. However, at the same time the indebtedness is rising and the poor exclude consumption of “important alternative public and private goods such as education”. (Dwyer 2009: 342)

Featherstone (2007) also discusses the democratization or the right to speak and take part in the public arena and the following ‘cultural de-classification’. The process of democratization has eventually led to that dominant consumer groups cannot monopolize the definitions of culture, as less powerful consumer groups are becoming increasingly strengthened, backed by an expansion of cultural intermediaries in mass media. Thus, we see less of a hierarchy of values. (Ibid: 96)

Firat and Venkatesh (1995) present five widely accepted postmodern marketing conditions used in the study of consumption. *Hyperreality* is a postmodern concept, which entails that the distinction between reality and fantasy is blurred through the creation of a symbolic marketing environment that is more real than real. In other words, the experience becomes the real, when members realize, construct and live a simulated hyperreality. This phenomenon results from a constant making of the present mainly through electronic media. (Ibid)

Moreover, consumers are viewed as *Fragmented* and *Decentred* as they attempt to restructure their identities and thereby attempt to emancipate the unity and truth in the market. Consumers have increasingly freed themselves from acting according to reason and instead live each moment to its fullest, to reach emotional peaks, to gain experience and to excite the senses. Thus, “each

private consumer engages in multiple consumption experiences” and seeks to consume according to “the variety of different images sought”. (Ibid: 255) In other words, postmodern consumers have fluid, negotiable and mutable identities and selves, leading them to engage in eclectic consumption like “shopping around”. (Ibid)

Another postmodern condition that redefines the conditions for consumption is the consumers’ acceptance for juxtaposition of anything with anything else as a response to artistic liberation. “Postmodernism refuses to privilege any one perspective, and recognizes only difference, never inequality, only fragments, never conflict” (Ibid: 255)

## 2.4 ‘By Invitation Only’ as a Marketing Practice

Marketing has been defined as a management process through which goods and services travel from the concept to the customer, aiming to respond to customer needs and thereby achieve customer satisfaction. This tied to the coordination of four elements: product, price, place and promotion. (Kotler et al. 2005) As ‘by invitation only’ has been frequently used as a marketing tool in today’s society it is important to understand what kind of consumer motives this addresses. We will therefore discuss the postmodern consumer’s consumption practices that marketers have responded to, in order to satisfy their clients.

It is generally held that the globalization has led to intensified competition in the marketplace and that firms are becoming increasingly attentive to their current customers. Namely, relationship marketing has re-emerged as a marketing paradigm, as it provides an alternative to transaction based marketing. Especially Susan Fournier’s influential study on consumers called Brand Relationships (1998) highlights the critical importance of understanding brands and consumers’ relationships with them to the advancement of marketing theory. Postmodernism has caused firms to utilize two different types of marketing approaches that both have a relationship focus and compliment each other. Underlying these approaches is Douglas and Isherwood’s (1980) statement that consumption has a social dimension and is not locked in the individual. One to one marketing allows companies to establish relationships on a brand to customer basis. In tribal marketing, the focus is to support the relationship between consumers. (Cova and Cova 2002) This is summarized in the table below and will be discussed in more detail next as we find it interesting to see whether any single relationship focus is more suitable in the context of ‘by invitation only’.

	<b>Individualistic approach</b>	<b>Tribal approach</b>
<i>Relationship focus</i>	Customer/company	Customer/customer
<i>Company positioning</i>	Pole of the relationship	Support of the relationship
<i>Marketing approach</i>	Cognitive means	Rituals and cult
<i>Loyalty</i>	Cognitive	Affective

Table 1: Two Schools of Marketing (Based on Cova and Cova 2002)

### **One-to-One Marketing**

The most common approach, one-to-one marketing (Cova 1996), belongs to the Northern School. Seen from the firm's perspective, one-to-one marketing is often an outcome of customer relationship management where the aim is to create a relationship between the consumer and the brand (Peppers et al. 1999). The relationship can take many different forms, which is dependent on the relationship quality, depth and strength. This is determined by positive feelings as well as an "affective and socio-emotive attachment (love/passion and self-connection), behavioral ties (interdependence and commitment), and supportive cognitive beliefs (intimacy and brand partner quality)" (Fournier 1998).

The individualistic movement have led consumption to be viewed as something self-defining and personal (Cova and Cova 2002). The arguments behind one-to-one marketing is that postmodernism is an era of individualism, brought about by the modern quest for liberation from social bonds. As a result of the individuals' rights to economic, political and intellectual freedom, they become forced to control their self, become someone and show their difference. (Cova 1997) Accordingly, consumers personalize the process of consumption and search for customized products "not through the tyranny of details, but with as few constraints and as many choices as possible." (Ibid: 299) These consumers most likely favor the use value of products (Ibid).

### **Tribal Marketing**

Curiously, a reverse movement to individualism is becoming increasingly important to explain consumer choices in postmodernity. Liberated individuals are seeking to maintain or (re-) create social links in an attempt to de-differentiate from others. (Maffesoli 1996) Namely, consumers use goods to create an intangible universe and to maintain social relationships. This development is called 'societing' as these consumers find the social link to be more important than the actual product. (Cova and Cova 2002) The marketing approach is called tribal marketing and is a communal form of marketing that serves known consumer tribes through the interactive and emo-

tional co-creation of meanings (Cova 1996). This is based on the postmodernist development where belonging to tribes has become more important than belonging to a social class. Social status is today a dynamic and flexible positioning of the individual within and between tribes, rather than a static position. As a member of several tribes, the postmodern individual might play a different role and wear a specific mask in each. (Cova 1997)

A tribe involves local, linguistic and cultural homogeneity. Tribes are unstable, small and effectual (Maffesoli 1996) and should not be confused with brand communities, as the later is explicitly commercial in contrast to tribes. Namely, passion and shared emotions hold the tribe together for as long as the attraction to the rituals and cult-objects remain. The members take different roles in the tribe and share emotions, lifestyles, moral beliefs, inequality sensations and consumption practices while committing symbolically and ritually. The tribes have an anchoring place where members gather and perform rituals. (Aubert-Gamet and Cova 1999; Cova and Cova 2002)

The tribal symbols gain meaning within the tribe as a result as members collectively negotiate and interpret the meanings. (Cova and Cova 2002) Individuals are essentially drawn to the goods and services that permit and support social interaction and sharing (Cova 1996), which making the aim of the marketers to support and capitalize on the social links between members of a tribe through taking part in social events where tribes meet (Cova and Cova 2002). Research by Kozinets (2002) illustrated that tribes will accept commercial motives providing that there are no exploitive motives, manipulation or socially isolating outcomes.

## 2.5 'By Invitation Only' as a Branding Practice

The 'by invitation only' phenomenon is not only a marketing practice, but as the example of the fashion label *VonRosen* shows, it is also a branding practice. Kapferer (2008) states that each expert comes up with his or her own definition of what a brand is. However, branding can be described as the process of creating a unique name and image for a product or service in the consumer's mind. This process is also aimed to establish a significant and differentiated presence in the market. (Ibid) To interpret consumer meanings of 'by invitation only' as a branding practice, we will in the next step seek to understand how branding and culture interact in postmodernity.

Branding is not only an economic but also a cultural process that encompasses goods and services with value (Sinclair 2008). The functional value of the products is often less important than the symbolic resource, as it provides cultural meanings which helps to construct and maintain the desired self (Elliott and Davies 2006; Holt 2002). As brands are first and foremost a depot of meanings in making socio-political ideology statements, the large challenge in postmodern

consumer culture becomes to understand more deeply the multiple sources and dynamic nature of brand meanings (Fournier 1998).

According to McCracken (1986), culture is represented as the original source and location of the general categories of meanings from which brands ultimately draw. These categories are basic distinctions that cultures use to divide and make sense of the phenomenal world (Ibid) consisting of both the shared meaning created through marketing systems and cultural traditions as well as the more personalized meaning constructed by the individual depending on for example one's socio-demographic situation (Allen et al. 2008; Kozinets 2001). The postmodern consumer culture is based on the pursuit of personal sovereignty through brands and individuals will actively negotiate a personal style by using an array of brands, adapting a so-called eclectic approach to consumption (Holt 2002).

### **Authenticity as a Key Brand Attribute in Postmodernity**

Marketers have realized that authenticity is a key brand attribute in contemporary marketing (Brown et al. 2003) as postmodern consumers desire authenticity when creating their distinctive personal identities through brands (Beverland 2010). This brand attribute is particularly important for luxury brands that rely on high brand equity to defend the high prices (Kapferer 2008: 5; Beverland 2006). An authentic display of coolness helps the consumers to develop status in the form of subcultural capital (Thornton 1996).

Paradoxically, postmodern consumers also want to resist conventional corporate influences. Consequently, marketers strive to ingratiate and integrate their brands into various spheres of popular culture, as a successful attempt lead to an aura of authenticity. However, many of the current branding techniques aimed at making brands authentic cultural resources is failing, due to that a large number of brands act more aggressively and persuasively to be perceived as authentic while critics in society educate the consumers of these marketing practices. (Holt 2002)

Researchers agree that consumers view authenticity as experiences and sensations that are genuine, real, and/or true. In this study we find it important to be able to explain deviant opinions of what is perceived as authentic and, therefore, we take into account personal goals in describing how each consumer produces authenticity as suggested by Beverland (2010). We disregard other authenticity research that instead focuses on widespread aspects viewed as authentic to narrow our topic somewhat. (Ibid)

In Beverland's (2010) study, it was shown that consumers try to find meaning in their lives that are in line with their personal goals. Moreover, they are motivated to search meanings in brands and experiences that will support their desired identity (or identities). When producing authenticity they prioritize certain information cues, while downplaying or ignoring cues that are

inconsistent with their judgment. (Ibid) As consumers' goals differ, people find authenticity in a range of objects, brands, and events that others deem as fake. Personal goals that have been identified as drivers in connection to consuming authentic objects are control, connection and virtue. If the consumer's goal is control, authenticity is used to achieve mastery of the self and the environment. Connection goals refer to that authenticity are used in relating to others, culture, time, place and community. Virtue goals are about being true to a set of moral values. The consumer may seek multiple benefits in their quest for authenticity and there may be a conflict between competing goals. (Ibid) As it has been suggested to merge their self-interest with the community goals and moral norms in the macro environment, Beverland (2010) argues that the leading cultural discourses guide the judgment of authenticity and discusses specific experience in relation to this.

## 2.6 Status and its Components

Status is an important notion in our research as this was a central theme in our review of literature concerning club membership. Namely, status was described as the most important benefit members derived. Also related to status is that 'by invitation only' is utilized to create an exclusive ambience surrounding the products and services and to achieve an exclusive image of the brand. The notion of status is derived from the Latin for 'standing', and relates simply to one's position in society. The notion of status involves ideas about the political and legal rights of persons within a socio-political community and, therefore, the issues surrounding status are closely related to the issues surrounding citizenship. (Turner 1988)

According to Turner (Ibid), status can be approached from different angles and for the purpose of our research we will focus on status as a cultural dimension. The idea of status as a cultural practice is an essential feature of Bourdieu's perspective on distinction and status may be conceptualized therefore as a lifestyle (dress, speech, outlook, bodily dispositions). One can refer to the life world as a *habitus*, which is structured and constituted by the whole line-up of practices, dispositions and tastes, which organize an individual's perception of social space. (Ibid)

### Status Symbols

Baudrillard (1988 in Corrigan 1997: 19) argues that consumption strives for social differentiation and is not a matter of specific needs, as commodities become a way of communicating social status. Status symbols are one way to assign social positions to individuals, as they signify occupation or class. "Status symbols visibly divide the social world into categories of persons, thereby helping to maintain solidarity within a category and hostility between different categories."

(Goffman 1951: 294) Thus, in a society where brands are increasingly consumed for their symbolic meaning, status symbols becomes a useful tool to express the “point of view, the style of life, and the cultural values of the person who makes it, or may satisfy needs created by the imbalance of activity in his particular social position.” (Ibid: 295) Status symbols are even more efficient as communication tools than the rights and duties that they signify. They function as cues to attribute status and for how to interact and treat the occupant. However, interpretation is a subjective process and, thus, opportunities for misinterpretations arise. (Ibid)

As individuals might manipulate symbols in a deceitful way through displaying the signs yet possessing only a doubtful claim to what they signify, Goffman (1951) analyzed how to restrict misuse of class and status symbols. As this is related to market shielding practices, we approach the ‘by invitation only’ phenomenon with the six general devices Goffman offered based on an era of modernism:

- *Moral restrictions* refer to the use of certain symbols made effective by inner moral constraints, which restrain people from misrepresenting themselves. By using the term intrinsic restrictions, he argues that we “symbolize our wealth by displaying it, our power by using it, and our skill by exercising it.” (Ibid: 298)
- Effective *scarcity* means to have a small supply in conjunction with a large demand. Scarcity alone, however, does not qualify an object for use as a status symbol, since there is an unlimited number of a different kind of scarce objects. "The expressive superiority of an object merely accounts for the fact that it, rather than some other equally scarce object, was selected for use as a status symbol.” (Ibid: 298)
- *Natural restrictions* refer to the factor of natural scarcity, which cannot be directly bought and sold. (Ibid)
- *Socialization restrictions*, an important symbol of membership in a given class and displayed during informal interaction, consist of the kind of acts which impress others with the suitability and likeableness of one’s general manner. In the minds of the observer, such a person is thought to be one of a kind. In addition, it is worth to note: “members of a class frequently exercise exclusiveness in just those situations where the categorical significance of a particular act is taught. This accounts in part for the common social fact that one class may use as a symbol an act which another class does not know it is being used in this way.” (Ibid: 300)
- An example of *cultivation restriction* “is found in the quality of restraint” (Ibid: 301); a form of sophistication upon which classes in many different societies have placed high value.

- *Organic restrictions* mean that class status is based not only on social qualifications but also on the length of time a person has possessed them. (Ibid)

Finally, a symbol of status cannot remain forever. A time is reached when social decline accelerates with a spiral effect: members of a declining class are forced to rely more and more upon symbols which do not involve a current outlay, while at the same time their association with these symbols lowers the value of these signs in the eyes of others. (Goffman 1951) The circulation of symbols has two major consequences: Firstly, “those with whom a symbol originates must turn from that which is familiar to them and seek out, again and again, something which is not yet contaminated.” Secondly, “status symbols provide the indication that is used in order to discover the status of others and, from this, the way in which others are to be treated.” (Ibid: 304)

### **Prestige and Taste**

For the ‘by invitation only’ concept where the aim is to create exclusivity, the status rankings of prestige are important. According to Benoit-Smullyan (1944) there are five main criteria that generate high prestige. Firstly, *admiration* creates high prestige and can be either objective or subjective. Secondly, prestige is an object of *deference* where symbolic priority is manifested through, for example, the presumptive right to initiate many social relations, to bypass the line, to receive a honorable position, to gain access to certain assemblies and ceremonies, to be addressed in certain a distinct way to gain favorable treatment in many social situations. Thirdly, prestige can be seen as an object of *imitation*, assuming a model position, which is replicated by others. Fourthly, a source of *suggestion* can generate prestige and is manifested in that others more easily accept one’s ideas. Finally, a centre of *attraction* is important as prestige can be transmitted to contacts on different levels. The source of prestige depends on what attributes are valued in a particular society. (Ibid)

On the subject of wealth admiration, Veblen (1975 in Corrigan 1997: 21) established that the upper class used conspicuous consumption as was a way to demonstrate one’s wealth. Conspicuous consumption involves social distinction through goods and denotes a feeling of what American postmodern artist Diane Kruger named in one of her artworks: “I shop, therefore I am” (Tate Magazine 2010). Consumer research has acknowledged that in cities, one knows nothing about the other except from what they see. As Bourdieu (1984) argues, different social classes use different goods to (pro)-claim their places in the social structure where taste brings people together and lies as the basis of social life. According to Turner (1988) taste is to be seen as the practical aspect of lifestyle, as social groups distinguish themselves from competitors by their ‘su-

perior' dispositions, bodily gestures, speech, and manner (Ibid). In today's society, consumer groups are in competition and they use goods as their weapons (Holt and Üstüner 2010).

### **Forms of Status Capital**

Defining social class involves referring to "discrete or discontinuous levels of prestige and privilege, where admission to any one of these levels is, typically, determined by a complex of social qualifications, no one or two of which are necessarily essential." (Goffman 1951: 296) We will next discuss the social qualifications in contemporary consumer research, as these create a foundation for our investigations: economic capital, cultural capital, social capital and subcultural capital.

Bourdieu (1984) argues that consumption corresponds to cultural and social hierarchies and that people's tastes are first and foremost a marker of class. He distinguishes between the material wealth (economic capital) and the cultural assets (cultural capital) of a social class. Cultural capital is here defined by formal education and social background, namely the longer one has attended educational institutions and the more elite these institutions were the higher is a person's cultural capital. These two types of capital can be combined in four different ways: high in both, high in economic - low in cultural, high in cultural - low in economic and low in both. This enables us to see how certain lifestyles characterize particular social groups, as different social groups are at ease within different economic-cultural combinations and will feel awkward outside of them. (Ibid) In consumer research, Bourdieu's framework is commonly used in order to examine the effect of social class hierarchies on the consumption processes (Holt 1998).

In 'The Forms of Capital' (1983: 248) Bourdieu defines social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition - or in other words, to membership in a group - which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word." Furthermore, the "volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected." (Ibid: 249)

Based on Bourdieu, Thornton (1996) introduced the concept of subcultural capital and consumer research is now increasingly acknowledging that new types of communities are born in the marketplace. Subcultural capital has been defined as "the mechanisms through which the members of the community embody the cultural codes necessary to maintain one's membership." (Östberg 2007: 95) Thornton (1996) demonstrates that subcultural capital is highly impor-

tant for youth status distinction and is objectified in the club cultures in the form of cool attributes such as fashionable haircuts and carefully assembled record collections. Östberg's (2007) findings show that in the case of the young and affluent *Stockholm Brats*, consumption is not about owning singular objects, but rather to carefully assemble and display several objects of a specific style to create the image of being 'in the know'. The 'linking value' of their social logic comes from their interpretation of 'style'. To give the owner of the objects status, other people must possess some degree of subcultural knowledge to interpret the relevant codes. Thus, the consumption community is dependent on media, as this external world helps constructing its internal codes. Finally, the linking value is valorized by that media and popular culture acknowledges the subcultural group. (Ibid)

To wrap up, the theory discussed in this chapter helped us explore and analyze consumer meanings of the previously uncharted but intensifying 'by invitation only' phenomenon that entered the commercial sphere in contemporary consumer society. The literature review forms an outdated and shallow basis to which consumer culture theory of the postmodern 'by invitation only' phenomenon will be added and revised. The review of the postmodern consumption world puts the research in its context and helps explain our findings. The consumer meanings related to individualism, tribalism and authenticity acknowledged in postmodern marketing and branding research highlights important aspects that improve our ability to understand our topic. Furthermore, as a core component of 'by invitation only', the status theory provides an important although dated building stone. All theory presented helped answering our research question as it facilitate our understanding of what socio-cultural dynamics and motives drive consumption of 'by invitation only' in postmodernity and how consumers form feelings of social solidarity and create cultural worlds through the pursuit of 'by invitation only'.

### 3 Methodology

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*In this chapter, we argue for our methodological approach and reasoning. First, we provide information about how our departure in CCT affected our choice of ontology and epistemology, as these factors affected the research strategy and -method, data collection method and the research design. Furthermore, we argue for our choice of sampling method, the selection criteria for our participants and how our interviews have been designed and conducted. Lastly, we explain how the qualitative interview data was analyzed.*

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#### 3.1 Research Philosophy

Our departure in consumer culture theory has led us to apply certain research philosophies, which will affect the end result and the applicability when studied within different approaches. In researching consumer meanings of a social phenomenon within the research field of CCT, we feel obliged to adapt a constructionist ontological stance, as this is highly appropriate to create an understanding of consumer perceptions (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008: 73). Here, reality is considered to be a social construct that results from different individual and group perspectives (Anderson-Hudson and Ozanne 1988). Namely, individuals' expressions of personal meaning are viewed as self-interpretations of universal cultural viewpoints that are adapted to the individual's unique life contexts (Thompson et al. 1994). Each person categorizes reality in order to make sense of their worlds and develop, transmit and maintain knowledge in social situations. Available systems of representation and cultural discourse both help and limit the broadcast of meanings through text, talk, images or signifying practices. (Moisander et al. 2009) Thus, the emphasis in this research is on language and conversations between people as they create their own meanings. (Thompson et al. 1994) In sum, we see reality as something created through social interactions between individuals in a contextual and contingent manner. (Moisander et al. 2009) As reality continuously changes and different realities co-exist, our findings are merely one truth out of many (Anderson-Hudson and Ozanne 1988).

The process through which one gains knowledge is commonly referred to as epistemology. It is important for us to recognize knowledge created from the subjective meanings of social actions as this allows richer descriptions (Bryman and Bell 2007: 19). Since this is common practice in the CCT field, we practice the philosophical hermeneutics view that takes an interpretivist stance and enables a rich description of the person-culture dialectic. The person-culture dialectic aspect is seen as necessary as "consumer beliefs and actions are fully situated within a multifaceted network of cultural meanings that can be modified and transformed but never escaped".

(Thompson et al. 1994: 449) Accordingly, we view the individual's understanding of 'by invitation only' as something that reflects broader and shared cultural meanings, as interpreted from that individual's unique life experiences (Ibid).

### 3.2 Research Strategy

To fulfill our aim to develop theory in consumer culture that explains why 'by invitation only' has become a popular marketing and branding strategy in postmodern consumer culture and what meanings consumers attribute to this, we will implement an exploratory study, as this is used "to gather preliminary information that will help to better define problems and suggest hypotheses" (Kotler et al. 2005: 345).

We implement a qualitative strategy, as words are the preferred form of data collected in this study (Bryman and Bell 2007: 402). This is a normal practice in consumer culture theory where theory is supposedly created rather than tested (Ibid: 28). McCracken (1988: 21) explains this pattern with the argument that "qualitative research is most useful and powerful when it is used to discover how the respondent sees the world". Namely, without a qualitative understanding that emphasizes words of how culture mediates human action, we can "know only what the numbers tell us". Utilizing a qualitative approach makes it possible for us to define categories during the process of our research and outline relationships between these categories. (Ibid)

Some researchers argue that qualitative research is too subjective, difficult to replicate and hard to generalize (Bryman and Bell 2007: 423). However, postmodern marketing research is increasingly acknowledging "the boundedness of knowledge, the limits to generalization, the lack of universal laws, the prevalence of disorder over order, irrationality rather than rationality, subjectivity instead of objectivity and passionate participation as an alternative to dispassionate spectatorship." (Brown 2006: 214) Moreover, Goulding (2005: 294) backs up our approach as she states that "the last two decades have seen a steady increase in the number of qualitative papers appearing in the premier journals, and while we may be a long way from reaching a full Kuhnian paradigm revolution, it is fair to say that qualitative research is no longer viewed as merely 'speculative', or 'soft', as was generally held to be the case by many in the past".

After we had created a general research question, we chose how to relate between theory and the research aimed to conduct. The approach we chose is iterative, which involves a "weaving back and forth between theory and data" (Bryman and Bell 2007:14). The iterative approach is appropriate to generate theory and is in accordance with the hermeneutic philosophy where "preconceptions provide a necessary frame of reference rather than act as distorting 'biases' that hinder understanding" (Thompson et al. 1994: 433) Our preconceptions, consisting of theoretical

and cultural knowledge, therefore provide a provisional foundation from which we can develop a more informed understanding of the 'by invitation only' phenomenon and save valuable time and money. (McCracken's 1988) The first step was therefore to conduct an exhaustive review of the literature and a cultural review including the associations, incidents and assumptions we perceived surrounding the topic, as we believe in McCracken's (1988) argument that the benefits of the pre-conceptions created in our case is much greater than their cost. These preconceptions were useful for preparing a loosely structured framework of questions and helped in the rummaging during the data analysis as it specifies categories and relationships that may organize the data and it establishes distance by determining the concepts on which perceptions depend. (Ibid) As Master of Science students in marketing, we have good knowledge of marketing practices and a basic understanding of consumer culture theory and the ongoing consumer trends. Our pre-existing knowledge of literature had a significant impact on the circumstances and constructs in focus in this study and helped us save valuable time. We kept an open mind to emerging concepts in our data collection and its interpretation (Goulding 2005) to balance the utilization of prior knowledge while allowing theory to emerge from our observations.

### **3.3 Research Method**

"A methodology is not a correct method to follow, but a creative approach to understanding, using whatever approaches are responsive to particular questions and subject matter." (Laverly 2003: 16) Thus, we complement the use of a research methodology with our good judgment and responsible principles as guidance in the research process.

We found that ethnography was not suitable for the purpose of this research, as this method focus on meanings of people and cultures (Bryman and Bell 2007: 441) rather than the consumer meanings of a phenomenon. According to Fennell (1985), firms should engage in phenomenological research in order to grasp consumer meanings and what they want, and thereby more efficiently market themselves. In accordance with Laverly (2003: 16) our "hermeneutic research is interpretive and concentrated on historical meanings of experience and their developmental and cumulative effects on individual and social levels." Consequently, hermeneutic phenomenology is the method we chose to guide our research process, as it focuses on arising consumer meanings from the interpretive interaction between the reader and historically created texts. (Ibid)

Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with peoples lived experiences and how these make up a life world. We therefore highlight details and seemingly minor aspects within their experiences that may otherwise be taken for granted to create meaning and understanding. Herme-

neutic phenomenology dates back to work by Martin Heidegger, who viewed humans “as being primarily concerned creatures with an emphasis on their fate in an alien world”. (Lavery 2003: 7) Hans-Georg Gadamer (1976 in Thompson et al. 1994: 434) was the first to practice the hermeneutic phenomenological method as a way to interpret text, when arguing that interpreters “can never step outside of their own historical frame of reference, nor would they want to”. However, to achieve the best account of the phenomenon, it is important in hermeneutic research to modify and / or change the research over time by being responsive to the emerging text and to additional information that provides insights into the consumer meanings (Ibid). We therefore designed the interview questions in a way that allowed respondents to expand on the topic. This allowed us to (re-) specify our research question after interpreting the data and thereafter collect additional theory and data (Bryman and Bell 2007: 406).

### 3.4 Data Collection

According to Lavery (2003: 18) “data can include the researcher’s personal reflections on the topic, information gathered from research participants, and depictions of the experience from outside the context of the research project itself, including the arts, such as poetry and painting” in hermeneutic phenomenological research. “Although there are other methods for conducting phenomenological research, such as the analysis of written statements, the interview is perhaps the most powerful means for attaining an in-depth understanding of another person’s experiences” (Thompson et al. 1989: 138). Easterby-Smith et al. (2008: 145) add that interviews are suitable in our case as the respondents’ constructs of opinions and beliefs are of interest, as understanding the world of the respondent is the aim and as the logic is unclear and issues are sensitive. We chose to collect data through face-to-face interviews as Bryman and Bell (2007) suggest that face-to-face interaction is the fullest condition of participation in someone else’s mind.

In this research we conducted existential-phenomenological interviews, as the aim is to describe and understand consumer experience as it is lived. This individualistic approach to social ontology and mentalism analyzes social phenomena as constellations of individuals where the location of the social is in human minds. Here, social order and social action is explained in terms of mental structures of knowledge and meaning, whereas culture is located in the minds of individuals. (Thompson et al. 1989; Moisander et al. 2009) Thus, we view the respondent as more than a ‘thinking’ individual but also as an ‘acting’, ‘feeling’ and ‘living’ individual as our task is to reflect and analyze their behavior (Thompson et al. 1989). Three key characteristics have to be considered in the context of conducting existential-phenomenological interviews. Firstly, experiences are seen as contextual. Secondly, experience is a dynamic process, meaning that different

events can be standing out while others stay in the background, which makes it crucial to understand the participant's experience within its life situation. Thirdly, experiences are reflected and un-reflected, meaning that we encourage the participant to reflect on aspects they have not reflected upon before. (Ibid)

The aim of the research decides how structured the interview should be (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008: 142). Some researchers are opponents of structuring the interview, as it is the meaning of the consumer that should be retrieved (Thompson et al. 1989). We agree with McCracken (1988) who suggests that the interview should be structured loosely through predetermined prompts and a well-designed questionnaire. We do this due to our lack of experience as interviewers which will most likely make us feel stressed by this task, and since we may damage the quality of the research data through a failure to attend important topics (Bryman and Bell 2007: 218). As interviewers, we must be able to concentrate to be "perceptive and sensitive to events, so that lines of inquiry can be changed and adapted to ones progress" as confusions and disagreements surround people's meanings and constructions of particular situations (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008: 146).

We conducted a semi-structured 'long interview' with the aim to increase the quality of our research. In the semi-structured interview, questions are rather general in how they are framed and the interviewer is free to ask follow-up questions. In the unstructured interview, the interviewer has a list of topics that should be covered and in the surrounding a conversation takes place, causing the phrasing and sequencing of question to vary between interviews. (Bryman and Bell 2007: 213) The structure, accomplished through an interview guide, allowed us to create a flow in the interview, formulate interview questions in a way to respond to our research question, plan prompts and help in recollecting the underlying theory of the different parts while paying full attention to the respondents answers (McCracken 1988; Bryman and Bell 2007: 483) By conducting 'long interviews' we got near the mental world of the individual and glimpse the categories and logic by which they see their world (McCracken 1988).

### **3.5 Sampling Method and Participant Selection Criteria**

While quantitative projects require investigators to construct a sample of necessary size and type to generalize the larger population, the qualitative issue is not about generalizeability. The aim in participant selection in hermeneutic phenomenological research is instead to gain access to the right individuals that are willing to talk about their experience (Laverly 2003) which makes external validity and the ability to generalize less relevant than rich data. (Bryman and Bell 2007: 200) Many researchers argue that the respondent should be a 'perfect stranger' (or not know) the in-

interviewer, as they may find it easier to open up as they never expect to see them again (Krueger 1994). Therefore, our sampling method was based on direct and indirect social ties, common for example in CCT status consumption research (see Holt and Üstüner 2010), due to the sensitive and confidential nature of the phenomenon to be investigated. In doing so we question whether this affected the quality of the research, as Nancarrow et al. (2001) referred to perfect strangers as a myth. Namely, we doubt that research participants really are constrained by knowing the interviewer, as being friends could potentially lead our informants to open up more to support the research. Our subsequent preferable choice of sampling method was snowball sampling, a non-probability sampling method where the researchers first contact people they deem relevant to the research topic (recruited through social ties) and then utilize these people to make contacts with others (Bryman and Bell 2007: 200). We gathered rich data already in the first round of interviews conducted through social ties and time constraints and a limited travel budget inhibited us from recruiting more respondents through snowball sampling.

The sample size was chosen according to the long interview principle: “less is more” (McCracken 1988). We followed McCracken’s advice of no more than eight respondents and the decision to interview six people was due to our limits in time and budget. The criteria used in the recruiting strategy followed guidelines in hermeneutic phenomenological research: “to select participants who have lived experience that is the focus of the study”...”and who are diverse enough from one another to enhance possibilities of rich and unique stories of the particular experience.” (Laverty 2003: 18)

More specifically, our strategy was to interview people with first hand experience (Thompson et al. 1989) in ‘by invitation only’ and related exclusive membership constructs. Our participants share a noticeable interest in luxury brands and ‘by invitation only’ constructs in a contemporary consumption context. We chose to recruit young graduate students and young professionals (female and male), as they are born in the era of postmodernity. In addition, we agree with Bryman and Bell (2007: 417) in that it could be problematic to interpret problems through some of the participant's eyes if they are very different from us. As a result, we interviewed people who are in a similar stage in life as us, ranging in age from 24 to 28 and within a phase of adolescence and adulthood. Possessions fulfill different functions in our lives, but people express themselves through material possessions throughout life. However, this varies over our life spans and to a decreasing extent as one ages. During ones youth, when people often own less material possessions, there is a tendency to define oneself through doing things rather than having things. (Belk 1988) As ‘by invitation only’ in a contemporary sense rather emphasizes do-

ing something than having something this makes our focus on the selected target group comprehensible. We interviewed culturally diverse respondents, to gain rich and unique descriptions.

Table 2 summarizes our respondent's profiles.

Name	Sex	Age	Nationality	Residence	Education	Occupation
Venus*	Female	24	US American	Lund, Sweden	Graduate student in Asian Studies Lund University, Sweden	Student
Björn*	Male	24	Swedish	Lund, Sweden	Bachelor student in Business Lund University, Sweden	Sales
Roger*	Male	28	Swedish	Helsingborg, Sweden	Bachelor in Construction Engineering Uppsala University, Sweden	Consultant
Johanna*	Female	24	Swedish	Malmö, Sweden	Graduate student in Business Lund University, Sweden	Student
Serena*	Female	24	Turkish	Lund, Sweden	Graduate student in Business Lund University, Sweden	Student
Boris*	Male	25	German	Copenhagen, Denmark	Graduate student in Business Copenhagen Business School, Denmark	Student

Table 2: Participant Profiles (\*=Pseudonyms)

### 3.6 Designing and Conducting the Interview

We made sure to conduct the interviews in unthreatening and relaxed atmospheres or neutral grounds, as deemed necessary by many researchers (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008: 151). Interviews were conducted separately in both the homes of the respondents, the homes of the interviewers or in separate rooms in libraries. Only the participant and two researchers (three interviewers in the first interview and one interviewer in the last interview) were present at each occasion during April 2010.

Following the aim of existential-phenomenological interviews involving to stay as close as possible to the lived experience (Laverty 2003), our interviews were designed to resemble more a conversation by providing a context in which respondents were free to describe their experiences in detail rather than applying a question and answer session (Thompson et al. 1989). Thus, our role as interviewers involved to appear less or equally powerful and knowledgeable as the re-

spondent, to allow the respondent to be the expert regarding his or her own experiences controlling the flow. We adapted a non-directive listening approach, which involves the avoidance of reading the hidden meaning of speech and gesture to later repeat it to the respondent. Follow-up questions were based on the respondent's own words and phrases (Thompson et al. 1989) as we continuously tried to identify and cultivate data on categories and relationships that have not been anticipated. Achieving a true conversation proved hard to accomplish in practice and our interview frame proved helpful in this context to deal with our inexperience as interviewers and imperfect familiarity with the topic.

In hermeneutic phenomenology, text will be generated within the relationship between the respondent and the interviewer. To create good data, it was therefore important to establish safety and trust early on and to maintain it throughout the interview (Lavery 2003). To signal that the interview is not threatening, we started the interview with simple and informational questions. More specifically, these were biographical questions, which included general background information about the participant, designed to capture simple descriptive details of an individual's life (McCracken 1988). In the early phase of the interview, we signaled assent to assure that there were no dangers in a potential loss-of-face through body postures and facial gestures (Thompson et al. 1989). Following these opening questions were the grand tour questions (McCracken 1988), designed to cover the list of topics provided by our literature review and trigger the informant to converse about the broad area of consumption. According to the hermeneutic phenomenological method, these questions are open and nondirective so that respondents can tell their own story of specific experiences in their own terms. (McCracken 1988; Thompson et al. 1994) These so-called first-person descriptions of 'by invitation only' as lived provided insight into the nature of the encounter, enabling rich descriptions of real experiences however acknowledges the subjectivity of respondents (Thompson et al. 1989). To a large extent, we restricted ourselves from asking the respondent direct 'why' questions, as this leads to a more distant and abstract discussion and may cause the respondents to rationalize their actions and become defensive. Keeping with phenomenological interview techniques, the opening grand tour question was designed to begin the dialogue of 'by invitation only' by asking: "when you think about 'by invitation only', what comes to mind?"

Due to the fact that the categories identified in the literature and cultural review may not emerge spontaneously in our interviews, we prepared "planned prompts" as suggested by McCracken (1988). Their purpose is to provide the respondents with something to push off against. This way, respondents can consider and discuss phenomena that they failed to recall. We asked the respondents to comment on pictures of *VonRosen*, *The Worlds Finest Clubs* and *ASmall-*

*World*, in order to provide their own version of what they see and think. (McCracken 1988) Inserting photographs into the interviews is called photo elicitation (Harper 2002) or visual ethnography (Bryman and Bell 2007). This also helps to develop a more complex understanding of the “chains of activity” (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008: 162) regarding identity constructions related to the phenomenon.

Another way to get respondents to talk was to use floating techniques, such as expressing surprise and asking about the key terms we identified. Moreover, as we agree with Blumer (1954 in Bryman and Bell 2007: 408) that concepts should be treated as a reference or guidance instead of as something definite, we took nuances and alternative views through finding out the respondent interpretations and meanings into consideration.

As data quality is reflected in the presence of the respondents, we encouraged them to share emotional experiences, stress political action, take sides, reflect and act throughout our interviews. We tried to minimize the respondent’s distortion by paying attention to impression management, topic avoidance, deliberate misrepresentation, a lack of understanding and inexplicit material in the respondent testimony (McCracken 1988), as “people cannot be trusted to say exactly what their motives are, as they often get ideas about their own motives from commonly accepted half truths” (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008: 145). Not only deception, but also unintentional lies occur, as the respondents may lack awareness of their motives and thus respond inaccurately.

To check the accuracy in respondent’s statements and thereby increase the quality of our research, we often used challenging and deepened probes in specific topics (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008: 145). To possess skills in probing eliciting information from respondents, we made sure to prepare and we mainly did the interviews in pairs. (Bryman and Bell 2007)

We followed McCracken’s (1988) recommendation to record the interviews on tape and to transcribe them in word documents. The transcripts will stand as evidence that we assumed the role we have now argued for (Thompson et al. 1989). Lastly, we ensured our participants’ confidentiality of the research data, asking for informed consent as well as protecting their privacy and anonymity (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008: 133). More specifically, we asked respondents to sign a ‘standard ethical protocol’ where they were made them aware of ethical aspects concerning their participation in our research (McCracken 1988). The ‘standard ethical protocol’ is attached to the appendix of this thesis.

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

Theory and categorization emerged from the collection and analysis of data while trying to understand inherent patterns and a cultural logic on which these ideas rest (McCracken 1988). The

object of our analysis was to determine the categories, relationships, and assumptions that inform the respondent's view of the world in general and the topic of 'by invitation only' specifically (McCracken 1988).

Data analysis in hermeneutic phenomenology is built on a hermeneutic circle of understanding, which involves co-construction of the data with the participant. (Laverly 2003) Underlying is that "personal understandings are always situated within a network of culturally shared knowledge, beliefs, ideals, and taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of social life" (Thompson et al. 1994: 433). Therefore, "understanding occurs through a fusion of horizons, which is a dialectic between the pre-understandings of the research process, the interpretative framework and the sources of information" (Koch 1995: 835).

The interpretations were accomplished in accordance with the hermeneutical circle methodology, by means of the "continuous part-to-whole and whole to part movement" (Thompson et al. 1994: 435) in order to develop a holistic understanding of each interview transcript (Thompson and Haytko 1997). In existential-phenomenological analysis and interpretation, the part-to-whole process occurs in two phases. Firstly, each interview and transcript was analyzed individually (idiographic level). Secondly, a new part-to-whole phase began while separate interviews were related to each other in order to identify common patterns and global themes. (Thompson et al. 1989) In accordance, we applied a method similar to the five-stage analysis process recommended by McCracken (1988) where each stage represents a higher level of generality. This method is suitable as it moves from the particular to the general.

Following the hermeneutics position where language represents "a wide range of commonsense sayings, metaphors, and stories that can provide a meaningful perspective on one's cultural and personal history" (Thompson et al. 1994: 434), leads us to focus the analysis on what is really being said. Interpreting language does not only include verbatim reports but also what is said between the lines. Therefore, we paid attention to "silence, the absence of speaking, the silence of the unspeakable and the silence of being or life itself." (Laverly 2003) Throughout the analysis phase, we paid increased attention to the sensitivity of symbolic metaphors used by each participant, reflecting that different events or images are likely to be of symbolical importance to each participant. By applying symbolic metaphors the researcher is able to interpret interview statements in a way that emphasizes important distinctions among participant's viewpoints, unlike thematic interpretations, which tend to stress points of similarities among participants' perceptions while "smoothing over specific meanings and issues that could serve to differentiate among them." (Thompson et al. 1994: 436) However, we also acknowledged that the interpretations of symbolic metaphors do focus on patterns of similarity: "Although symbolic metaphors

may increase sensitivity to differences across participants, they still serve a more thematic, similarity-highlighting function in each interview text.” (Ibid: 436)

### **3.8 Collection of Primary and Secondary Sources**

To find the relevant information about the commercial development of the ‘by invitation only’ phenomena, we searched the internet for businesses and used our own and the knowledge of friends ‘in the know’. The process of collecting literature and theory was a continuous one to keep up to date and complement our understanding of the topic and theoretical base. We aimed to use mainly primary sources in this study, which refers to the data collected during the time of the research process (Princeton 2010). We used mainly these original works such as journal articles which gave us insight on the latest developments in research. As these published articles are peer reviewed, meaning that two or more experts approved the article before being published, they are also highly reliable (Fisher 2007: 81). Primary sources were found through the index ELIN at Lund Business and academic databases such as Emerald, Ebsco and JSTOR. Interview findings provided insights about the specific research question.

The reason to include as few secondary sources as possible is that these sources, including textbooks, that analyses and interpret information from primary sources (Princeton 2010) may be misinterpreted by the authors. If we could not find the primary source and the textbook was printed by academic press, we considered these to be reliable enough for our study.

Key search words in our literature review included: by invitation only, membership clubs, Gentlemen’s Clubs and synonyms to these.

## 4 Analysis

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*The analysis part attempts to answer what meanings and motives consumers attribute to 'by invitation only' that has made the phenomenon an increasingly popular marketing and branding strategy in postmodern consumer culture. Following the hermeneutic approach, we will first analyze and categorize the context and background of the interview stories, in order to provide a concrete framework for the understanding of the consumer meanings of 'by invitation only' in a contemporary consumption context. Thereafter, we conduct an in depth analysis of the empirical material concerning the topic under investigation obtained from the consumer interviews accomplished. Here, we analyze the data according to 'playgrounds' and cross themes.*

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### 4.1 Participants and their Consumption Practices

CCT acknowledged that consumption is an instrument to build the identity of individuals, as the symbolic value of consumer goods play a significant role in contemporary society. These goods are one of the most important templates for the self and consuming them select, display, assume and change personal meanings. (Belk 1988; McCracken 2005) As we are investigating consumer meanings of the 'by invitation only' phenomenon that entered postmodern marketing practices, we are also interested in the general consumption practices and identity projects of our selected participants. Below we will provide the reader with six rich profile cases of our respondents making it easier to get familiar with them right from the start of the analysis chapter.

#### **Boris - Cash is King**

Boris is a 25 years old graduate student born in Germany. Currently he is living in Copenhagen, Denmark studying for his master degree in the field of business administration. Besides his studies, Boris has several interests. He describes himself as a "car freak" that loves cars and sports cars in particular. Furthermore he has an interest in boats in general and goes skiing every year. He also enjoys fashion and shopping, although normally he only buys his "standard brands".

*"I like to go shopping. It's nice and I usually don't buy anything on the Internet unless I don't have money and I get it much cheaper there. I more like to go shopping and look at windows. I do have my certain brands and I usually tend to buy only these brands even though other seem very nice, the clothes and fashion, but then I rather look how it looks there and check out the brand I use to buy and I like to have something similar or even better."*

For Boris, fashion is a way to express his identity and he has a clear idea of what he likes. His favorite clothing brand is *Ralph Lauren* because he “just can perfectly identify with the East Coast American style...that’s very elegant, sporty but also fashion as a classic - it never runs out of fashion...” Boris uses the tool fashion to show his values, what he means and to express “status”. According to him you make a statement with your choice of fashion.

*“...expressing yourself, showing what your values are and what you mean. And it’s also part of status, of course, if you can afford kind of expensive stuff. You make a statement with that. As far as I know it is like this. I am a creative person but when it comes to fashion I got my certain standards, because firstly it’s nice I know the quality, I know the brand, it’s fits my style so why shall I change? I have my identity and I express that through these brands...”*

In terms of fashion, Boris considers himself as being a more conservative person: “a little relaxed but sophisticated conservative...” He also likes customized goods like shirts that he once bought at a tailor. Here, he emphasizes the aspect of quality but also the crucial point of “immediate satisfaction” that is important for him, as he does not like to wait too long for the result. When it comes to a specific lifestyle he sees himself more appealing to the “Yuppie” character and lifestyle, as he usually wears a blazer and a collared shirt when he goes out in a discotheque rather than just a T-Shirt as this doesn’t “appeal” to him.

Because Boris does not want to “look like everyone”, he avoids buying clothes from *H&M* as many people wear it. When it comes to food and alcoholic beverages, Boris sticks to well-known brands like *Kraft* or *Absolut Vodka* avoid private label products from discounters because he just feels more comfortable and the taste is better. Most of Boris’s friends share an extrovert behavior and “high emphasis on getting quality and value for money”. Interestingly, when it comes to coolness and to describe a cool person, Boris bases his argumentation not on a specific image but on ‘action’. For him coolness is based on a person’s behavior rather than the possessions he or she own. Furthermore, for him the cool people are people you identify with.

*“I would say someone that is cool is a person that knows what he wants. It’s not like just wearing the hip clothes and going always with the trend. To me a cool person is a person that has visions as much as dreams, that actually does something and has ideals to live for.”*

Boris’ future plan is “making a good career”, which does not necessarily mean to become “super rich”, but entails that it should be possible to have a “nice living”. He explains having enough

money with an attention-grabbing example of having “spoiled children and going on extra vacation”. This is an indication of status symbols on a personal (children as a trophy) and material level (leisure and vacation). His relation to money is diverse. On the one hand, his approach is very rational as he puts high emphasis on “getting quality and value for money”. On the other hand, he has an ironic exposure to money as he rather believes in *Deutsche Bank* instead of going to church too often.

*“Well, how can I say...I am protestant but honestly I don't go often to church; I rather believe in Deutsche Bank because they pay out in cash so that is more important to me. [Laughing]”*

Boris has first-hand experience with ‘by invitation only’ as he is a member of an exclusive members only nightclub in Hamburg, which for him is the “most exclusive club.” Boris also mentions ‘by invitation only’ in connection to his favorite fashion label *Ralph Lauren*.

### **Serena - Shopping is my Religion**

Serena is 24 years old and was born in Turkey. Before she moved to Lund, Sweden to study for her master degree in business, she lived also in Cyprus, Finland and in France. In Turkey Serena gained an English based, private education as well in high school as in her university studies in the field of Business Administration. During the interview Serena iteratively emphasizes the importance of the private education she gained, as this is an indicator of mechanics of class distinction in Turkey.

Her major interest, which she also names her “first priority”, is fashion. Serena describes her shopping practices as her “religion thing”. More specifically she likes fashion design, and created her own designs in collaboration with a small sized fashion company. Throughout the interview Serena is really excited and happy when she talks about her interest in fashion and fashion design. Her favorite brand and simultaneously designer is *Marc Jacobs*, because she appreciates his style and designs, which are “a little bit crazy” and “not so classy”. She prefers “simple dresses” instead of colorful ones. When she really loves a brand, like she loves *Marc Jacobs*, Serena does not think that much about money: “it will be worth it because it's my favorite designer” ‘...’ “whatever I pay for him it will be really worth it.”

Besides the strong interest in fashion, which makes her really happy, Serena loves music and European cinema, especially French cinema. In addition she loves art and “everything related to art”; she likes surrealist artists in particular. In France, Serena spend a “really intense” month in Paris “trying to learn the Parisian lifestyle and French”. During this time she also saw the designer *Marc Jacobs* from far during an exclusive fashion show of a well-known fashion house,

where a friend invited her during her “French culture month” in Paris. Serena describes her experience very enthusiastically and it can be seen as an authenticity gathering tour to import cultural capital (Holt and Üstüner 2010).

*“This life was great because we had nothing to do. My friend was looking for...an internship. So we had nothing to do, just seeing the city every day. Just sitting with the locals. It was really great, but I can say we really enjoyed it because we had time to walk in every street. And see everything. It was really great.”*

Similar to the Turkish high cultural capital (HCC) class described in Holt and Üstüner (2010), Serena puts effort into embracing the “Western Lifestyle myth” but mentions that she prefers the European lifestyle over the American lifestyle, as she is not really interested in “American things”. Like the HCCs who strongly adopt the global consumption field imposed by the West what gives status value, Serena relies upon the Western lifestyle, and especially the French lifestyle, as cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Holt and Üstüner 2010).

Although Serena first hesitates she admits to sharing worldviews with her closest friends: “the same activities, same lifestyle and same things”. Coolness is for Serena a mix of intellectuality, fashion style and the right manners. Good manners derived from an upper class background is important for her because “you can understand that if you are with a bunch of people, if somebody is acting a little bit different you can see the differences and you can understand that it is coming from his roots...”

After finishing her degree Serena would love to travel in Asia, work as a volunteer working for a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in Africa. Serena's future plans and career goals are to work in the fashion marketing business or in the fast moving consumer goods industry.

Serena has lots of experiences of taking part in ‘by invitation only’ events. She was part of the *Rotary Club*, where “you have to be advised by someone” to get in, when she was younger. She ended her membership now as she does not have time to go to their gatherings any more. She also has experience of ‘by invitation only’ clubs, fashion retailers and social networks.

### **Björn - Self-Made Man with Blue Blood**

Björn is 24 years old, Swedish and is a business student at Lund University. Currently, he is taking a break from studying in order to work with business and he is a part owner in a small company selling consumer goods in the grocery industry. When talking about his career he is showing a lot of ‘drive’ to succeed in his field of interest. Björn's goal is to ultimately have his own firm; how-

ever, he considers working for a few years in marketing in order to gain experiences, possibly as a marketing assistant in the firm in which he is a part owner of.

Björn is from an upper class background, as he was born noble. He grew up in a town in Sweden that is known for hosting an international tennis tournament that takes place there every summer. During this tournament the normally sleepy town gets invaded by the *Stockholm Brats* (Östberg 2007), which move their party from Stockholm to Båstad. Both his parents are highly educated; his mother is a therapist and his stepdad is a retired CEO for one of the most famous Swedish companies. Fitness, golf, tennis, hunting, martial arts, shooting are some of his hobbies and a common denominator of these sport activities are their upper class image.

When discussing shopping habits with Björn, we find out that he defines himself as a “pretty usual male consumer when it comes to clothing”. Following this he describes himself as a person who shops on a few occasions in the month, where he buys a few things without much consideration and then he feels satisfied. Lacking an interest in fashion, he still finds it important to dress in a nice way and he sometimes enjoys “to check out clothes”. Something that intrigues Björn is quality of the material and how things are produced. This has led him to buy rather “a few quality things than many lower quality things”. He also likes customizing clothes, as he finds it considerably nicer to customize a shirt than to buy it already made. The most effort in purchasing he devotes to technical objects such as his TVs, computer, etc. and describes this as a result of the large amount of specifications provided, as he has a need to compare these. Thus, he expresses a need to be in control over owning high quality products.

Björn claims to not look up to a certain group of people in deciding what to consume and does not label himself. However, he is open about that he and his friends dress in a similar way and that this “group thing” creates a sense of belonging.

*“If you are a gang of friends that wear pretty classical things and then a punker joins a group, then you see directly that it’s not fitting. I think we have this inside of us, as gregarious animals. That you always try to fit in, it’s like a surviving thing as you are stronger together than alone.”*

However, in comparison to Björn, some of his friends are more interested in certain fashion brands. Björn is rather brand loyal when it comes to clothes, as he likes to continue buying what he fancies. However, brands are becoming less important to him and he has problems to name a brand that he likes a lot.

*“When I was a kid it was more like that you should have that brand for cars, and those specific things, if it was a stereo it should only be Yamaha or you know...It becomes so equal now when everything is becoming so good. I think it is harder now... when you grow older... when you make choices, it isn't as important, or at least not for me.”*

He describes his style as “pretty plain” in few colors including items such as blue jeans, shirts and nice shoes, white sneakers and thin jackets. When he explains how he differs from his friends he says:

*“I guess you try to find your own thing, to differentiate from the whole thing. That is what I find so interesting, you want to be the same, but also a bit different” ‘...’ “But you don't want to copy what anyone else has. But then in the end, it always ends up with that if you are a big gang of friends, then everyone looks similar in the end anyway...which is a bit funny. So maybe unconsciously you do that. And you try to find your personal touch.”*

It is clear that Björn looks up to people who express their views and sees, and perhaps accepts, reality and its many nuances. *Anna Anka*, a Swedish luxury wife who generated a lot of attention in media in the last year due to her outspoken and different views, is someone he would like to meet to see what is hiding behind “the craziness”. Another object of admiration is his stepfather as he is a so-called self-made man who made it to the top when he reached a CEO position in one of Sweden's most famous companies. The fact that the stepfather also taught Björn the value of money adds to the impression that Björn wants to succeed in business by himself and make his own fortune.

*“...he has been my father during the larger part of life and he did everything from the bottom, all by himself and he has worked himself up and been really big. And I look up to him because of that, he has really done that you know...and he is the one who showed me the value of money and the value of everything, and I share a lot of values with him. That's why I look up to him and think he is cool.”*

Björn has worked at a ‘by invitation only’ club popular in the ‘brat culture’ (Östberg 2007) as an assistant nightclub manager. In this position, he could invite people to be on the guest list. Therefore, he has impressive knowledge about existing clubs and societies and he seems to have a genuine interest in the phenomenon. He's also experienced as a guest at ‘by invitation only’ nightclubs and bars. A close relative to Björn is a member of *Noppe's*, one of the most prestigious

clubs in Stockholm where the king himself is a member, and the club owner *Noppe* himself is a friend of the family.

### **Johanna - The High Society Chameleon**

Johanna is 24 years old and was raised in Sweden. She is currently a Master student in the field of Business Administration and at the same time working. Johanna's father is working in the US while her mother live in Sweden. Siblings and relatives are spread out globally.

Johanna's family has been rich for several generations, as a result of the many generations of successful business. As she claims that she could have whatever she wanted and that her future is secured, she can be considered to have high economic capital (Bourdieu 1984). Even though money is not a problem for Johanna, she started working when she was 16 years old and has "never stopped". She reasons in the way that "I can get financial backup, but I would rather buy it myself". Her drive is not only independency but also her interest in conducting business. Her very ambitious career goals include management positions in large international firms and ultimately a career as an entrepreneur.

The grand parents of Johanna donated money to different charity causes and thus were very popular in their society. Johanna talks about this with admiration and mentions that also she engage in charity work when she has time. Her closest friends already spent a lot of time on charity work. Thus, it is evident that charity is important for Johanna.

Johanna is careful to adapt her personal brand within different groups of friends and in different countries. As seen in the quote below, Johanna doesn't like talking about her money even though she feels that she has earned it. This is especially the case with her student friends.

*"I don't have any student loans. I have friends with student loans accounting for 300 000 to 400 000 SEK. And then it's really embarrassing to talk about such a subject. But at the same time it's silly because I have really been fighting for it."*

Johanna expresses a particular fondness for travelling to USA for many reasons involving luxurious living. About treating herself with spending a lot of money on shopping, clubbing and massages she says: "I liked it, its fun to do that sometimes." Although Johanna finds shopping hard work and time consuming and expresses a general dislike of the activity, luxury shopping in the US, in stores such as *Gucci*, is expressed as a positive experience where she can find nice things with high quality. Interestingly, Johanna would never visit the same stores in Sweden. Namely, she appreciates the service level and more relaxed atmosphere in American luxury stores compared to the same shopping in Sweden. Interestingly, Johanna really enjoys the more luxurious

activities she engages with in the US, while expressing that “even being on a guest list” feels embarrassing in Sweden.

*“But then for example when we are in the US, we only went to VIP things, me and my sister, all the time. And it was thanks to my father’s contacts. We had champagne in the room 24/1... or perhaps you say 24/7 [everyone giggles]. Just to check into a hotel at your own VIP desk. You just go there and you don’t have to stand in line...lots of small things. And there it feels good, but in Sweden it does not feel good. Here it is embarrassing to do something...even to be on a guest list sometimes, because people think that you think that you are special to be on a list and can go before the queue.” ‘...’ “There I could easily drive around in a Porsche if I would feel like it, but I would never do it here in Malmö... never! It would just feel embarrassing.” ‘...’ “I don’t like people that think they are special in some way.”*

The negative associations of being seen as someone special in Sweden are later explained by Johanna as a result of the relatively small population and equal distribution of wealth in Sweden. This is contrasted with the large size of the US and the unequal wealth distribution that doesn’t “annoy” people in the same way. Differences in culture help explaining this phenomenon, as Sweden’s culture is affected by the societal values of the “Jante Law”, which states the same things as Johanna has hinted: setting yourself apart and thinking that you are better than someone else is unworthy and inappropriate (Nationalencycledin 2010). In contrast, the US has largely positive associations to wealth, due to the ‘American dream’ supported by the ‘Declaration of Independence’, which claims that all men are born equal and thus have equal opportunities to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (US History 2010). This fear of “bothering” people and thus “feeling embarrassed”, has caused Johanna to be more inconspicuous in displaying her wealth in Sweden; for example, she wouldn’t wear a *Louis Vuitton* bag in school and she does not want to be “sticking out in any way.”

Johanna does not consider herself to be a part of a subculture: I don’t really look at another group of people.” She claims to not look at anyone else in deciding what she buys, but rather that she buys what she likes. However, Johanna describes her closest friends as ordinary and educated people that wear “basic” clothes and herself in a similar way according to behavior and clothing style.

After having troubles coming up with a brand that she likes a lot, she later expresses that her favorite brand when it comes to bags is *Chanel*. Here, she relates to memories from her childhood as well as luxury. It can be argued that since the reason to not buy *Louis Vuitton* is that there exist “such good copies” and feels that it “destroys so much”. When discussing more tech-

nical possessions such as her computer and mobile phone, Johanna expresses a need for simple and easy to use products. However, due to a need to fit in, she buys and considers buying the trendiest but for her technologically advanced products *iPhone* and *Mac* that is used by a broader reference group in her immediate surrounding.

Johanna looks up to *Carolina Gynning* [a Swedish glamour model and TV personality] as she likes “luxury goods and all this a lot”, but at the same time she does not want to be seen as something she is not. This coolness involves not being uptight through behaving according to socially accepted manners, but rather people who has the courage to be themselves. She is especially provoked by people that work as a “drive courier during the weeks and order bottles of alcohol and mixers on the weekends and think that they are something. And then they aren’t anything.” The annoyance with conspicuous consumption seems to be expressed further also as it relates to newly rich people, which she refers to as “wannabes...that want to show off all the time.”

The ‘by invitation only’ phenomenon has not been a large part of Johanna’s life, although she does like the benefits it brings. She is a participant in the ‘by invitation only’ crowd as she goes to some events. She did attend rather spectacular ‘by invitation only’ events as the daughter of her father, since he is a member of ‘by invitation only’ clubs and VIP programs. Experiences relating to her own achievements includes being invited to one event that she did not attend and being a frequent guest at a club at a time when it only let in people from the guest list. She is fascinated by this concept as, for example, she shows less interest in the above-mentioned club since they stopped using ‘by invitation only’ strategies.

### **Roger - The Grand Tourist’s Need for Speed**

Roger is 28 years old, Swedish and currently lives in a city known for its history and beauty in Sweden. He started studying at Uppsala University, Sweden directly after his military service and after three years of studies he started to work. His father has his own company. Roger holds a Bachelor degree in Construction Engineering and is now working as a consultant within this field. He has worked in Stuttgart, Germany for one and a half years as a team leader.

Roger’s personal interests include tennis, motor sport, photography, travelling, computer and video games. The biggest passion is *Formula One* and he has recently started to travel to watch the races live. He says that he wants to travel and watch a race at least once a year. He loves spending his holidays at the French Riviera in places like Cannes, Nice and Monaco. He likes it because as he says its “warm, exclusive, nice and really cool” with the possibilities to play tennis and golf with his family and shopping. He enjoys the private beaches where there are fees to get

in and after a long day he and his brother often hit the nightlife at nice clubs. He likes the fact that you have to dress well to get in.

In his professional life, Roger works in the building industry and is at times in charge of projects. No set career goals exist but he considers developing his father's real estate. He points out that he does not want to work ten hours a day until he is 60 and dreams of "earning good money but working less".

He enjoys shopping abroad and sees himself as kind of a "brand freak" where *Ralph Lauren* is his favorite clothing brand. He has even developed what he calls his 'Ralph Lauren Index' which tracks the price of *Oxford Shirts* in different countries. Roger describes his clothing style as a "classic preppy American college style". To dress well is important for Roger as he strongly believes in other benefits than just looking good. He refers to an image that others will recognize and the importance of dressing nice at work.

*"At least at work, I always dress well, always chinos and dress shoes and shirt, always, and I have always had it that way. I have colleagues that come in with jeans and T-shirt with a zipper thing and sneakers, and they don't get anywhere. They are not the ones that get to travel abroad for work like me. It is like when they sent me down to Germany, they do not have to say 'Roger', and you need to dress up first before you travel down. They do not need to say that to me. So that is why I think I got the chance to travel down there, not only because of the clothes but it's good. Some people just don't give a shit, but if you want to advance then it's good."*

Apart from *Ralph Lauren* his favorite brand is *Porsche*. When he was working in Stuttgart the first time in 2007, he "had a Porsche at home" as he says that he wanted the model for a long time.

*"Porsche is from Stuttgart, so I went to the museum and this shit. Then I walked into the Porsche centre and stood there with a new turbo, which was black and nice" '...' "So I had two of them for a while. And this car, I was looking into a lot before I"*

Roger also has first hand experiences with 'by invitation only'. He enjoys what he calls the "brat parties" and the fact that they often are 'by invitation only' as similar people come together. However, he points out that he despises the 'brat culture' when it is taken to the extreme.

### **Venus - Eclectic in Taste and Can Do it All**

Venus is 24 years old and was raised in a cosmopolitan large city in USA. Before she moved to Lund, Sweden, to study for her Masters degree in Asian Studies, she lived in both Beijing and Shanghai for almost four years in total. Her family is working in business, except the mother which works as a nurse. Venus went to several boarding schools in the US.

Personal interests include traveling, photography, fitness, and other “nice things”. Venus career goals are broad but ultimately she would like to work within the public sector, and working for the United States state department. At some point, she would like to go to law school in the US and would also like to work privately for a while.

Venus enjoys shopping and especially consuming high-end goods. She points out that Asia is the best place to shop as everything is made there. She is the only informant to describe herself as “eclectic” in her shopping habits and style, emphasizing that she “can do” all sorts of brands.

*“I am eclectic... you know I could do Dolce&Gabbana, I can do Prada, and I can do Gucci, this kind of style. Not these particular brands but this you know line of, the way they focus on markets. I can do it all. You know I don't say I only wear, you know business casual all the time, and no, it's not me.”*

Her main priority when consuming and making purchasing decisions are quality and longevity “because you have spent the money and you have made an investment every time you buy something.” She is also very interested in an knowledgeable about the fashion production and distribution process thanks to a friend.

*“I remember when H&M first came to the states...and the quality was quite good. I don't know what there factory standards were then, but now its shit! Quality has definitely seen a drastic change. In terms of T-shirts, I don't know if they changed where they are getting their cotton from, like maybe they are using their Chinese cotton factories in Dongchuan and they are not using Malaysian or Indonesian cotton anymore so this is very poor. Poorly manufactured, so you wash it once and it is kind of done. So definitely looking for quality where things are produced, how they are produced and these processes are very important to me.”*

Venus wants to find unique pieces, whether it is shoes or clothes. The clothes should fit properly, be unique and accentuate the body: “I mean who wants to look like everybody else.” This could be explained by that image is something that is important to Venus. Moreover, she is very aware of luxury services, fashion and nightlife, and her background as a marketer makes her “insights”

obvious, when explaining what companies can provide to make wealthy people have a comfortable life and their feelings and thoughts regarding this lifestyle.

She describes her friends as international in terms of well traveled, educated and that they like to enjoy themselves. 'By invitation only' events did figurate somewhat in Venus life, she has been at a Polo event at the "super, super super exclusive" 'Royal Salute' Polo Club in Shanghai where they target "these ridiculously rich Chinese people".

## 4.2 The Exclusivity Aura of 'By Invitation Only' and its Components

Consumers immediately have an exclusive image of 'by invitation only' products and brands, just as media has proposed (Profit 2010) and firms have aimed to achieve (VonRosen 2010). The level of exclusivity of 'by invitation only' is dependent on many different aspects that we will discuss next. We give a deeper description of why exclusivity, which our informants generally addresses as the feeling of being someone special and larger than others, are so important for our informants and how this is provided by the 'by invitation only' phenomenon.

The limited customer base is in Björn's opinion a "prerequisite" to exclusivity, making 'by invitation only' a great tool to achieve it. This is supported by membership theory created by Häckner and Nyberg (1996), who state that the value of the brand is negatively related to the total number of purchasers, as it is the exclusiveness of the product that creates its value. Björn describes the this aspect satisfies the need to feel a bit larger as the level of exclusivity increases with the number of people being rejected and as people compare themselves to others. Also Johanna is opposed to clubs that does not take the 'by invitation only' seriously and really limit the crowd, as she clearly expresses that she finds it "really ridiculous" with clubs where it is "not difficult" to become a member and "to let everybody in is of course not so good." Boris is on the same track as he mentions how hard it is to get in when he speaks about the most exclusive club, in his opinion, *Upper East* in Hamburg, Germany. That exclusiveness of the 'by invitation only' club is dependent on how many want to become a member and how many is rejected is also in line with research created by Taddei (1999), which suggested that the reputation of the club is crucial, as prestige is dependent on how difficult it is to become a member.

The difficulty of becoming a member and, therefore, the amount of status gained is also decided by the allocation rule used for admitting members (Basu 1989). This phenomenon also occurs in our study. For example, Johanna associates 'by invitation only' with the process of selecting members that are given the privilege to join intimate events with a smaller group of people. Johanna talks about how nice it is "to get invited to different things" as this represents that "you are in their target group." Supposedly, she wants the target group to be defined as this gives

her more specific associations and as this increases the worthiness of belonging to the club (Taddei 1999).

Our informants clearly express that they like ‘by invitation only’ as it gives them the opportunity to be with similar people. The resulting heterogeneous population, where some individuals are more desirable members than others, occurs when the population attaches a high value to status (Ackere and Haxholdt 2002). The optimal strategy from the club manager’s perspective is here to exclude undesirable individuals (Ibid) and attract prestigious members that others want to be associated with (Taddei 1999). Thus, who are members and how strict the selection criteria are affects the exclusivity of the ‘by invitation only’ club. The difficulty to join can in turn limit the individual’s cost of status seeking activities by making it difficult for new status seekers to join. (Congleton 1989)

A new finding occurs in our study concerning how exclusivity of the ‘by invitation only’ club is affected by the delivery of the invitation. For Venus, one of her first associations to ‘by invitation only’ was a (physical) paper invitation, as this possibly represents exclusivity for her. She tells us about how she received a champagne bottle as an invite once and that this made her feel special. She describes that ‘by invitation only’ marketing and branding strategies feed on the fact that people are “narcissists” and that they want to “feel important”. And as illustrated in Serena’s quote below: the nicer the invite, the more exclusivity. Thus it can be argued that being wooed may increase the exclusivity of the ‘by invitation only’ club.

*“One day I go to my mail there was a purple bag and there was a card inside in an envelope. So it was really cool like” ‘...’ “And then you opened it and there was a purple little bag and you got your card. It’s really chic you know, it’s not like only an envelope and a card inside. They make it really fancy so you say, ‘oh my god – this week I’m there’ because I got invited to the first opening. If it was a random mail like ‘you are invited to our club opening’. You may say maybe I’ll go... but if you receive in that chic bag and with your card, of course I will be there cause everybody is gonna be there. So it was really good.”* *Serena, 24, Turkey*

Björn finds that for him to feel exclusive it is not enough to have a limited customer base but other people must also know what the brand or event is about. Namely, if people “recognize the product you get the feeling that you are recognized”. The exclusivity of the ‘by invitation only’ club is therefore dependent on the fact that other consumers recognize it. Recognition is a necessary attribute underlying membership as a source of ‘societal’ status, as Taddei (1999) suggested that prestige was achieved from being perceived as an important person worthy of belonging to a club. Success in achieving recognition depends on the level of buzz the firm achieves through us-

ing ‘by invitation only’ (Economist 2009) as well as the other measures they implement to educate the consumers in question. Here, media plays a key role as it functions as a creator of subcultural knowledge and informs about the “linking value” of the ‘by invitation only’ club in relation to different goods (Thornton 1996; Östberg 2007).

Our findings show that the decision of making information about the ‘by invitation only’ club public is complicated, as consumers also value the mystery ‘by invitation only’ surrounded with it. This consumer meaning has not been addressed in membership literature previously. The need for mystery occurred in the interview with Björn, as he was convinced that it is important for ‘by invitation only’ clubs to have a secret guest list. Moreover, Serena was intrigued by the secrecy that a whole club was kept secret from the public, as this creates a stronger bond also to the other members. This is visible in the quote below. Serena also talks about how people in these clubs are ‘in the know’ leading us to an additional explanation for the need of mystery, namely that it helps members to gain association value (Basu 1989) of being influential and ‘in the know’. Thus, the club has to balance how much information is made public and how much remains secret.

*“We had one club called Gossip...it was open four years ago and it was really secret at the beginning. It was in the basement of another club, so most don’t know what’s going on there and you have to have this card to get in. So invitation only is really important” ‘...’ “So then you can know who is going to your place and [people] not going to cause trouble. It is really important I think.” ‘...!’ ” So it was also good that you knew that the people going there are chosen – not random people – so you fell better in these places then you say ‘yeah you are chosen’ so the party is gonna be great. It was good.”*

*Serena, 24, Turkey*

The intrinsic value of the membership is also affecting the exclusivity of the ‘by invitation only’ club (Basu 1989). For example, Johanna associates ‘by invitation only’ to events where she is offered “finger food and champagne” and Venus thinks about “red carpets and champagne”. These physical benefits seem to be expected and can be described as relatively expensive features that often occur at glamorous events. Therefore, we argue that providing glamour while caring for the members will increase the exclusivity of ‘by invitation only’ clubs.

### **4.3 ‘By Invitation Only’ and its Commercial Playgrounds**

In this section, we aim to make visible what meanings consumers attribute to ‘by invitation only’ and thereby grasp the additional consumer motives and meanings addressed by the increase in ‘by invitation only’ strategies in postmodern consumer culture. To accomplish this, we have gathered

the respondent's experiences with 'by invitation only' in profit driven companies. We chose to analyze consumer meanings according to the commercial areas first as consumer meanings of the phenomenon showed to vary greatly from 'playground' to 'playground'. This helped in describing how the postmodern 'by invitation only' phenomenon sets itself apart from the London Gentlemen's Clubs in the nineteenth century. Thereafter, we discuss the emerging cross themes in chapter 5.4 that we find important to highlight in answering our research question. The consumer meanings regarding 'by invitation only' in this study mainly relate to the respondents first hand experiences and to a smaller extent third party interpretations when experience was lacking.

### **Playground Nightclubs & Bars - In Search for the Real Party**

The immediate and most important connection of 'by invitation only' in the minds of our respondents is to nightclubs and bars where being on the guest lists or owning a membership card is a requirement in order to get in. The respondents had most awareness and experiences of 'by invitation only' in this sector and it was utilized for both marketing and branding purposes. This can be explained by that there is little 'by invitation only' around except the 'by invitation only' nightclubs, as in the case of Roger who lives in Helsingborg. However, he thinks that "it would have been fun with more". In a similar manner, Serena explicitly expressed that nightclubs using 'by invitation only' are more important for her than boutiques utilizing this strategy, as she will go to the nightclubs on a more frequent basis.

Björn describes the shared consumer meanings by our respondents with a pattern being visible throughout the interviews. He perceives that going to 'by invitation only' clubs and bars is "most often about the fellowship that you get there" as it is a lot about "the community and many of these are old friends". This is strengthened by Maffesoli's (1996) research that confirms the growing importance of creating social ties in postmodernism.

In Serena's case, this is very visible as she described knowing everybody in the club as something that made it "really good to be there" and therefore it became her "favorite club" in Ankara: "You know that you are belonging to the same group and you feel closer to the other members of these clubs." The original function stems from the exclusive membership clubs in late nineteenth century London that provided space for social intercourse and a 'social set' where individuals chose to meet old and find new acquaintances (Taddei 1999). However, in postmodernism, the importance to get to know people better than at a normal nightclub has increased with the chance that you will engage in relationships. This is a way to 'de-differentiate' you from others and create and maintain these social links (Maffesoli 1996), an important social movement in postmodernism.

What is interesting in our findings is that all respondents treasured that they meet similar minded people in these clubs. One reason is that restricting who is allowed to join is for Johanna a way to “keep a certain standard” and for Venus it is about “keeping the riffraff out”. Björn acknowledges that being around similar people is a need consumers have as this helps them to create an image through associations. Supporting this is that in postmodern markets consumers are increasingly interested in the symbolic marketing environment or a produced “hyperreality” (Firat and Venkatesh 1995).

*“It is in this way you attract these people, through promising them that it is only them and similar people who will be there, so there will be no people there that doesn’t dress similar to them, that doesn’t have the same habits as them, that live in a totally crazy place, and that doesn’t have a nice car...and...you know. It is a bit like that, because then they don’t feel as they want to feel any longer...and you can say that this spoils a bit their profile” ‘...’ “it is because they want to go to a hip place where they can have great fun with similar people and good looking chicks and guys.”*

*Björn, 24, Sweden*

Second, our informants express that the people going to ‘by invitation only’ clubs build close social ties. Serena describes this well in the following quote.

*“...in this club...mmb...I know everybody in there belongs to somewhere like some specific culture and backgrounds that are close to you; and you can share so much things with other consumers of these products or other customers of these clubs because.. Then you try, then you create a brand community I think. So if I go there I say “are you going to Gossip this weekend” and he says yes then I don’t know – I can’t describe it well at this moment but you feel that you are something special and you have something special connected to the other person...”*

*Serena, 24, Turkey*

Roger thinks in a similar manner when he explains that ‘by invitation only’ clubs is a great way to meet potential girlfriends that have the same lifestyle and/or the same style “because then perhaps you fit well together.” In this context, he also stresses that it is really important that you always meet the same girls.

Third, Serena and Johanna both highlight that they can be themselves and are more comfortable around similar people. Behind the need to be with similar people lies the postmodernist fragmentation of consumers as our informants relate and act in different ways with their different groups of friends (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). In a society where democratization is happening

everywhere (Featherstone 2007), subcultures are becoming increasingly strong as people are longing for distinction and to be in environments where they don't need to fit in with everyone, just with the ones they find cool within their subculture (Östberg 2007; Thornton 1996). For example, Serena says, "I don't know because sometimes you can see someone and you can be really – how to say – not annoyed but not happy that you feel not comfortable when they are around. So if they pick all the people from the same class and the same level you can be more comfortable." In Serena's case, this partly reflects her opinion that the upper class has better manners than lower classes and that this is a way to exclude "the mafia" that threatens her safety. The lack in manners could possibly be explained by the large class differences in the Turkish society and that the poor are not as educated as this has been prioritized away (Dwyer 2009: 342). Johanna also hints that manners differ between the classes when she claims that celebrities can use 'by invitation only' to "avoid the pressure from normal people that gets excited just because they see a famous person. Perhaps they want to be freer...for themselves...without getting so much attention." However, in Johanna's case, her being comfortable in 'by invitation only' clubs relates more to the fact that she is not comfortable with showing her wealth among her less wealthy friends. She says that there is no jealousy in this 'by invitation only' group of friends, as people know that if they want something they can buy it and as people are on the same status level.

In the context of nightclubs and restaurants, the physical benefits include that you can go to this club and enjoy the music, drinks or setting. Björn says that at clubs such as *Noppe's*, you can eat lunch and take part in organized events for members such as golf tournaments and fashion events. Underlying the fact that none of our respondents have mentioned these types of happenings could be that clubs they attended did not organize anything similar.

Our informants are strikingly aware of the commercial intention underlying the fact that clubs are implementing 'by invitation only', as this allows the club to make more money than if targeting the mass. Namely, they all agree in that 'by invitation only' consumers spend more than the average consumer. Although displaying commercial intent is something luxury brands try to avoid as it has a negative effect on authenticity claims (Beverland 2006). Our informants describe the party itself as something positive and authentic in the way that it is a genuine and real event where people are themselves (Beverland 2010) and that it is an obvious symbol of a specific lifestyle. Research by Kozinets (2002) confirms that the commercial motives are accepted, as our informants perceive no exploitive motives.

Johanna refers to 'by invitation only' as real parties: "When I talked about real parties, hmm. I don't know how to describe it, there are people that are really rich there, and at this party people can be themselves." For example, the members involve in conspicuous consumption with

booked tables in clubs where they order in drinks. These drink she says are cocktails and champagne and that “you don’t see anybody ordering beer in there” unless they “think beer tastes good.” Here, Johanna expresses that consuming in a conspicuous manner (Bourdieu 1984; Östberg 2007) and drinking specific drinks are cultural codes that create membership, i.e. sub-cultural capital which ties the ‘by invitation only’ group together (Östberg 2007). That everyone can be comfortable in being themselves underpins the “good atmosphere”, in the Swedish society where people are somewhat uncomfortable with expressing wealth as in particular the case of Johanna. “Convenience” is also something that excites Johanna with ‘by invitation only’ as she dislikes queuing. She also strives for good service and great locations in her consumption practices. This is the prestige criterion of deference where she receives favorable treatment (Benoit-Smullyan 1944).

Many of our informants bring up that the ‘by invitation only’ parties are better than parties for the masses. A good example is Johanna describing ‘by invitation only’ as “the best imaginable party” as it is “always totally crazy evenings with them”. She says, “they are very good at partying. The craziest nights I have had, has been with them.” The “great mix of people” explains a large part of the excitement of ‘by invitation only’ and signifies the importance consumers attach to the social link in marketing (Cova and Cova 2002). In general Johanna thinks that these restricted clubs “guaranteed that it was only good people and only people that you wanted to spend time with.” That only “good people” are allowed in shows that just like with the gentlemen’s clubs, ‘by invitation only’ can be traced back to the desire for the upper class to exclude people they do not want to mix with. (Taddei 1999) With the expression of “good people” Johanna refers to “good looking” and “clean” people: “Good looking girls, with nice breasts, long hair, and high heels. The guys take care of their looks and are good looking...some are not so good looking.”

Roger highlights the all-encompassing benefits of ‘by invitation only’ clubs as this creates a great experience: “It is normally a really good party and good music and everything...everything is normally good...Everyone is partying hard. Instead of in a club where there are many different people, it is good but you don’t get the same ambience.” Björn agrees when he says that what differentiates the ‘by invitation only’ club from the normal society is the “more total experience”. These experiences are not necessarily only for people belonging to the group, but also as Björn says it is “about escaping their weekday” ‘...’ “To get away from what you are used to and feel a bit special and you can be in a different way”. This statement is supported by Firat and Venkatesh (1995), arguing that consumers seek to experience and/or create a variety of images. Clubs are benefitting from the same movement that can be seen in the shopping environment

among retailers, that creating a club personality and providing rich experiences will be very useful if the products and brands sold are similar to others (Ailawadi and Keller 2004). Thus, 'by invitation only' fulfils a need for a complete experience (Firat and Venkatesh 1995).

According to Björn, the part of the crowd that is not there for the social platform and intercourse with friends is mainly there to create a "very useful network", a function spotted also in the classic Gentlemen's Clubs by Taddei (1999): "A good example is if you consider a poor guy who does not have a lot, and if he would become a member in world bachelors club then maybe his chances to succeed or get a job would increase substantially." Serena sees the importance of building a network and the opportunities 'by invitation only' can give her: "then you know everyone and you have these job opportunities." Serena states that being invited gives the members a "really good privilege" and "it's also good for your business life because members of this clubs are generally the higher class, so it's really a privilege and it really affects people to get in." That Roger does not mention networking in a business sense can be explained by that networking in the industry where he works is taking place when meeting the clients: "There is nobody at my work place that is under 50. So I am just mingling with lots of old men. They don't go there ['by invitation only clubs]." Roger is however quite convinced of the usefulness of belonging to this club if you work in another industry: "...if you are a banker in London and know somebody that can recommend you it is probably great."

A related factor brought up by Björn is the "security" and "protection" members gain by getting closely acquainted with other high standing people. "If you are a member and something happens then you get help from them and you get to know a lot of attorneys, then you help each other out if you are a member of this club...so it can make you stronger so to say..." For that reason, we argue that similar as in the exclusive Gentlemen's Clubs, the 'by invitation only' bars and restaurants are a lot about creating informational networks through access to other influential club members (Taddei 1999).

Summing up the amount of strong consumer meanings relating to networking, we perceive that what is most important for nightclubs and restaurants is the social link between members. This confirms Maffesoli's (1996) theory that mentioned liberated individuals who are now seeking to maintain or (re-) create social links. Moreover, our informant's expressions and experiences agree with Cova's and Cova's (2002) term of group narcissism - now in a commercial 'by invitation only' context. As Björn, who speaks as a consumer but also as a former marketing assistant at a 'by invitation only' club, says "together you are stronger" and "it is a bit the meaning in the end...that you create a sort of club spirit." Björn is of the opinion that 'by invitation only' clubs differentiate from normal clubs in the social opportunities it provides: "the best is really for

everyone to gather and do things together for a year, then you know each other and can do things together. Then you trust each other” ‘ ...’ “it is a lot easier to build a network”. The importance of the social link for consumers is something that marketers of ‘by invitation only’ seem to have acknowledged as they engaged in social marketing in Serena’s case. She describes one of these clubs as a business that is trying to build a relationship to her group of friends: “When somebody invites you they probably know your friends, too. I never had a friend out of this invitation...well in this close group of ten people...where we really go together.” Finally, underlying the importance of ‘by invitation only’ as a association good is that our informants’ motives of ‘by invitation only’ nightclubs and bars indicate that not only companies try to apply market shielding, also consumers are seeking for a “shield” that separates and protects their image and lifestyle from the masses.

### **Playground Fashion & Cars - Everybody Wants to Feel Special**

‘By invitation only’ in the context of manufacturer brands is something our respondents are less aware of and experienced in, compared to ‘by invitation only’ nightclubs and bars. We now aim to investigate consumer meanings related to the ‘by invitation only’ usage of luxury brands.

From our own research and from our respondents’ answers it is visible that ‘by invitation only’ techniques are either used on an event basis or as a market shielding concept (Park et al. 1986) in deciding who can buy the products. In this study, this is visible in the world of manufactured luxury brands and retailers of luxury brands. That ‘by invitation only’ is mainly present among luxury brands is not surprising, as luxury brands are about distinguishing oneself in an otherwise democratic society. Namely, the heart of luxury is to give “men and women of power the privileges that accompany it” (Kapferer 2008: 96).

The ‘by invitation only’ concept was visible in the luxury fashion industry and luxury car industry, as our informants revealed. We speak about fashion as this, in contrast to clothing, is about intangibility and symbolism. Within the study of consumer culture, fashion can be treated as a manufactured cultural object, which is related by all sociologists to the concept of imitation. (Kawamura 2005) Luxury brands expert Kapferer (2008) states that consumers are willing to pay more for luxury products as they attribute meanings like beauty of the object, excellence, uniqueness, feeling of rarity, timelessness, reputation, creativity and sensuality to it. As stated by Kapferer (Ibid), consumers use luxury brands to distinguishing themselves from the crowd by showing that they are privileged. Björn thinks that as brands now mainly differentiate in price, people currently distinguish themselves through money. He reasons that ‘by invitation only’ helps consumers distinguish themselves in other ways: “you have to have accomplished something in your life, have a position or a CV or something to buy it.”

An aspect that was crucial for the consumer meanings in this research was whether the consumer had an interest in the product type or in the brand. This seemed related to, whether the customer was mainly interested in building a relationship with the company or to other consumers, thus affecting what type of marketing strategies should be considered. Firstly, we will discuss the case when the respondents have no deeper interest in the particular industry. Our Swedish respondents have not so much an interest in fashion, although a clear interest in dressing “nice” became apparent. None of them have experience of ‘by invitation only’ fashion. For example, to varying extent they dress to fit into their group of friends and they normally stick to similar brands and / or products. This low interest has led them to take very little interest in meeting other members of the club, as this is not mentioned at all. Instead, all three respondents talk about the need to gain enough benefits in order to join. Johanna skeptically questions if she would get enough benefits to give out her E-Mail and contact information: “sure it might be fun to be a part of this, and they get a lot from me as well. Because without me, they would not have a network.” Roger is on the same track when he claims that he would “be happy” if he was invited to events such as fashion shows where he gets a chance to buy clothes from one of his favorite brands *Ralph Lauren*. Through events like this he clearly sees as a way for the company to create a stronger relationship with him as a customer: “if we get some offers and stuff it is always good. Keep your strong customers, so to say.” Björn also talks about getting benefits such as “really good prices”, “access to the collection before it is released” and “special edition collections” to join a ‘by invitation only’ club in fashion. In contrast, Boris, who uses his interest in fashion to resemble the “yuppie” style, goes to ‘by invitation only’ sales events; one of his favorite brands *Ralph Lauren* organizes them and Boris goes there mainly to get good prices. In sum, for those people that are not that interested in fashion, ‘by invitation only’ in this context is thought of more as a loyalty program where monetary savings and symbolic aspects are important benefits and benefits related to building relationships with other customers are not asked for.

Fashion loving Serena has experience of two ‘by invitation only’ fashion boutiques in Turkey that sell different luxury brands like *Chanel* and *Prada* as she says. She finds it problematic when fashion products can be seen on too many customers and ‘by invitation only’ helps her achieve scarcity. She says that it is a “good thing” that she can see and buy the products before everyone else. ‘By invitation only’ is an excellent way to accomplish scarcity in fashion, as our informants uncover. Baudrillard (1998: 43) already noticed that “All societies have always wasted, squandered, expended and consumed beyond what is strictly necessary for the simple reason that it is in the consumption of a surplus, of a superfluity that the individual - and society - feel not merely that they exist, but that they are alive.” In addition to the motive of scarcity, consuming

from these boutiques is largely to show that she belongs to the upper class group as “a member of a community”. Thus, Serena does not search monetary benefits, but rather the privilege to be allowed to buy these products and brands that will increase her status consisting of owning a certain mix of brands (Östberg 2007). Furthermore, Serena’s information indicates what Holt (2002) named “personal sovereignty through brands”.

Although scarcity becomes a more important aspect in ‘by invitation only’ fashion, how many members exist is more invisible here than in the nightclub sphere. Namely, when Björn is faced with the example of *VonRosen*, he wants to know how scarce it is, “because it could be whatever”, before making a decision about if it is attractive for him or not. When finding out that approximately fifteen per cent had been accepted out of the applicants, he gives a positive reply, as he says: “that is pretty cool”. Thus, the scarcity that ‘by invitation only’ provides in fashion is something customers value and question. In line with Goffman (1951) who argues that scarcity alone does not qualify an object for use as a status symbol, but that the scarce object has to be selected over others to become a status symbol, Serena finds it important that ‘by invitation only’ is utilized for the right brand: “having a chance to have one piece from the brand must be privileged, not a random thing.” In addition, Johanna would not join a ‘by invitation only’ fashion club unless “the style is good”. Moreover, that the brand is well known is also an important incentive for Johanna to join a ‘by invitation only’ fashion club. When asked about her interest in *VonRosen* she says: “I don’t even think it’s a well known brand. I mean, what is *VonRosen*?” She seems to resist “conventional corporate influences” and the brand’s possible attempt to “lead to an aura of authenticity” is unsuccessful in her case (Holt 2002).

In the context of the car industry, Johanna lacks an interest and is ill informed about cars. For example, she speaks about one luxury car brand she particularly likes, thinking it was an average or cheap model. However, she still sees benefits of attending the *Ferrari* and *Maserati* ‘by invitation only’ events. In her case, this is about reaching career goals through networking as it’s “a great chance to get contacts” as “CEO’s of different companies” are around. She finishes the statement by underlining the potential of these events: “you never know who you are going to meet. It could be potential business partners in the future.” Interestingly, Johanna would not consider buying a *Ferrari* due to her nonexistent interest in cars. What does this depend on? Johanna hints that people that join a ‘by invitation only’ club of a brand or a store, which is not in their style or interest, perhaps “want to be apart of a special culture” and “feel special”. This is an association she perceives as negative: “I don’t have a need to be a part of this. Perhaps if I found something that I really wanted to be a part of.” Boris talks about the importance that brands fit him in style as it is not just about being the invitation only selected person but that a brand or

fashion item must appeal to him: “I would say ‘thank you that’s very kind of you but that’s not my style and not my music’. This indicates the importance of not misrepresenting oneself (Goffman, 1951).

Roger also has a striking interest in cars and especially *Formula One*, dating back to his childhood and his father’s influence, which led him to buy a *Ferrari*. When being invited to a *Ferrari* ‘by invitation only’ event he mainly felt privileged to see the nice work on the new car model and the social event where he meets people with the same car interest that he doesn’t meet otherwise. In addition, Roger also strengthened his social ties when he could bring his friend that “was really interested” in cars and “he became really happy.” These benefits he saw as higher than the cost of a not so perfectly glamorous event, damaged by how the cover of the car was removed: “it was a bit ‘B’ ” ‘...’ “but you have to accept that”. In accordance, Roger neither make any claims of monetary savings and his large interest in the product and the fact that he meets people with the same interest even outweighs the formalities of the event. For both Roger and Johanna, Ferrari can be seen as a tribal symbol, which gains meaning within the tribe as a result as members collectively negotiate and interpret the meanings (Cova and Cova 2002) and car interested individuals are suggestively essentially drawn to the goods and services that permit and support social interaction and sharing (Cova 1996).

In summary, respondents with an interest in the fashion industry are somewhat interested in ‘by invitation only’ of their favorite brand, if these give them enough benefits to make the effort. On the other hand Serena sees ‘by invitation only’ of her favorite brands more as a privilege to belong to a group of influential people and owning a scarce object as a symbol of status in the tribe, thereby not caring much about more tangible benefits. In the car industry, Johanna lacking interest finds an opportunity to network for a business context, no matter if she is interested in the brand or not. The car-interested Roger on the other hand values more than anything to be around the likeminded ‘tribe’ and the product itself.

### **Playground Social Networks - Image is Everything**

Social networks using the ‘by invitation only’ strategy are a postmodern phenomenon made possible by the invention of the Internet. This is interesting, as Taddei (1999) found that the introduction and spread of new communication tools in the nineteenth century was a factor that led to a decline in membership clubs.

Venus explains that ‘by invitation only’ websites like *ASmallWorld* can be really well used for “expats” [expatriates] since it is an easy way to meet people where it might otherwise be “difficult to meet people”. Venus joined *ASmallWorld* for the purpose of marketing research but also to meet people when she came to Sweden. That her friend told her that *ASmallWorld* is basically a

“meat market” which people use to “hook up”, has to a large extent negatively influenced the image she has of the social network and her motivations to be a member. She now uses *ASmallWorld* to meet people and perhaps expands her network for professional advancement, however avoids using it as a “social string of Saturday night.”

Björn also related ‘by invitation only’ to *ASmallWorld*, although prompting on our behalf was needed. He is a member as he benefits from the business opportunities, especially as he could apply for jobs abroad through this network and since some of his friends got jobs through it. The postmodern globalization of the labor market is therefore an underlying factor for the popularity of *ASmallWorld* (Featherstone 2007). Although he has used it to apply for jobs for his girlfriend, he has never used it to apply for jobs for himself. Johanna also joined *ASmallWorld* due to the networking opportunities; however she has not used it much since.

Serena needed to be prompted with pictures of *ASmallWorld* to remind herself of ‘by invitation only’ in social media. She finds social networks such as *ASmallWorld* useful in creating relationships in her social life if these are restricted enough. Namely, Serena starts recognizing people from the website after a while and through this she can assume about these people, that they are “good” in the sense that “maybe he has a good background or a good family somewhere some connections so it gives you a good image, actually being a member of this thing”.

Overall, our respondents emphasize the functional aspects of the ‘by invitation only’ social network as useful, perhaps mainly as professional network but also as a tool to recognize potential friends if the social network is restricted enough. Interestingly, due to the nature of the social network “the thing” becomes the “social link”. Social networks therefore respond to the postmodern consumer trend of creating social links (Cova and Cova 2002).

That the network needs to be restricted enough is also related to status. Serena is of the opinion that it is possible to gain status through similar web pages, by being associated with a “selected class”. In Johanna’s case, *ASmallWorld* is not making her feel special, as “then I can send out an invite if I feel like it, to anybody”. The lack of stricter selection criteria is devaluing the feeling of exclusivity and thereby the status gained, as also argued by Basu (1989). The importance of belonging to this specific group of people is a sign that ‘by invitation only’ networks are classic association goods used to gain status through one’s membership as Basu (Ibid) wrote. According to Serena, not too many members should be allowed to join and is supported by Häckner and Nyberg (1996).

*“...You know that in this place when you first are a member of something like Facebook, you know that it’s special because not everybody is there. But after a while, when you don’t do invitation only, you see every one on that*

*webpage and it can be annoying because I don't...when you know that only people from a selective class is here, you know it is gonna be more elite. Not like you can see anymore because it can be disturbing after a while." '...'*  
*"You want it as a consumer, you want to be in that group, because people have this thing – just belonging to a group – and of course if you want to belong to a group you don't want to be 'oh yeah I want to be a lower class person'."*

*Serena, 24, Turkey*

The failure to accomplish a restricted amount of users and who is allowed to join can explain why Björn, Johanna and Venus do not get an exclusive feeling from 'by invitation only' in a social network context.

*"It used to be, actually I used to be a member of it before it got more global and less exclusive because it used to be like stated to be very exclusive and now it's becoming less and less exclusive so now every 'Tom, Dick and Harry' is on a Small World. And I think what they can offer to a working business person is like in terms of networking at some of the events they have on there might be interesting."*

*Venus, 24, United States*

Venus opinion gives us a hint towards Goffman's (1951) analysis of status symbols: a symbol of status cannot remain forever. If *ASmallWorld* in her eyes used to be exclusive and members used to rely on the positive image this is now declining, as some members like "Tom, Dick and Harry" rely more and more upon *ASmallWorld* as a status symbol, which lowers the value of these signs in the eyes of others. Venus does not want to be associated with them. This example also shows that the networks approach of trying to use scarcity alone, does not qualify an object for use as a status symbol, since there is an unlimited number of a different kind of scarce objects (Goffman 1951).

Boris on the other hand finds *ASmallWorld* more useful in claiming status. He talks about his experience with *ASmallWorld* after getting reminded by a picture prompt. He is rather upfront with the fact that although he never uses his account as none of his good friends are using it, he still likes having it.

*"I haven't met anyone there so far that I think I have to have frequent contact with. It's just nice to be there, see the people you know. They are on the same level, they see you and it's more seen and be seen. I would say this same appeal is also a part of ASmallWorld right..."*

*Boris, 25, Germany*

From this we can understand that the reason is that Boris wants to claim status by showing that he is on the same level as the people who own it. Thus, Boris sees the efficiency of this status

symbol as a communication tool rather than the rights and duties that they signify. This is in line with Goffman (1951) who continued that these symbols function as cues to attribute status and for how to interact and treat the occupant.

*Facebook* is another social community mentioned by our respondents, which however does not operate 'by invitation only'. Nevertheless, Roger mentioned that when he gets invited to 'by invitation only' events this is usually through *Facebook* and that it is rare that he gets a physical letter sent home. As we claimed earlier, this tactic could cause consumers to attach a less exclusive aura to the 'by invitation only' event.

The main points were that 'by invitation only' networks may provide less usefulness in maintaining established social ties than networks open to the public, as some of the individual's friends may be excluded from the more narrow network. The restrictive market shielding practices of 'by invitation only' creates great potential as a status symbol.

#### **4.4 Cross Themes from the Playgrounds**

As mentioned earlier we chose to cross analyze our informant's meanings of 'by invitation only' in order to let common patterns and global themes emerge (Thompson et al. 1989). The following themes emerged after a thorough analysis of our informant's experiences within the different playgrounds and can be seen as broad themes of 'by invitation only' meanings taking the partly different playground meanings into account which helps answering the research question of investigating contemporary consumer meanings of 'by invitation only' in a commercial context.

##### **Same, Same - But Different**

Bourdieu (1984) suggested that taste represents a distinction of social classes and this phenomenon is obvious in our 'by invitation only' research. In general, respondents use 'by invitation only' across the different playgrounds to be among similar people, still sharing a certain feeling for uniqueness. Boris for example expresses that in 'by invitation only clubs' "you are with people you don't know but you know they are like the same as you are but also having differences" '...' "People that are there share the same values kind of have similarities to you..." Our informants feel that they are on the same level with the others in the 'by invitation only' club, meaning they are something special and have something special connected to the other person according to the principle that "birds of a feather flock together". As expressed in the below quote, the people going to 'by invitation only' are also connected through their monetary resources. Also style becomes a crucial linking value (Östberg 2007) for this group of consumers as our informants describe it as "sophisticated" and "elegant".

*“Interviewer: What do you mean with ‘same feathers flock together’?”*

*Roger: It’s an old expression really, it is for example with travelling. Many cannot afford travelling and then it is not so fun if everyone else go and someone cannot join. And for the people that always can, it is fun. Then you can go out travelling. And at nightclubs...well it is style also, people have similar styles, girls are at the same level, everyone is doing the same race.*

*Interviewer: How are the girls at the same level?*

*Roger: They normally...clothing...they have the same style kind of. Ehm...nice. They are elegant. [laughs] They are different of course. They are normally nice, kind and pleasant. They are no idiots...”*

*Roger, 28, Sweden*

Georg Simmel (1957), an expert in seeing the dualistic side of social phenomena, saw fashion as the desire for imitation and differentiation at the same time and many other sociologists shared this view (Kawamura 2005). This is very true in the case of fashion for our informants. Björn states that him and his friends have a similar taste in clothes: “if someone would wear something completely nuts then you wonder where the hell they bought that.” Boris thinks that it is important to “stick out” a little bit, even “among the people that are on the same level and can afford the same stuff.” Serena points out that “you know that they [by invitation only consumers] are chosen due to some criteria and you are matching each other” but at the same time “you must have...some special pieces, they have there own style”. The foundation is the social link that brings them together while distinguishing themselves from the masses (Östberg 2007) which entails the consumption of luxury brands that shows their image of superiority and attaches specific values (Kawamura 2005). Simultaneously they attempt to wear singular pieces to set themselves apart within the group of consumers (Brown 2006). Thus, we find a contradictory relationship in how the ‘by invitation only’ followers consume. On the one hand, they consume the same brands to a large extent in order to signify something to other members and the society in large, thus letting the market dictate their identities in accordance with the modernist consumer movement (Holt 2002). On the other hand, they all share the need to show their difference as common in postmodern consumer movement (Cova 1997).

On the topic of ‘by invitation only’ clubs, Roger says that “you go where you fit in - style and this kind of thing” and Björn thinks that clubs should exist for every image. Hence, ‘by invitation only’ clubs figurate as status symbols by attracting people with a certain image that creates a more defined image of the consumer and as being picked makes them feel special. Moreover, status can be seen as a cultural practice of distinction with a certain lifestyle in one’s clothing, values and taste as our informants reveal (Bourdieu 1984). We agree with what Goffman wrote in

1951 and argue that 'by invitation only' is seen as a status symbol that visibly divides the social world into categories of persons, thereby helping to maintain solidarity within a category and hostility between different categories.

*"It is in this way you attract these people, through promising them that it is only them and similar people who will be there, so there will be no people there that doesn't dress similar to them, that doesn't have the same habits as them, that live in a totally crazy place, and that doesn't have a nice car...and...you know."*

*Björn, 24, Sweden*

The habitus shows to be a central construct in the postmodern 'by invitation only' version of the classic membership clubs. In sum, we can conclude that 'by invitation only' bridge the gap between the actual self and the ideal self (McCracken 1986) and people consume objects associated with a particular lifestyle to build a bridge towards it. The lifestyle central in this study is one where fashion, looks and gesture are of utmost importance.

### **Money is the Name of the Game**

Bourdieu (1984) referred to economic capital or monetary resources as a way members express status and in our 'by invitation only' research this proves to be a prerequisite to join. As mentioned earlier, Featherstone (2007) discusses certain "democratization" and "de-classification" movements visible in postmodern societies. In detail, the process of democratization has eventually led to that dominant consumer groups cannot monopolize the definitions of culture, as less powerful consumer groups are becoming increasingly strengthened, backed by an expansion of cultural intermediaries in mass media (Ibid).

However, Max Weber discussed status related to economic class, as class refers primarily to the effective ownership, control and possession of economic resources. Economic class position is exhibited in observable differences in income, wealth and other material benefits. (Turner 1988) According to all our informants this pattern is visible in 'by invitation only' despite the general trend of 'democratization' and 'de-classification': what it comes down to is the money, nevertheless one often needs to offer something of value besides it.

Our Swedish informant Johanna gives us insights into her experiences of membership in 'by invitation only' as she says that it is firstly economic capital that is needed. Roger has no illusion that the business mechanisms behind 'by invitation only' are all about making money. He finds that brands and nightclubs "want to have a certain type of people and for these people to come back again. They want to earn money." Also Boris mentions money as a selection criterion:

*“...that depends on how much money you spend right...in the bar...then you probably are likely to spend a lot of money in the club as well” ‘...’ “People that are there...have a good position they have money...”*

*Boris, 25, Germany*

In Turkey the aspect of money seems to be even more striking. Based on who the members of the ‘by invitation only’ nightclubs where Serena’s goes, she perceives that members are selected according to how much money they can spend and that, therefore, “They invite people who have good monetary background and they check the family I think.” Our informant Venus thinks that the selection criteria to join ‘by invitation only’ is “definitely money” in Asia and probably so in the US.

Björn ranks the importance of money as a selection criterion for ‘by invitation only’. People that are allowed into ‘by invitation only’ clubs are people on the top with high status that can influence other people and that know a lot of people as “then it falls down to the bottommost”. Björn thinks that it is sometimes “not only money, but today it is really a lot about the money. It can also be history and name and a lot more” but one thing becomes clear: in the end “you need to be able to pay.” He backs this up by saying that these clubs focus on a smaller group of people that spend a lot instead of a large number of people that cost more in maintenance and usage as “you get much more money”.

In sum, spending a lot of money is seen as a basis in order to have the “privilege” to enjoy invitation only clubs, suggesting that having ‘economic capital’ (Bourdieu 1984) is seen as a hygiene factor today in ‘by invitation only’ clubs. Following the capitalistic ideals in society is Kapferer’s quote (2008: 96): “Aristocracy is now dead, but it has been replaced by the power of money.”

### **Mind your Manners**

Goffman (1951) mentioned that socialization restrictions, an important symbol of membership in a given class and displayed during informal interaction, consist of the kind of acts which impress others with the suitability and likeableness of one’s general manner. Also Bourdieu (1984) points out that cultural hierarchies correspond to social ones and people’s behaviors are first and foremost a marker of class.

Our informants reveal that only socializing with people that have good manners is something they value with the ‘by invitation only’ phenomenon. This shared value is something that strengthens the link between these consumers (Östberg 2007). Björn shares values of how to behave and treat people with his friends. Also Roger finds manners important and he attributes good manners and no fights to ‘by invitation only’ and expresses with humor that “most fights is

at places that are torn, because people there are a bit more, or not as well mannered. Farmers kind of. They hang out...it normally ends that way.” Serena finds manners to be a more serious matter and an important benefit with ‘by invitation only’ clubs, which can be partly explained by “the mafia” in Turkey: “Only these people can get in, so it was really good inside – nobody was fighting – everybody knew each other. So you don’t have to worry about what’s gonna happen tonight...” In this context she also brings up the less grim aspect of the conflicting paradigms of “old money” and “new money” (Holt and Üstüner 2010) Namely, Serena gets annoyed by the manners of people that have “new money” as she finds that when you all of a sudden earn a lot of money, you start “changing your behaviors in a really, really bad and crazy way” She brings up one example:

*“You start like spending money stupidly and he wasn’t really sophisticated person and he came with us and you know he was so bad. We were five girls and one boy, this boy, and he was like ‘oh yeah my girls and stuff I am rich’. And we were like ‘what are you doing... you don’t belong here’. And he doesn’t have a card [member card in the Gossip club], he came with us and it was so humiliating and then he tried to flirt with other girls and he made them really uncomfortable so we were so humiliated by this person. So we said there was a reason not to let him in to this club because he acts so...he shows that he doesn’t belong there.”*

*Serena, 24, Turkey*

In the above stated quote it is visible that the status people gain through organic restrictions (Goffman 1951), involves for how long the money has been possessed or the family name to restrict the use of ‘by invitation only’. Serena describes that in Turkey, where class differences are very evident, ‘by invitation only’ takes great notice of the family, as the aim of the club is to create a meeting place for the social elite:

*“...But of course they are checking the family background mostly, because most of the families know each other so the kids know each other and after a while you start a community like this and in these nightclubs you see every one you know because you know their families, you know them from school, and you know them from your social life so...actually it’s really great because you have the chance to see all people want to see in one place. So, it’s good.”*

*Serena, 24, Turkey*

Björn, who is born into nobility, has received access to ‘by invitation only’ mostly through his name. In Björn’s case it is demonstrated that for him the family background is sometimes more important than solely having money: “I am not an especially good customer in the way that I

don't spend a lot of money there. Since I am from a noble background...I have my family and things...and name is important". Following this he explains that "as they want to include blue blood in there...they say 'ey, it would be really cool of you if I could put your name on the member list, then we pay your entrance and you can get some things' and such things. That feels a bit weird."

In conclusion, we can say that 'class' as described by Goffman in the 50's is of some importance today. However, what is more especially noticeable in a 'by invitation only' context is to own a specific 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1984) that reflects for example having the right manners.

### **To Know and Be Known**

The cross analysis of our informants' rich 'by invitation only' experiences uncovered that it is important 'who you know' and at the same time 'who knows you', which is in line with Bourdieu (1984). Serena explains that in Turkey "when you are a private university student everybody knows each other and everybody has a background. So somehow you can get in every place you want. But if you are a public university student it's a bit different..." Through these upper class friends, she has "this chance to go to every party 'by invitation' and stuff...because they know the insiders and the club owners." Serena's description of "insiders" and "outsiders" is eye-catching, as it underlines the importance of who is "in the know" (Östberg 2007) and who is not. Serena explains that in Ankara the people from first commerce are insiders who know all club and café openings that are 'by invitation only' because these events are "like a debut where you introduce yourself to the society"...and that the outsiders "invade after two or three weeks".

Also in Sweden, status as it relates to social capital (Bourdieu 1983) is crucial to enter 'by invitation only' clubs. The importance to know and be known in a 'by invitation only' context is also well expressed by Johanna: "It can be people that have the right contacts that have the possibility to get in...and then it can also be people that have become recommended by a friend to be a part of such a network..." Björn uncovers the necessity of having several characteristics to contribute with when he says: "it is only the best who can join" [*Noppe's*, the private Gentleman's Club in Stockholm.] He continues by stating that the "criteria I guess is that it is not so much only about the money, it is about your name and that you know the right people...and that you can contribute with something. If it isn't beauty, it is something else".

This leads us to a concluding remark on who can consume 'by invitation only'. Namely, we argue that it depends on the club and its specific selection criteria that target a specific market. However, influential people that have status according to one or several of the following aspects

are necessary: cultural capital, social capital, subcultural capital. Then again, the underlying requirement is in most cases economic capital.

### **Moral Issues? It Is What It Is**

The inspection of 'by invitation only' as a form of 'demassification' through market shielding and thereby also 'consumer shielding' in an otherwise 'democratized' postmodern society, was mentioned earlier in this research paper. We raised this topic of "democracy and morals" related to 'by invitation only' and restricting the customer base as this could be otherwise easily hidden due to its sensitive nature. The nature of existential phenomenological interviews allowed us to encourage our respondents to reflect on aspects they have not reflected upon before, as experiences can be reflected and unreflected (Thompson et al. 1989).

Our findings suggest that our respondents experience no moral conflicts with the rise of 'by invitation only', but rather view this as a natural aspect of the world claiming: "it is what it is". Baudrillard argues that (1981 in Kawamura 2005) fashion, an important playground of 'by invitation only', is one of those institutions that best restores cultural inequality and social discrimination under the pretense of abolishing them. This is demonstrated in the case of Serena and the Turkish society where fashion is governed by the social strategy of class (Ibid) using 'by invitation only' to restrict unwanted customers from consumption. Serena does not seem to have moral problems with 'by invitation only' as it helps in terms of keeping the quality of your organization and refers to luxury fashion designers *Tom Ford* and *Marc Jacobs* preferring their designed bags "to burn", rather than "seeing them on a really, really bad how to say bad known person". Boris has no moral issues with restricting the customer base and uses the following sociopolitical ideology statement (Holt 2002):

*"No, I wouldn't say moral issues. I mean of course I would say I am a conservative person and I think it's good that you have some distinctions in society... and that not everyone does everything cause otherwise we would have a completely socialist, communist style of living and I mean that didn't work out on a political level and I think it's not gonna work out on the social level either."*

*Boris, 25, Germany*

Also Johanna does not experience moral conflicts. and although Björn does express some sympathies with the excluded and thinks that it could be a "hard thing" if its done "face-to-face", he does not see restricting the customer base as a problem as he finds that the exclusion should be viewed as "the goal" and a "niche", nevertheless finds it somehow sad. Venus, challenged with the question of morals and restricting specific goods for specific people, thinks that it is a different reality, not necessary good or bad. She continues:

*“So sure I can understand some inequalities in society because they are just perpetuated by this kind of phenomenon and if it continues in the gap between the rich and the poor is definitely a gaping hole so this kind of perpetuates and this phenomenon I think because of this consumptive behavior which is inherent in capitalism and this is the reality of the world that we live in.”*

*Venus, 24, United States*

Finally, also Roger comes to the conclusion that it is “like that in society”. Hence, although the ‘by invitation only’ phenomenon, at a first glance, opposes the democratization movement in our society it also represents the capitalistic society (Featherstone 2007) and the postmodern consumer’s acceptance for different perspectives and blindness for inequality (Firat and Venkatesh 1995).

## 5 Discussion

We add to theory in CCT research in the domains Consumer Identity Projects and Marketplace Cultures by exploring consumer meanings of the previously uncharted but intensifying ‘by invitation only’ phenomenon that entered the commercial sphere in the contemporary consumer society. More specifically, we give insight into how young and affluent people consume symbolically charged ‘by invitation only’ objects, events and virtual items and what meanings they link to the phenomenon. We draw upon insights from membership literature in order to analyze differences and similarities, taking into account that we are living in a world affected by postmodern characteristics. In doing so, our theory also provides a broad and at the same time nuanced explanation why the phenomenon of ‘by invitation only’ gain increasing importance in postmodern consumption practices.

### 5.1 From ‘Class Shielding’ to ‘Consumer Shielding’

Our research shows that ‘market shielding’ (Park et al. 1986), as a marketing strategy backing up the ‘by invitation only’ concept in the contemporary sphere, can be seen as the advancement and / or continuation of Goffman’s (1951) ‘class shielding’ suggestions of how social classes can restrict misuse of their status symbols. Namely, the ‘by invitation only’ phenomenon is the firm’s response to that postmodern consumers, very aware of goods’ symbolic value, are seeking for a ‘shield’ that separates, protects and secures their image and lifestyle from the masses in many ways. That this phenomenon exists mainly in the luxury industry is due to its exclusive aura and the high profit margins enforceable in this consumer segment.

In postmodernism, consumers find it particularly important to be differentiated from the masses and ‘by invitation only’ is an excellent way to accomplish this. Accordingly, the ‘scarcity’ Goffman (Ibid) referred to as created by a small supply in conjunction with a large demand is very important for consumers today in a broad field of playgrounds. Goffman (Ibid) wrote in modern times that scarcity alone does not qualify an object for use as a status symbol and this is also true today. Even though postmodernity acknowledges that consumers increasingly value symbolic goods, the large selection of goods today makes it very important that the scarce object itself has high use value. The ‘by invitation only’ label can be seen as an object that is selected for the use as a status symbol by a specific consumer tribe, especially in the case of fashion.

Our insights of contemporary consumer meanings show that Goffman’s (Ibid) ‘moral restrictions’ of class, that refer to how inner moral constraints posed by for example religion, ethnicity and economic propriety, hinder people from misrepresenting themselves, is not necessarily

true today. Not only tribe members but also ‘tourists’ who want to experience something different potentially visit ‘by invitation only’ events as they can immerse themselves in a different setting and thereby get a ‘total’ experience. Also, consumers that are newly rich are not necessarily restricted by economic modesty but can take advantage of the postmodern capitalistic values in ‘by invitation only’ nightclubs and bars which value money as a prerequisite to gain membership. As our study showed, there is a conflict between people with ‘new money’ and ‘old money’, in terms of how to behave and to act. This makes ‘economic capital’ a hygiene factor and stricter selection criteria according to subcultural capital, social capital and cultural capital a necessity. What specific personal characteristics are asked for depends on the club’s target.

Moreover, Goffman (1951) analyzed class restrictions in terms of ‘cultivation restrictions’, which is a form of sophistication typically concerning food, drink, and clothes upon which classes in different societies have placed high value. The ‘by invitation only’ mechanisms in a contemporary consumption context can be seen as a continuation of Goffman’s (Ibid) analysis as the exclusive label operates as a status symbol that attracts and includes people that belong to a specific lifestyle and image, thereby having the right manners, tastes and style. ‘By invitation only’ is charged with exclusivity that consumer can use to bridge the gap between their actual lifestyle and the particular lifestyles they desire. It helps consumers feel larger or special in a sphere where fashion, looks and gesture are of utmost importance as they attempt to signal an image of superiority to others.

The ‘organic restrictions’ proposed by Goffman (Ibid), which are based on for how long a person has possessed the social qualifications, is a somewhat visible factor in ‘by invitation only’ clubs, as this is seen as upper class. However this depends on who the target market is. In conclusion and in contrast to old Gentlemen’s Clubs, where membership was a privilege of the aristocrats and upper class, luxury and ‘by invitation only’ is now related to the power of money; whether or not it is ‘old’ or ‘new’ money. At the same time the fight for uniqueness and distinction continues.

## **5.2 From ‘Class Uniformity’ to ‘Tribal Conformity’**

The historical pattern in membership clubs was that the members always consisted of the elite in society, such as aristocrats in the seventeenth century and mainly politicians and highly educated professionals in the late nineteenth century. This is also true today, as the consumers of ‘by invitation only’ to a large extent consist of the elite but in a subcultural context as our analysis reveals.

Consumers ask for 'by invitation only' that targets narrowly and include only similar minded and similar looking people that have the same lifestyle. This is important to create networks and to gain status as will be explained next. The spread of 'by invitation only' in the contemporary commercial context has addressed people's need to distinguish themselves in what interests them the most (e.g. parties, fashion, cars) to help them gain status as an influential person within a consumer tribe. A 'by invitation only' club can become charged with meaning within the tribe and therefore functions as a possibly authentic tribal symbol. Being a member of 'by invitation only' clubs signifies a privilege that represents that you belong to a selected group of influential people and that you are in the know. A more authentic image based and experiential party is created in the 'by invitation only' nightclubs and bars, the conspicuous consumers that party hard and favor certain drinks. They are good looking and clean according to subcultural taste standards. Still being a bit different, they are around the likeminded tribe and the product itself is the created value. The practice of 'by invitation only' becomes useful as it helps consumers to preserve status and distinction through exclusivity in a society where luxury is being democratized and increasingly many people have the capital to consume luxury goods.

Moreover, in the postmodern capitalistic and individualistic society where people have few social bonds, 'by invitation only' events becomes a tool for consumers who wish to establish and maintain strong social ties through the club spirit. These social ties are either with potential friends and partners or to build a professional network that creates business opportunities. To create a public notion of mystery and secrecy of the 'by invitation only' club helps strengthen the bond between members who are in the know. That people are similar and behave in a similar way is increasingly important for our group of consumers when it comes to good manners. However, it is also necessary to contribute with cultural capital, social capital, or subcultural capital.

Our findings show that the phenomenon of 'by invitation only' can still preserve status and distinction even though the postmodern consumer society that is mainly characterized by the democratization of luxury. However, our informants are increasingly valuing products, services and events for the social link they provide. What used to be 'class uniformity' in exclusive membership clubs centuries ago became 'tribal conformity' through exclusive and commercial membership constructs, expressing the 'hyperreality' and the social ties searched by the fragmented and independent postmodern consumers.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

Findings show that 'by invitation only' is yet another form of cultural ideology, providing a foundation of culturally shared meanings and values. Through ideology and socio-cultural dynamics,

actions and thoughts of individuals are organized in a manner that allows for a sense of social solidarity and creating cultural worlds to maintain social order. We demonstrate that in the world of culture and consumption, there is an enduring reassertion of hierarchy and distinction, as privileged consumers' make an effort to distance themselves from the masses. Turner (1988: 77) mentions that "the cultural sphere becomes somewhat dissociated from the economic and the political systems, and the competitive struggle within the cultural field produces an explosion of cultural signs and a cacophony of lifestyles." 'By invitation only' as a marketing and branding tool is yet another cultural sign to preserve and develop status distinction for consumers in postmodern and capitalistic societies. What's next?

#### **5.4 Limitations and Future Research**

We found rich and substantial consumer meanings through our young and affluent informants. However, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged in this research paper. As our research is applied quite broad, investigating a whole phenomenon, there are several areas that can be addressed deeper in certain aspects in future research.

As a main advantage we could gather insights of the 'by invitation only' phenomenon from various cultural backgrounds and regions: the US, Western Europe, Scandinavia, Turkey and Asia (Shanghai and Hongkong). In order to gain even richer insights in consumer meanings of 'by invitation only', separate studies of different cultural regions can be researched in the future, as it became obvious that cultural and geographical differences affect the mechanisms of 'by invitation only' to a greater or lesser extent. Similarly to Holt and Üstuner (2010), arguing for a theory of status consumption in less industrialized countries, we propose for future research to look more specifically at 'by invitation only' consumption patterns in diverse and separate cultural contexts.

Furthermore, the selected group of informants of six affluent students and young professionals represents a quite narrow life stage as there consumption practices may differ from people in other life stages (e.g. affluent adults consuming conspicuously). As mentioned earlier, possessions fulfill different functions in our lives, but people express themselves through material possessions throughout life. However, this varies over our life spans and to a decreasing extent as one age. (Belk 1988) Consequently, we recommend approaching the topic with affluent informants in different life stages.

Gender differences are also an issue, not analyzed separately in this research. One of our informants revealed that often girls are at 'by invitation only' events because of their 'looks' like "high heels", "long hair" and "nice breasts" and that the boys were perhaps not that good look-

ing but compensating having money and therefore are invited or get accepted to these events. Therefore, we see a potential, tackling the phenomenon with a gender perspective.

Finally, our picture prompts were used to enrich the conducted conversational type of interviews; this of course influenced the discussion focus of the interview towards the examples of *VonRosen*, *The Worlds Finest Clubs* and *ASmallWorld*. Using other types of playgrounds or perhaps going deeper into one playground could have generated even more insightful data.

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## 7 Appendix

### 7.1 Standard Ethical Protocol

“Hi, our names are Christian Koch, Robert Lindhe and Jessica Ljung. We are master students researching on a project in the field of consumer culture theory.

The project is sponsored by the Department of Business Administration (School of Economics and Management), Lund University. We may be contacted at this phone number 0046 (0) 739 729244 should you have any questions.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research project. Your participation is very much appreciated. Just before we start the interview, we would like to reassure you that as a participant in this project you have several very definite rights.

First, your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary. You are free to refuse to answer any question at any time. You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time. This interview will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to members of the research team. Excerpts of this interview may be made part of the final research report, but under no circumstances will your name or identifying characteristics be included in this report.

We would be grateful if you would sign this form to show that we have read you its contents.”

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Signature & Date

## 7.2 Consumer Interviews

Synonym: **'Venus'**; Date: 15.04.2010; Place of interview accomplishment: Lund

Synonym: **'Björn'**; Date: 15.04.2010; Place of interview accomplishment: Lund

Synonym: **'Roger'**; 18.04.2010; Place of interview accomplishment: Helsingborg

Synonym: **'Johanna'**; 20.04.2010; Place of interview accomplishment: Malmö

Synonym: **'Serena'**; 22.04.2010; Place of interview accomplishment: Lund

Synonym: **'Boris'**; 23.04.2010; Place of interview accomplishment: Lund

